

# Toni Cade Bambara's Use of African American Vernacular English in 'The Lesson.'

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[(essay date fall 2003) *In the following essay, Heller contends that in "The Lesson" Bambara celebrates African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a vehicle for conveying the Black experience.*]

In Toni Cade Bambara's short story, "**The Lesson**" (1972), the narrator, Sylvia, speaks and narrates in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This is an appropriate dialect for Sylvia, who lives in a New York ghetto, is a working-class black child about twelve years old, and has a strong feminist attitude. AAVE is also a dialect that Bambara herself would have learned growing up during the 1940s and 1950s in New York City's Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant communities. AAVE adds realism and humor to Sylvia's narrative. The dialect also reflects Bambara's pride in her ethnic heritage. Finally, AAVE fits the story's themes, one of which is that the black children in the story need to learn about the world outside their ghetto and another that wealth is unequally and unfairly distributed in American society. In "**The Lesson**," most of the have-not children in need of education speak AAVE. This dialect emphasizes the children's distance from mainstream white bourgeois culture and economic power. However, Bambara also celebrates AAVE as a vehicle for conveying black experience: Sylvia uses AAVE to express her self-confidence, assertiveness, and creativity as a young black woman.

Gavin Jones points out that, by the late nineteenth century, ethnic dialects provided American writers with "a voice for social commentary and political satire" (5). Dialect literature questions "sociolinguistic wholeness" (51). Writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar valued dialect for its realism as well as "its power to structure a

political response to larger social, cultural, and racial issues" (Jones 20). Such writing implies resistance to the dominant culture, destabilizes the privileged dialect/discourse, and portrays "subversive voices" that present "alternative versions of reality" (11, 13, 46).

Bambara's fiction reflects the perspective of her black contemporaries. Sylvia Wallace Holton explains that, by the 1960s, many African Americans were alienated from aspects of life in the United States. Especially traumatic for blacks were "White resistance to Civil Rights legislation, the loss of a number of important leaders," and the Vietnam War, which blacks considered racist. African Americans became interested in the movements that emphasized Black Power, Black Pride, and black nationalism (144-45). Holton analyzes the work of black writers like Amiri Baraka who experimented with AAVE in fiction. "Committed to writing for a black rather than a white audience, Baraka [...] refuses to be bound by the rules of 'white' literature and language. Instead, he expresses himself [...] in a normative but distinctive black speech" (180). Bambara carries on this tradition of cultural nationalism in her fiction and essays.

Barbara Hill Hudson's research indicates that in literature by African-American women writers, "the Standard speakers display conformist behavior, while the Vernacular speakers use more creative, individualistic behavior." Colorful, striking language is part of this individualism (120, 161, 185, 192). Denise Troutman argues that black women often use an assertive, outspoken style of speech (219). In general, the African-American community values sophisticated verbal skills and associates such ability with intelligence (223, 234). Furthermore, Richard O. Lewis has pointed out that African-American writers use AAVE to emphasize their political and social commentary. AAVE can effectively convey the characters' "strong emotion. The language of these characters marks impropriety; it signals commission of some taboo act that transgresses society's limits. These challenge phrases indicate conflict between authority figures and subordinate figures" (27). Lewis's analysis applies to Sylvia: she is a rebellious youngster who dislikes having to learn summer lessons from Miss Moore, an older woman and the authority figure in the story. Sylvia's language, which includes cursing, expresses her self-confidence, nonconformity, anger, frustration, and inventiveness.

In the opening sentence of "**The Lesson**," Bambara clearly indicates that Sylvia is narrating in AAVE. Here, Sylvia describes Miss Moore as an adult with "nappy hair" (87). The word *nappy*, of course, originated in AAVE, though it has passed into standard usage (see *nappy*, Major 315; Smitherman 64; and *nappy*, the first lexical definition, *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3d ed., 1993). Sylvia also notices that Miss Moore has "proper speech" (87). In contrast to the children in the story, Miss Moore is college-educated and speaks Standard American English. According to Sylvia, the other blacks in the neighborhood tended to

"laugh" at Miss Moore, made fun of her behind her back, and even "kinda hated her" because she seemed to them to be putting on airs. However, the black adults respect Miss Moore's education and allow her to teach their children in an informal summer school session. At first, Sylvia and the other kids view Miss Moore's lessons as "boring-ass," but by the end of the story, they have greater respect for her because a field trip that originally seems to be about arithmetic turns out to be quite revolutionary: by showing them the pricey toy store F. A. O. Schwarz, Miss Moore has made them question the fairness of social and economic class stratification in America.

