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## Finding Their Chrysanthemum: Linguistic Representation in Children's Literature

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Finding Their Chrysanthemum: Linguistic Diversity in Children's Literature

By Marielena Zajac

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2022

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## Introduction

My name is Marielena Josephine Zajac (Mary-uh-layn-uh Joseph-eeen Zay-jack).

I always knew that there was something different about my name. I knew how to spell it in full by the time I was three, trying to outshine my older brother who was struggling to sit and read the homework he'd bring home from preschool. I had a fourth-grade reading level by the time I hit kindergarten, and when I went to school for the first time, I flipped through every book I could get my little hands on. I was a sponge, constantly absorbing words and stories and pictures until I eventually began asking for books as presents. Books have been my world for as long as I can remember, but not one single book had a character with a name like mine. That was when I first began to notice that I was something no kid wants to be: different.

Once I began school, I noticed how teachers would never struggle with other students' names but always butchered mine. The roll call and class lines were torture for me because with a last name starting with "Z," I was not only the last to be called on, but I was also the one with the most noticeably difficult name in the class. Having to gently correct my teacher on how to say my name was absolutely mortifying. Thankfully, the teachers were always kind and after a week of self-correction they'd usually be able to pronounce my name without missing a beat. But I was still the girl with the weird name, the one who drew attention to herself simply by existing. As a form of escapism, I went to my books.

My mom was incredibly supportive of my reading addiction and enabled me frequently. Trips to the bookstore were always an adventure, and if I ever got in trouble, I would be grounded from the little library I had made for myself. Sometimes I would also find new books just added to the shelves, stories that became regular bedtime reads or would casually replace the older books that I had essentially destroyed from reading so many times. One day, when I was

around seven years old, I found a book on the shelf called *Chrysanthemum*, written by Kevin Henkes. I don't remember the exact moment I stumbled upon it, or if I specifically begged Mom to buy it after a recent trip to Walmart. Regardless, all I remember was reading it and feeling. . . *seen.*

The story is about a little white mouse named Chrysanthemum, who absolutely loves her name. One day, a couple of Chrysanthemum's friends tease her, saying her name is too long and complicated. The music teacher, Mrs. Twinkle, defends Chrysanthemum, claiming that a lot of people, including herself (her first name is Delphinium), have long names and that long names are beautiful. The two friends who initially teased Chrysanthemum become jealous because they don't have long names, and Chrysanthemum is once again proud of her name. *Her identity.*

I read that book every single day for a month.

This was the first time I truly identified with a character in a book. Until then, I had thought I'd never read about someone with my similar experiences. I had constantly been exposed to books who had characters named Jessica, Ashley, and Sarah (all of which were popular female names in America in the 1990's). But after reading this book, I realized that there were people out there, like me, who had long complicated names, and that I should be proud of my label, my identifier. As an adult looking back, I am convinced my mother saw my struggle with my name and looked for this book as a way to reach out and truly speak to me and my experience.

As I got older, I realized that a lot of the kids around me also found identity and acceptance in books but in different ways. Some were proud to see their culture portrayed in a positive light; others felt relief and acceptance through portrayals of LGBTQ+ youth. To me,

books have always been synonymous with identity and community, with embracing your uniqueness through the stories you read.

During my time as a SAT and ACT prep tutor, however, I began to see that my views about books weren't shared with the students I taught. Many of my students expressed frustration with the standard language they needed to master in order to go on to their dream universities and voiced how there was a disconnect between how they talked every day and what was expected of them in what they wrote or how they learned English Language Arts (ELA). I found myself also asking similar questions: why do we normalize the importance of different accents and dialects in media and everyday conversation, but penalize those incredible, valid languages in educational settings?

These questions led me to apply to be a graduate teaching assistant in Kennesaw State University's Master of Arts in Professional Writing program. I wanted to see how I could help change the negative narrative associated with reading and English language acquisition and discern how best I could share my love of reading and writing with future generations. During this time as a TA, I was introduced to linguistic principles of code-meshing, translanguaging, and World Englishes. Notably, World Englishes seek to validate the many dialects and accents of English not only throughout America but also throughout nations around the world that use English in conjunction with their native languages.

As my studies continued, I realized a profoundly troubling concept: American children are taught from an early age that Standard American English is the socially correct way to speak and write. And this linguistic expectation didn't necessarily only apply to those from racial minority backgrounds—many of my White students with thick Southern accents shared that they felt they were “too dumb” to read or write because teachers and students had mocked how they

talked. I understood this deeply. I am a North to South transplant; in addition to having a hard-to-pronounce name, as a child I had a thick Northeastern accent in a very Southern town. Dialect and accent, to me, became an issue that not only applied to the wonderful racial diversity in America, but also applied to the regional dialects and accents in our country.

Thankfully, the #OwnVoices movement emerged. This movement in the publishing industry sought to finally bring those with unique and marginalized voices to the table and give them the spotlight they deserved. Within this movement, however, discussions surrounding authenticity, authorial autonomy, and creative freedom have impeded the progress of diversity in publishing. Indeed, especially within children's and young adult literature, many #OwnVoices authors and publishing officials have now grown cautious and guarded to share their stories for fear of either cancellation or stereotyping. This conundrum highlights how multi-layered the issue of linguistic authenticity can be, showing that no movement without true self-reflection and action can be successful.

To help further the conversation and promotion of linguistic diversity in American society, this capstone will analyze dialectal representations in children's and young adult literature. One of the first ways children are exposed to standard language ideology—which Rosina Lippi-Green defines in her book *English with an Accent* as “a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions” (67)—is through media. With this in mind, I will explore current literature and resources that discuss literacy acquisition in adolescents, trends in dialects in America, and childhood sense of self at an early age. While linguistics focuses on features such as pronunciation and phonetics, this capstone will analyze the attitudes that surround language. Therefore, I will discuss current trends in the publishing industry regarding voice and African



American, Latinx/Spanish-speaking, and Appalachian/Southern linguistic representation in fictional children's and young adult literature; this conversation regarding trends in the industry will lead to an analysis of the relationship between authenticity of voice and the #OwnVoices movement. From there, I will dissect and critically assess first-hand insights from children's book publishing professionals as to how the industry can best include and promote the importance of seeing and hearing children's voices in the books they read.

As I start this capstone, I wish to take a moment to ask the reader to keep an open mind as well as an open heart. By sharing my personal literacy journey, I am in no way, shape, or form meaning to suggest that my experience with ostracization due to my name makes me on par with the hardship and struggles faced by minorities and marginalized American citizens today. I am a White, cisgender woman who grew up in an upper middle-class household where I was surrounded by every comfort and luxury I could have asked for. I've never faced outright discrimination due to the color of my skin, and I've never had to worry about women who look like me being portrayed in movies, TV shows, commercials, or books. I am extremely privileged to say the least and have had to do some real soul-searching and self-educating when it comes to race and identity because of that privilege.

Still, I go back to the seven-year-old who found comfort with a book because it made her proud of her long, convoluted name. And I can't help but think: if a little White girl from Connecticut found identity by recognizing her experiences and self in a book over something like a name, imagine what a book could do for a little Black boy whose family practices Islam; or a little girl who is first-generation Vietnamese American trying to find a book celebrating her nationality and traditions. Because of my experiences with books and identity, I now wish for

kids whose voices are silenced due to systemic and institutionalized racism to feel a sense of belonging. I want them to feel seen and to know their words and identities are valued.

So, I invite you to join me as I attempt to help future generations of Americans find their *Chrysanthemum*.

## Methods and Methodologies

When discussing accent in children's literature, there are many topics to consider. This capstone will explore the following topics which directly correlate to dialect in children's literature: linguistics, dialect, sociolinguistics, literacy acquisition, American publishing house practices, and the #OwnVoices movement. The existing literature addressing these topics seem to be discussed in great detail individually, but currently there is yet to be a comprehensive analysis of all of these subjects together and how they relate to each other. Therefore, this capstone will bridge the divide between linguistics and American publishing house practices to illuminate how multifaceted language representation has become in American publishing. In order to come to a full resolution with the lack of dialectal representation in children's literature, it is necessary to break down and directly address the many factors that contribute to silencing young voices.

### Research Questions

There were three research questions that shaped my capstone:

- What are the trends in children's fiction publishing regarding African American, Latinx/Spanish-speaking, and Appalachian/Southern dialectal representation for children and young adults?
- What can American publishing houses do to help produce more children's fiction books that accurately reflect African American, Latinx/Spanish-speaking, and Appalachian/Southern dialects in American society?
- Why is it important developmentally and socially for young children to see or hear their languages in children's books?

While there are many cultural and regional dialects in our country, I chose African American, Latinx/Spanish, and Appalachian/Southern because my past research indicated these were some of the most discussed (and therefore, stigmatized) American dialects in current affairs, including education reform, critical race theory, and political party stances. Additionally, I chose to explore children's literature broadly rather than limit the conversation to one age group; as my research progressed, it became impossible to not include young adult (YA) literature into this capstone because it seems to be, at this moment, the one sub-genre of children's literature that contains more instances of dialectal variation within their texts. I also chose to focus on fiction rather than other genres of children's literature because there is a lack of literature regarding linguistic representation within children's nonfiction or poetry books. Finally, I chose to investigate child psychology and literacy acquisition to gain insight into how children's identities might be formed from the texts they or their parents read growing up. Understanding the trends and overall regard for these three dialects was vital to ultimately understanding why people in power within publishing made certain decisions and strategies involving dialect and voice.

## **Methods**

The methods for collecting answers to my research questions employed a mixed methods approach including primary and secondary research. My secondary research mainly encompassed examining academic and scholarly journal articles, educational texts, linguistic and sociolinguistic books, and online sources valued by the publishing community, such as the *We Need Diverse Books* website. This secondary research, as presented in this capstone via literature review, will (1) analyze the history behind linguistic representation in children's literature, (2) explore African American, Latinx/Spanish-speaking, and Appalachian/Southern dialect variation in America, (3) explain childhood literacy acquisition in relation to self-identity, and (4)

critically analyze the history of the #OwnVoices movement in American publishing. All of these points of research will help explain how American society has grown to value one dialect over many (despite its label as a “melting pot”), why it is important children not only see themselves but also hear their home languages reflected in media, and what measures the publishing industry are enacting to address the issue of authentic voices in children’s literature.

Further, I wished to gather firsthand insights into the publishing industry from publishing officials themselves, so I contacted and interviewed industry professionals whom I had met through my studies at KSU’s MAPW program. These five individuals shared knowledge through interviews that helped me learn about the current trends and conversation surrounding dialect and accent in children’s and young adult literature and provided me with many fascinating pieces of information about marketing, editing, and bookselling. The interviews uniquely addressed gaps in the secondary research that had not addressed some critical topics. This capstone will reveal these insights, opinions, and trends, and indicate how prominent the #OwnVoices movement was in shaping current children’s and young adult publishing ideologies and practices.

## **Methodology**

The secondary research, which was gathered from scholarly sites, academic journals, educational texts, and other online repositories provided me with information regarding childhood literacy acquisition, the current changing landscape of American dialects, and specific historical and relevant material about African American, Latinx/Spanish-speaking, and Appalachian/Southern<sup>1</sup> dialect variation in America. To advocate for inclusive linguistic representation, I needed to understand how the dialects mentioned have been marginalized,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this project, the term *Appalachian/Southern* indicates that both the Appalachian and Southern dialects are unique yet similar in their nature. I will explore both dialects in further detail in the literature review.

silenced and ridiculed in American society to better show standard language ideology's negative ramifications on young, impressionable minds. The results of the secondary research will be shared in length in the literature review included in this capstone. The rich work of other scholars provided a foundation to this project that allowed me to better understand the work that has gone before me and identify critical gaps and opportunities for new questions and scholarship about American dialects, literacy acquisition, and children's publishing practices.

The primary research interviews (conducted via Zoom conferencing tool or in-person) were with children's publishing industry professionals who not only brought credibility to this research thesis but also helped accurately reflect the current conversation regarding linguistic representation in children's literature. The insights revealed from these publishing professionals were vital to understanding the current conversation surrounding dialects in children's literature as well as how the #OwnVoices movement attempted to rectify the lack of diversity within the industry. Indeed, these interviews revealed further insight into the decision-making process in children's publishing houses regarding book themes, author selection, and story creation in relation to children's and young adult literature and dialect.

During my studies in the MAPW program, I was privileged to meet several potential participants for this research project who expressed interest in my thesis prior to the initiation of the capstone—our early conversations in my classes helped me shape the research questions that underpin this work. When my capstone process began, I developed a research protocol in line with the KSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements to obtain permission for the interviews (IRB #FY22-304). Once I received IRB approval to conduct my interviews, I contacted these professionals via email with a message that stated the goal of my research, what their level of participation would entail, and how long the process would take. All of these

diverse methods enabled me to find answers to the research questions and add credibility to the research findings.

There were some limitations that arose during the primary research process. Due to my own restrictions, only five publishing professionals were interviewed and therefore only represent a small fraction of the voices within the industry. This lack of representation can lead to potential biases shared among the participants. Additionally, all of the interviewees were from the South and thus constituted that specific American region rather than all regions across the country. Further, four out of the five participants were White. Because of this primary focus on one region and central mentality on White experiences, there is a lack of firsthand experiences based on other regional and cultural dialects, such as Latinx/Spanish and African American English. Moving forward with the dissemination of information gathered from these interviews, those who read this capstone are advised to consider that the voices analyzed in this research provide a mere glimpse into the publishing industry overall.

To protect their anonymity, all interviewees were given the option to be represented in this project by alias. The first set of questions covered basic demographics and background:

- Please describe your experience in the publishing industry, including your current title and responsibilities. What led you to working in the children's and young adult book/publishing industry?
- Where did you grow up and where are you from?

The second set of questions focused on literacy acquisition in relation to American dialects:

- Describe your literacy journey as a child, and your educational background overall. What was your experience with books and reading growing up?

- Did you grow up listening to a specific dialect? If so, what was it? Did that dialect have an impact on you in any way in forming your identity? What dialects do you remember reading as a kid?

The third set of questions explored dialects in children's book publishing:

- What trends are you noticing in the children's and young adult book publishing industry?
- How has the publishing industry, most notably with children's, adolescent, and young adult markets, included dialect within recent titles?
- When you think of dialects in books, what do you consider? Vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, or something else?

During my secondary research, many authors and scholars (see Raughley; Hoffman et. al; Acevedo-Aquino et al) addressed the issue of authenticity within the publishing industry and thus became a surprising yet relevant component to addressing dialects in children's books. Because of this new information, I created a fourth set of questions which asked the participant to share their insights into how the children's publishing industry is addressing authenticity:

- What are current practices that the publishing industry is taking in portraying dialectal and linguistic authenticity? What kind of outside resources does the industry use when finding authentic voices?
- How do you think American publishing houses, big or small, can best represent dialects in their books?

