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Article abstract

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“I Said What I Said”—Black Women and Argumentative Politeness Norms

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Abstract: This paper seeks to complicate two primary norms within argumentation theory: 1) engaging with one’s interlocutors in a “pleasant” tone and 2) speaking directly to one’s target audience/interlocutor. Moreover, I urge argumentation theorists to explore various cultures’ argumentative norms and practices when attempting to formulate more universal theories regarding argumentation. Ultimately, I aim to show that the two previously mentioned norms within argumentation obscure and misrepresent many argumentative practices within African American Vernacular English—or Ebonics, specifically the art of signifying.

Résumé: Cet article cherche à complexifier deux normes principales dans la théorie de l’argumentation: 1- s'engager avec ses interlocuteurs dans un ton «agréable» et 2- parler directement à son public cible / interlocuteur. De plus, j’exhorte les théoriciens de l’argumentation à explorer les normes et les pratiques argumentatives de diverses cultures lorsqu’ils tentent de formuler des théories d’argumentation plus universelles. En fin de compte, je vise à montrer que les deux normes d'argumentation précédemment mentionnées obscurcissent et déforment de nombreuses pratiques argumentatives au sein de l'anglais vernaculaire afro-américain - ou Ebonics, en particulier l'art de signifier.

Keywords: AAVE, feminist argumentation theory, intersectionality, modus tonens

1. Introduction

When we dissent, ideally, we enter into an argument that each interlocuter approaches and engages in holding argumentative civility

norms in mind. Within the argumentation theory literature, it is not uncommon for reasonable dissension to involve civil words (Aikin and Talisse 2008; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004; Burrow 2010) and the treatment of interlocutors as epistemic peers (Cohen 2002; Hundleby 2013; Aikin and Talisse 2008), which includes properly addressing arguments towards interlocutors rather than using proxies or argumentative surrogates. To deviate from these practices and to intentionally subvert these norms is considered at best an argumentative faux pas and at worse vicious. However, such norms are specifically modelled after "dominant" Western argumentative practices and conceptions.

This paper seeks to complicate two primary norms within Western argumentation theory and Standard/Dominant American English: 1) engaging with one's interlocutors in a "pleasant" tone and 2) speaking directly to one's target audience/interlocutor. Moreover, I urge argumentation theorists not to make universal (re: Western and white) assumptions regarding the pragmatics of how people argue. While there has been some literature on gender norms of argumentation spanning across decades,[1] there is even less work being done on a cross-cultural level regarding argumentation.[2] When we shift the demographics to women of color, the literature drops to abysmal levels. I find this to be deeply problematic for multiple reasons: 1) it is a disservice to argumentation theory not to include the argumentative practices of women of color. A cross-cultural or multicultural analysis of communicative and argumentative practices not only tests the current theories of argumentation but offers up the opportunity to formulate new theories; 2) argumentation theory will have a wider breadth and further depth—globally speaking, white Western society is the minority; and finally, 3) incorporating such analyses has the potential to reduce instances of argumentative injustice. It is pertinent that the literature begins to explore various cultures' argumentative norms and practices when attempting to formulate more universal theories regarding the nature of

[1] See Ayim (1991, 1988), Govier (1999, 1988), Hundleby (2013, 2010), Burrow (2010), Moulton (1983), Orr (1989), and Rooney (2012, 2010).
[2] See Kim et. al. (2020), Demir et. al. (2019), Xie et. al. (2015), and Mohammed (2015).

argumentation.[3] This project is a diagnostic enterprise, so the scope does not include a prescriptive program. The prescriptive project of an ideal cross-cultural model is in the works. Here, I aim to show that the two previously mentioned norms within argumentation obscure and misrepresent many argumentative practices within African American Vernacular English (AAVE)—or Ebonics, specifically the art of signifying.