In creating the character of Miss Moore, Bambara may have been influenced by the writings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose work she admired. Bambara praises Freire's "activist pedagogy" and quotes Freire's dictum, "The purpose of educational forms is to reflect and encourage the practice of freedom" (Bambara, "**Education**" 250). Also, as a child, Bambara had an older friend whom she called Grandma Dorothy who "steeped me in the tradition of Afrocentric aesthetic regulations, who trained me to understand that a story should be informed by the emancipatory impulse. [...] She taught that a story [...] should be grounded in cultural specificity and shaped by the modes of Black art practice" (249-50). Thus, Miss Moore may also be modeled on Bambara's mentor, Grandma Dorothy. In the 1974 essay "On the Issue of Black English," Bambara writes that the goal of teachers of black children should not be to force-feed Standard American English, white conversational rituals, or mindless answers to questions. Rather, teachers should strive "to develop question-oriented students. Inquiring. Explanatory. Curious. Critical. Analytical. An informed citizenry is one that can raise the intelligent question itself" (111). Miss Moore may represent one aspect of Bambara herself.

Sylvia represents another aspect of Bambara. "On the Issue of Black English" conveys the spirit, pride, and combativeness of an adult version of Sylvia. Bambara fills this essay with sentence fragments, AAVE vocabulary, AAVE syntax, taboo words, and in-your-face confrontation of traditional methods of indoctrinating black students with standard English. The piece is also full of humor, as is "**The Lesson.**" Bambara even inserts a mini-drama in the middle with a black educator trying hard to explain AAVE to a group of prejudiced white teachers. Bambara comments after the dialogue, "You can lead a fool to water but the trip'll be a thorough drag" (110).

In "**The Lesson,**" Sylvia's consistent narration in AAVE enables Bambara to indicate that Sylvia is an African-American child without the author's having to state this explicitly. However, Bambara does have Sylvia comment on the shade of Miss Moore's skin ("And she was black as hell"), and Sylvia refers to her own family members' having "all moved North the same time" (87). These comments

also give clues about the characters' race and their recent move to New York from the South.

The young narrator's language makes her ethnicity quite clear in its phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax. An example of Sylvia's use of AAVE phonological rules is that she often simplifies consonant clusters (apocope) in words like *ole* for *old* (88). Sylvia occasionally adds extra syllables to words to avoid consonant clusters such as *pr*, using "puredee" (88) for *pretty*. At other times, she simply engages in syllable contraction, which is a feature of AAVE and of many vernacular American dialects. Sylvia shortens *because* to *cause* (87, 89, 94, 95, 96), *before* to *fore* (91), *ashamed* to *shamed* (93), *especially* to *'specially* (94). John Baugh transcribes the sounds in *cause* as /kawz/ (61). Guy Bailey and Erik Thomas list "unstressed syllable deletion (initial and medial syllables)" as a feature of AAVE phonology. They argue that this feature is present in "most English varieties; more frequent in AAVE" (88). Another common example in "**The Lesson**" is *cept* for *except* (87). Baugh gives *cept* as an example of "syllable contraction" in what he calls "black street speech." In fact, Baugh notes that the word can be further shortened to be pronounced /sɛp/ (61). He observes, "Speakers reduce syllables quite regularly in the vernacular" (62). Sylvia usually changes [e] to [n]. For example, she describes Miss Moore "knockin herself out about arithmetic" (88), Junebug "punchin on Q.T.'s arm for potato chips" (88), the children "hangin out the window" of a taxicab (89), Sylvia and Sugar "screamin" (90), Miss Moore explaining "the somethinorother in a speck of blood" (90).