Finally, the last question posited:

- What does "diverse" mean to you?



During each interview, the responses were recorded. Once the interviews were complete, the responses were kept in a safe, secure place as per IRB guidelines required, and from there I personally transcribed each interview for accuracy. After the interviews were transcribed, each participant's responses were compared to reveal qualitative results. In particular, I analyzed the results for common themes among the answers as well as any comments that presented a potential new direction in future conversations about dialects and authenticity. This textual analysis revealed many surprising answers and opened the door for further discussions regarding representation in children's literature. The results of those interviews will be described in detail later in this capstone.

## Literature Review

### Introduction

What does it mean to speak American? In our current divisive culture, American citizens seem to have differing, passionate responses to that question. There is a misconception that to be an American, one must assimilate to a common tongue and that speaking the same language will unify this nation and establish nationalistic pride. As current literature in linguistics, dialectology, and psychology show, though, this mentality is disruptive and a detriment to most American citizens. Further, research in the fields of literacy acquisition and child psychology reveal that a child's home language provides them with a strong sense of self and identity from an early age. This discord between American society's expectations of language and the increasingly changing dialectal landscape in this country has created a need for children's literature that portrays a wide variety of accents and languages in their texts. American publishing houses have begun to address this need through the #OwnVoices movement, a campaign aimed at solving the issue of diversity in publishing yet filled with complications that reveal new factors to consider in the fight for authentic representation.

This literature review provides a comprehensive look into all of these elements in linguistic representation in children's literature. Additionally, this section presents publishing industry officials, educators, parents, guardians, and librarians with questions that aim to promote further conversation regarding how best to showcase the many voices in this country in an inclusive and authentic manner. As the research will reveal, there is no one direct answer or solution to the lack of dialectal diversity in children's literature; nonetheless, the information shared will hopefully spread awareness regarding language representation in America in the hope of helping children see themselves in the texts they read.

## Defining Language

### *Human Language, Dialects, and Semantics*

In order to effectively approach the need for inclusive, accurate portrayals of American dialects and accents in children's literature, we must determine what makes a language, *a language*. In their book *How English Works*<sup>2</sup>, Anne Curzan and Michael Adams define *human language* as a conventional system of signs that allows for more creative communication of meaning (8). This definition correlates to many within linguistics, including from Harald Hammarstrom in his article "Linguistic Diversity and Language Evolution," in which he characterizes human language as a method of "expressing the entire communicative needs of human society" (19). Further, human language is shared by a community, follows a set system and organization of rules, and gives individuals a chance to be creative in how they choose to communicate different meanings and utterances (Curzan and Adams 8). Some of these creative methods can include "spoken languages where form is acoustic and there is a vowel/consonant distinction and signed languages where form is given by constellations of the human body" (Hammarstrom 19). These definitions and characteristics of human language give new meaning to the claim that "language is just language;" yes, human language is set by rules, but it also allows people to invent new methods of communication. For example, consider how changes in vocal patterns can change the meaning of the common phrase—often recognized in Southern vernacular—"bless your heart" into a negative connotation that politely dismisses someone or something.

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<sup>2</sup> *How English Works* will be heavily cited throughout this section. Anne Curzan and Michale Adams's comprehensive text provided a strong and vital foundation for this literature review along with other sources and research joining the analysis they provide, which so strongly supported this work.

The “bless your heart” example is just one of many when discussing *semantics*, “the study of meaning in language” (Curzan and Adams 204). Regarding semantics, there are three key limitations with respect to reference of words: (1) the meaning of words is complicated rather than straightforward because everyone has different experiences and interpretations; (2) words don’t necessarily have meaning outside of discourse or sentences; and (3) words have meaning in a specific cultural context, and removing that context removes the meaning (205). Semantics, then, can become dependent on physical cues and gestures, depending on the circumstance, for further clarification of a word’s meaning. Indeed, in their article “With Some Help from Others’ Hands,” Susaane Vogt and Christine Kauschke conducted a study of young children’s lexical learning patterns and found that children’s word-learning improved when they were presented with iconic gestures while simultaneously hearing new words, indicating that iconic gestures help improve lexical learning (3214). As Curzan and Adams share, “Understanding what a word means, then, depends on cognitively sorting through alternative meanings and selecting the most appropriate meaning for the context in which the word is used or understood” (205). Language isn’t solely dependent on lexical variation or mastery of grammatical rules; rather, language encompasses interpersonal, intercultural, and physical components that make it nuanced and situational.

Curzan and Adams continue their conversation by discussing language variation, which broadly encompasses concepts like dialectology, multilingualism, and accents. These authors define *dialect* as “a variety of a language spoken by a group of people that is systematically different from other varieties of language in terms of structural or lexical features” (347). Further, Walt Wolfram in his article “Everyone Has an Accent” states that dialects “denote patterns” and that “these patterns include pronunciation (or ‘accent’), vocabulary and

grammatical structures that reflect the user's cultural and regional background" (18). Wolfram's definition reveals that dialects actually have their own sets of rules regarding grammar and vocabulary, and that "dialect structures are in themselves natural and neutral." Given these definitions, there is still a misunderstanding in American society about what constitutes a language versus a dialect.

In his article "What's a Language, Anyway?," John McWhorter writes that "there is no objective difference between the two: Any attempt you make to impose that kind of order on reality falls apart in the face of real evidence." Instead, he claims that dialect and language seem to have a distinction based on "intelligibility," and that, by nature, dialect tends to be labeled as "lesser" in America due to others' inability to understand every dialect in our nation—someone from the Northeast may label a speaker of Southern dialect as inherently stupid or ignorant based solely off accent. This labeling highlights an important fact of language variation called *speech communities*, or "groups of speakers who share linguistic norms and ideologies" (Curzan and Adams 359). By examining the situation and community in which language variation thrives, it is easier for linguists and dialectologists to better understand the different factors in what makes a dialect, *a dialect*.

#### *Social Network Theory and Covert Prestige*

Additionally, Curzan and Adams contend that "your age, gender, socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and social networks can all have an effect on how you speak" (360). Specifically, "social network theory focuses on the networks of relationships that govern one speaker's regular interactions with others," and these networks are defined by their *density* and *multiplexity* (365). Sociolinguist Lesley Milroy is credited with introducing the concept of social networks in linguistics, observing in the 1986 article "Social Network and Linguistic Focusing" that

“network analysis is designed fundamentally to reflect the character of an individual’s relationship to the informally constituted groups with which he is associated.” Therefore, social network analysis is a “technique that can be seen as a useful tool for the purpose of characterizing the manner in which persons adapt their language to the language of the various groups to which they may be said to belong” (378–79). In sum, social network theory claims that the more you surround yourself with people you work with, socialize with, and live near, the more likely you are to pick up traits of that network’s vernacular. This concept seems pretty clear on paper; however, social networks become further complicated with regard to *covert prestige*.

Covert prestige refers “to the value that nonstandard varieties [of a language] carry within specific communities,” and this prestige “has the power to define membership within communities and mark group identification” (Curzan and Adams 351). In their article “Sound Barriers,” Natalie Lefkowitz and John Hedgcock call covert prestige a “paradox” due to its users’ desire to affiliate with high-status factions or individuals in the classroom discourse community who resist pedagogical and prestige speech norms (224). What this means, in a confusing and potentially challenging way when you consider social norms in America, is that when White teens speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE), these teens are responding to the covert prestige of this dialect within youth and popular cultures (Curzan and Adams 351). Indeed, covert prestige changes the narrative of cultural appropriation and raises some interesting questions that certainly require further research. For example, is it cultural appropriation if teens are simply reflecting the social community in which they live? To expand further—society tends to stigmatize poor, urban parts of major cities as a “ghetto” filled with African Americans even though many other cultures and ethnicities dwell within these parts of the city, and, therefore, adopt the same vernacular as that community. If a White child grows up

in the same environment as a Black child, in this scenario, is it appropriate to label the White child as someone who culturally appropriates (someone who adopts the customs and practices of a marginalized society without proper acknowledgement of those customs)? When people claim that a Black person “speaks White,” are we in turn accusing them of culturally appropriating “White” vernacular? Research and current conversations within the field of sociolinguistics shows that the line between dialects and cultural representation is not as clearly drawn as we have been led to believe.

Notably, in her book *English with an Accent*, author Rosina Lippi-Green states that language is a social construct, and how people think about language is crucial to studying language as a whole (6). Similarly, Curzan and Adams state that we use language to maintain friendships and relationships and can define us as social beings (4). Because of America English’s social nature, we as American citizens make choices daily about how we choose to represent ourselves linguistically, which can lead to judgement and discrimination regarding how we talk and communicate (6).

#### *Style-shifting, Code-Shifting, Code-Meshing, and Translingual Practices*

Sociolinguists explore language’s ability to mold and change given certain contexts and situations through what is called critical discourse analysis, which “connects systematic analysis of features within a discourse to the larger sociopolitical context in which the discourse occurs” (Curzan and Adams 237). One element in analyzing discourse is style, which is defined as anything from informal versus formal speech, to academic versus social speech (260). Further, the authors share that “all speakers style-shift, moving from more formal to less formal, for example, or from more local to more supralocal styles, depending on the context and purpose of their interactions, as well as the other interlocutors” (261). This idea of style-shifting in relation

to discourse is particularly noteworthy, especially considering the current conversation surrounding code-switching and code-meshing: does this mean that all people, regardless of racial or cultural background, code-switch?

Code-switching, code-meshing, and translingual practices are “en vogue” in modern day sociolinguistics and English pedagogical practices, with many studies, articles, and books created by educators and researchers alike that dive into how best to utilize translingual practices in an ever-evolving shared world (see Young; Li; Canagarajah). To clarify, in the article “Adaptability of Teachers’ Code Switching in MA’s Classes of English Majors,” Hui Li defines code-switching as “using two or more than two language varieties in one conversation” or “an individual’s use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange” (568). Anne Beatty-Martinez, Christian Navarro-Torres, and Paola Dussias expand on the numerous benefits of code-switching in their article “Codeswitching: A Bilingual Toolkit for Opportunistic Speech Planning,” observing that in a bilingual setting “codeswitching offers a unique flexibility that is driven by an interplay of bottom-up and top-down processes, but through which resources from both languages are ultimately recruited to convey speakers’ communicative intentions” (2). Further, their research shows that code-switching aids language fluency by allowing both languages to remain active and accessible (9). While there are some American educators and policy makers who believe that code-switching “enables students to not fulfill their potential” (as shared in Melissa Lee’s “Shifting to the World Englishes Paradigm by Way of the Translingual Approach”), many case studies on code-switching actually prove the opposite. In the article “Code-Switching Patterns in the Writing-Related Talk of Young Emergent Bilinguals,” Mileidis Gort explains:



Research demonstrates that code switching (a) is a sophisticated, rule-governed, and systematic communicative behavior used by linguistically competent bilinguals to achieve a variety of communicative goals; (b) is determined by a complex network of sociolinguistic variables and constrained by syntactic and sociolinguistic properties; and (c) increases in prevalence and complexity with more advanced bilingual development.

(46)

Most importantly, when considering the wonderful benefits code-switching practices provide to educators in a bilingual or multilingual classroom, Michelle Devereaux and Rebecca Wheeler claim in “Code-Switching and Language Ideologies: Exploring Identity, Power, and Society in Dialectically Diverse Literature,” “code-switching offers a perfect bridge to discuss language ideologies” (96). By creating an environment in which children and young adults are exposed to different languages, questions about power, control, and identity can bloom, thereby eventually changing ideologies.

What is important to note here is that there are those within the translanguaging pedagogical conversation who have mixed and slightly differing views with code-switching. In the book *Other People’s English*, Ashawn Vershanti Young and fellow contributing authors state that while code-switching is intending to act as a gateway to translanguaging practices, it is actually a “racial compromise” that has “not paid off well” (7). After reviewing multiple studies of code-switching in lower education classrooms, they suggest that there are three main costs to the practice: linguistic division that forces minorities to “act White,” increased negative attitudes toward African American English (AAE) by African American students, and linguistic confusion (68–73). These costs can start as early as the preschool years. They also observe that in a study of preschoolers’ use of AAE, the researchers discovered that young children were already

learning code-switching by adjusting their speech depending on their topic, who they were talking to, and the reason they were speaking (25). The concerns presented by Young and other important linguists and educators (see Baker-Bell) have led to an increase in research and literature in a pedagogical approach called code-meshing.

Code-meshing is defined as “a strategy of writing that encourages students to develop an integrated understanding of how all varieties of English and even other languages in their repertoires may be spliced together to serve their interests” (Lee 317). Code-meshing, or any translingual practice in general, was created “to help students and anyone else produce expressive, persuasive, effective prose for academic, creative, and professional purposes” (Young et al. 7). Further, translingual practices focus on the blending of languages and embraces the fact that language boundaries are never fixed (Lee 316). In this case, code-meshing practices do not seek to adhere to traditional “standard English” norms such as prescriptive grammar rules (a set of norms or rules governing how a language should or should not be used rather than describing the ways in which a language is actually used), but instead aim to focus on rhetorical skill and communication (a descriptive approach) (Young et al. 81).

I will discuss AAVE further in this literature review and will touch on identity in relation to AAVE. In the meantime, my ultimate observation in the debate between code-switching versus code-meshing is that both methods seek to promote an inclusive way to promote minority dialects and languages. As Michelle Devereaux and Chris Palmer share in *Teaching English Language Variation in the Global Classroom*, individuals should not “get too bogged down by the names or technical differences among approaches.” Indeed, there are many layers to the code-meshing versus code-switching argument, but what is important to consider is how different techniques can employ strategies that capitalize on a student’s “existing competence” to

further multilingual education (xx). This debate will only become further studied and discussed as social issues and norms continue to rise in America, like the Black Lives Matter Movement. Through these conversations I seek to show how American dialects are shown as linguistically valid and emphasize that efforts to properly label ideas and perspectives do not detract from the discussions overall.

Knowing the context behind code-shifting and code-meshing, Curzan and Adams observe that style-shifting and code-switching are two different entities. They write, “Sometimes the line between style-shifting and code-switching is blurry” (263) but make clear that “all speakers control multiple speech styles and style shift in many ways” (268). These claims show how intricate and complicated language is overall. Language has and always has been synonymous with power, as discussed further within this literature review.

#### *Pidgins, Creoles, and Exposure*

One ongoing example of language’s power in contemporary society is through the creation, maintenance, and subsequent elimination of pidgins and creoles in America. According to Lippi-Green, *pidgins* are formed in a restricted social context, in which groups of people that speak two or more different languages “cobble together” a language in order to effectively communicate. Pidgins, in turn, become *creoles* when children of pidgin speakers acquire the lexicon and “data” of that pidgin upon acquisition (236). What is important to note here is that pidgins are not typically any community’s first or only language and are usually less grammatically complex than other varieties whereas creoles are full-fledged languages (Curzan and Adams 330).