This paper will proceed in the following manner: first, because many within my audience will be unfamiliar with the practice of signification within AAVE, I provide a brief description along with a case example to highlight the ways in which signifying does and does not work. It is a practice that is not only appropriate, but is, in many ways within Black African American women's communities, expected to be mastered and deployed. Engagement with signifying is paradoxically a disrespectful signal of respect. From here, I give an exegesis on norms of engagement utilizing a "pleasant" tone. I engage with Aikin and Talisse's conception "modus tonens" along with several different variants of non-adversarial feminist argumentation models (NAFAM). Aikin and Talisse conceive deployment of an incredulous tone of voice, which implies that the interlocutor is cognitively subordinate, as vicious. NAFAM also perceives such practices as vices; moreover, all the models attribute such practices to the furthering oppression of women.[4]

I use signifying within Black African-American women's speech communities (BAAWSC)[5] as an example to show not only that such

[3] Of course, such endeavors need to be done in an ethical manner so as to not partake in epistemic exploitation. Some of the work that has been written examining non-Western argumentative practices I do find to be somewhat problematic, but that is a topic for another paper. For more on the dangers of epistemic exploration, see Berenstain (2016).

[4] Elsewhere I have argued that upon further examination of NAFAM, the critiques, along with the suggested remedies to the adversarial method, focus on white women's oppression, rather than all women's oppression. See Henning (2018).

[5] I want to explicitly state that not all Black African American women engage in these communicative practices. These practices are neither sufficient nor necessary to consider oneself and be considered by others as a Black woman. However, there is a common historical narrative and cultural backdrop that we do share, which makes a category, such as BAAWSC, possible.

practices should not be construed as vicious (even though they are utilized to display dominance and support subordination), but that they are forms of argumentative bonding and empowerment. From here, I review the norm of proper addressment with an interlocuter/audience. It is considered rude and "bad" argumentation to not properly address the target for one's dissension, especially if some of the only acknowledgment is exercised in a demeaning or belittling way. Aikin and Talisse (2008) purport such a maneuver as fallacious. Govier (1999) construes it as a dialogical impediment since interlocutors would be unable to track one another's premises. I situate the BAAWSC practice of signifying against this commonly accepted norm and argue that such a norm is not the "norm" within many of our language communities. Signifying is often modelled after Niger-Congo call and response methods of argumentation, which rely on indirectness, surrogate interlocutors, and "reading someone to filth." While such practices are indeed meant to "turn someone out," they are also meant as a civil means of argumentation. To not engage in such practices is either flat out rude behavior or the art of signifying is seen as too complicated for outsiders of our practices to deploy. That is to say, you play the game, or you can't hang.

I conclude this paper with some remarks as to the stakes of not properly nor seriously taking into account other argumentative practices within academia's argumentation theories, especially the norms for dissension. Given the precarious depictions of Black women within the United States (and globally), coupled with a misunderstanding of our communicative norms and practices, it is all too easy to write off standards that deviate from the dominant Western norms as rude and the Black women deploying them as angry, brusque, or "difficult to deal with." I rely on Collin's (1998, 2009) notion of "controlling images" to show that this particular form of oppression, in conjunction with a lack of engagement with our argumentative practices within the literature, forces many of us to resort to practices such as code switching. If code-switching is not properly mastered and our practices of argumentation are utilized within dominant Western settings, then we become more susceptible to what Bondy refers to as argumentative injustice (2010).

2. "Talkin like a man with a paper in his hand"

The art of signifying is a practice that falls within the highly contested conception of Ebonics—also known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), African American Language (AAL), Black English, Black Vernacular English, or Black English Vernacular.[6] The language practice incorporates English words, but retains syntactic features found within Niger-Congo languages and follows distinct linguistic rules including but not limited to negative concord, deletions of verb copulas, habitual aspect markers, semantic bleaching, and 'it' for the dummy explicative 'there' (Smitherman 2015). Rules such as these are regulated and maintained. There is a proper and improper way of speaking Ebonics, or AAVE, so it is not merely "in vogue" improper English, or simply reducible to slang. Practitioners of AAVE can distinguish between individuals who are fluent from those who are making a mockery or attempting to imitate the vernacular. Determining fluency is not racially based but is demarcated by the command of verbal and non-verbal practices. A grammatically correct example utilizing the invariant 'be' as a habitual marker is "She be workin new research." 'Be' here is marking repeated/habitual actions. The verb is not just used recklessly and without purpose, so the sentence "She be 25 years old" is incorrect because there is not a habituated state of being a certain age. However, "She be actin 25 years old" would be correct