Some writers use "eye dialect" to emphasize AAVE. Holton defines eye dialect as "variations from normal spelling that do not indicate significant dialectal differences in pronunciation" (58). However, Bambara avoids eye dialect in "**The Lesson.**" The only exception is in the last sentence, where Sylvia uses the word "nuthin" for *nothing* (96). Bambara's avoidance of eye dialect gives Sylvia more dignity than the black characters of white authors like Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain. Toni Morrison has complained in *Playing in the Dark* that eye dialect distorts characters: "the dialogue of black characters is construed as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disfamilarize it" (52). Similarly, Holton argues, "Eye dialect calls the reader's attention to the 'difference' of the speech without really contributing to its 'realism.' [...] Often eye dialect is added in the represented speech of a character who is to be patronized by the reader" (58). Eye dialect can even make a character appear stupid. William Dahill-Baue believes that eye dialect can "misrepresent and minstrelize" black characters and that it also has racist connotations (461, 463). Gavin Jones agrees, calling eye dialect "orthographic buffoonery that inscribed the semiliterate status of the speaker" (38). Jones points out that some dialect writers reveal "a racist logic of black difference and inferiority" related to the notion

"that intellectual capacity was strictly limited by nonstandard speech" (45-46). Bambara does not want to use eye dialect because it may distance the reader from her characters and degrade them. While "**The Lesson**" uses humor, Bambara wishes readers to take her ideas seriously and respect her intelligent characters.

Sylvia's AAVE lexicon clearly reflects her heritage. I have already discussed her use of *nappy* in the first sentence of "**The Lesson.**" Later in the story, Sylvia gets annoyed when Miss Moore tries to focus the children's attention on the poverty of their neighborhood. Sylvia tells the reader, "And then she gets to the part about we all poor and live in the slums, which I don't feature" (89). *Feature* is an AAVE slang term here for "comprehend; understand" (see Major 167). Other AAVE slang terms that she uses include *winos* (87) and *lay on* for *give* (88). In *Juba to Jive*, Major explains that AAVE borrowed *wino* from "hobo" usage (512), and *lay on* is shortened from "lay [something] on [one]" (278). When the children arrive in downtown Manhattan in a cab, they "check out [...] Fifth Avenue" (89). *Check out* is an idiom in AAVE meaning "to closely observe; pay attention" (Major 88). Inside the toy store, Miss Moore comments that a microscope enables people to see what is "invisible to the naked eye." The children react strongly to an adult's reference to human nakedness: Sylvia describes the kids as "rolling" (90), which is one way to refer to laughing uproariously in AAVE's youth culture (Major 388, first definition of *roll*). All of these terms from the AAVE lexicon remind readers that the children are black and proud of their own culture.

Even the names of the children in the story mark their socioeconomic class and their cultural difference from the white community. The unique AAVE monikers also foreground and celebrate the children's black heritage. Sylvia's cousins and neighborhood friends sport names like Rosie Giraffe, Sugar, Junebug (also called Junior [88]), Q. T., Flyboy, and Big Butt (also referred to as Fat Butt [88]; Miss Moore calls him Ronald [90]). Barbara Hill Hudson argues that AAVE speakers in works by African-American women writers are likely to use diminutives and to use both a first and last name as in "Rosie Giraffe" (120). Denise Troutman's research shows that "culturally-toned diminutives" like "girl" and "Gracie" are characteristics of African American Women's Language or AAWL (217). According to Clarence Major, *sugar* is "a term of affection or endearment for either sex" in AAVE (457). *Junebug* is "a variant of 'Junior Boy,' nickname for one who is named after his father" (266). *Q. T.* means "quiet" and is a contraction of *on the QT* (371). He is, in fact, the youngest and quietest of all of the neighborhood children in "**The Lesson.**" One girl is named Mercedes, which may indicate some Latina heritage but is also a noun in youth culture AAVE meaning "an attractive and shapely young woman" (Major 301). She is the only young person in "**The Lesson**" who uses Standard American English consistently (91, 92, 95). Her family seems to

