

## LITERACY EDUCATION

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AMY I. BUONO (2005)

## LITERACY EDUCATION

Literacy is a process by which one expands one's knowledge of reading and writing in order to develop one's thinking and learning for the purpose of understanding oneself and the world. This process is fundamental to achieving competence in every educational subject. Since literacy is a necessary foundation for educational achievement and it has not always been legal for black people to be literate in the Americas, an understanding of historical approaches to literacy education for black children can elucidate larger relationships between individuals, communities, and the world. In an effort to ensure children's success and ability to be self-determined in a largely literate society, approaches to literacy education have included multilingual, multicultural, and multimedia resources.

The institution of slavery and subsequent racialization that situated Africans in America in isolated speech communities contributed to the development of what is now termed African American English (AAE). Many scholars have noted the effects of slavery on literacy education; they have also noted the effects that isolation had on language acquisition and development (Baugh, 1999; Morgan, 2002; Rickford and Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2000). Just as efforts were made to categorize enslaved Africans as inferior to European settlers, similar campaigns were also made to stigmatize the language of African Americans. The outcome of these subjugation strategies contributes to negative language attitudes concerning AAE today. Negative language attitudes can be a barrier to literacy education because literacy draws upon the linguistic and cultural knowledge of language learners as they create and interpret texts. In response, various researchers have empirically countered trends to designate AAE (and the related inferences regarding the cognitive abilities of African Americans) as different and somehow deficient compared to a European-centered norm. Moreover, educators have combated such educational practices by incorporating culturally and linguistically relevant curricula.

Enslaved Africans developed strategies to acquire and maintain literacy. Despite legislation forbidding literacy,

some enslaved Africans were nevertheless literate in various languages, such as Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. After Emancipation and the passing of amendments that secured citizenship rights, examples of literacy education in schools began to emerge. Efforts such as the use of spirituals and other cultural materials to facilitate multiple literacies of black youth are evident throughout the era of segregation (Yasin, 1999). As integration policies began to be enforced, the number of black schoolteachers declined, as did linguistically and culturally relevant literacy education. During the 1970s, with civil rights legislation and the advent of the Black Power movement, there were increased efforts to include alienated African-American learners from language study. Civil rights legislation, Title VI in particular, protected students against discrimination and also served as the basis for cases (e.g., *Lau v. Nichols*) that protected the rights of other language minorities in the United States. Ensuring equitable education for African-American children did not end with legal and policy changes. The Black Power movement revolutionized societal values and perspectives regarding African culture, language, and history. Such attitude shifts were reflected in curricula that were intended to support African-American youth. Theories of how to best make curricula culturally and linguistically relevant flourished.

### SESD APPROACHES TO LITERACY

One of the most noted programmatic changes in literacy education resulted in readers for Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD). These programs approached the literacy of African-American children much like English as a Second Language (ESL) programs approach nonnative English speakers: They introduced standard English (SE) grammatical structures while attempting to respect students' home dialects/languages. SESD programs were launched in urban areas around the United States, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Detroit, as well as in rural areas where large numbers of African-American children were schooled (e.g., north and central Florida). Similar programs were initiated in urban areas throughout the Caribbean as well. According to Marcylina Morgan, in Chicago and Florida, for example, the curriculum of SESD programs included (a) culturally relevant material such as "dialect stories and folk tales . . . , (b) grammatical exercises that reviewed AAE exclusively, (c) grammatical exercises that tested General English (GE) exclusively, and (d) contrastive exercises that included both forms" (Morgan, 2002, p. 141). Morgan criticizes SESD programs for not adequately informing students' parents about the functions of dialect readers and how

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they are used to teach standard literacy. Such priming was necessary given the nation's history of stigmatizing African-American language varieties. This lack of collaboration with community constituents eventually led to the decline of the SESD, although numerous studies attested to their success. Morgan observes that "these readers were an innovation that actually contradicted everything that the community—and most Americans—expected to happen in a classroom. No one had been socialized around dialect readers and with the notion that a quality education included them—especially when integrated educational institutions had worked so hard to exclude black children culturally" (2002, p. 141).