The books *English with an Accent* and *American Voices* speak at length about the creoles of the Hawaiian Islands, the Gullah Islands, and Smith Island, among other regions in the

country. With regard to the Hawaiian Islands, both texts have described the “devastating effect” English has had to Hawaiian Creole (HC), which was originally formed from a pidgin that began in the 1800s when Hawaii started trading with other countries (Lippi-Green 236; Meyerhoff 166). More countries began to populate Hawaii (Portugal, Japan, the Philippines, etc.), with the U.S. ultimately staging a coup and formally colonizing Hawaii in the late 1890s (Meyerhoff 167). As perceived in other nations around the world, English therefore became the dominant, standardized language, and this dominance has led to stigmatization of native HC or Olelo speakers.

For example, Lippi-Green shares that “Mainland Americans tend to have a romanticized an unrealistic impression of Hawaii. . . racial, ethnic and socioeconomic conflicts are played out in terms of language ideology at a level of complexity unmatched anywhere in the mainland” (235). This language divide is observed in how the citizens of Hawaii view and refer to themselves—Meyerhoff notes that there is a noticeable label difference between “Locals” and “Hawaiians” (167). The continual exposure Hawaiians receive from a range of different individuals from different nationalities on the islands as well as the tourists who come visit have ultimately resulted in marginalization that comes with colonization. And while Hawaii has only been a part of the U.S. in the last century, it has faced a rapid decline and “othering” in terms of its dialect.

While Hawaii has had long exposure to outside languages and dialects, the Gullah dialect on the coast of South Carolina and Georgia has only just recently been exposed to dominant mainland dialects. Similarly to Hawaiian Creole, Gullah is believed to have been formed from a type of pidgin that came from the African slave trade, according to Tracey Weldon’s piece “Gullah Gullah Islands” (180–81), as slaves came into contact with multiple different dialects

and languages and had to create a language system in order to effectively communicate with one another. While this is close to the origins of Hawaiian Creole, the most notable difference with Gullah is that “the distinctiveness of Gullah was preserved for many years by the isolation of the Sea Islands and limited travel to and from the mainland” (181). However, the number of bridges and growth of tourism in those areas have led to a merging of Gullah with mainland dialects, a process of decreolization that is making many concerned that this unique American variety will soon cease to exist. With this in mind, Gullah is currently in a “in between” stage in terms of exposure and subsequent “standardization” of that area’s language.

What happens, then, if an American region’s dialect hasn’t been touched or exposed for hundreds of years? As Natalie Schilling-Estes shares in “Fighting the Tide,” Smith Island, located off the coast of Maryland, is “one place in which dialect differences have not only persisted but have actually become more pronounced over several generations” (196). In fact, the dialect has persisted so much so that many who come into contact with it refer to it as “Shakespearean English,” indicating it truly has not changed much since settlers first inhabited the island in the 1600s. This isn’t to say that the dialect hasn’t changed at all over the centuries; Smith Island English has “undergone considerable changes over the centuries, and it includes many words, pronunciations, and sentence constructions that originated in the Americas rather than the British Isles” (198). Nonetheless, the island (or rather, cluster of islands) has been able to retain its unique dialectal identity despite its tiny population. But how?

There are four main factors involved in this scenario that, for the most part, all have to do with limited exposure to outside dialects. First, while islanders are encountering the mainland more than before, there still is a significant lack of contact, especially after those living on Smith Island began to build more schools on their island, rather than have their children travel to the

mainland for education. Second, while islanders come into contact on their own terms with people from the mainland, no one from the mainland really goes to Smith Island, making home contact minimal. Third, Smith Island's small population has heightened their dialect's distinctiveness to an even higher level, making it almost impossible for outsider communicators to interlope. Finally, Smith Islanders are simply proud of their culture and identity and take active measures to preserve their unique dialect (Schilling-Estes 201). The lack of exposure for Smith Island provides a fascinating case study revealing how mainland culture and Standardized American English (SAE) can completely dominate a region and, more importantly, how regional dialects can evolve when left untouched.

Despite the unique situation of Smith Island, there is still concern from linguists regarding the erasure of languages, creoles and pidgins in particular. For example, Nala Lee shares that "at least half and possibly as much as 90% of the world's languages will no longer be spoken by the end of the present century, while a more recent empirical study estimates a slightly less catastrophic rate of loss, at one language every three months" (53). When discussing language endangerment, she notes that contact languages like pidgins and creoles are neglected in terms of preservation and advocacy (53), a problem that contributes to a lack of knowledge acquisition for linguists. Lee claims, "The knowledge argument can and must be extended to linguistic knowledge. All studied languages make up the sum of what linguists know about language" (74). Her analysis reveals an interesting argument: for linguists to understand the natural progression and evolution of languages, contact languages should be preserved, embraced, and represented. When considering the argument for accurate portrayals of dialects in media, the concept of embracing dialects for educational and research purposes only further adds

to the many reasons why dialectal representation in American society is vital to our society overall.

### **The History of Standardized American English**

Research on the conventions and subsequent social and psychological effects of SAE has increased in recent years, with many scholars calling for a change in how Americans perceive their form of English (see Rickford; Lippi-Green; Wolfram; Montgomery). Indeed, American society promotes SAE, the language that McWhorter implies “is a dialect that got put up in the shop window” (“What’s a Language, Anyway?”). SAE has become, as the name implies, the standardized version of how Americans are “supposed” to speak and write, and any variation or dialect that contradicts the standard is, then, inadequate. Lippi-Green explores the concept of what she calls the “standard language myth” (55). After reviewing two popular definitions of SAE, she writes:

Both definitions assume that the written and spoken language are equal, both in terms of how they are used and how they should be used. . . While the definitions make some room for regional differences, they make none at all for social ones, and in fact, it is quite definite about the social construction of the hypothetical standard: it is the language of the educated. (57)

Lippi-Green and McWhorter both astutely observe that first, there is a difference between dialect and language, but it is infinitesimal yet important at the same time, and second, that the powers that be in American society have determined that there is one correct way to speak, a standardization that both disagree with to some extent. This selection of and subsequent obsession with correct forms of utilizing the English language is not new, however.

Britain underwent nearly one thousand years of, for lack of a better phrase, a language identity crisis. Beginning with the Germanic invasion of Britain in 449, followed by the Norse invasion in 787 and the Norman Conquest in 1066, the Old English and Middle English periods were times in which “the language underwent significant phonological, syntactic, and lexical change” (Cuzan and Adams 431). What’s noteworthy, though, is the political and social changes that took place within the English language. According to Curzan and Adams, “Language marked relative power” (431), so when the Germanic tribes rose to power, Germanic dialects increased, as is true with the Norse and Norman reigns. These transitions of power continued over the course of many centuries, and within those centuries many writers wrote in multiple different languages, such as French and Latin (431–32). Eventually, the English took control of the country again in 1204, and in 1362, English was “reestablished as the national language of England.” By the middle of the fifteenth century, a standard of English was established for many reasons: England was involved in international trade and therefore needed a standard language for communication; the Hundred Years’ War with France created nationalistic sentiments and thus promoted English as the language of domestic political and legal affairs; and the English used by clerks in the Courts of Chancery became the norm. As Curzan and Adams summarize, “Nationalism, commerce, literary culture, and bureaucratic language intersected to produce a late Middle English standard” (434). All of these factors ultimately changed the trajectory of the English language in terms of linguistic ideological practices; they provide an interesting yet familiar insight into how culture can influence a language.

To expand further, during the Early Modern English period, the rise of the printing press and the creation of the Church of England led to further questions about what it meant to actually speak English. Curzan and Adams share, “From these positions, several competing attitudes



about the English language developed: (1) there were linguistic nationalists who wanted to keep the English language pure, free from the taint of foreign influence to whatever extent possible...” (442). Many Englishmen at the time thought that their vernacular sounded “crude” compared to Latin, French, and Italian, but ultimately the nationalistic mindset won out. The nationalistic inclination in the Early Modern English period bears an uncanny resemblance to what is currently occurring with English in American society. In the face of growing immigration and language merging—which, as Curzan and Adams point out, “No living language stays fixed in time or structure” (462)—prescriptivism and adherence to a “pure” English are seemingly just as rampant as they were hundreds of years ago. The argument for maintaining a Standard English is nothing new (at least in the last several centuries), yet Americans continue to argue and debate about it as though it is a revolutionary idea that was formulated only in recent generations. In fact, history has merely repeated itself.

Ironically, while prescriptivists promote the purity and standardization of English, much of the English language itself was formed off borrowed words. According to McWhorter, “English’s hybridity is high on the scale compared with most European languages,” and “this muttly vocabulary is one of the things that puts such a distance between English and its nearest linguistic neighbours” (“English is Not Normal”). Despite the nationalistic idealism of the Early Modern Age of English, “plenty of foreign words found their way into the English lexicon” (Curzan and Adams 445). These words include Greek and Latin terms such as *adapt*, *alphabet*, *phrase*, and *ephemeral*, along with Romantic words like *broccoli*, *pasta*, and *lottery* (445–46). Even today, English speakers are still borrowing words from wherever English presents itself—American English regularly uses words like *vigilante*, *mosquito*, and *rodeo* in its current lexicon. Imagine what some would say today if they came to find out *guitar* isn’t an English-oriented

word and was instead borrowed from Spanish? Questions like the previous one pose a direct threat to Standard Language Ideology (SLI) in America, and maybe even more of a threat to English-only ideologies.

Interestingly, there is a current lack of scholarship regarding the overall development of SAE, as noted by Michael Montgomery in “The History of American English.” He writes that while linguists and historians know the English language dispersed widely in the nineteenth century and acknowledges that American English may be one of the most thoroughly documented language varieties (or collection of varieties) in the world, the proportion of scholarship on its historical dimensions remains relatively small (3). This discrepancy is surprising, especially considering how prevalent SAE has become in American education and media; why hasn’t there been much dedicated research into how exactly SAE has formed into the commanding force it is today? This body of research into the history of the English language is and has been growing, but as American English continues to evolve over the next century (which will be further analyzed in the following sections), linguists and sociolinguists alike should remedy mistakes from the past by continuing the conversation surrounding SAE.

### **Standard Language Ideology vs. Changing Language**

American English has truly become synonymous with Standard Language Ideology (SLI) in the new millennium. Similar to SAE, Lippi-Green defines SLI as:

A bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class. (67)

SLI ultimately promotes the idea that in order to be a united nation (a “true” United States), we must adhere to one “perfect” homogenized language, hiding under the guise of “common-sense” arguments meant to unify rather than divide (Lippi-Green 68–9). However, this rationality is based on false views and assumptions about what it means to be united, and conveniently places marginalized voices as the targets for linguistic racism, especially within American classrooms.

To understand SLI and its impact on American English education, we need to learn one of the most fundamental characteristics of the English language itself: *English changes despite efforts to keep it stable*. According to Connie Eble in her article “What is Sociolinguistics?,” “The basic premise of sociolinguistics is that language is variable and changing. As a result, language is not homogenous.” Additionally, Lippi-Green states that “fifty years of empirical work in sociolinguistics have established that language is flexible and constantly flexing” (66). This observation is vital to understanding the contradiction that SLI ultimately promotes: that there is a way to keep the English language “pure” and “intact,” and that we need “to secure it in a stable form” (Curzan and Adams 33). SLI, then, is a practice that ultimately goes against what sociolinguists study, even though “there has never been a successful academy to govern the English language” (32).

In the context of SAE, Lippi-Green suggests that education “is at the heart of the standardization process,” and that requiring SAE in English classrooms is “an institutionalized policy to formally initiate children into the linguistic prejudices (and hence, language ideology) of the middle class” (68). Additionally, Curzan and Adams point out that “English teachers” and “grammar and usage books” are considered to be “language authorities” by those who speak or learn the English language (33). However, it’s important to note that these authorities comprise a “loose network” of authoritative figures, despite how much we invest in these authorities to tell

us what constitutes “good” and “proper” English. Americans place such emphasis on standardization when “most definitions of Standard English are fuzzy” (36). Even though people can’t properly define SAE, why are we expected to adhere to it?

Subjecting the populace to norm-adherence is difficult when the English language itself is constantly changing and is currently undergoing new shifts in American dialects, as stated by Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes in “Language Evolution or Dying Traditions?”. One of the main reasons for this change is shifting cultural centers, according to the authors, specifically stating that “important dialect changes are now initiated in the suburbs, not the city proper” (5). While older generations tend to think that major linguistic changes are happening within urban cities and communities (1–2), the exact opposite is happening; suburban teens are the individuals changing the dialectical landscape of America, and this is hugely due to our society’s ongoing changes in multiplexity and covert prestige. The norms are constantly changing, and this means we need to change the way we approach the unquestioning embracing of SLI in America.

Curzan and Adams said it best when they proclaimed, “When it comes to language, Standard American English is no longer flexible enough to enfold all the nonstandard alternatives in other dialects, and many speakers resist such mixture” (381). In its attempt to bring the country together with a common language, what American society has actually done is prove that the “one-size-fits-all” mentality doesn’t apply to language, because it’s ever-fluid, ever-changing. Not only that, but American society also continues to perpetuate a gate-keeping ideology when it comes to dialects that are somehow labeled too “un-American.” The truth is, there is no “correct” way to “speak American”; rather, the view that should be spread is that what makes American English great is its ability to embrace change.

### **Embracing Their Identities—A Look into Identity and American Dialects**

Lippi-Green claims that language “is the most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities” (3). As a nation that has numerous dialects and accents, America and its citizens have been proud in their voices, despite the overarching societal need to conform to a standard language. Truly, if we were to interview individuals from around the country, from different regions and cultures, we would find that there is recognition and identity among the communities in which certain dialects are spoken: Northern, Southern, Midwestern, Latinx, African American. There is a sense of dignity in how people speak, and that is certainly the case for American citizens.

Before I delve into the many different American dialects and their unique identifiers, I want to highlight three similarities between the different dialects in this country. First, according to Curzan and Adams, “from a linguistic perspective, all varieties are equal—that is, from a structural perspective, no variety is superior to another...all dialects are equally rule-governed in terms of descriptive rules” (380). This means that SAE, Appalachian English, Southern, and all the other dialects in this country are equal, despite the preference of SAE in American education.

