

KEY CONCEPT STATEMENT

Feminism and Language Rights: Emerging or Converging?¹

Staci Perryman-Clark

As I reflect on the task of helping to set an agenda for the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition (CWSHRC), I am inclined to think about the scholarship I have produced over the past five years as a tenure-track assistant professor and Writing Program Administrator. Thinking about the work I included in my recently submitted tenure dossier, I see two primary threads: one, the promotion and celebration of the Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) Resolution in relation to African American Language (AAL) speakers and writers (including all students); and two, contributions by African American women to both feminism and composition. During the process of composing projects related to both threads, I've often desired to write about language rights and its *intersection* with the status of African American women in the academy to show how, together, these topics might form a new, combined area of inquiry.

Although extant scholarship related to African American women has significant implications for language rights and linguistic diversity (Troutman; Richardson; Smitherman "Testifying"), I have personally been unsuccessful bringing them together in a single manuscript.² Importantly, my inability to make these connections has not been for lack of trying. Instead, reviewers consistently could not see these two issues as related in my work. To be clear, I do not suggest they were wrong. Rather, I question to what degree we as a field may be missing key conversations on not only a well-defined area and methodology for pursuing Black feminist intersections with language rights, but also a nuanced understanding of Black feminism (or feminisms). As a result, I am calling for us as scholars in the CWSHRC to actively, conceptually engage intersections between Black feminism and language rights in our intellectual work.

My own response to this problem was to investigate the relationships between language rights and feminism, and my starting place was Jacqueline Jones Royster's definition of Afrafeminism as a means of "mak[ing] overt connections [. . .] between the everyday understanding of African American

women" (274). Taken up and extended as an approach to the study of SRTOL, Afrafeminism offers pedagogical, theoretical, and rhetorical means of directly engaging with language rights in relation to both Black feminism and histories of African American women. Looking ahead to the Coalition's next 25 years, my wish is for readers of *Peitho*—as well as scholars working in the histories of women's rhetoric more broadly—to join me in developing Afrafeminist studies of language that identify and affirm the contributions of African American women to struggles for language rights. Specifically, I see two main locations for this work: historical scholarship about language rights and biographical scholarship of key language rights scholars. In both locations, however, how we must understand feminism is key.

Turning to the history of SRTOL, one cannot ignore the leadership of women of color on the Conference on College Composition and Communication Language Policy Committee, including not only Geneva Smitherman but also Guadalupe Valdés and Ana Celia Zentella (Wible 88). While most of us are familiar with the breath and depth of Smitherman's contributions, we tend to be less aware of how she connects language rights, alternative perspectives on feminism, and African American women's experiences. Yet Smitherman herself never shied away from this combination of topics. In *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans*, of feminism, Smitherman writes: "I wanted a feminism that would allow me to explore who we are as women—not as victims. One that claimed the powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being black girls now—sistas of the post-Civil rights, post-feminist, post-soul, hip hop generation" (104). Read through an Afrafeminist lens, it appears Smitherman also wanted to link feminism and language. In fact, in an interview with Austin Jackson and Bonnie Williams, she explains that it was "Students' Right to Their Own Language that really started [her] thinking about the relationship between language and gender" (129).

Afafeminism not only helps make these connections visible, but it also helps us understand why they have been so hard to see. Typically, the struggle for language rights is positioned alongside the struggle for racial rights (Smitherman "CCCC's Role"; Smitherman "Foreword"), even when class politics are taken up (Parks). Within this racialized framework, although the work of women scholars of color has been prominent, the subject of gender has not (Troutman; Smitherman; Richardson "To Protect and Serve"). One result is there has been little discussion about African American women's distinctive feminist practices. As Tamika L. Carey writes:

Because African-American women's historically marginalized social positions frequently result in their efforts to exercise the authority to engage in sociopolitical action is often interpreted as 'going against

the grain' of the general culture's dominant values and expectations, entering such spheres of argumentation can require them to be overtly strategic. (132)

Further, as Smitherman suggests, our feminism may include elements of the "post-Civil rights, post-feminist, post-soul, hip hop generation" (104). To conduct historical Afrafeminist studies of language rights, then, including studies of SRTOL, we must find ways to work *with* rather than *against* the grain of contributing African American women scholars' experiences and beliefs.

Similarly, taking Black feminisms into account is crucial to Afrafeminist biographical scholarship. Already, scholarship by Scott Wible as well as Austin Jackson and Bonnie Williams offers strong examples of how we might turn from the what women of color contributed to language rights struggles to the examples set by these women themselves. To further mine NCTE and CCCC archives along with other resources and better understand Smitherman's and others' contributions, we also have to see how someone like Smitherman herself draws specifically on feminism in her own work.

Here again, Tamika L. Carey provides essential insight. In "Firing Mamma's Gun: The Rhetorical Campaign in Geneva Smitherman's 1971-1973 Essays," she observes:

Smitherman's work is rarely tapped beyond its informational or historical value in contemporary rhetorical scholarship. Given the challenges she describes [. . .] our delay in examining the rhetorical strategies she must have used to gain such an authoritative role on African-American language and culture during such a contentious period is an oversight that obscures the complexity of her argumentation and her contributions to understandings of African-American women's rhetoric. (132)

Here Carey does more than help us connect language rights with the contributions of African American women. She also reminds us: We need ways to examine and honor female scholars of color such as Smitherman for more than their scholarly contributions or productivity. We also—and more importantly—need ways to understand and distinguish the feminist nature of their labor and its powerful impact on our field.

While I have identified two specific locations for Afrafeminist work in language rights, there are many more. Afrafeminist approaches can be broadly applied to issues of linguistic diversity including emerging discussions about transgender language rights. I also acknowledge that from a racial perspective, the promotion of SRTOL is certainly not a black/white issue. As Royster suggests, Afrafeminist methods include "*careful acknowledgement of passionate attachments, attention to ethical action, and commitment to social responsibility*"

across color and gender lines (emphasis in original, 279). Nonetheless, starting the conversation by identifying and honoring the women of color who began the struggle for students' rights is a necessary component for designing future projects. Framing this honor publicly—and especially in our peer-reviewed and published scholarship—serves as one of the most powerful tools we have as rhetoricians to lay new ground.

Notes

- 1 The title of this essay is inspired by Geneva Smitherman's research study, "Black English, Diverging or Converging?: The View from the National Assessment of Educational Progress," published in *Language and Education* 6.1 (1992): 47-61. This study found that students' uses of Black English have converged with edited American English over the past 20 years. Borrowing and revising Smitherman's title, this essay seeks to merge Afrofeminism with language rights, thus converging the two topics in ways that are explored more extensively.
- 2 I briefly mention implications for gendered discussion in relation to language rights in two articles, "Black Intellectuals in the Academy: Inventing the Special Topics Course," published in *Composition Forum*, and "Troubling the Boundaries: (De)Constructing WPA Identities at the Intersections of Race and Gender," published in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* (co-authored with Collin Craig).

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About the Author

Staci Perryman-Clark is an Associate Professor of English with a joint appointment in Gender and Women's Studies at Western Michigan University, where she also directs the First-Year Writing Program. She has published and edited two books: *Afrocentric Teacher-Research: Rethinking Appropriateness and Inclusion* (Peter Lang, 2013), and (with David E. Kirkland and Austin Jacks on) *Students' Right to Their Own Language: A Critical Sourcebook* (Bedford/St. Martin's and NCTE, 2014). Her current projects examine the intersections of Black feminist rhetorics in relation to gender, language rights, and Writing Program Administration. She is the 2015 recipient of Western Michigan University's College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Award for Research, Scholarly and Creative Activity.