[6] Ebonics is a conglomeration between the words 'ebony' and 'phonics,' pertaining to the linguistic practices found in West African, Caribbean, and United States African slave descendants. It encompasses both verbal and non-verbal linguistic practices. While linguistic scholars now agree that Ebonics is a language, several scholars in other areas are still in disagreement as to whether Ebonics should be classified as a dialect or a language. For the purposes of this paper, I choose to remain neutral on this matter as the outcome of this debate does not bear on whether or not the practices of signifying within BAAWSC should be considered as counter examples to the two norms of argumentation theory that I examine. The point is that these practices occur, and such practices do not rely on Ebonics being a language, dialectic, or something else entirely. What is important for my purpose, however, is the understanding that Ebonics is not merely "bad" American English. For more on the Ebonics debate, see Blackshire-Belay (1996), Crozier (1996), Smitherman (2015) (2000), and Williams (1975).

grammar.[7] Since there are rules, those who speak Ebonics are not using poor English enunciation or grammar, nor is its usage a sign of cognitive disorders. Kirk-Duggan (1997) argues that deficient language should not be marked cross-linguistically; rather, "Language use is disordered or defective when one's skills register lower than one's peers" (p. 141). If peers who are fluent in Ebonics possess the ability to distinguish between application and misapplication of the rules, then a misapplication would register as defective. With AAVE containing regulative rules and practices enforcing proper usage, its utilization is not a sign of deficiency in linguistic or argumentative skill. In fact, quite the opposite. I say all of this because I want to stress again that the practice and art of signifying is not bad argumentation run amok, but rather illustrates particularized structured and enforced norms of engagement within a community.

Signifying or signification[8] is a specific type of speech act within AAVE that utilizes exaggeration, irony, and indirection to partake in coded messages, which are riddled with insults, during discourse (Morgan 2002). It relies heavily on indirection, and the focus can be "on a person, thing, or action either for fun or for corrective critique" (Kirk-Duggan 1997, p. 142). Gates Jr. characterizes signifying as a practice that "subsumes other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis" (p. 686). One subset of signifying that the reader may be familiar with is the practice of "playin the Dozens," where "the one signified usually is a person's mother" (Kirk-Duggan 1997, p. 142). And examples of such would be "yo momma so dumb, I gave her a penny fo her thoughts, and I gots change." Within a "Dozens" exchange, an indirected discourse takes place where, in my example, the person being signified is acting as a surrogate or intermediary for the targeted exchange—they are an associated or ancillary target, while the real target is the overhearer. Morgan states that "speakers who use indirectness actually mean to target certain individuals and they mean to do so indirectly" (2002,

[7] Since the grammatical features of AAVE are not the focus of this article, I will not give further examples. For more, see Young et al. (2014), Smitherman (2015), and Baugh (2000).

[8] It is also referred to as sounding or snapping.

p. 47). The dissension is coded, and at face value might not be seen to others outside of BAAWSC as targeting someone other than "their momma." Morgan notes that often within AAVE, indirectness can take two forms: pointed indirectness and baited indirectness. Within this paper, I focus on pointed indirectness, which is enacted either when a speaker is acknowledged to say something to a surrogate receiver but the target is different, or when local knowledge is drawn upon to target someone seemingly ancillary to the discussion.[9]

Within the following segmented conversation,[10] I hope to highlight some of the key features within signifying. The conversation takes place between three members of my paternal family and myself: Sherry—also known as Baby Alice (a Black 62-year-old social worker), cousin Deborah (a Black 61-year-old social worker), and my grandmother Geraldine (a Black 84-year-old retired factory worker). The argument involves why Sherry, who is older than Deborah, is referred to as the baby of the family despite being my father's older sister and older than her cousin Deborah. We are sitting around my grandmother's kitchen table, with everyone directing their responses towards me despite me only speaking twice and raising two questions.