Second, all American regional dialects “emerge because related cultural or social groups, who speak a common language, diverge geographically” (Curzan and Adams 386). So regardless of background, each dialect in America became sequestered and regionalized because a group of people who all shared the same communication style outgrew their location and expanded elsewhere. This expansion is certainly evident with how the Northern regional dialect shifted from New England all the way into Minnesota, how the Midland dialect emerged from German and Welsh dialects in Pennsylvania, and how the Southern regional dialect eventually moved from Virginia all the way into Texas. And as Curzan and Adams note, this pattern will only

continue to occur with the growth of Hispanic dialects in the West and Asian languages in the Pacific Northwest in the twenty-first century (394). These assertions indicate that so long as immigrants continue to find their home in America, American dialects will look drastically different in the next fifty years,

Third, and arguably most important, all American dialects are similar in that they are destined to continually change. In fact, American dialects are changing today in subtle ways. Lippi-Green shares that there are four current shifts in American dialects: (1) the extension of (r)-less pronunciation in Manhattan as opposed to the eventual full (r) pronunciation within the next three generations in the South (29–33); (2) the vowel change phenomenon of the Northern Cities Chain Shift (for example, *bat* sounding closer to *be+at* in Chicago) (33); (3) the increase of lexical variation discourse markers, such as *like* (35); and (4) the evolution of weak verbs into strong verbs (e.g. *sneaked* into *snuck*) (37–38). Yet, “[i]n spite of all the hard evidence that all languages change, people steadfastly believe that a homogeneous, standardized, one-size-fits-all language is not only desirable, it is truly a possibility” (47). Knowing this, why do Americans attempt to hold on to ideals that will never be permanent?

What is puzzling is that American society, which promotes individualization and identity, seems so averse to portraying those fundamentals through American English. This shaky balance between individualism and identity is an interesting contradiction that Lippi-Green brings up while discussing the changing nature of language:

When we choose among variants available to us—a process which happens well below the level of consciousness—we use those language signals that will mark us as belonging to specific social groupings, and distance us from others. We do this sometimes even when we are not trying to. . . (40)

It seems that in our attempt to be individual and unique, we simultaneously (and unconsciously) look for belonging among people who are similar to us, and that is an incredibly valid psychological phenomenon. Nevertheless, the issue on the table isn't just this discrepancy in American identity; it is also the false belief that there are no similarities among American dialects, that our accents have too many differences, rendering it impossible to find ways to identify with or understand each other. In the following sections, I will analyze some of many American dialects and demonstrate that despite what SLI attempts to promote, Americans can be united in their unique accents, rather than just in the communities in which they directly inhabit.

### *Northern vs. Southern Dialects*

Lippi-Green discusses the stigmatization of the “undesirable South” in depth. Mainstream media’s portrayal of the South has always been one of trivialization, mockery, and condescension, which has ultimately brought covert prestige to the Southern dialect community (217–24). While my earlier example of covert prestige describes white teens utilizing hip-hop vernacular, in a similar vein, the South—which has been mocked endlessly for having an “ignorant” dialect—has found covert prestige in their language in the face of the overt prestige of SAE. As Guy Bailey and Jan Tillery share in their article “The Persistence of Southern American English,” “The persistence of SAE as a divergent variety in the face of extensive migration into the South, of standardizing forces such as universal education, and of the negative attitudes of non-Southerners toward it is surely a result of its situation in a culture that values its divergence and fosters its independent development” (314). Therefore, despite negative stigmatization from other Americans and increased migration into the Southeast, Southern Americans are still holding onto their accents to “fight back” against SAE.

The “othering” of the Southern dialect as inferior and unintelligent has ultimately created an environment in the South that has, as Lippi-Green shares from Edward Ayers, Patricia Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter Onuf, embraced defining itself as different from the North:

The South eagerly defines itself against the North, advertising itself as more earthy, more devoted to family values, more spiritual, and then is furious to have things turned around, to hear itself called hick, phony, and superstitious. The South feeds the sense of difference and then resists the consequences. (222)

In our attempt to be individual and unique, we as an American populace are constantly changing the community terms and services, and this double standard is very evident here with this analysis of the Southern dialect.

Southerners’ resistance to those in a high position of power doesn’t only apply to the Civil War, it also speaks true to what Lippi-Green calls *strategies of condescension*, “a reference to a tactic whereby an empowered individual...appropriates the subordinated language for a short period of time in order to exploit it” (223). Mainstream media loves portraying the South in a bad light: the family from *The Beverly Hillbillies* and the character Cletus from *The Simpsons* are a few of many examples of the negative stereotypes associated with the South, and as Lippi-Green mentions, these stereotypes have a profound and long-reaching effect, showing that their power is real and effective (225–26). As a result, “the South provides, more than any single ethnic, racial, or national origin group, strong resistance to language subordination” (226). This resistance to American standard language ideological practices is reflected further in Appalachian English, a similar yet unique dialectal “cousin” to Southern American English.



As Curzan and Adams note, “large dialect regions include smaller ones, also easily distinguishable from those surrounding them,” yet “some regional dialects do not fit neatly into the major dialect divisions” (such as Northern or Southern) (395). This linguistic loophole, so to speak, is fully evident in Appalachian English, which spans as far north as Maine and as far south as Mississippi. Appalachian English speakers often live in the South and therefore have sometimes been labeled as interchangeable with Southern English speakers (397). Nevertheless, both of these dialects are unique from each other and therefore are designated as separate entities for the purpose of this literature review.

In the piece “Defining Appalachian English,” Kirk Hazen and Ellen Fluharty boldly declare that just as Southern American English speakers have suffered from negative stereotypes, Appalachian English speakers also face an “ugly kind of prejudice”: “At its root, prejudice against Appalachian English is more a social judgment of Appalachian people than of the language they speak” (18). The dialect, which has roots in Scots-Irish heritage, also has a shared linguistic history with adjacent Southern dialects, yet still maintains its distinctive phonological and lexical features (Curzan and Adams 399). This identity security is due to the region’s isolation from the rest of American society: “the Appalachian region’s culture and identity continues to be dissimilar to that of its neighbors” (Hazen and Fluharty 20). Thus, just as with the case of Smith Island, Appalachian English still continues to be a distinct dialect spoken by Appalachian residents, who themselves are unique and proud of their identities.

Similar pride is evident in a surprising location: the quintessential Northern state of New York. As Lippi-Green mentions throughout her work, Southerners seem to be resisting the subordination that they believe hails from the Northern United States. However, as Michael Newman, a contributor to *American Voices*, shares, “many New Yorkers still talk of their speech

as a problem to be overcome” (83). In fact, he adds “there was a time when many New York colleges...had required voice and distinction courses, and their curriculum targeted certain local dialect peculiarities” (83). The common view of American dialects is that the standard reflects Northern regional dialects, but apparently this is not the case.

New Yorkers are known for their r-lessness, and according to Newman, “[i]t is only when r-lessness combines with other, less obvious New York characteristics that it acquires negative connotations” (84). So while New Yorkers are going through a vowel shift (*aw* for words like *all*, *coffee*, and *caught*), they are primarily focused on the most extreme r-less pronunciations in the New York dialect. This concern, though, is unfounded: Newman states that “[m]any middle- and upper-middle-class New Yorkers of all ethnicities use the dialect” and because of this “working-class minority speech has taken on the outsider status the classic Brooklynese has left behind” (86). Therefore, New Yorkers are embracing the Brooklynese dialect which until recently was designated as an unfavorable language.

Newman’s analysis of the classic New York accent raises a new question: what is Brooklynese? Just as some varieties of Appalachian English are sub-dialects of Southern American English, Brooklynese stems from the New York dialect. Newman shares that regarding those who speak Brooklynese, “there is an aspect of their speech that many New Yorkers appear to be actually proud of— the distinctive vocabulary” (85). Further, “the appeal of these words lies in their evocation of immigrant roots, and New York dialect...serves as a kind of counterpoint to mainstream Anglo America,” resulting in *Brooklynese*, a nod to the urban life of their dialect (85). Notably, this pride in speaking Brooklynese ties directly to the dialect’s lack of integration into the American mainstream, mirroring the sentiments Southerners have toward those who speak in a Northern dialect. In fact, as Kara Becker and Luiza Newlin-Lukowicz

share, this pride extends so deep that there are many within New York that claim that there is a distinction between Brooklynese and accents from the other NYC boroughs, despite numerous studies that disprove that differentiation (9). As Newman sums, “the ultimate resilience and uniqueness of New York dialects lies in our intense local pride, and this is as true for the minority versions as it is for the so-called Brooklynese” (87). Just as Southerners take pride in their dialects, New Yorkers who speak Brooklynese also find immense pride and identity with their own accent, showing that these two regional dialects are more similar than different.

The previous research and literature analyzed indicates that both Northern and Southern dialects are fighting against “the Standard English man,” yet meanwhile also try to police themselves from within their own communities—Southerners and Appalachian residents from sounding “too stupid” and New Yorkers from sounding “low-class.” It is profound that in the presence of so many similarities, dialect communities throughout America still use covert prestige as a way to differentiate themselves, continuing a trend of “othering” when, in fact, they are more similar than they are necessarily different. Yes, phonologically, morphologically, and lexically, these dialects are unique, but these dialects share the same fundamental principles that they take pride and ownership in their identities, which, somehow, morphs into the formation of exclusive communities.

### *African American Vernacular English*

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has an interesting history given that its origins are still highly debated among linguists, despite having been studied for the past forty years. According to John Baugh’s piece “Bridging the Great Divide” in *American Voices*, American slaves share a unique linguistic history because they didn’t necessarily come to the United States with a shared native language, unlike others who emigrated to the U.S., such as the

Dutch, Irish, and British (218). Many slaves hailed from West African nations and tribes that each had their own distinct language, and slave traders would purposefully separate slaves who shared a common language to prevent uprisings. From there, slaves obviously weren't allowed to go to school in America, so they never learned Standardized English. There is still debate as to where exactly AAVE came from in the first place: did this dialect originate in West Africa before slaves participated in "shackled emigration," as contributors Walt Wolfram and Benjamin Torbert state in their piece "When Linguistic Worlds Collide" (225), or did AAVE have more of an Anglo influence than originally thought?

Wolfram and Torbert state, "two major explanations have dominated the modern debate over the origin and early development of AAE [African American English]" (226), and these theories are called the Anglicist Hypothesis and the Creolist Hypothesis. The Anglicist Hypothesis argues that "the origin of AAE can be traced to the same sources as earlier European American dialects of English" and "assumes that slaves speaking different African languages simply learned the regional and social varieties of White speakers as they acquired English" (226). In contrast, the Creolist Hypothesis asserts that "an English-based creole spread through the African diaspora," and that this creole spread to plantations and became the "prototype for the development of AAE" (227). It's important to note two things with the Creolist Hypothesis set forth by Wolfram and Torbert: first, this idea of American slaves speaking creole still holds when you consider the Gullah dialect, which we discussed earlier, and second, while African American speech has changed over the centuries, linguists can still find creole imprints in AAVE. While there is still a debate among linguists about where AAVE came from, one thing is certain: the current form of AAVE is complicated when considering *who* exactly speaks it.

AAVE has developed some intense stereotypes in the past couple of decades regarding who actually speaks the dialect, a compelling phenomenon considering that “how many Americans of African descent speak [AAVE] is a relevant but difficult question, in part because there is no definition of AAVE that has wide consensus” (Lippi-Green 186). Despite this, entertainment and information industries have “conveyed the impression that Black speech was the lingo of criminals and hoodlums” and that it primarily was used in poor, lower class neighborhoods (187). Interestingly, linguists have helped contribute to this stereotyping by focusing their studies on AAVE in inner-city, poor neighborhoods (188); while linguists may now be shifting to focus more on African American middle-class, rural, and suburban populations, it’s important to know moving forward that AAVE forty years ago was studied as something new and unexplored.

Regarding determining who speaks AAVE, Lippi-Green notes that “middle-class African Americans may seldom or never use grammatical features of AAVE” (182), which has created an identity crisis of sorts within the African American community. According to Lippi-Green, “Blacks who are not comfortable speaking AAVE are often defensive about their language, and protective of their status as members of the Black community” (202). Further, in the Black community, the need to assimilate to Standard English creates a false promise where Black students are told that if they conform to “White English” they will achieve success (193), which creates distrust between Black citizens who speak AAVE and those who speak the “standard” (202). AAVE has earned a reputation for symbolizing “African American resistance to the cultural mainstreaming process,” a label that has created a policing mentality about what it means to “speak Black” (194).

However, with AAVE's prominence in hip-hop culture, AAVE as a dialect has become even more widespread and commonplace than before. AAVE stands at the intersection of linguistics and cultural anthropology, especially regarding hip-hop culture, which has not only strong African American roots, but also Latinx roots (Lippi-Green 184). Additionally, while numerous studies and authors put the number of AAVE speakers at 80%-90% of African Americans, AAVE speakers come from all socioeconomic backgrounds and AAVE is spoken by people who are not Black (186). Children grow up to learn their home language first before attending school, meaning that a White kid from Oakland could very well grow up speaking AAVE. And what makes identifying AAVE speakers even more difficult, especially when the threat of cultural appropriation looms overhead, is that studies show that people can identify AAVE by simply *hearing* the dialect, not seeing the individual speaker, indicating that AAVE heavily relies on rhetorical and tonal markers not typically seen in other dialects (182).

Cecelia Cutler, a noted linguist who specializes in language and identity, has written extensively about White utilization of hip-hop linguistic characteristics. In her piece "Yorkville Crossing: White Teens, Hip Hop, and African American English," she notes that the "adoption of African American speech markers is an attempt by young middle-class Whites...to take part in complex prestige of African American youth culture" (429), and that "the adolescent construction of 'style' can involve tense negotiations of the relationship between self and other" (439). In a later article titled "Keepin It Real: White Hip-Hoppers' Discourses of Language, Race, and Authenticity," Cutler expands on the danger of potentially racializing languages, or in this case, youth culture: "racializing languages—or youth culture, for that matter—can obscure the more subtle and intriguing process by which linguistic (and cultural) patterns unexpectedly diffuse across cultural boundaries" (213). While she astutely allows that there are those who

appropriate Black culture in America, and that White privilege does pose as a threat to Black culture overall, she ultimately questions the idea that certain language varieties are the exclusive domain of particular groups, especially the fluid and invisible nature of AAVE and hip-hop style (216). The conversation regarding authenticity in children's literature will continue further later in this literature review and in the next section analyzing primary research findings.

What is interesting is that there are those in our society who gatekeep who can and cannot speak AAVE knowing these facts: that hip hop culture has become mainstream and reaches a wider audience than ever before; that White or Asian children who grow up surrounded by AAVE may be labeled as cultural appropriators even if that dialect is all they've ever known; that there are activists who advocate for implementing Black English in classrooms despite it not always being clear who is and isn't a part of the AAVE-speaking population (which can lead to potential stereotyping by well-intended teachers). With so much uncertainty, people often voice strong and divisive opinions as if they are always driven by facts.