have more money to spend than the other children's families do, and they tend to harass Mercedes for this reason, especially Rosie Giraffe (92, 95). Big Butt's name could refer to his obesity, or it could be a variant of *bigass*, which is American slang for "pretentiously large," "pretentious," "self-important," or "arrogant" (Chapman 24, Spears 16). *Flyboy* became military slang during World War II and refers to "an aviator, esp[ecially] a glamorous, heroic, or daring aviator" and is often used ironically. According to Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, *flyboy* is now a derogatory term that implies snobbishness (194). Eugene E. Landy defines *fly* as an underground verb meaning "take narcotics" or "feel the effects of a drug" (81). Major does not list *flyboy* in *Juba to Jive*; however, he includes *fly*, which is a verb derived from Gullah that means "to be fast and ecstatic; brash; good or great" (177). David Claerbaut defines *fly* as an adjective meaning "neat in appearance; stylish looking" or "attractive in manner, alluring in character" (64). Tony Thorne also considers *fly* an adjective and explains the term as black street slang for "streetwise, fashionable" (142). Major also lists *flychick* as an AAVE noun meaning "a pleasure-loving, party-going young female" (177) and *flygirl*, another AAVE noun referring to "an attractive girl" (178). *Flyboy* seems to be an analogous compound.

Sylvia is aware that her dialect differs from that spoken by Miss Moore. For example, when Sylvia shifts code from her usual informal vernacular AAVE to use a vocabulary word that she picked up from Miss Moore, Sylvia emphasizes this shift for the reader: "So me and Sugar leaning on the mailbox being surly, which is a Miss Moore word" (88). Bambara relies on the reader's awareness of Sylvia's self-conscious choice of AAVE as the vehicle for narration in this story.

Because Sylvia narrates "**The Lesson**" as if she is speaking to a peer, she curses and uses other taboo expressions to convey her annoyance with Miss Moore and other nuisances in her life. For example, Sylvia refers to Miss Moore's being "black as hell" (87), the junk man's "sorry-ass horse" (87), the drunks who "pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play [...] without a goddamn gas mask" (87), Miss Moore's "boring-ass things for us to do" (87), Aunt Gretchen's falling for "some ole dumb shit foolishness" (88), "the starch in my pinafore scratching the shit outta me and I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree" (88). Sylvia terms Miss Moore a "bitch" again on page 93. Sylvia calls Flyboy "a faggot" (89), she is angry at Big Butt "for bringing it [the microscope] up in the first damn place" (90), the high price of a toy sailboat "pisses me off" (92), and she complains about Mercedes's "smart ass" (92). Speculating about Q. T.'s being too young for the expensive sailboat, Sylvia concludes, "So what the hell" (92). When she is confused about Miss Moore's references to the economic *pie*, Sylvia tells readers that none of the children understands "what kind of pie she talkin about in the first

damn place" and complains about Miss Moore's "Messin up my day with this shit" (95). At the end of the day, Sylvia dreads another "draggy-ass lecture" from her mentor (95). Some of the other children also use taboo phrases. For example, when jealous of Mercedes's desk and perfumed stationery, Rosie Giraffe insults her about the "smelly-ass stationery" (91).

Baugh has discovered that people use slang and curse most frequently when speaking with peers (84). Arthur K. Spears terms such language "uncensored mode" because labels like "obscene" are biased. He argues that, in general, uncensored speech has increased in frequency in the United States over the last half century, not just in AAVE. Spears contends that this is "a by-product of American culture" ("African-American" 226, 232). However, Spears believes that "directness," including uncensored mode, characterizes more speech in AAVE than in Standard American English. In fact, he considers directness a basic "*principle*" of AAVE. The directness of AAVE gets expressed in "aggressiveness, candor, dysphemism, negative criticism, upbraiding, conflict, abuse, insult, and obscenity--all frequently deployed in the context of consciously manipulated interpersonal drama." Spears insists that understanding the context and AAVE norms of direct speech helps one to determine whether it conveys a positive or negative message ("Directness" 243-45). Direct speech can be used for a variety of functions, including to "demonstrate verbal wit and creativity, express the speaker's emotional state" (248).

Such creativity and strong emotions characterize Sylvia's use of directness in "**The Lesson.**" She clearly uses *damn* and other four-letter words to emphasize her feelings. Sylvia's "-ass words" also express her emotions and ability to use language creatively. Spears finds such compounds, which he abbreviates as "AWs," frequent in AAVE. Such words also have "rhythmic utility" and even a poetic quality in sentences. Spears emphasizes that AAVE speakers value "expressive ingenuity and social effect" ("African-American" 237-38). Sylvia's creative use of uncensored speech in "**The Lesson**" conveys her intelligence and rebelliousness. Elliott Butler-Evans has observed that Bambara's female characters break "society's stereotypes of females as fragile and vulnerable" (98). Sylvia's AWs and other taboo expressions emphasize her toughness, strong emotions, and unconventional attitude.