> Tempest: Just gettin' somethin' straight—Aunt Sherry, you're older, yea? Than Deborah?
> Sherry: Older and wiser hon, but *none* would know just by lookin
> Tempest: So, why we call you 'baby Alice'?
> Deborah: No, no, no, now now Tempie... Baby Alice gets mad when we call *it* that
> Sherry: Don't *you* be listenin to that nonsense now, *some peoples* just mad cause I'm the baby with baby privileges

[9] Conversely, baited indirectness is "when a speaker attributes a feature to a general target and audience that may be true for a segment" (Morgan 2002, p. 47). This tactic is often used to see which members of the audience 'speak up' or 'fess up' to the generalized feature and in doing so, expose themselves—hence the name "baited indirectness."

[10] I was graciously given permission to publish this familial conversation.

> Deborah: Nah she means *she* gets babied... Tempie, now listen here...
> Geraldine: But she *aint'* the baby—that's your daddy
> Sherry: Right, but *I'm* my momma's baby
> Deborah: "I'm my momma's baby" [mocking tone]—Nah, Tempie *it gets babied*
> Sherry: [cackles] Tell her Tempie, I get babied because I'm the baby. There's a *whole lotta peoples* who get jealous of that fact—gotta watch out for ems
> Deborah: Whatchu gotta watch out for are dems peoples who get dems special treatment and favoritisms. They end up not being able to do nothin fo demselves
> Geraldine: uh…watch out now! Girl [addressing Tempest], why you gone and start up nonsense?

Within this dialogue, Sherry, Deborah, and Geraldine all offer competing conceptions of what it means to be the baby of the family—an obvious case of disagreement. Sherry views being the baby as specialized treatment—pampering and attention, Deborah expresses conflicting notions stipulating that such special treatment marks the individual as incompetent, while Geraldine offers up an interpretation of being the baby of the family as someone who is lexically just that—the baby of the family (i.e., the youngest). The signification specifically occurs when all three members engage in the argument through me, the surrogate receiver, but each of these women's comments are signals to one another. Sherry and Deborah are arguing with one another through my presence initiated only by my preliminary questioning. Moreover, the indirectness discourse and reference to one another as 'that,' 'it,' or 'a whole lotta peoples' utilizes unambiguous referents commonly used within AAVE. Such referents are often used to signal who the specific target is regarding the signifying—in one case, it's a pointed indirectness when Deborah refers to Sherry as "it," and in another case towards the end of this segment, Sherry deploys baited indirectness invoking "a whole lotta peoples" to illicit a response from Deborah, and Deborah responds in turn. But each woman directs their responses to one another through me, the surrogate receiver. Sherry also "reads" Deborah in her initial response to my question by insinuating that while

she is older than Deborah, Sherry looks better. The conversation ends with my grandmother shaking her head and criticizing my initial line of questioning.

Within BAAWSC, there is a saying: "Talking like a man with a paper in his hand." The saying refers to individuals who lack the skill and know-how to understand that raising questions within social contexts needs to be grounded in contexts "which incorporate or reflect their reasoning, rather than simply satisfy[ing] institutional or intellectual curiosity" (Morgan 2002, p. 52). Directed discourse, within the art of signifying, is devoid of any notion that discourse is co-constructed intent. Morgan demarcates directed discourse from indirect discourse not only via the lack of indirection, but also the lack of audience collaboration along with lack of nuance and attention to varying social contexts (1989). At the end of this conversational segment, my grandmother was critiquing my direct question and insinuating that I should have used better reasoning for my questions.[11] Directed discourse is seen as a "work" or "school" communicative style,[12] and the proper employment or shifting from indirected discourse within AAVE to directed Standard English discourse is known as code-switching. More will be said on this phenomenon later.

Direct discourse is seen, within Standard/Dominant English, as the agreed upon (and preferred) mode of communication between interlocutors. Since most of the argumentation theory literature is written in accordance with Standard/Dominant English and articles cite each other, the direct discourse modus operandi trickles down and in effect latently gets taken up. For the white Western NAFAM and other dialectical models (Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004; Jackson and Jacobs 1980), parties enter argumentative discourse with the understanding to resolve disagreement. And this intent is seen to be understood by both parties in dialectical models, but such an intent within BAAWSC is perceived as merely an institutional way of knowing, so lines of questioning enacted directly are

[11] Specifically, I should have known better than to have asked such things given what all I know about each woman and the family dynamics.