The most notable example of strong, divisive (and often non-fact-based) opinions on AAVE and Black education emerged during the Ebonics controversy in the 1990s. There was huge pushback from mainstream media, conservatives, and liberals about the Ebonics resolution, with false claims and misinformation spreading rampant to the point of blacklisting the movement (Baugh 221). Curzan and Adams state that many linguists attempted to respond to the controversy, but were ultimately silenced:

They tried to clarify the school board's goal of teaching Standard English by using AAE [African American English] as a bridge. They tried to legitimize AAE as a full-fledged dialect of American English. They wrote many editorials that were never published; they taped television interviews that were never aired. (410)

Advocates of AAVE have been promoting it as a legitimate and equal dialect, and many texts have been released in recent years that discuss effective strategies for including AAVE in a classroom setting. In their book *Teaching Language Variation in the Classroom*, Michelle Devereaux and Chris Palmer share practices that ELA teachers can promote in their classes that recognize and validate AAVE and its speakers, notably presenting lesson plans on how to address AAVE's grammatical patterns and registers. Additionally, April Baker-Bell's text *Linguistic Justice* introduces a new pedagogical approach to addressing AAVE with Black students and critically dissects how some current approaches to language education in America can be harmful to Black students and their identities. Despite these efforts, far more work needs to be done in society to destigmatize AAVE in educational and other professional contexts.

#### *Latinx/Spanish-Speaking Dialects*

Similar to Black Americans and AAVE, “Latinos/as retain strong ties to homeland and heritage,” and these ties can be seen in settlement patterns across the United States (i.e. Little Havana, Puerto Rican communities in New York) (Lippi-Green 255). This same mentality is also reflected in Chicano communities in the Southwest across the Mexican border, where there are “intercultural tensions between well-established Chicanos and those newly arrived from rural Mexico” (256-58), showing the trend of marginalized communities “othering” those within their communities. To these communities, they have held on to these cultural and homeland identifiers tightly, to a point where their culture is synonymous with their souls: as Gloria Anzaldua claims in her piece “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” “Being Mexican is state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship” (42–43).

This othering becomes further complicated when considering how these communities are labeled by the U.S. Census Bureau. Lippi-Green observes, “Despite differences in their history



and culture, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans have all been identified by the U.S. Bureau as ‘Hispanic’” (259). Additionally, “Latinos in the United States predominantly self-identify as ‘Hispanic’ and/or ‘Latino’ in addition to their national origin, but they do not self-identify as ‘American.’” The reason: these communities’ strong ties to homeland, family, religion, and their Spanish language (259). It seems that the main linguistic difference between AAVE and Latinx communities seems to be, in this case, the still-prevalent use of Spanish in the Latinx community, as opposed to the use of AAVE, a dialect of English.

To continue, what AAVE and Latinx and Chicano/a English have in common is performance theory in relation to race and ethnicity. Lippi-Green explains, “In our everyday lives we simultaneously recognize, substantiate, and (re)create ourselves as well as others through performance...performance becomes a ubiquitous force in our social and discursive universe.” This makes it so that in situations where societal racism comes into question, “the performance of race and ethnicity become emotionally extreme” (265). While Lippi-Green goes on to discuss the issues of performing Whiteness and White discomfort, Gloria Anzaldua shares the shame and confusion that can be associated with Chicana self-identification. She writes:

Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other. (38)

In this case, performance isn’t necessarily determined between White and Hispanic differences, but differences in identity within the Hispanic community itself. As Anzaldua observes, because “Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their own censure,” Chicanas and Latinas tend to default to English to avoid further discrimination and judgements,

this time within their own communities (39). They will actively perform among themselves instead of embracing the rich history both of their languages and dialects have to offer; they would rather control the “Spanish-speaking” narrative and police themselves, and keep to their own cultural identities, in order to continually preserve themselves and their cultures.

Maybe this is why, as McWhorter analyzes in his article in *The Atlantic*, “Why *Latinx* Can’t Catch On,” many within the Latinx community have yet to embrace the gender-neutral/inclusive term “Latinx.” He observes, “new language comes from below...that is, tomorrow’s words and constructions are ones that even today feel not swanky but ordinary, like ‘us’” (“Why *Latinx*”). For example, as McWhorter claims, the term “African American” was embraced by Black people because Jesse Jackson helped promote it within the Black community. In contrast, “Latinx” was created by academics who were not necessarily within the community to begin with. So while the intent of creating “Latinx” came from a good place, a place where people in our world didn’t feel targeted by their gender (despite Spanish being an incredibly gendered and Romantic language), “Latinos/as” don’t perceive it as such. In fact, they see it as an “imposition” (“Why *Latinx*”), indicating that they would much rather have an inclusive term that came from within their community— a collective that is clearly strong within itself in terms of identity, than have anyone else dictate to them what should or should not be said.

Overall, while each dialect mentioned in the previous sections have unique identifiers and places within American society, there are many commonalities that unite them together. These dialects are similar in that they resonate with feeling that they have been subjected to harsh, negative stereotypes, and that any conversation on including their speech in a positive environment has been met with resistance from mainstream media and the linguistic powers that are prevalent in America. “Othering” our unique dialects has contributed to the divisive nature of

American English, and this divisive mentality starts at an early age and is extended through children's media and language acquisition.

### **Language Acquisition and Bilingualism**

The subordination process mentioned earlier by Lippi-Green seems to be reflected in terms of childhood literacy acquisition. As Walt Wolfram shares, “language use symbolically represents fundamental dimensions of social behavior and human interaction” (“Sociolinguistics”). This social behavior ultimately starts at home, with home languages—where along the way do children learn that their home languages, aka how they speak, is incorrect?

There is a common assumption that children learn how to talk through imitation—that kids and babies merely babble what they hear on a day-to-day basis and use a system of trial and error to see what sticks in their lexicon. However, according to Curzan and Adams, this speculation is incorrect and doesn't “account for many of the facts of children's language acquisition” (311). For example, “children make mistakes they have no head from adults (e.g., “I eated it,” “I no go”). Additionally, Curzan and Adams claim that “there must be something innate in the human brain that allows children to take the language input they receive and construct grammar,” and there are many debates and theories within linguistics and psychology about how exactly children acquire language.

One of those theories was developed by linguist Noam Chomsky and details what he called “Universal Grammar,” which states that babies are born with some linguistic knowledge that allows them to process language and create grammar (Curzan and Adams 312-313). In contrast, scholar Lila Gleitman “views language acquisition as tied to an innate cognitive ability to map or create associations between language and the world,” meaning that our brains simply

map language that way (313). These are two of many debates and theories within the subject of childhood language acquisition, but what exactly *do* linguists and psychologists know about the topic?

Studies from the past fifty years show that there are many parts of language acquisition we know. First, children have an instinct to pay special attention to features and behaviors of other humans, and specifically they tend to “tune in to the sounds that other humans make when communicating with each other in context” (Curzan and Adams 316). This attention is noteworthy when considering the contextual significance of certain dialects and accents in the United States. Not only do children simply gravitate toward human language characteristics, but they also pick up the intercultural and interpersonal communicative practices exhibited by the speakers around them. This phenomenon is incredibly profound and further indicates how closely tied language and identity are to each other, and how before children even learn to speak, they are adapting to the dominant dialect/language in their environments.

The second steadfast fact regarding spoken language acquisition is that babies can distinguish between their native language and other languages by intonation patterns as early as *four days old* (Curzan and Adams 316; emphasis added). This is possible because babies in the womb can hear at about seven months gestation, indicating that babies are picking up their home languages before they are even born (316). As previously covered in the beginning of this section, children have an innate sense that helps guide them through the language process, and societal and behavioral practices greatly influence that process as well. Why, then, is there a misconception in America that if you are born in America, you “speak American?” To phrase it differently—can we even make the claim that children born in America should automatically

adhere to Standard American English if that is not the home language environment in which they were raised?

Clearly, home environment and language have a significant impact on childhood literacy, especially when considering bilingualism and self-image in early childhood education. Curzan and Adams observe that “children raised in bilingual homes or communities often pass through the early stages of language acquisition later than other children” due to the fact they must sort through two languages as opposed to one (340). Despite this “late-stage acquisition,” children seem to take to new languages better at an early age than those who try at an older age (333). This fact isn’t overly surprising: as Curzan and Adams point out, many nations throughout the world promote and use multilingualism in their everyday lives (340). So this raises a new yet related question—why is multilingualism negatively stigmatized in America?

This information on home language environments leads to further questions about bilingual education in schools, which Curzan and Adams note that decisions regarding bilingualism in education are ultimately up to the schools themselves (340). They sum up the ultimate goals and questions that bilingual education in America seeks:

The aim of all bilingual programs is to educate children in fluent academic English.

Another goal of many bilingual programs is the maintenance of home languages. So the question becomes, how can children’s home languages be reinforced as valuable parts of their culture, their identity, and their linguistic repertoire if they are taught only in

English and allowed to speak only English at school? (341)

Indeed, much of the dialogue surrounding multilingualism in the classroom supports the importance of validating children’s identities with regard to their home languages. In the article “Toward Early Literacy as a Site of Belonging,” Mariana Souto-Manning, Hyeyoung Ghim, and

Nicole K. Madu state that “belonging has great significance for students’ socioemotional, academic, and behavioral outcomes,” and that “many young students feel that they do not belong in their classrooms and schools” (483). They continue to dive into how educators can bring about this belonging and inclusivity in classrooms, but this focus on education doesn’t directly address the issue of identity and language. If aspects of literacy begin developing before children even begin to speak, shouldn’t we change how we approach early-stage literacy education and American linguistic social norms? While it is true that one of the primary ways to normalize multilingualism in English and American education is to start in the schools, but I see another option as well: publish more and make more readily available children’s literature that can be read and normalized in home environments, which will popularize and promote linguistic diversity outside of formal or traditional classrooms—this could effectively augment needed change.

A large body of evidence and literature discusses the importance of reading books aloud to children at an early age (see Cameron Faulkner and Noble; Montag et al.). In their work “The Sooner, the Better: Early Reading to Children,” Frank Niklas, Caroline Cohrsen, and Collette Taylor state that “children’s language and literacy competence does not begin when children enter school—children’s literacy learning starts well before formal schooling,” and that “the home literacy environment (HLE) is the context in which children first acquire language and literacy skills that equip them to make sense of, describe, and participate in the world” (1). Additionally, Heather Knauer, Pamela Jakiela, Owen Ozier, Frances Aboud, and Lia C. H. Fernalda reveal in their work “Enhancing Young Children’s Language Acquisition Through Parent-Child Book Sharing” that “the availability of storybooks in the home and the quantity and quality of parents’ reading engagements with their children are consistently associated with

children's cognitive and language development, school readiness, and achievement" (179).

Therefore, providing books that have dialectal variation and representation, and reading these texts aloud to children, can provide a unique method for children to acquire literacy and allow dialectal development.

In the article "A Comparison of Book Text and Child Directed Speech," authors Thea Cameron-Faulkner and Claire Noble claim that "a number of studies have highlighted the positive impact of shared book reading on language development and narrative structure" (270). In this study, they "looked beyond CDS (Child Directed Speech) in order to identify other potential sources of linguistic input available to young children; specifically, [they] focus on the grammatical characteristics of books" (270). While their study analyzed the literacy acquisition of monolingual English-speaking children from middle-class families, Cameron-Faulkner and Noble ultimately found that "the linguistic content of the book sample is a source of enriched linguistic input," indicating that book texts that are read aloud in a shared environment can provide "young language learners with vital clues about the underlying structure of their target language" (275–76). Simply put, implementing CDS techniques into a child's language acquisition journey can increase that child's linguistic knowledge.

What is also important is making sure these texts that are read aloud are linguistically diverse. Jessica Montag, Michael Jones, and Linda Smith share in "What Words Children Hear" that "because of the higher number of unique word tokens (relative to child-directed speech), the contextual diversity of the picture-book text is higher, and such diversity is associated with better learning" (1495). As Zachary Maher, Michelle Erskine, Aryn Byrd, Jeffrey Haring and Jan Edwards note in "African American English and Early Literacy," "the influence of dialect mismatch on literacy achievement spans various subcomponents of reading, including decoding

and reading comprehension” (120). Therefore, creating and reading aloud books that are dialectically similar to children’s home environments is crucial to childhood literacy development.

A simple enough solution to ensuring future generations embrace the multiplexity of American English is to encourage publishers and publishing houses to create books that incorporate accurate portrayals of the diverse linguistic and dialectal variations in our country. If parents are reading books that embrace Southern accents or Latinx dialects to their children before they even attend school, the question of language authority can form at an early age and create further discussion. This continued conversation, then, would hopefully lead to further research and further acceptance on the importance of hearing one’s voice in media, as opposed to having to assimilate to hope for even a chance at success in American society (Lippi-Green 71).

### **Dialects in the Publishing Industry**

There is a massive body of literature that shows the importance of children’s literature and literacy practices in relation to multilingualism. While the literature mentioned in this section speaks primarily to cultural languages and dialects, I want to reaffirm the value of creating children’s books that display regional American dialects as well, such as Appalachian English or Midwestern English. There is wonderful evidence of studies in relation to children’s books and cultural dialects, yet a shocking lack of literature that explores regional dialects in this country. I encourage those who read this section to remember that, as stated previously, dialect does not only apply to culture and that as Devereaux and Wheeler share, “language varieties are linguistically equal” (94).

According to Keith Newvine and Sarah Fleming in their article “Changing Terms, Not Trends,” “Literacy reflects the social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives



on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world. As such, the constructs of these literacies figure prominently in the reading experiences of youth” (6). Indeed, as María Paula Ghiso and Gerald Campano share in “Ideologies of Language and Identity in U.S. Children’s Literature,” “Literacy researchers have thus pointed to the value of children’s literature for honoring students’ diverse identities, supporting their academic growth in multiple languages, cultivating multicultural understandings, and inquiring into linguistic and cultural pluralism” (48) As Nicola Daly claims in “Kittens, Blankets and Seaweed,” “there is great value in children’s literature being a mirror and reflecting children’s experiences as well as being a window into unfamiliar worlds” (33). Thus, children’s books are vital not only in promoting literacy acquisition in multilingual settings but also in acting as entryways for critical inquiry into cultural and societal norms. Fiction is a powerful tool in learning about the world and how other people think and interact (Daly 22), making children’s books ideological sites that circulate discourse through words and images, as shared by Maria José Botelho and Robin Marion in “Representing Spanishes” (3).