AAVE also strongly influences Sylvia's syntax in "**The Lesson.**" Workingclass and young blacks are more likely to use the distinctive syntactical features of AAVE (Rickford and Rickford 126-27; Wolfram, *Sociolinguistic* 136, 141, 156, 169), and Sylvia fits into both categories. Like many vernacular speakers, Sylvia does not add *-ly* to distinguish between adjectives and adverbs: her family members "then spread out gradual to breathe" (87), "he don't need it bad as I do" (89), "we talk about his mama something ferocious" (89), "'Can we steal?' Sugar

asks very serious" (89), the toy sailboat might "sail two kittens across the pond if you strap them to the posts tight" (91-92), little Q. T. "wanted it [the sailboat] bad" (92), Sugar "teased me so bad I tied her up in the shower" (93), and "I watched Miss Moore who is steady watchin us like she waitin for a sign" (94).

AAVE speakers often do not use *-ed* as the past tense or past participle morpheme. Sylvia reveals this pattern in clauses like "And school suppose to let up in summer" and "I'm really hating this nappy-head bitch" (88). The first example involves consonant cluster simplification. Baugh observes that further syllable reduction can take place: "suppose" can be pronounced two ways by AAVE speakers: /əspoz/ more formally and /spoz/ informally (61). Geneva Smitherman points out, "Black Dialect relies on either the context of the immediate sentence or the context of an entire conversation to signal conditions of time," rather than using the *-ed* suffix (26).

Sylvia often uses multiple negatives, which are characteristic of AAVE and other vernaculars. For example, she complains about Miss Moore, "She don't never let up" (88), describes the children placing bets on what the taxi meter will read "when Flyboy can't hold his breath no more" (89), and insists "I have never ever been shy about doing nothing or going nowhere" (93). Her friend Big Butt even generates a triple negative: "And I don't get no homework neither" (91). Multiple negation in AAVE and southern vernacular dialects is often combined with inversion or "fronting" of negative auxiliary verbs (see Wolfram, *Dialects* 293). This combination is evident when Sylvia gets annoyed with the other children because "Don't nobody want to go for my plan" (89) and has trouble understanding Miss Moore because "don't none of us know what kind of pie she talkin about" (95). Sylvia ends the story with a triple negative combined with fronting of the auxiliary verb: "But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin" (96). Baugh's research indicates that "Multiple negation is [...] one aspect of the vernacular that speakers can consciously manipulate" (82). Sylvia uses multiple negation to create emphasis, to identify with the black community, to express defiance of school lessons, and to emphasize her self-confidence.

Sylvia's dialect often reveals a unique feature of AAVE, the absence of *is* as a copula and as an auxiliary verb (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 171). For example, she resents Miss Moore's intruding on summer vacation to teach the children lessons when "she not even related by marriage or blood" (88). The narrator describes another child: "And Flyboy checking out what everybody brought for lunch" (88). Similarly, Bambara writes, "And Rosie Giraffe shifting from one hip to the other waiting for somebody to step on her foot or ask her if she from Georgia so she can kick ass" (88). Like many vernacular speakers, Sylvia also deletes *are* in analogous contexts. In the taxicab, "they all fascinated with the meter ticking" (89). Feeling self-conscious, Sylvia explains, "And people lookin at us" (93). Other



examples include this passage: "Then we check out that we on Fifth Avenue and everybody dressed up in stockings. One lady in a fur coat. ... White folks crazy" (89). William Labov's research on New York speakers of AAVE indicates that street speakers can omit *is* and *are* in the same syntactic environments where Standard American English speakers may use contractions of the copula (73). However, the research of Walt Wolfram, Roger W. Shuy, and Ralph W. Fasold on the speech of six- to eight-year-old black and white lower-class children in Lexington, Mississippi, shows that the black children rarely use contractions with *are*, unlike white children, who often use such contractions. Such findings raise questions about Labov's conclusions about copula deletion as a phonological rule and the close relationship between contractions and the zero copula (Wolfram, "Black-White" 148-50). Patricia Cukor-Avila has found evidence that since World War II, more black speakers manifest "zero copula before non-stative adjectives" (117). Similarly, John R. Rickford argues that younger African Americans delete *is* and *are* more often than their parents or grandparents do, especially when talking to friends (10). As a narrator, Sylvia addresses us readers as if we were friends, so she feels free to omit the copula.