[12] In full disclosure, I initiated this conversation in the hopes of eliciting examples of signification, so my grandmother's critique was apt. The communicative style of directed discourse here was indeed used for work.

"confrontational, intrusive, and presumptuous" (Kochman 1981, p. 99). Jones (1988) takes a stronger stance and asserts that directed questions are potentially harmful to the respondents. Within the following two sections, I will expand more upon the argumentation literature that endorses 'polite' directed discourse.

3. Modus tonens

Within the previous section, I outlined the basic practice of signifying, and having given the reader a basic understanding of how the practice functions, I will now give an overview of an argumentative vice[13] within argumentation theory regarding politeness, "modus tonens" which stipulates that condescending tones and inflections should not be used in insincere manners. I view the "vice" of "modus tonens" originating from the conglomeration of adhering to both the virtues of the sincerity principle and the politeness principle.

Below is an illustrative example of "modus tonens" entitled "Gun Control":

> Speaker 1: You see – if we allowed more people to carry handguns, then we would have fewer cases of gun violence. Arming people has a deterrent effect.
>
> Speaker 2: so, let me get this straight – *more* people with guns will *reduce* gun violence?
>
> (To the audience): *More people with guns will reduce gun violence?!?* (Aikin and Talisse 2008, p. 522, emphasis in original).

"Modus tonens" refers to the adverse use of tone in a speaker's voice, which is used to manipulate the audience/overhearers. While Aikin and Talisse acknowledge that certain viewpoints are so

[13] My use of the term 'vice' here is not in direct connection with virtue argumentation theory. Aikin and Talisse categorize "modus tonens" as a vice; however, I interpret their usage to be more synonymous with fallaciousness as opposed to a vice in the Aristotelian tradition. On some levels, I believe Aikin and Talisse would see "modus tonens" as a vice in the sense that it impedes on the development of virtuous habituated argumentative characteristics, but their argument seems more structured around the fallacious nature of negatively stage setting another's argument.

ludicrous that we may react out of surprise, what makes "modus tonens" particularly insidious and vicious is that "it controverts the goals of argumentative exchange" (p. 532). This tactic does not adhere to the goals of argumentative exchange because it 1) shifts the burden of argumentative proof in an inappropriate way and 2) epistemically subordinates one of the interlocutors. Within the Gun Control case, Speaker 2 rejects Speaker 1's claims, but does so without offering up reasons why they reject the claim or reasons why the audience should reject the claim. As a consequence, Speaker 2 has placed the argumentative ball back in Speaker 1's court without having to "dirty their hands." Moreover, Speaker 2 has not only steered the argumentative ball away from their court, but they have done so in a manner that "one's interlocutor is cognitively subordinate" and gives "an assessment of the dialectical situation disguised as a directive within it" (Aikin and Talisse 2008, p. 524). So, these speech acts are not a form of commissive speech that displays non-acceptance of a standpoint or argumentation.[14] Aikin and Talisse argue that directives such as these not only assert that the interlocutor is not to be considered an epistemic peer, but also do so in a manner that offers up the claim that the interlocutor is not to be considered an epistemic peer by using *non-argumentative means.* Given this, "modus tonens" not only shifts the argumentative burden, but also puts interlocutors, such as Speaker 1, in a position to defend their cognitive ability.

However, not all cases of "modus tonens" are created equal. Aikin and Talisse distinguish between using this tactic at the opening and closing of argumentative exchanges. If "modus tonens" is deployed at the closing of arguments, then the conclusion "still registers non-acceptance, but its vice is that it does not provide any reason for rejecting the conclusion beyond is supposed prima facie implausibility" (2008, p. 525). It merely is a failure of good argumentative cooperation. If the tactic is used at the opening of

[14] Eemeren and Grootendorst define commissive speech acts as "acts in which the speaker or writer undertakes vis-à-vis the listener or reader to do something or to refrain from doing something" (2004, p. 64). I will say more later as to whether signifying should be viewed as a commissive or directive speech act. I argue that Aikin and Talisse wrongfully see "modus tonens" as strictly directive.

argumentative exchanges, then Aikin and Talisse deem it to be vicious because the stage has been set, without proper justification, for rejecting the interlocutor's standpoint and arguments.

