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Research article

African American Vernacular as Cultural Resistance: An Analytical Study of Sonia Sanchez's "blk/rhetoric"

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of African American Vernacular as described in Sanchez's "blk/rhetoric" as a form of cultural resistance in the Black Arts Movement. While previous studies have examined Black identity and feminism, the use of African American Vernacular English as a cultural resistance in this poem has not been explored extensively. The study employs qualitative textual analysis guided by theories of Language and Power, Black feminist criticism, and Minor literature. The analysis focuses on Sanchez's use of irregular spelling, broken syntax, and oral speech patterns to subvert the power of Standard English and to assert Black identity and community consciousness. The findings indicate that Black Vernacular is a literary and political weapon of cultural resistance that aids in the comprehension of how language, identity and power are connected in African American literature.

الإنكليزية الافريقية الامريكية العامية بوصفها أداة للمقاومة الثقافية: دراسة تحليلية لقصيدة سونيا سانشيز"blk/rhetoric"

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المُستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة توظيف اللغة العامية الإفريقية الأمريكية كما تتجلى في قصيدة "blk/rhetoric"للشاعرة سونيا سانشيز بوصفها شكلاً من أشكال المقاومة الثقافية في إطار حركة الفنون السوداء. وعلى الرغم من وجود دراسات سابقة تناولت الهوية السوداء والنسوية، فإن توظيف اللغة العامية الإفريقية الأمريكية بوصفها أداةً للمقاومة الثقافية في هذه القصيدة لم يحظَ بالدراسة الكافية. وتعتمد الدراسة منهج التحليل النصي النوعي، مستندةً إلى نظريات اللغة والسلطة، والنقد النسوي الأسود، وادب الأقلية. ويركّز التحليل على الكيفية التي توظّف بها سانشيز التهجئة غير المعيارية، والبنية النحوية المتكسّرة، وأنماط التعبير الشفهي، لتقويض هيمنة الإنكليزية المعيارية وترسيخ الهوية السوداء وتعزيز الوعي الجمعي. وتبيّن النتائج أن اللغة العامية السوداء تؤدي دورًا أدبيًا وسياسيًا بوصفها أداةً للمقاومة الثقافية، بما يسهم في تعميق فهم العلاقة بين اللغة والهوية والسلطة في الأدب الإفريقي الأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الإنكليزية العامية الإفريقية الأمريكية، المقاومة الثقافية، حركة الفنون السوداء، سونيا سانشيز

Introduction

The Black Arts Movement was a cultural and political movement which emerged in the 1960s to redefine the African American literary effort. This movement used its literature, music and creative expressions to highlight the dignity of black, political challenge and cultural identity. Harris (1997) stated that Black artists believed that their creative work was connected with politics and Black art should mirror the reality, problems, and goals of African American communities. This link between art and resistance rendered literature an effective means of fighting racial injustice and re-establishing cultural identity.

Sanchez and Wood (2010) proposed that the Black Arts Movement created literature and performance that was grounded in the political and cultural awareness of African Americans. Black Arts writers did not necessarily follow the conventions of traditional literature; they did not attempt to conform to accepted aesthetic norms and instead questioned the cultural hegemony of the dominant white organizations by abandoning traditional poetic structures. Writing became a tool of political resistance and reconstruction of black identity and experience.

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, which grew out of the social and political turmoil of the era, was a forum for African American artists to defy racial prejudice and depict African American experiences through literature. The movement was a motivation to minority voices to contest prevailing narratives in society and seek cultural relevance, as Bouallegue (2024) relates. Crucially, BAM was a movement that

differed from its predecessors insofar as it was one of resistance, revolutionary consciousness, and a refusal to be assimilated into white culture.

Writing in the Black Arts Movement was generally political in nature and often was directed against African Americans themselves to raise social awareness and defiance (Neal, 1968). Many writers who were part of the movement incorporated into their writing African American Vernacular English, verbal patterns, and rhythmic expressions that were not considered typical of conventional English (Harris, 1997). It was a conscientious application of AAVE that allowed black poets like Sonia Sanchez to create literature that was both reflective of black communities and a challenge to white cultural authority.

Sanchez is a major participant in this movement, and is known for her unique style of poetry and performance in Black Vernacular. Works such as *Homecoming*, 1969 and *We a BaddDDD People*, 1970 make extensive use of black oral traditions, musical rhythms and everyday speech to create an entirely African American writing style. By departing from the traditional European literary norms, Sanchez creates a cultural space that celebrates black identity, heritage, and struggle through poems. Her unconventional linguistic style therefore serves as a medium for expression as well as a rejection of what is considered artistically accomplished work in the conventional English language.