Children’s books can reflect cultural history and memory, contribute to identity construction, support language learning, and affirm cultural experiences (Botelho and Marion 2). Most noteworthy, though, is that children’s books offer a sense of literary belonging, or acceptance through literature, to children who draw on their home languages to further their own literacy (2). Since the United States promotes a standard language ideology, especially in a classroom setting, some children’s worlds at home and in their communities are not accurately reflected in texts or schools (Ghiso and Campano 54). However, as stated previously, linguistic and dialectal trends are changing in America, and “with the growing diversity of neighborhoods, children’s linguistic communities extend beyond their family heritage” (53). Children’s

literature, then, has to reflect the reality of America's changing linguistic landscape and adopt strategies and formats in children's books that promote inclusive dialectal representation.

To illustrate, a growing body of literature explores the role of dual language picture books in drawing on the linguistic capital of multilingual children in classrooms (Daly 20). Specifically, when read aloud, dual language picture books "enable [children] to use their linguistic capital within mainstream classes" (21). As Gabrielle Strouse, Angela Nyhout, and Patricia Ganea observe in their article "The Role of Book Features in Young Children's Transfer of Information from Picture Books to Real-World Contexts," "joint readings have been associated with a variety of later language outcomes, including vocabulary growth and early literacy skills like letter-knowledge" (4). Therefore, the most supportive thing adults can do to help children learn, even more than selecting high-quality books, is to have conversations with them during reading (Strouse et. al 12). Directly engaging with children by reading books that accurately portray even one of the many American dialects can start conversations regarding social status, standard language ideology, and cultural norms, which leads to future change with the generations to come.

Considering this evidence, what has the children's book publishing industry done to address dialectal representation in the literature they create? The publishing industry's issues with diversity aren't new and are relatively well-known. A *New York Times* article entitled "Just How White is the Book Industry?" by Richard Jean So and Guz Wezerek shares that of the 7,124 books released by major publishing houses between 1950 and 2018, 95% were written by White people. This broad imbalance is linked to the people who work in publishing; 85% of the people who acquire and edit all books are White, as are the heads of the Big Five publishing houses (So and Wezerek). That being said, due to movements such as #OwnVoices and #PublishingPaidMe,

some efforts have been and are still being made in addressing the massive diversity gap in publishing, as shared by Saadia Faruqi in her article “The Struggle Between Diversity and #OwnVoices.”

In particular, when discussing the presence of Spanish in children’s literature, Botelho and Marion share that the Spanish language has been represented in children’s books since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unfortunately, these texts were not initially characteristic of the Spanish-speaking children in the United States and made translation errors and stereotyped characters (1). Despite these offensive mistakes, the publishing of multicultural children’s literature increased between the mid-1980s to late 1990s due to developments in multicultural education, whole language teaching, and publishing practices (1–2). Most recently, “the largest multicultural (American) children’s book publisher, Lee & Low, is experimenting with producing Spanish first and English second in their dual language offerings” (4). This is all wonderful news, until we hear that in 2019, only 6% of the books produced were created by Latinx/Mexican voices (Newvine and Fleming 10).

Indeed, Newvine and Fleming sum up the conflicting feelings regarding linguistic diversity in children’s literature:

While recent publishing trends in children’s and adolescent literature have changed for the better, if even ever so slightly, and research about the importance of diverse reading experiences for students has become concentrated, centered, and validated, very little progress has been made to diversify children’s and young adult book publication or K-12 literary curricula. (5)

The grim statistics don’t end with the Latinx community. Books written by Black and Indigenous People of Color increased a mere 0.4% between 2018 and 2019, and books about Black and

Indigenous People of Color increased even less (0.2%) (12). One positive outcome is that “book publishing companies who only focus and feature diverse books are growing and gaining popularity. . . in short, some book publishers and readers are listening” (19). While attempts at remedying the lack of diversity in children’s publishing are being made, it is still truly not enough—at least, not yet.

What is also important to keep in mind is that, as Newvine and Fleming point out, even if publishing companies only published books by and about historically marginalized individuals, it would take a conscious effort on behalf of the teachers (and parents) to center those stories in the classroom and curriculum (13). If parents and teachers began to wholeheartedly demand for linguistically inclusive books for their homes and schools, publishing houses will be inclined to listen in order to keep up with market demand. Increased awareness about the lack of dialectal representation in children’s books then, should be promoted, and more movements like #WeNeedDiverseBooks (which is discussed in the next section of this literature review) should emerge that focus solely on children’s literature diversity.

Indeed, one movement has recently taken the publishing industry by storm and has had profound effects in children’s literature: #OwnVoices. Created in 2015, the hashtag captured the interest of many publishing houses and literary institutions who then began implementing practices that actively sought underrepresented stories and authors. #OwnVoices appeared to be the solution to the problem of diversity in the publishing industry. Unfortunately, what once started as a movement which sought to open the doors to a gatekept industry inevitably became the problem itself, with many publishing houses using the term as further means to ostracize and exclude certain voices under the guise of being “inauthentic.” What went wrong?

## #OwnVoices Movement

### *The Birth of a Movement: 2014–16*

In 2015, YA author Corinne Duyvis created a Twitter post that suggested people use #OwnVoices as a way to recommend books written by authentic voices and authors, rather than the books themselves, as shared in the article “What is #OwnVoices?” by Gwen Vanderhage. In an interview with *Disability in Kid Lit*, Duyvis expands further:

I love the movement for diverse books, but it was frustrating to see people occasionally shove aside the need for more diverse *authors*. If you only show marginalized experiences as filtered through the eyes of people who aren’t marginalized themselves, you end up with a skewed perspective, no matter how well-intentioned the authors are or how much research they do. One important aspect of not only improving the *amount* of representation, but also the *quality* of representation, is simply listening to people whose experiences are depicted. (Hoffman et. al)

So, while #WeNeedDiverseBooks was well-intended in promoting diverse books, Duyvis sought to promote the actual voices behind the stories and emphasized the need of authentic storytelling to bring about positive changes in diversity in the publishing industry.

Additionally, and incredibly noteworthy, Duyvis shared what the movement was *not* about in two points. First, she explicitly states that #OwnVoices was not about demanding marginalized authors write solely about their own identities. Second, Duyvis said it was also not about demanding that authors stay in one creative space and be given one creative label: “It’s not about demanding authors, marginalized or otherwise, don’t write outside of their identities” (Hoffman et al). These pieces of information are crucial to understanding how the #OwnVoices

movement eventually steered away from its initial intent of diverse representation towards harmful and problematic gatekeeping practices.

#OwnVoices seemed to catch on like wildfire, with many articles and blog posts within the publishing community discussing what the hashtag meant and how best to promote diverse and authentic authors and voices. For example, on December 19, 2016, the organization The Young Adult Library Services Association released a blog post detailing important questions surrounding the movement. Author Alain Leary asks, “Are we discussing diverse characters, or diverse authors, or diverse gatekeepers and industry professionals?” These questions indicate that Duyvis’s tweet and creation of the movement was initially successful: members of the publishing industry were beginning to move away from creating books that contained superficial iterations of diversity, and instead shifted toward focusing on hiring diverse authors and seeking out their authentic experiences. The conversation surrounding #OwnVoices would continue this way for years, until cracks began to form in the movement’s foundation.

#### *Falling Apart: 2019–20*

By 2019, the #OwnVoices movement had become successful in grabbing the attention of publishing industry officials worldwide. Vanderhage shares, “Now #OwnVoices is used across the board in reviews, editorial content, and in marketing materials to highlight when an author is writing from their personal experiences in a marginalized group.” While the “buzz” seemed to indicate a positive direction in the effort toward inclusivity and diversity in publishing, #OwnVoices readers and authors alike began to express doubts and frustrations with how publishers were handling the call for more authentic voices.

In the article “OwnVoices Reviewers on Goodreads Call for Authenticity in Minority Representation,” contributor Juliana Fujii discusses how users on the popular book social media

site *Goodreads* expressed disappointment with how certain #OwnVoices-labeled books portrayed minority characters. One reader in particular shared, “I felt infantilized. I felt reduced to stereotypes, even if kindly. I didn’t feel like a person anymore after reading it.” Additionally, Fujii observes what she calls “unprecedented exclusivity” within #OwnVoices, indicating that minority group authors were accused of not being “#OwnVoices enough,” and that minority authors were instructed to “stay in their own lane” regarding issue books, limiting their creativity in the process. She concludes by creating a call to action for readers to continue to encourage the industry to do better in terms of creating characters whose stories weren’t “one note,” but this plea isn’t just centered in this one article: multiple other sources cite the need for the industry to “do better” (Fujii).

For example, Kat Rosenfield writes in “What is #OwnVoices Doing to Our Books?” that “the impact of this movement on the landscape of YA has turned increasingly toxic, leading to callouts, controversy, and canceled books—often for the underrepresented authors it was supposed to help.” Despite the utilization of different initiatives within the publishing industry for improving diversity, such as the annual Twitter event #DVPit and sensitivity readers, the hyper-focus on “authenticity” became “a hindrance, not a help” to promoting inclusivity. The YA “callout culture” began to manifest in a secretly sinister way, with members of the YA community turning against each other for not being “pure” or “authentic” enough, thus discouraging minority writers from producing their own works for fear of being canceled (fear of people no longer supporting their endeavors, businesses, or entirety as a human in general) (Rosenfield).

Ironically, it appears that most of the time, it was not even minority writers turning on each other. As Rosenfield shares:

It's not lost on minority authors that the quest to police their books is largely being led by White gatekeepers who desperately want more diverse books, but are terrified of being seen as racist, ableist, or otherwise un-hip to progressive values if one of their books 'gets it wrong'... gatekeepers who consider themselves anti-racist allies can have troubling preconceptions of what marginalized people's stories should look like, and will pressure writers with different backgrounds to stick with 'issue books' centered on oppression or injustice.

In a strange deviation of Duyvis' original intent, gatekeepers were not necessarily denying admission to marginalized authors, but seemed to be checking off an imaginary list of what it means to be truly authentic. And the trend continued until it reached a boiling point.

*Front and Center: Analysis of the Fall Issue of The Journal of Children's Literature*

In fall 2020, in the face of the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor murders and the Black Lives Matter Movement, *The Journal of Children's Literature* released an issue dedicated solely to the #OwnVoices movement. The editors' introduction, titled "The Complexities of #OwnVoices in Children's Literature," set the pace for directly addressing and candidly bringing to light the problems occurring within the movement. They write, "we are all human, and even at our best, we can still make mistakes" (Crisp et. al 5). As a team, they also "lament the fact that the foundational essays are often as relevant today as they were at the time they were written" (6), indicating that at the time, plenty of discussion took place regarding #OwnVoices, but no clear actions had yet to be taken. Their call to action strikes a familiar chord of exasperation and frustration from those within the industry for publishing officials to do better:

Ultimately, if we truly believe that children's books serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding doors, and if we believe that children's books shape the minds and lives of young



readers, and if we believe that children's books don't merely reflect but help create the reality in which we live, it is essential that the field cease the perpetual spinning that allows those in the positions of power and privilege to stay perplexed or continue to "take time to think and read" without doing anything else and ultimately leave the field unchanged. (Crisp et al 6)

Truly, their call to action is more of a plea—a plea for the industry to actually hear minority voices, rather than merely appease or talk in circles, for the sake of changing the very nature of children's literature.

The candor continues throughout the issue, with topics such as the definition of authenticity and diversity being called into question as well as whether #OwnVoices had turned against the very people it sought to protect. In "Reflections of the #OwnVoices Movement," panelist Jesse Gainer reflects that while #OwnVoices literature can be a "great way to educate White people on systemic racism and White supremacy...*quality* has been a loaded term and when left unquestioned, it often serves as a gatekeeper for the status quo" (Acevedo-Aquino et. al 27–31). Fellow panelist and author Zetta Elliott echoes this sentiment, sharing that "as long as the publishing industry remains dominated by one group (straight, White, cisgender women who don't have disabilities), the #OwnVoices movement will be limited in its ability to empower kid lit creators from marginalized groups" (Acevedo-Aquino et. al 30). To close, author Maria V. Acevedo-Aquino seems to prophesize the eventual direction of #OwnVoices in relation to diversity:

But I wonder about 'diverse' unintentionally becoming (1) a label to continue 'othering' stories that are not representative of mainstream culture, (2) a collective forced to meet higher standards to compete with the 'not diverse' books, and (3) an excuse to maintain

problematic notion of culture that only see culture as including those not viewed as the norm. (Acevedo-Aquino et. al 35)

It is critical to note that these observations were shared from authors and industry officials who come from diverse and varied backgrounds: Gainer is a White, straight, male, cisgender educator; Elliott is a black, female Canadian American poet, playwright, and author; and Acevedo-Aquino is a female Puerto Rican assistant professor. Despite their differing identities, all the contributors in this article expressed profound concern with the trajectory of #OwnVoices and the potential silencing of minority voices in the name of “authentic storytelling.”

Perhaps one of the most scathing yet accurate assessments of #OwnVoices within this issue occurs in Robert Bittner’s article “Beyond Mere Representation in the Classroom: Finding and Teaching Literature by and About LGBTQ+ Authors.” Bittner discusses how the #OwnVoices movement has complicated how LGBTQ+ lives are represented in texts and advocates for literary analysis of LGBTQ+ texts themselves. He observes that “authors are now expected to perform a dual role as both writer and public performer,” which is the result of the now “complicated” #OwnVoices movement; instead of being a descriptive, all-encompassing concept, #OwnVoices had become “prescriptive” in relation to gender and sexuality (36).

Directly addressing the now “corrupt” nature of the movement, Bittner shares:

The original purpose of #OwnVoices...has been corrupted, moving from something that allowed readers to know if a book had been written by someone with a personal connection to a specific marginalized identity, to something that the publishing industry and many educators and reviewers see as a stamp of ‘authenticity,’ an assurance that a book will be less likely to contain stereotypes or other problematic elements because of the link between authorship and nuances of lived experiences. (37)

The intention of *The Journal of Children's Literature* is clear within these articles: #OwnVoices, while originally well-intended, had become problematic and must be addressed in clear, definable terms in order to truly become a welcoming space within the publishing industry. The question, though, is how?

*Fall From Grace with Potential for the Future: 2021*

Tensions within the publishing industry came to a head with the shocking press release from *We Need Diverse Books* (WNDB) denouncing the use of #OwnVoices. WNDB stated what many within the community had been sharing for the past year, that the hashtag had become a “catch all marketing term by the publishing industry.” This observation indicated that the commercialization of #OwnVoices detracted from the movement’s initial message and instead placed diverse creators “in uncomfortable and potentially unsafe situations” (“Why We Need Diverse Books”). The aftermath of WNDB’s claim brought forth more people within publishing who agreed with the press release while bringing to light what seemed to be the true issue at hand: the lack of authentic diversity within the publishing industry itself.