Returning to signifying, we can now better see how, at first glance, such a practice might be construed as falling under the category of "modus tonens." Recall my previously mentioned exchange—many of the comments were laced with incredulous and sarcastic tones directed towards me and regarding the other interlocutors (namely Sherry and Deborah). Deborah clearly restated Sherry's comment "I'm my momma's baby" with well-placed inflections to dismiss and render Sherry as epistemically subordinate. Deborah even takes it one step further and directs me not to listen to my Aunt Sherry and corrects Sherry's interpretation of the topic at hand (why Sherry is called Baby Alice), stating, "*It gets babied*." The argumentative ball also gets thrown around a few times without actually addressing each other's objections or claims. My assenting to one view of the argumentative claims was a test to see where exactly my loyalties lie—with my cousin or with my aunt. Although, as a quick aside, the surrogate interlocuter or overhearer is typically not to be heard, only seen. Any obvert interjections would have been perceived as engaging in directed discourse, which would have been rude. Also, I will note that seniority plays a salient role within signification exchanges. Although I am a grown woman, with a household of my own, compared to my older matriarchs I am still a girl, and it would be inappropriate for me to interject myself in such an argument.[15]

Strong or extreme cases of "modus tonens" involve using the tactic as "purely oratorical...in which the speaker is actually making a gesture wholly for the sake of the onlooking audience" (Aikin and Talisse 2008, p. 527). One could easily (albeit mistakenly) surmise that the art of signifying is done for the overhears or surrogate interlocutors, especially since all the comments within the aforementioned example were directed towards me. The women were speaking to me, yet I was not the target for their claims; rather, I was serving merely as a proxy or surrogate. I was the observing

[15] For more on the roles of BAAWSC in terms of "rites of passage," see Morgan (2002).

audience. But signifying is not just for the audience; the practices are done for the speaker, hearer, and overhearer. The practice is one in which not only the audience is taken into consideration, but also the interlocutors along with the speaker themselves. It is a collaborative endeavor that requires that all parties assent to the rules of AAVE.

I would hardly classify such an exchange as vicious or derailing of argumentation itself. Aikin and Talisse purport that speech acts laced with incredulous tones and that assert epistemic subordination are best construed as directives rather than commissives. I disagree. Commissive speech acts can serve various roles within argumentation, including:

> (1) accepting or not accepting a standpoint, (2) accepting the challenge to defend a standpoint, (3) deciding to start a discussion, (4) agreeing to assume the role of protagonist or antagonist, (5) agreeing to the discussion rules, (6) accepting or not accepting argumentation, and—when relevant—(7) deciding to start a new discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2003, p. 68).

The start of signifying, in my view, serves as a commissive since it fulfills van Eemeren's and Grootendorst's points 3 and 4—the onset and agreement to play particular roles. Within my example, the onset of signifying began with Deborah's entry into the conversation, and by continuing the argument, both Sherry and Geraldine assented to the rules (5) and roles (4). Later within the argument, we can see how directives do come into play, and in my view, the directives serve more than just articulating or settling a difference of opinion.

But it would be improper to view the opening of the signifying as a "modus tonens," despite it possessing all of the characteristics. It should more properly be construed as a commissive, because like some commissives, "such as agreeing to discussion rules," it is only feasible when "performed in collaboration with the other party" (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, p. 68). Signifying is a collaborative enterprise that involves not only the participation of speakers, but also hearers and overhearers. Aikin and Talisse assert that "just as incredulous stares cannot be refuted, one cannot refute a modus tonens" (p. 526). However, I believe the practice of signifying is a

way to refute "modus tonens," due to its affiliative properties, and onset agreement of indirectness, misdirection, and subordination "play."