Sanchez is one of the leading voices of the Black Revolutionary and Black Arts movements. She dedicated her career to supporting the Black Cultural Identity and social consciousness. Her poems continually reveal the discrimination and socioeconomic structures of mainstream white American culture and highlight black identity and experience. Poems are a way to confront and endure, as Barbara Christian (1985) points out, a way for Black woman poets to assert voices that often have been dismissed or ignored. Throughout her poetry, Sanchez underscores black speech and communal awareness to further reinforce this resistance. Through this, her poems are a Black woman's culture of resistance (Collins, 2000) and language is used as a tool for social uprising and appreciation.

RudeWalker (2023) explains that Sanchez's poetry is heavily dependent upon the use of Black Vernacular syntax, aural cadence, and vernacular speech to produce an accurate portrait of Black society. In Sanchez's hands, black people's language is authentic and reliable as a vehicle for literature, and she doesn't bother to alter it to fit the norms of conventional English. The use of this language enhances the emotional effect of her writing and also promotes the radical goals of the movement which are primarily concerned with cultural identity, personal identity and the rejection of white linguistic supremacy. This study emphasizes the oral rhythms, black resistance and identity of this language usage, whereas few studies mention the use of African American Vernacular English as a means of cultural and linguistic resistance as is done in "blk/rhetoric."

In "blk/rhetoric," Sanchez challenges the hegemony of standard English and celebrates the Black language and consciousness as a part of the Black Arts Movement through such as unconventional spelling, broken writing, the use of spoken patterns, and rhetorical questions.

Through a study of the themes of cultural resistance, Black feminist criticism, and minor literature, the paper assesses Sanchez's use of black vernacular in "blk/rhetoric. Patricia Hill Collins' concept of black

feminist consciousness illustrates the use of language both as a means of strengthening and as a means of revolt against dominant cultural norms. Furthermore, minor literature (as Deleuze and Guattari have described it) emphasizes the importance of the political in marginalized forms of expression that resist language's dominion. The theoretical perspectives provide a means for showcasing Sanchez's use of Black Vernacular as a literary and political tool to challenge cultural domination and reclaim a Black identity in the context of the Black Arts Movement.

Numerous research endeavours have explored Sonia Sanchez's poetry and its relationship with Black identity, cultural defiance, and the Black Arts Movement. Abdulrahman (2022) examined Sanchez's poetry as a cultural conflict and discovered that her works incorporate Black vernacular and cultural motifs to challenge racial subjugation and affirm African American identity. Similarly, Abd-ur-Rahman (2018) explored the rhetorical strategies of resistance in the work of Sonia Sanchez, Don L. Lee and Nikki Giovanni, and concluded that language is an effective means of demonstrating political resistance and advocating for black consciousness. Furthermore, Abdul Zahra (2017) conducted a stylistic examination of Sonia Sanchez's poetry (specifically "right on: white america") and observed that the poet's employing non-standard vocabulary and stylistic elements enhances black identity and aids in combating racial prejudice.

Although these studies offer vital insights into Sonia Sanchez's poetry, they are mostly concerned with cultural resistance, stylistic analysis, and Black Arts Movement topics. None of them explicitly discusses the employment of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a cultural resistance in Sanchez's poem blk/rhetoric. This research is thus aimed at filling the gap by investigating the use of AAVE as a linguistic and cultural strategy of resistance in this poem.

Language and Resistance

Language plays an important role in the social organization, in the construction of identities and in the influence of political discourse. Language options regularly indicate broader forms of authorization in literary and political contexts and determine which perspectives are embraced or suppressed. According to Swetha and Aravind (2025) language can be a tool to validate dominant ideologies and address unfairness. This is based on the assumption that language is strongly connected to political power. Talbot, Atkinson, and Atkinson (2003) claim that "language is crucial in articulating, maintaining, and subverting existing relations of power in society, both on global, national, and institutional levels and on the local level of interpersonal communication" (pp. 1-2).

Therefore, vernacular speech takes on the role of a cultural and political tool for the marginalized to re-assert themselves for recognition, authority and identity and as a creative tool in black literature. Black Arts Movement writers saw the use of the vernacular as a rebel act against a dominant cultural authority imposed by the white American governments. African American Vernacular English is more than a form of sociolinguistic variation; it is a cultural and political resistance to Eurocentric system dominion. In this paper, Dishar (2025) uses critical discourse analysis to examine the construction of African American rhetorical strategies in order to claim agency and to challenge institutional power relations. This

perspective is that the discourse of AAVE is not only a cultural artifact, it is an active counterhegemonic discourse as well. The vernacular language user uses his/her language and pronunciation as a potent semiotic weapon to resist cultural assimilation, to preserve a group's history, historical memory and cultural autonomy in relation to dominant cultural values and narratives.

Black innovative Speech in blk/rhetoric

In literary works, black females are often portrayed as resilient, proud, and defiant against racial discrimination. Lisa Jones (1994) asserts that black women poets employ language to assert freedom and joint authority. In her writing, Sanchez reflects this attitude; black vernacular is an expression of black identity, black existence, and innovative consciousness.