In the *Publisher's Weekly* piece “The #OwnVoices Conundrum,” LGBTQ+ author Amanda Kabak observes that the #OwnVoices hashtag could be contradictory in and of itself due to its self-labeling techniques. Additionally, she echoes concerns that as an author, she could become “boxed in” with her art due to the movement, claiming that she also does not wish for diversity to become formulaic or “inauthentic...to fill quotas or facilitate marketing and sales.” To bring about diversity, then, that same diversity is required “within the ranks of people in power—the gatekeepers, the tastemakers.” Sarah Raughley summed up the current situation beautifully in her piece “The Demise of #OwnVoices”: “publish, promote, and market authors of all backgrounds. Do not discriminate. Stop hierarchizing. Publishers don’t need a hashtag to

figure out how to do that. They just need the willingness.” Duyvis’ original view for #OwnVoices to not become a place of limitation may have initially failed, but the WNDB release seems to have many within the industry regrouping, and hopefully, actually listening.

So how can #OwnVoices rise from the ashes of cancellation? Many share that approaching marginalized stories and topics with respect and thorough research is an excellent place to begin. Going back to 2016, Duyvis herself shared that there were three practices she recommended authors take when approaching characters outside their lived experiences: “(1) learn about broader representation, tropes, and politics; (2) do as much research as you can on the specific situation, focusing on hearing from people directly rather than filtered through the eyes of a doctor or relative; (3) get one or multiple consultants” (Hoffman et. al). Others, such as Acevedo-Aquino, Elliott, Gainer, and Bittner, emphasize the importance of critical literacy and reading in classroom settings when dissecting #OwnVoices texts, rather than immediate cancellation of authors and their works (Acevedo-Aquino et al). As Emily Booth and Bhuvan Narayan share in “That Authenticity is Missing,” outside authors writing inside perspectives need “thorough research and deep respect for these narratives and marginalized communities” in order to become successful in writing outside their knowledge and experiences (77). Many within the industry are open to authors having creative license so long as there is respect and research, traits that authors should inherently possess when writing any novel, much less an #OwnVoices text.

Ultimately, authors, readers, and publishing industry officials are calling for the resurgence of authorial autonomy, of allowing authors to have the creative freedom to write about outside experiences without the fear of being pigeonholed, stereotyped, limited, or outright canceled. Moneeka Thakur, in her article “The #OwnVoices Movement: Whose Voices are

Being Heard?,” concludes that “authors need to be trusted to own their stories, whether they are a reflection of their own communities, or an exploration of something new.” Rosenfield directly calls for the industry to “relinquish its stranglehold on the stories themselves,” observing that “a colorful and creative future lies in welcoming and supporting authors from all backgrounds—and then letting them use their voices to tell whatever kinds of stories they want.” The problem with #OwnVoices is two-fold: (1) the search for authenticity has resulted in cancellation rather than acceptance, and (2) the industry itself needs to examine its own practices before instructing others on how to write their own stories.

As discussed in the literacy acquisition section of this literature review, dialect plays an incredibly important role in both narrative and dialogue portions of children’s literature (see Strause et. al; Ghiso and Campano; Newvine and Fleming). Therefore, children’s books should reflect the diversity and authenticity that the #OwnVoices movement initially aimed to achieve in the publishing industry. Unfortunately, there is still much work that needs to be done, primarily within publishing houses themselves and American society’s fascination with cancel culture, before true change can occur.

### **Summary of Literature Review Findings**

As shown in this literature review, the issue of dialects and linguistic representation in children’s literature encompasses far more than basic grammar conventions. Indeed, discrimination toward different dialects and accents has been prevalent throughout the history of the English language and continues to divide English speakers in America. This partiality and preferential treatment toward a standard language has only built walls between American citizens and contributes to nationalistic ideologies that only further the linguistic divide. Children therefore are brought up in America learning that their home languages will be mocked, othered,

or disfavored from their “more standard” peers, leading toward a resentment and hatred of English language instruction. And since the American education system promotes prescriptive grammar norms, it has become almost impossible for children to see themselves and hear their voices in the texts that they read, as researchers have shared. Thus, one of the most important practices parents, teachers, librarians, and guardians can utilize to fight standard language ideology is critical discourse analysis through books that actively incorporate varying dialects in their texts. But in order to accomplish that goal of inclusive voices in children’s literature, the publishing industry needs to address crucial principles of authenticity and creativity within their business practices. #OwnVoices sought to accomplish the goal of normalizing marginalized voices and embracing unique stories, but ultimately became another way to gatekeep the authors the movement initially aimed to protect and promote. Again, it may seem that true authenticity and proper dialectal representation in children’s literature is an impossible feat to accomplish. As the next section will reveal, though, all hope is not lost in the fight for authenticity voices in children’s literature.

## **Authenticity in an #OwnVoices World**

As shared in the previous literature review, many publishing houses and literary institutions took notice of the trend #OwnVoices and began implementing practices that actively sought underrepresented stories and authors (see Vanderhage; Hoffman et. al). #OwnVoices seemed to be the solution to the problem of diversity in the publishing industry; however, what once started as a movement which sought to open the doors to a gatekept industry inevitably became the problem itself, with many publishing houses using the term as further means to ostracize and exclude certain voices under the guise of being “unauthentic.”

The creation and subsequent decline of the #OwnVoices movement created a plethora of new problems within publishing. Instead of questioning the lack of diversity in the industry, questions veered toward a more philosophical direction: what does it mean to be authentic? Who is the authority behind authenticity? Is there a set of guidelines to determine who is an authentic author, or what is an authentic experience? (see Acevedo-Aquinno et. al; Booth and Narayan; Cutler). How does the publishing industry proceed in the fight for diverse stories and languages in literature without the fear of being canceled? All of these questions have left many in the industry frozen with indecision, which ultimately has led to nothing but conversations with no benefits or action (Rosenfield).

As I began analyzing these findings on the #OwnVoices movement from my secondary research, I had a sobering thought: so long as the industry remains at an impasse regarding diversity, it is virtually impossible to imagine a world in which children will be able to hear their voices in the books they read. This rather pessimistic and unhopeful mentality led me to a new line of thinking: if I felt this frustrated with American society and American publishing, how do officials within the publishing community feel? With this question in mind, I set out to gather

information firsthand from publishing officials regarding their experiences and thoughts on #OwnVoices to see if they aligned with my own dismay.

I had the immense privilege to interview five publishing industry officials for this capstone, each of whom revealed profound insights into not only the current business trends and strategies but also the community's outlook on diversity and authenticity. These professionals also disclosed their personal beliefs on how the industry can best include and promote the importance of seeing and hearing children's voices in the books they read. My hope is that the qualitative data obtained from the interviews will inspire future conversations about authentic voices and lead to positive, meaningful, and lasting action in the publishing industry.

### **Demographics, Background, and Literacy Acquisition**

As shared in the "Methods and Methodologies" section, I interviewed five professionals in children's and YA literature. Regarding the demographics of the five participants—four identify as women and one as a man; all participants are between the ages of twenty-two and fifty-five; and three of the participants are editors, one is a marketing professional, and one is the manager of an independent bookstore with a substantive knowledge about graphic novels and experience as a writer. Out of the five individuals, two have experience working with a Big Five publishing house; two have experience working for mid-size houses; and one works at a prominent independent children's bookstore in the Atlanta area. All five participants are from the Atlanta area, though one shared that she currently resides in Jersey City, New Jersey, just outside of New York City. When asked how they came to work in children's and young adult literature, all expressed a deep love and appreciation for storytelling and books. The five participants have nearly forty years of publishing and industry experience combined, which only adds further value and credibility to their answers.



The participants all had unique yet somewhat similar literacy journeys. Most of the participants revealed that their parents had influenced their love of reading and surrounded them with books and stories. As Laura Apperson, editor for Callisto Media shared, “I do remember always having books around and always being attracted to books. Both of my parents loved to read.” Similarly, Justin Coloussey-Estes, manager of Little Shop of Stories in Decatur, Georgia recalled, “When I was sick, my mom would bring me home comic books.” These observations aren’t too surprising; as discussed in the literature review, many linguists, educators, and child psychologists share that there are direct, positive correlations between literacy and early access to books (see Knauer et. al; Curzan and Adams; Cameron-Faulkner and Noble).

Additionally, participant “Allison,” who works in marketing at one of the Big Five publishing houses, said that she grew up in a bilingual household and also had a speech delay. Both of these aspects of her upbringing, which some could designate as potential impediments to English literacy, did just the opposite. When reflecting on speech therapy and her bilingual environment, Allison said, “Now I have such a great literacy, and I am able to speak it as I do, but it’s interesting because I think that was the starting point of me continuing to read for my pleasure on my own.” This statement further confirms Niklas, Cohrsen, and Tayler’s stance on multilingualism—that creating a safe environment in which children can embrace their home language(s) only further promotes literacy in children (9).

Some participants particularly highlighted how their education affected their love of reading and books. While Ashley Hearn, acquisitions editor for Peachtree Publishing, recalls growing up with books, she credits her high school teachers for her career in publishing:

I honestly don't think I'd be in publishing if I hadn't had those particular high school teachers. My 10th grade teacher taught me really how to love it [books and reading]. My

11th grade teacher taught me how to analyze it. And then [during] my senior year, [a] teacher was kind of a good synthesis of those two: [he] taught me how to love [and] taught me how to analyze.

Kelsey Provow, former subsidiary rights assistant at Peachtree Publishing, had a more unconventional literacy journey that was influenced by a teacher. In fact, what started out as encouragement (and slight bribery) changed Provow's entire outlook on reading:

I hated reading when I was a kid. I absolutely hated it. But in fifth grade, Ms. Bridge had wanted me to get enough 'points' that I could go to the pizza party with the rest of the class. And she was like, 'I need you to finish this book [*Little House on the Prairie*]. You have to finish this book.' So she encouraged me to read it during recess...and to read it at home. And then when I finally finished this book, I was like, 'Whoa, I can read a big book. I can read a really big book.'

These experiences confirm Souto-Manning, Ghim, and Madu's stance that educators have an important role in developing students' literacies (483). While the literature review discussed the importance of bilingual and diverse dialectal books in a home environment, the data collected from these interviews reveals how vital it is to have someone in the classroom who encourages their students to read and write. In response to the data, I posit this scenario: imagine what literacy rates in America would look like if teachers incorporated multilingual practices into their English lessons.

### **Dialects**

When asked if they grew up with dialects as children, the respondents each discussed how their home environments shaped their dialectal identities. For Allison, growing up with multiple languages (French, English, and Korean), which was (and still is) uncommon in

American society, gave her a deep appreciation for her multilingual background. She shared, “growing up in the United States...that’s not normalized as much. And so I am fortunate that I grew up learning two languages [because] I think language has always been very interesting to me.” What is noteworthy, though, is that aside from occasionally reading French dialects in her literature growing up, Allison couldn’t recall reading any other sort of dialect. This revelation reveals some possibilities to consider: was Allison unable to remember reading certain dialects because she was young and simply forgot? Or does this observation hint that standard language ideology practices in American society and, subsequently, publishing, potentially made it more difficult for dialects to be present in children’s literature?

The other participants had similar difficulties remembering seeing any linguistic representation in the books they read as children. However, they all shared the common trait of growing up hearing and speaking with a Southern accent, which ultimately died out as they grew up. The reason for this dissociation with their linguistic heritage is profoundly sad: they were afraid and ashamed of the negative labels associated with “speaking Southern”:

**Hearn:** I grew up with a pretty thick Southern dialect...my mom’s family have a white Midwestern accent. I always kind of knew that different sides of my family spoke differently. I originally kind of pushed against it [her Southern accent]. Took me a while to kind of realize there’s a lot of beauty to that regionalism.

**Provow:** When I was a kid, I had a very thick Southern accent. But I had a friend who had such a Southern accent, and I remember the rest of the kids thinking she was dumb because she had such a thick Southern accent, that she was redneck and stupid. I remember thinking to myself I didn’t want people to think of me like that. So I worked really hard to create this kind of non-accent. I do look back on it now and say, ‘Oh, I kind

of wish I still had a little bit of a Southern accent,' because I take a bit of pride in being from the South—at least being an individual from the South who is not like the stereotypes we associate with the South.

As evident in these quotes, how people view and treat non-standard dialects can have lasting ramifications on children's identities and consequently how they view the world around them. Lippi-Green spoke of how Southerners have either grown to fully embrace or completely cast aside their accents in the name of remaining neutral, and the data here accurately reflects that sentiment.

When considering what dialects look like in literature, the participants emphasized the importance of context clues, vocabulary selection, and accurate dialogue from authors and their characters, rather than prescriptive norms (as defined earlier in the literature review) such as grammar and punctuation. Hearn notes, "the words that you choose are going to be different depending on where you're from, so it's vocabulary and sentence rhythms for me." Apperson also agreed that vocabulary was important for her view of dialects, claiming, "grammar to me is almost like a non-barrier." This information is truly profound, especially when considering the prescriptive grammar norms that dictate American society and language today. Additionally, these publishers' viewpoints on dialects versus grammar are fascinating in view of Wolfram's earlier definition of a dialect: dialects are not outside of grammar, but in fact have their own grammar mechanics and rules. The participants' thoughts and perceptions on grammar being inherently different from dialects indicate that there may be a lack of understanding within publishing as to what a dialect is and how to properly address dialects in literature. This potential revelation regarding understandings surrounding dialects raises the important question: would

publishing professionals benefit from learning more about descriptive grammar practices in their university studies or professional development?

With regard to dialects in children's and YA literature, there does seem to be an increase of books that incorporate different dialects and linguistic practices into their texts. Allison shared that due to global trends, American publishing houses are stopping the practice of italicizing dialogue spoken in another language because, "It's to show that just because it's another language, just because it's something else, doesn't mean it can't still exist." Referring to a book Peachtree Publishing recently released, Hearn revealed, "the mom speaks Mandarin, and we just put the Mandarin in there. Sometimes it's translated. Sometimes it's not translated. We wanted to deliver that experience as if you were just listening to the conversation." Techniques like these certainly lend hope to marginalized voices and point toward a positive direction in normalizing other dialects and languages in popular literature. Even so, those instances seem to be the extent of the action being taken in the industry, and that may be due to the confusion surrounding what it means to be an authentic storyteller.

### **The Authenticity Trend**

As the questions progressed, the conversation among all the participants shifted from their personal identities and backgrounds to the main conversation within the publishing industry: authenticity and the #OwnVoices movement. When asked what trends were prevalent in children's and YA books, the answers rarely touched on topics like cats, fairy tales, or superheroes, instead discussing the drive toward finding any stories that were created by authentic, diverse authors.