Another unique feature of AAVE is the "remote time stressed *béen* to mark [...] a state that began a long time ago and is still relevant" (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 171). Smitherman argues that the stressed *béen* also shows emphasis (23). Sylvia uses this feature in sentences like "She been screwed into the go-along [...]" (88). At times, the past participle of an irregular verb can replace the past tense form in AAVE (McGreevy). Sylvia uses this feature in phrases like "pushing me off her feet like she never done before" (95). In addition, Sylvia uses the completive *done* instead of *had* as an auxiliary verb in sentences like "Sugar done swiped her mama's lipstick, so we ready" (89). Baugh terms this latter example "perfective *done*," which indicates "completed actions." He notes that southern white dialects also use perfective *done*. Baugh emphasizes that in AAVE, *done* has both "perfective functions and an intensifier role similar to that of *really*" in Standard American English (69, 74-77). Smitherman points out that when *done* is used with other verbs, it indicates that an action has been recently completed and thus resembles SAE's *have*, *has*, or *had* (24).

Sometimes, Sylvia omits the auxiliary *do*, especially in questions. Speculating about the people who can afford the expensive toys at F. A. O. Schwarz, she asks herself, "What kinda work they do and how they live [...]" (94).

Like many speakers of AAVE and other vernacular dialects, Sylvia often deletes the -s morpheme in possessive constructions and in third-person singular forms in the present tense. The latter involves regularization of verbs, and both of these rules often involve consonant cluster simplification. "**The Lesson**" contains many examples of -s absence: "Junebug foot still in the door" (89), "she say" (88), "Miss

Moore say" (89), "So here go Miss Moore" (90), "Junebug go to town on that 'naked'" (90), "Then Miss Moore ask what it cost" (90), "And she know damn well what our homes look like" (91), "'And you got the strap,' laugh Big Butt" (92), "And he rap him on the head" (92), "Then Sugar run a finger over the whole boat" (94). Sometimes, Sylvia uses a singular verb for a plural subject: "the million and one living things in the air around us is invisible to the naked eye" (90). In addition, she uses an unmarked verb for a singular subject, especially the verb *do*: "it don't make sense" (90), "Only she don't lead the way" (93), "But it don't necessarily have to be that way" (94), and "she don't continue" (95). Similarly, Sugar tells Miss Moore, "Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don't it?" (95). Further regularization of verb forms is evident when Rosie Giraffe worries that the expensive sailboat will just "get all broke up" (93). She uses *broke*, the standard past tense form, for the irregular past participle *broken*.

Sometimes, Sylvia adds -s to the present tense first person verb, as she does in "I says to Miss Moore" (93). Such AAVE verb forms "mark a lively past time narrative" (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 179). Some researchers believe that forms like *I says* are variable features used for stylistic effect, such as greater emphasis (Baugh 65, citing Walter Pitts).

Occasionally, Sylvia uses verbs that mark the aspect of an action rather than the tense. Complaining about her Aunt Gretchen's falling for hare-brained schemes, Sylvia insists, "You got some old dumb shit foolishness you want somebody to go for, you send for Aunt Gretchen" (88). This sentence shifts from past to present verb tense, but Sylvia clearly indicates that Gretchen's gullibility causes her to commit the family to misadventures frequently. Furthermore, AAVE allows one to delete *if* from adverbial clauses like "If you got some ..." (Dillard 63-64). A similar verb tense shift occurs in "And I watched Miss Moore who is steady watchin us like she waitin for a sign" (94). Dillard points out that AAVE speakers often mark verbs "for the ongoing, continuous, or intermittent quality of an action rather than for the time of its occurrence." Unlike Standard American English, AAVE "gives the speaker an option with regard to tense, but its rules demand that he commit himself as to whether the action was continuous or momentary" (43-44). *Steady* in the quotation from "**The Lesson**" is a modal in AAVE, and *steady* serves as an intensified continuative. Baugh notes, "*Steady* typically occurs with progressive [...] verbs," it is associated with a process, and it denotes an action completed on one occasion. *Steady* indicates that the verb's action is "intense, consistent, and continuous" (86-87). Bambara's use of *steady* in the above sentence emphasizes Miss Moore's intense focus on watching the children in F. A. O. Schwarz to see whether they understand the importance of her lesson.