Despite initial community rejection, programs that are philosophically similar to the SESD programs emerged. The unified school districts of Ann Arbor, Los Angeles, and Oakland are noted for implementing such literacy programs (e.g., the Language Development Program for African American Students in Los Angeles). Though these programs received negative and ill-informed media coverage, they were praised by many professionals for being linguistically sound, and these programs are considered a legal right by various organizations ranging from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The social uproar that followed the Oakland Resolution, which is popularly referred to as the "Ebonics debate," is instructive for understanding pervasive stereotypes and prejudice regarding the languages and cultures of African Americans. It is also indicative of how negative language attitudes can continue to affect literacy strategies via the "miseducation" of the masses through the media. Experts have responded by educating both the public and policymakers about the utility of AAE for literacy education.

Marcylicna Morgan (2002) and John Rickford (2000) outline these histories in detail by explaining—case by case—how knowledge of AAE can positively and empirically increase the literacies of black children. However, because literacy involves knowledge of culture and language, multilingual, AAE-informed educational programs are not the only ones designed to facilitate literacy among black children. Recently, literacy efforts that include multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and even popular cultural approaches that use hip-hop have emerged.

## MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

Multicultural education is a process of school reform that ensures equitable education for all students by embracing diversity and affirming pluralism in pedagogical practice.

Some scholars posit that critical pedagogy is an underlying philosophy of multicultural education, but various scholars define the concept differently (Bank and Banks, p. 48). Most agree that the goal of multicultural education is social change. James Banks and Cherry McGee Banks (2004, p. 20) describe the five dimensions of multicultural education as content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure.

## CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy was introduced by Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) in their seminal work regarding literacy as empowerment for oppressed peoples. Henry Giroux developed the concept of critical pedagogy into a field of literacy research that has important implications concerning the education of black children. Giroux writes that "pedagogy in the critical sense illuminates the relationship among knowledge, authority and power. . . . [It is] about the knowledge and practices that teachers, cultural workers, and students might engage in together" (p. 30). This perspective corresponds to the goals of literacy education explained above. Teaching children to use reading and writing in an effort to expand how they make sense of their worlds entails criticism (assessing the strengths and weaknesses) of current knowledge production, authority, and power relations.

If Giroux is correct, then perhaps the future of literacy education lies in strategies that encompass aspects of youth culture, such as popular culture and hip-hop in particular, in order to further make literacy education appealing and relevant to youths' lived experiences. Indeed, teachers can design curricula utilizing hip-hop to facilitate youth-centered discussions about literacy (Morgan, 2001; Smitherman, 2000; Yasin, 1999). Educational scholars have noted this utility as they have researched teachers who guide students through identification of specific literary terms and grammatical concepts by studying hip-hop lyrics as texts or as bases for lessons on intertextuality (e.g., Ladson-Billings, pp. 82–84; Mahiri, pp. 111–117; Yasin, pp. 213–217). The educators featured in these studies often use hip-hop as an exercise in "translation" and as a supplement to using AAE-informed literacy approaches in the classroom. Therefore, these contemporary strategies combine and build upon the approaches to literacy education highlighted above in the SESD programs, multicultural education and critical pedagogy.

Given the myriad approaches to literacy education for black children, one might hope that their implementation will eventually erase negative language attitudes that impede educational achievement and community success.

LITERARY CRITICISM, U.S.: OVERVIEW

Just as the enslaved Africans innovated in their efforts to ensure literacy—even when it was illegal—educators and other experts concerned with the literacy of black children will probably continue to innovate as they strive to improve community conditions and bridge educational achievement disparities.