For example, the following was shared regarding the strange relationship of diversity as a trend:

**Allison:** We are seeing changes that are being made because of events that were happening in 2020. And so because of that, it is now bringing forth a discussion of what diversity and inclusion really means. What they [publishing officials] weren't realizing is that it's not just people within the industry that need to be diverse and included; it needs to also be the authors and the books. And it's sad that this is a trend.

**Apperson:** I hesitate to call it a trend though, because I think it's just a positive change. I think there's a lot more thoughtfulness about bringing more diversity and inclusion into children's books. It's not perfect, but it is absolutely improving, like with #OwnVoices. And now there's even a change in #OwnVoices because there's constant movement in these sorts of ideas. But I think the trend is—again, I hate to use the word *trend* because it feels like, you know, a throw away and it's not. It's seeking out and lifting up voices that previously have been told by gatekeepers that they're not allowed or that they don't make money or things like that.

Others shared the more important conversations and questions surrounding authenticity occurring among editors and illustrators because of the constant promotion of the #OwnVoices movement:

**Hearn:** I do think that one just kind of universal trend that we've seen just across the industry, is this increasing emphasis on authenticity. I think that that kind of goes universally across age category that we're just thinking more consciously about like, especially when it comes to things like voice and dialect: is this authentic to the experience of the characters and the readers who are going to be connecting with this? And how is that authenticity lent? Is it through research? Is it through lived experience? Is it both of those things? And who has the authority to tell what stories? Those are

questions that we've just been more consciously asking ourselves as editors across the across age categories.

**Coloussey-Estes:** Probably five, six years ago, there was this big push from We Need Diverse Books authors and writers saying two things: one, we need more voices on the page because we need kids to be able to see themselves on the page, and two, we need more writers and illustrators who can authentically speak to those experiences in publishing, not just as writers and illustrators, but also as editors and publishers.

As shared earlier in the literature review, many of the participants expressed that the drive for diversity has come with its set of complications, leaving many within the industry in a “gray area”:

**Provow:** I think there's a very, very strange gray area that we're all trying to navigate as we find what's the best way to tell those stories. There are many editors I'm noticing who are leaning into only acquiring stories about those experiences from authors of those lived experiences. They refuse to hire someone or acquire somebody who does not connect with that experience because they don't want the backlash of critical reviewers coming in and saying, ‘Nope, that's not okay.’

The information Provow revealed in particular raises many concerning questions: how often are editorial decisions made based off of fear rather than principle? How does an editor determine whether or not someone has genuinely had an authentic experience? What happens when publishers only focus on acquiring stories from those who meet “authentic criteria”? All of these questions seem to indicate a troubling answer: that with the trend of authenticity and diversity also comes a trend of cancellation and uncertainty, leading to yet another form of gatekeeping within the publishing industry.

## Defining and Addressing Authenticity and Diversity

When discussing the current practices that the publishing industry is taking in portraying dialectal and linguistic authenticity, a couple of the participants, such as Allison and Apperson, detailed employing authenticity readers and compiling databases of subscribers and social media influencers who identify as an #OwnVoices voice. Others, like Hearn, noted that it was also important to have a diversified author list. She stated, “I would never want to publish a list full of authors with the same dialect. I want any reader to be able to come to my list and find the book that they see themselves reflected in, and dialect is one of those ways in which readers connect with a book.” These practices seem to be currently used in big and small publishing houses and indicate that the #OwnVoices movement did change some marketing and editorial strategies—but recent conversation within the community reveals that those practices may be changing in the future:

**Provow:** #OwnVoices is actually in the last year frowned upon in the way that we market books now, and the reason why is that authority figures like We Need Diverse Books or other prominent figures in these discussions have said it's become too gimmicky in the way that we use it. It gets slapped on everything. Everything is #OwnVoices. So it's no longer attributing to the positive cause of representation in the way that it used to. We [Provow's previous employer] took out [everything that had “#OwnVoices” in it] because we didn't want to continue to reinforce that gimmicky style of this term. I completely agree after looking at the way it has been used. It's exactly that. But it all comes back to the representation. Who are you publishing it for? Are you publishing it for White readers who need to learn about Black experience or are you publishing it for Black readers who want to learn or see themselves within stories?



Provow's critical yet thought-provoking answer reflects the most recent conversation regarding the #OwnVoices movement (see Kabak; Raughley; Acevedo-Acquino et. al). This raises the question: if the current #OwnVoices movement isn't solving the lack of diversity and is only complicating what it means to be authentic, what practices should the publishing industry promote instead?

The participants shared four elements that would help the cause for diversity: (1) intentionality from publishers, (2) trusting authors, (3) access to quality educational materials on diversity, and (4) willingness to make mistakes and then improve. Participants Allison, Apperson, and Provow expanded on these factors toward true diversity in children's literature in clear terms:

**Allison:** I think that's what it is at the end of the day—it's fear. People are fearful of saying things wrong. And so now they're constantly hearing about what's going on to make sure that they don't go through that type of thing again. But the thing is you can't be afraid to try to learn something without making sure that you have the resources for us to do it. If you have all the resources and you go through all of them and somehow you're still wrong: mistakes happen, but at least you can say at that point, 'It probably was my fault because I went through all these resources or I probably didn't use them, or I didn't have it.'

**Apperson:** I think the first order of business would be for publishers to think that it's worthy of publishing. After that, I think it's just a matter of authors being willing to put in the work to include characters who speak different dialects, or hiring an authenticity reader or a partner with the book to help them edit those portions of the book.

**Provow:** I think it all comes back to the authors that they're representing. I think trusting that their authors, if they are using the dialect from their own lived experiences, then they are the authority in that realm. Editors need to be very conscious of how they're providing commentary as well. I think the other thing is being open to learning, because this is obviously a long, long ingrained part of not only the industry, but our country as a whole. There are so many layers of our biases and racism and prejudices, that as we are working it through ourselves and through our companies, we cannot fix it all on one go. And to think we can is our hubris.

As revealed here, there are many steps that the publishing industry and American society need to take if there is to be true representation in children's books. There needs to be honest and difficult discussion on why certain books are acquired while others are rejected; there need to be resources that industry professionals can refer to when attempting to work with an outside dialect or culture; and people need to be allowed to make mistakes and grow from those hard lessons learned without fear of cancellation. Texts such as *Intercultural Communications in Contexts* by Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama reflect this concept of forgiveness in the face of mistakes, indicating that there are those who agree with the sentiments shared by the participants. What is truly hopeful is that there are those within the industry who are willing to grow, adapt, reflect, and learn in the journey toward true representation in the publishing industry.

The concluding question presented to the participants asked that each of them define diversity as they understood the term to mean. This question was posited in order to better understand how some publishing individuals may define diversity within the context of authenticity and dialectal variation. The respondents all seemed to share similar views, stating that true diversity, whether it be reflected in sexuality, gender, race, or social class, involves not

only embracing an author's own identity but also fully embracing other identities within the industry as well. Some answers, in particular, stood out in term of the potential questions they simultaneously raise:

**Apperson:** Diverse to me means a wide variety of lived experience and background and that can mean anything. I think that the word I like more is inclusion, and I feel like that's the key to having dialects more prevalent in book publics. You know, folks love to talk about diversity and of course, diversity is important, but diversity exists on this planet. You just have to open your eyes.

**Allison:** It means that as a human, you recognize your identity, and you also recognize the people around you don't have that same identity. [It also] doesn't mean I'm the spokesperson for everybody else. Everybody's different and yes, I may relate to a majority within it, but that doesn't mean that I can stand up on the podium and speak for every single person within the room

**Kelsey:** I think it [life] would be super, super boring and stories would become very formulaic and uniform, then creativity would cease to exist. So yeah, I think it encompasses humanity, and as storytellers that's the whole point of telling stories, is to learn about our humanity and learn about others.

These definitions of diversity bring forth interesting questions for future discussion. First, should the focus be less on labeling stories as "diverse" and more so on "inclusive?" Second, in a world filled to the brim with multiple different identities and backgrounds, how does one decide who is the authority figure for one individual experience? Finally, are publishers accidentally limiting creativity in storytellers by pigeonholing them to tell one specific story instead of many? These

questions are important to consider when navigating the murky waters of diversity and authenticity and should be addressed to its fullest in current publishing conversations.

### **Summary of Findings**

The primary research conducted in this section revealed many fascinating insights into the minds of some publishing officials within children's literature. While these thoughts do not reflect the publishing collective as a whole, they do indicate that there are those within the industry who recognize the importance of creating and maintaining diverse author lists for their houses and employers. Each participant reflected on their unique experiences, and that self-reflection brought forth awareness into how their own linguistic and literacy journeys helped shape their stances on editorial decisions, trends within children's literature, and more.

Additionally, the participants shared invaluable information regarding how their employers are addressing authenticity and the #OwnVoices movement and disclosed how they felt the industry should best promote inclusivity and diversity within their books. Ultimately, the qualitative results indicate that in order to combat gatekeeping within this current movement for diversity (a phrase that seems to inherently contradict itself while remaining true), the industry must embrace what true diversity is all about: letting storytellers share their experiences with the world. Indeed, a movement that results in gatekeeping practices cannot be labeled as truly diverse if it is still silencing the voices it sought to uplift and promote in the first place. As Provow observed, "I think that it [diversity] is infinite and ultimately embodies humanity because you can't have humanity without diversity." Humanity is already diverse. Publishers need to allow authors to be what they already are: authentically themselves.

## Call to Action

As analyzed throughout this project, there are many factors that comprise the issue of dialectal representation in children's literature. Defining human language and exploring the history of SAE establishing a common ground and understanding into common linguistic and sociolinguistic principles. Further, illustrating SLI in relation to the changing American dialectal landscape and providing an overview of certain American dialects revealed current misconceptions surrounding language in the US, which in turn exposed the current misunderstandings and problems within American English at large. Investigating recent conversations in children's literacy acquisition and highlighting the importance of diversity in the children's publishing industry raised questions as to why practices as positive as Child Directed Speech and home language depiction in children's books are not promoted in an education setting. Finally, critically analyzing the rise and fall of the #OwnVoices movement and speaking with publishing industry professionals helped with understanding how a movement that is created with good intentions but executed with unchecked mistakes can only further silence marginalized voices. Based on all the research collected and conducted, I have listed certain suggestions that could potentially be addressed by linguists, ELA educators, and publishing professionals alike:

- Create more literature and research with the intent of exploring the difference between covert prestige and cultural appropriation in an effort to accurately label what it means to appropriate a dialect.
- Effectively utilize proper methods and procedures that advocate for the preservation of contact languages, like pidgins and creoles, in order to study the linguistic development of certain languages.

- Analyze the historical development of SAE further and encourage more scholarship on the topic in linguistics, ELA education, and the publishing industry in order to stop SLI from silencing marginalized voices.
- Further conversations and narratives that remind American citizens that SAE is one of many dialects in America in an attempt to combat SLI in American society.
- Analyze and promote how American dialects and its many speakers share common ground in their linguistic and cultural pride in order to combat “othering” and negative stereotyping of dialects.
- Dedicate research to studying youth culture in relation to AAVE without labeling the conversation as “problematic” or “appropriating,” thereby helping determine the spread of AAVE in America.
- Create, promote, and request linguistically diverse children’s books to increase literacy in our ever-evolving linguistic world, as well as promote critical discussion of SLI in American society.
- Instead of fully canceling the #OwnVoices movement, encourage open, honest, and difficult conversations surrounding diversity, as well as allow for forgiveness and understanding in potential shortcomings.

Ultimately, the issue of representation has been plaguing the industry for decades, and within the umbrella of representation, topics such as dialects, voice, and authenticity connect many different cultures and communities together. There is an abundance of literature and conversation that indicates that the industry is willing to *discuss* diversity, yet it is still unclear whether publishing officials, linguists, and educators actually know how best to address and solve this problem. And even so, the information shared in this project hints that when it comes to

representation, publishers seem to be more concerned with portraying *experiences* more so than actual *dialect* in children's literature. The research revealed how important dialect is to identity in children, so why is this not one of the primary concerns in discussions about diversity? Yes, discussions surrounding diverse languages are increasing, but there is a dearth of actual, tangible solutions that will bring about change, and it all circles back to the lack of proper representation within the industry and American society itself. No growth can truly take place in the publishing industry and in children's literature until we examine our practices and allow authors and voices of every background and experience to do what they do best: write and speak candidly without fear. Educating the American populace and publishers, forgiving mistakes, and giving authors the freedom to write may, in fact, be the way to help children one day find their *Chrysanthemum*.

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### Relevant Experience:

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Taylor and Francis Group/Routledge - Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

*Editorial Assistant, Education*

April 2022 - Present

- ◆ Prepare manuscripts for production, arrange the review of new book proposals, and liaise with authors, series editors, and reviewers
- ◆ Administer contracts, reviewer payments, and gratis copies
- ◆ Assist with general administration for the Education list

Kennesaw State University - Kennesaw, Georgia

*Graduate Research Assistant*

August 2021 - May 2022

- ◆ Assisted with editing, bibliographic checking, and index building for the Routledge title, *Teaching English Variation in the Global Classroom: Models and Lessons from Around the World*
- ◆ Formed a database of examples of academic writing for future research projects
- ◆ Investigated and annotated secondary sources for a book on politics and the English language

Kennesaw Journal of Undergraduate Research - Kennesaw, Georgia

*Editorial Assistant Intern*

June 2021 - August 2021

- ◆ Read, proofread, and edited submitted manuscripts
- ◆ Communicated with reviewers and worked with student authors through the manuscript review process
- ◆ Recommended editorial decisions and participated in editorial meetings
- ◆ Collaborated in updating spreadsheets, internal documents, and coordinating KJUR events

Gables Residential - Atlanta, Georgia

*Administrative Assistant*

February 2017 - May 2019

- Assisted by running reports and completing spreadsheets for meetings
- Proofed and archived materials and prepare formal agreements
- Planned and coordinated company meetings and events when requested
- Made travel arrangements, coordinated event registrations, and created expense reports

### Other Experience:

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Applerouth Tutoring Services - Atlanta, Georgia

*Tutor/Mock Grader*

June 2019 - August 2020

- ◆ Conducted one-on-one, group, and class ACT/SAT tutoring sessions for high school students
- ◆ Helped the Operations team with mock grading and other office duties
- ◆ Assisted with proofreading and editing the latest edition of Applerouth textbook

Scientific Games - Alpharetta, Georgia

*Technical Sales Proposals Writer*

November 2015 - September 2016

- ◆ Wrote to technical requirements within an RFP
- ◆ Supported the proposal development process by updating boilerplate, merging product write-ups, copy editing, and rewriting
- ◆ Ensured proper grammar and message consistency while applying a persuasive writing style

### Education:

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Kennesaw State University

Master of Arts, Professional Writing

May 2022

- Certificate in Professional Editing and Publishing

Bachelor of Sciences, Communication - Public Relations

December 2015