Sylvia also uses *ain't* instead of *isn't*. She is bored at first when Miss Moore talks about "how money ain't divided up right in this country" (89), she complains that

her friend Big Butt "ain't got the first notion" of what to do with a microscope (90), and she asserts that Miss Moore "ain't so smart cause I still got her four dollars from the taxi and she sure ain't gettin it" (95). Other nonstandard contractions that Sylvia uses include "scratching the shit outta me" (88), "I say we oughta get to the subway" (89), "I gotta have that" (90), "Whatcha gonna do" (90), "she ask how long'd take" (90), "I dunno" (92), "I kinda hang back" (93), "What kinda work they do?" (94). Sylvia imagines her mother rebuking her, "You wanna who that costs what?" (94). Sylvia concludes the story with "But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin" (96). Contractions with the second word *to* condensed to /ta/ or /na/ and *of* condensed to /a/ are especially frequent in her dialect. Sometimes, Sylvia generates a contraction that is common in AAVE but not in SAE. She states that Junebug doubts Miss Moore's veracity at one point and wonders whether "Miss Moore crazy or lyin one" (90). *One* here is an elliptical expression for *one or the other*.

J. L. Dillard has pointed out that AAVE often uses "the undifferentiated pronoun (*him, me, her, them*) as subject of the verb" (60). In Bambara's "**The Lesson**," the subjects of many clauses are "me and Sugar" (87-91, 93-94). Standard adult English would be *Sugar and I*, but many children and vernacular English speakers in general do not use *I* consistently as a subject pronoun and do not put the pronoun last in a series. Dillard observes that this use of object pronouns happens most frequently "where there is more than one subject (*him and me, me and you*, in casual styles)"; however, he argues that it is an important "distinctive" feature of AAVE (60).

Similarly, AAVE, like forms of pidgin English and many nonstandard dialects, uses the undifferentiated pronoun as a demonstrative form. Sylvia employs this construction to describe Miss Moore's smile: "Givin me one of them grins like she tellin a grown-up joke that never turns out to be funny" (94). At this moment, Sylvia is furious about the economic and social inequality that her visit to F. A. O. Schwarz has revealed.

Sylvia, like many speakers of AAVE and other vernaculars, uses the article *a* before a vowel sound, while Standard American English switches to *an*. For example, she refers to "a oven" (90).

Another AAVE syntactic feature of Sylvia's narrative is her frequent use of fragments. Carol E. Reed has pointed out that in AAVE, "If the 'subject' has been stated, fragments and run-ons may follow because there is no need to repeat the subject" (cited by Lewis, Appendix C, 56). Bambara uses fragments to develop her narrator's character. Referring to Miss Moore, Sylvia points her out to the reader as "The only woman on the block with no first name" (87). This fragment emphasizes Sylvia's age and creates humor because an adult would know that

Miss Moore must have a first name; her neighbors use the title *Miss Moore* to convey respect and to express their distance from a college-educated woman. Another good example of a fragment following a stated subject is the following: "So right away I'm tired of this and say so. And would much rather snatch Sugar and go to the Sunset and terrorize the West Indian kids and take their hair ribbons and their money too" (88). Bored with Miss Moore's lesson on money, restless Sylvia imagines more profitable ways to spend a summer day. The fragment emphasizes her lack of conventional values and her aggressiveness. After Miss Moore responds to her question about the cost of a yacht, "Why don't you check that out [...] and report back to the group?," Sylvia generates the fragment, "Which really pains my ass" (93) to express her anger with her mentor. She also spouts fragments when the high prices of the toys at F. A. O. Schwarz shock her: "Cost \$35" (94), "Handcrafted sailboat of fiberglass at one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars" (93).