Sanchez challenges dominant cultures and languages through the use of black language. Robinson (1996)contends that she "refuses to utilize the language of the oppressor" (p. 19) and, in lieu of this, fosters a poetry style rooted on Black cultural experience and vernacular language. Haki Madhubuti (1984) further emphasizes Sanchez's ability to use Black Vernacular and place it into recognized literature, making the everyday vernacular a noteworthy form of literature. Sanchez intentionally challenges the standard rules of conventional English literature through the use of abbreviations, irregular spelling and urban Black vernacular (Furaih, 2017). This confusion of language contributes to the revolutionary stance of blk/rhetoric where language becomes an act of cultural resistance and self-definition. In this way Sanchez's poetry exemplifies what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the political function of minor literature: to make use of the ignored speech as a weapon of resistance.

In her writing, Sanchez occasionally uses the non-standard grammar and Black Vernacular such as "u," "gonna," and "blk. These linguistic choices which mirror the speech patterns of the Black community are an attack on standard English authority. The poem is all about blackness and a challenge to the dominant language and the demand for black freedom, and not merely a shallow slogan.

In blk/rhetoric, Sanchez critiques any superficial forms of Black empowerment that rely on catchphrases, materialist ideals or fleeting moments of joy. Phrases like "catch/phrases" and "cad/ill/acs" are Sanchez's frustration with the "emancipation" of artificial political jargon and capitalist objectives (Bingham-Risher, 2017). Through the broken spelling and word division, Sanchez reveals the moral and sociological degradation that underlies these kinds of false consciousness. Similarly, her denial of exploitation, and commercialization and deceiving resistance, have been demonstrated by reference to "wite/whores," "pimps," and "quick/fucks in the hall/way/of wite/america's mind "(Sanchez, 2021, p. 28). Sanchez, however, is calling for real revolutionary change with political and communal consciousness, not just figurative opposition. Her fractured language thus symbolizes her people's fractured realism, which she wants to denounce and heal.

The structure of the split-line and the visual space are used extensively in the black rhetoric to produce meaning and rhythm. Sanchez creates pauses and space division to determine the tempo of the poem and to draw attention to certain lines and ideas (Prousebj, 2024). Rather than writing proper English, Sanchez

resorted to such phrases as "u dig" and "who's gonna," which were the style of normal Black speech. This vernacular approach gets people talking directly to Black people, and raises connection and mutual understanding. At the same time, the oral quality of the poem demonstrates the influence of black musical and speech practices and makes the poem a socially and politically charged communicative act:

u dig?
i mean
Like, who's gonna
take all the young / long / haired
natural / brothers and sisters
and let them
grow till
all that is
impt is them
selves
moving in straight /
revolutionary / lines
toward the enemy
(and we know who that is)
like. man. (Sanchez, 2021, p. 27)

The text is fragmented and presents ideas in separation, requiring the reader to pause and think through every idea. The rules and features of vernacular speech can be seen in the frequent use of informal expressions like "u dig" and "like, man." Moreover, repeating "who's gonna" is a rhetorical call to the Black community, motivating a sense of shared responsibility and revolutionary change. The poem is thus not just personal expression, but an appeal to social action to affect cultural and political change.

Lawrence B. James (1980) noted that several black poets continue the literary traditions of Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson in depicting the commonplace, the familiar, and the everyday of blacks through the use of vernacular language patterns. Likewise, Sanchez uses colloquialisms like "u-dig," and abbreviations like "u", "blk" and "wite." These unusual spellings and grammatical changes are not aesthetic experimentation, but thoughtful defiant gestures to the authority of Standard English. This is the way Sanchez validates vernacular speech as a literary and cultural medium and highlights the political agenda of the Black Arts Movement through the transposition of language to vernacular speech structures.

Deleuze and Guattari (1983) advocate that since suppressed or "minor" writing arises from socially restricted, disagreeable contexts, it is essentially politicized. Correspondingly, Shadd (2019) argues that there are close ties between speech and power; those who give voice to what is "proper" language also give voice to cultural supremacy. In American society, historically, the conventional English has been used to

assert authority, and black vernacular has been seen as intellectually deficient. Sanchez radically rethinks the hierarchical system of Black rhetoric, and reanimates vernacular language as a dynamic tool for political discussion:

who's gonna give our young
blk/people new heroes
(instead of catch/phrases)
(instead of cad/ill/acs)
(instead of pimps)
(instead of wite/whores). (Sanchez, 2021, pp. 27-28)

Sanchez speaks explicitly to the black community, challenging society to change, by asking "who's gonna?" over and over again, creating a sense of urgency and a sense of responsibility for the community. She seems to ridicule of linguistic uniformity in her fractured spellings like "blk/people", which violate the conventions of standard English in the graphic mode. At the same time, the poem attacks commonplace expressions and empty popular images, demanding the formation of "new heroes" who might actually be able to trigger a genuine revolution. Therefore, Sanchez sees language as a place of political conflict, cultural reconstruction, and a means of communication.