4. Whose politeness norms?

Stressing the importance of affiliative and communal argumentative practices has often fallen under the purview of non-adversarial feminist argumentation models (Hundleby 2013; Rooney 2010; Cohen 2002; Burrow 2010). Many variants of the NAFAM object to the decontextualized practices of indirectness. Yet scholars working on signification have argued that those within the BAAWSC find directed discourse discomforting or downright rude (Kochman 1981; Jones 1988; Morgan 1989). While both the BAAWSC and NAFAM purport to engage in more contextualized communicative and argumentative styles, the NAFAM views many of the practices within BAAWSC to be hostile and partaking in the adversarial method.[16] Within this section, I highlight some of the ways in which the NAFAM, while calling for more intersectional and affiliative argumentation models, alienates and would consequently render the practice of signifying as oppressive and adversarial. For the NAFAM, not only would the brusque language and culturally toned diminutives be problematic, but, more importantly, the act of indirect discourse would be construed as disrespectful and rude.

According to NAFAM, "feminine politeness strategies aim at cooperation through connection and involvement, reflecting values of intimacy, connection, inclusion and problem sharing" (Burrow, p. 247). What exactly are "feminine politeness strategies"? They are argumentative and communicative styles that are affiliative, bereft of rude language and name calling, and characterized by direct engagement with one's targets and non-dismissive tones (Cohen 2002; Burrow 2010; Hundleby 2013). Govier (1999) stresses the importance of direct interaction, because "[w]hen others speak to and argue *directly to us,* we can interact with them, challenge, hear their responses, and conduct a genuine, real, critical discussion" (p. 191, emphasis mine). That is to say, communication and discourse

[16] For more on the ways in which BAAWSC practices are, in general, counter intuitive to numerous goals and ideals within NAFAM, see Henning (2018).

(under a commitment model of argumentation) should be oriented directly towards our interlocutors, rather than an ancillary communicator. This explicit and direct mode of discourse not only promotes respect between interlocutors, but also is a sign of respect because "an arguer, in actually or potentially addressing those who differ, is committed to the recognition that people may think differently and that what they think and why they think matters" (p. 8). Engaging in directed discourse, for Govier, is a step towards mutual understanding of another's point of view and signals that a differing stance matters. In a cooperative argumentation model, it is demanded that we attempt to understand our interlocutor "as they wish to be known and understood," and engaging in direct discourse would facilitate such a goal (Makua and Marty 2013, p. 69).

With such a brief introduction to NAFAM, I hope the problems the models would have with signifying are clear to the reader. As previously stated, both NAFAM and many BAAWSC practices are in agreeance that argumentation in many cases should be affiliative and communal. However, one person's politeness norms are another's disrespect. Crude and even obscene language is acceptable within many of our exchanges. As is the practice of name-calling. Recall my primary example of signifying—Deborah, on a few occasions referred to Sherry as "it" or "that." Such name calling and demeaning language would be unacceptable under NAFAM, due to its function of subordination and display of dominance. Although tone is difficult to convey via text, it would not be unreasonable to interpret much of what was said in an angry or abrasive manner. For Tanesini (2018), anger or displaying an angry tone is distracting at best, and at worst it is destructive towards reasoning. Howes and Hundleby (2018) situate anger as informative within arguments, so it does not quite have the destructive consequence Tanesini perceives it to have. But Howes and Hundleby focus on anger within arguments concerning oppressive systems. No oppressive systems were at play throughout the dialogue. Sherry's opening response would also more than likely be problematic for such a model, due to her insinuation that she was better looking than Deborah. Rooney (2004) calls for a practice in which interlocuters engage with one another's reasons, as opposed to "verbally attacking" each other. Criticisms should not be directed towards the person, but the

person's argument. By insinuating that Deborah is less attractive and looks older than Sherry (despite Sherry in reality being the older person), Sherry was, under the NAFAM, attacking Deborah as a person rather than engaging with Deborah's arguments. These "attacks" continued throughout the dialogue, especially with the references to 'it' or utilizing 'they,' as though the other person was not sitting at the same table. Moreover, there was no direct interaction between the interlocutors of this debate. Each interaction was addressed towards me, but I served the role as a surrogate interlocutor. Morgan (2002) likens such examples as being akin to "talking behind someone's back." Both Sherry and Deborah were speaking to me about one another as though the other individual was not also sitting at the table. Other than my opening questions, there was no direct engagement. And at the closing of the argument, I was even chastised by my grandmother for engaging in such a direct and inappropriate manner.