Sylvia's narration contains references to AAVE metaphorical practices, such as the dozens: when angry at their cab driver, the children "talk about his mama something ferocious" (89). Verbal games like the dozens focus on something that is socially and/or culturally significant for blacks and place it "in implausible contexts." These games use "irony, sarcasm, wit, and humor in order to *play* with the serious signifier" (Morgan 267-68). Many of the tropes used focus on the targeted person's mother, perhaps using the common reverence for one's mother "as an emotional weapon" (Perceland 22). The most common dozens examples have the following structure: "Your mother (is) so *adjectival* ... (that). ..." Morgan cites the following trope: "Your mother is so old that when she read(s) the Bible she reminisces" (269-70). Sylvia's and her friends' use of the dozens reflects their wittiness, combativeness, and cultural grounding in the African-American tradition.

Like many speakers of AAVE, Sylvia uses hyperbole very creatively for emphasis. In the first paragraph of "**The Lesson**," she complains about the winos in her neighborhood whose urine "stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and-seek without a goddamn gas mask" (87). Bambara highlights the hyperbole and colorful language by repeating the *st*, [k], [g], [s], [a], and [h] sounds. When the group of children enters F. A. O. Schwarz, Sylvia narrates, "Then the rest of us tumble in like a glued-together jigsaw done all wrong" (93). The simile here stresses the lower-class black children's feeling out-of-place in a store designed for wealthy white families. In the concluding paragraphs of the story, Sylvia describes the children's return to their neighborhood: "Miss Moore lines us up in front of the mailbox where we started from, seem like years ago [...]" (95). Her exaggeration of the passage of time foregrounds both her tendency to get bored and the disturbing lesson that the children have learned at F. A. O. Schwarz.

What has Sylvia learned in "**The Lesson**"? Jerome Cartwright has argued, "Rather than simply teaching a single lesson, the story is essentially about the value of lessons themselves, the value of learning and thinking" (61). He emphasizes Sylvia's initial resistance to learning from Miss Moore (62) and contrasts her final commitment "to think this day through" (Bambara 96). Cartwright believes that Sylvia's new focus will help her to make it in a difficult world (63).

Martha M. Vertreace agrees with Cartwright that Sylvia has learned something important. However, Vertreace believes that the child has learned a different kind of lesson. Vertreace argues that Bambara's central theme is "the question of identity--of personal definition within the context of community. [...] Her female characters become as strong as they do [...] because of the lessons women learn from communal interaction. Identity is achieved, not bestowed" (155). When the community is the "locus for growth," Vertreace contends, "Learning then influences societal liberation and self-determination." She sees similarities between the learning in Bambara's stories and "older, tribal milieus" (156) in which the elders teach the young people. In "**The Lesson**," Miss Moore serves as the older guide who creates a learning community among the children (159).

Elliott Butler-Evans insists that the major purpose of Bambara's stories "is the awakening of cultural nationalist and feminist consciousness." Bambara's use of AAVE supports her didactic goals: "the linguistic subcode itself, a reified construction of 'Black English,' becomes the sign of difference from the dominant culture and unity with the alternative Black community" (121).

One can also interpret "**The Lesson**" as emphasizing the need to question one's society and one's role within that society. By the end of the story, Miss Moore asks the children and Sylvia is asking herself many questions about why some people have lots of money and can afford expensive toys and why other people have very different lives (94-95). Note that Sylvia uses AAVE to pose many of these questions: "Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1,000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it?" (94). This shows that Miss Moore's teaching style has worked well, and her pedagogy fits the model that Bambara outlined in "On the Issue of Black English." Bambara implies that we readers should ask questions similar to those of Sylvia and that we need to ask these questions in the framework of our own culture. The author's relationship to her readers resembles Miss Moore's relationship to the young black children in her neighborhood.

Thus, AAVE has multiple functions within "**The Lesson**." AAVE is a realistic framework for the speech of a ghetto child, it conveys Sylvia's pride in her heritage, it develops the themes of social inequality, it links Sylvia to her

community, and it expresses her untraditional toughness and self-confidence as a young woman. AAVE also embodies Sylvia's and Bambara's ability to question their society and to resist the pressure to conform to the dominant culture.

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