Sanchez uses line separation, recurrence, and space intentionally to highlight certain words and enhance the rhythm of the poem. For instance, Sanchez seems to be talking directly to her audience when she says "toward the enemy" and split it from "and we know who that is." Additionally, the painterly movement of the poem is disrupted by repeated use of slashes and splits in phrases like "like" and "selves", requiring the reader to pause and ponder each phrase (Prousebj, 2024).

Moreover, the chant-like melodies of the Black Arts Movement are conjured up by the repetition of syntactic elements and rhythmic phrases. The forceful, dramatic nature of the poem turns it from a personal statement into a revolutionary one. By combining musical repetition with visual fragmentation, Sanchez links individual consciousness to collective resistance, thus promoting Black community solidarity and revolutionary action (Prousebj, 2024):

impt is them
selves
moving in straight /
revolutionary / lines
toward the enemy
(and we know who that is)
like. man. (Sanchez, 2021, pp. 28)

Sanchez emphasizes the poem's portrayal of a groundbreaking endeavor through the incorporation of fragments and gaps in these lines. The splitting of the term "themselves" to "them/selves" is an example of the process of self-discovery and cultural identity construction in black communities. Likewise, the word

"revolutionary" and the word "lines" have a double connotation: there is a political dimension and an aesthetic dimension, with the lines themselves being part of the revolutionary structure of the poem. Apart from this, Patricia Hill Collins' notion of black cultural awareness and common resistance is consistent with this sense of identity rebuilding.

The parenthetical "(and we know who that is)" is conspiratorial and communal, suggesting that the speaker and listener also know of systems of racial oppression. At the same time, the conversational diminutive ending "like, man" mimics the music of everyday speech, and the poem's oral and communal nature is maintained. Sanchez' creative decisions transform poetic form into a form of rebellion, unity and revolutionary concern.

Sanchez conceptualizes her study of reinterpreting rhetoric in black culture under the rubric "blk/rhetoric." Normally, rhetoric is defined as the ability to persuade or formal argumentation, but Sanchez adds emotional, psychological and community dimensions to the definition. The rhetorical question "Who's gonna?" used throughout the poem is an appeal for change in the black community instead of seeking an answer. This recurrence gives the impression of perseverance and a job unfinished, suggesting that cultural change requires more than just a comment and needs collective involvement. She reclaims the rhetoric as a tool of power to create social and political meaning.

Sanchez extends the political consequences of Black vernacular by questioning how far can one get with revolutionary discourse for any actual societal transformation. The refrain "Who's gonna make all / that beautiful black / rhetoric / mean something?" (Sanchez, 2021, p. 28) underscores the difference between political rhetoric and sincere reform. In this context, the word "meaning" is key because it highlights the fact that language has meaning only if it is connected to social action and social interaction and not to some sort of meaningless political performance (Shadd, 2019):

who's gonna make all
that beautiful blk / rhetoric
mean something.
like
i mean
who's gonna take
the words
blk / is / beautiful
and make more of it
than blk / capitalism. (Sanchez, 2021, p. 28)

She also involves with a commercial side of blackness with phrases like "blk / capitalism", which indicates that the vocabulary of autonomy becomes innocuous when it is translated into materialism or into a superficial black cultural advertising. Sanchez emphasizes the importance of real cultural liberation rather than symbolic political rhetoric, and she condemns the commercialization of the black identity (Bingham-

Risher, 2017). She uses line spacing, slashes and brackets to slow down the reading process and to create pauses that allow for meditation on the political implications of each phrase. These visual disruptions not only disrupt the uniformity of Standard English, but they also point to the fragmented social reality of the black community. Sanchez's work brings to the fore the sinister currents lurking beneath the surface of conventional political rhetoric, prompting readers to consider its implications and ideologies. In this way, blk/rhetoric sees African American Vernacular English as a cultural and political force that can resist assimilation and regain true Black consciousness, and as an alternative linguistic framework.

Conclusion

This study explored the use of African American Vernacular English in Sonia Sanchez's "blk/rhetoric" as a cultural resistance. The results show that Sanchez uses nonstandard spelling, nonstandard sentences, and speech patterns which contradict the dominance of standard English and assert Black identity and Black collective consciousness. The analysis shows how AAVE is a linguistic and cultural tool that represents marginalized voices in the context of the Black Arts Movement. This study is a contribution to the understanding of the relationship of language, identity and cultural resistance in African American literature and it emphasizes the importance of vernacular language as a way of literary expression and social resistance.

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