See also Education in the United States; English, African-American

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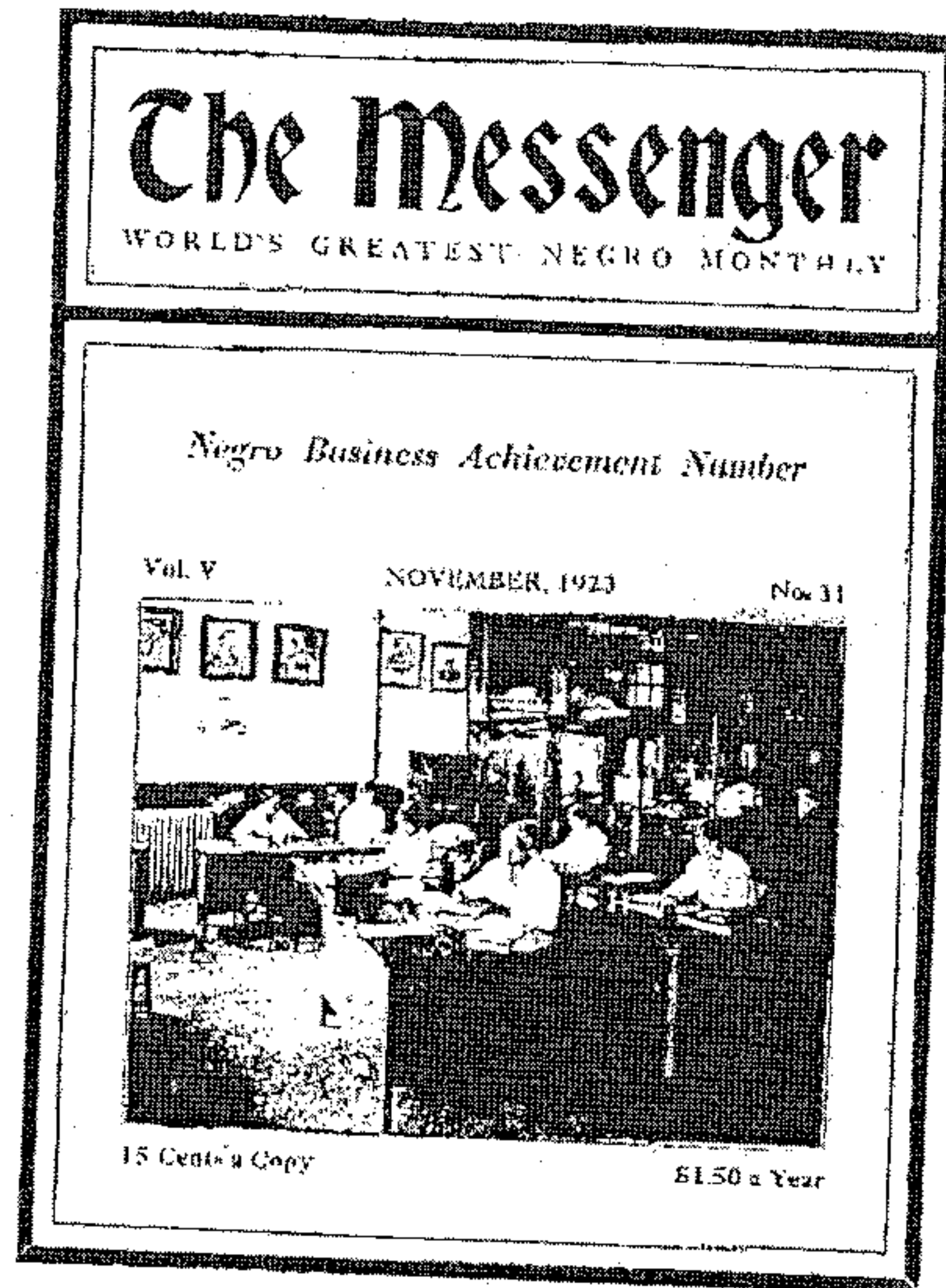
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DAWN-ELISSA T. J. FISCHER (2005)

LITERARY CRITICISM,  
U.S.

This entry consists of two distinct articles. The first by David Lionel Smith provides an overview of Literary Criticism in



Cover of the Messenger, November, 1923. During its early years the editorial policy of the Messenger was one of militant socialism, but by 1923 the journal was taking a more favorable view of the accomplishments of the black middle class. MANUSCRIPTS, ARCHIVES AND RARE BOOKS DIVISION, SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, ASTOR, LENOX AND TILDEN FOUNDATIONS.

an African-American context from its beginning to the mid-1990s. The second article by Shelly Eversley offers an update on changes in the field in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries.

LITERARY CRITICISM  
David Lionel Smith

SCHOLARSHIP IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
Shelly Eversley

OVERVIEW

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson, to illustrate his assertions of Negro inferiority, remarked, "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic; reference is to Phillis Wheatley], but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are