NAFAM proponents could contend that my exemplary case, and signifying in general, is done out of jest or fun. If all parties know the rules and all are privy to insider information, then their conceptions of politeness norms are still maintained. However, within signifying, there are elements of explicit and intentional dominance. It is *play play*, but also *for real for real*. Signification is not a case of feminist 'non-antagonistic playfulness.' Signifying is paradoxically an act of endearment and empowerment, but there are real stakes in the game. Slights are meant, and the verbal jabs do sting. Even though all three women have a deep respect and love for one another, they (especially Sherry and Deborah) were legitimately attempting to assert epistemic dominance over one another and purposely did not directly engage one another during the argument. Similar to back-handed compliments, signifying is meant to be fun, but at times painful. It is riddled with burns or 'playin by the dozens,' but done so out of love and affection. Practices like signifying within BAAWSC aren't typically used unless it is with those with whom we share an affinity. This is due to the communicative and affiliative nature of indirect discourse. If one is to immediately turn to directed discourse, especially with the knowledge that the interlocutor knows the game, then that's a pretty keen signal that they really don't want anything to do with you. We turn to directed

discourse when we don't feel a community bond with our interlocutor.[17] I am sure to many readers the practice seems paradoxical or counterintuitive, but because there aren't many instances of such exchanges within Standard English, it can be a bit difficult to explain to those without local knowledge of these communicative practices and the reasoning behind them. Focusing on this difficulty, within the next section, I will highlight how incredibly salient these communicative and argumentative practices are to us within BAAWSC.

5. How..?

In a passage quoted by Brown (2001), writer R. DeCoy asks:

> How...can you ever hope to express what you are, who you are of your experiences with God, in a language so limited, conceived by a people who are quite helpless in explaining themselves? How can you, my Nigger Son, find your identity, articulate your experiences, in an order of words? (pp. 59-60).

While DeCoy is addressing his son regarding the lack of effectiveness within Standard English and their argumentative practices, I believe such a passage serves our daughters as well. How indeed can Black African American women express themselves and offer dissent in such a way that is restricted by Eurocentric white norms that do not adequately encapsulate our argumentative norms? In what ways does learning Standard English and argumentative practices serve us? Within this section, I give an account of the benefits and downfalls of us utilizing and adhering to the argumentative norms outlined within the previous two sections. While there are a few pragmatic upshots to us adhering to such norms, ultimately, I argue that in constantly and permanently doing so, we forgo a large understanding of ourselves and our cultural roots.

The mastery of Standard/Dominant English can be truly transformative within Black African American lives. Over the centuries, we have learned that mastering this linguistic style and language can

[17] Either that or we have good reasons to believe that our interlocutor does not know the art well enough to hash out any dissension.

make or break us in specific courses of study and fields of employment that are dominantly white. This realization has led to the practice of code-switching, which is the ability to invoke Standard English rules and intonations.[18] However, while code-switching has been fiscally beneficial and has generated mobility within white spaces, the practice is one of coerced engagement. Young (2009) argues that code-switching is an oppressive survival tactic for Black women and does not accurately track cognitive abilities or achievements within diversity. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have noted that while the "burdensome benefits" of code-switching are largely known within Black African-American communities, Black girls have reported being hesitant to engage in the practice in fear of losing their blackness in favor of "sounding or acting white." It is semi-interpreted as cosigning dominant white linguistic and argumentative practices.[19] Some opponents of AAVE may concede that code-switching is a necessary adaptation to mainstream dominant American culture, but I argue that this is a failure to understand the centrality of argumentative and communicative practices such as signifying. Kirk-Duggan (1997) states that "These opponents of Ebonics failed to recognize the extent to which Ebonics is celebratory of African American life. They failed to acknowledge its distinctive fluidity, the way in which its speakers use intonational, stylistic, and often indirect methods in order to make a point" (p. 150). As Lakoff (1973) states, "Language uses us as much as we use language" (p. 54). The utilization of signifying, and some of its key features that fly in the face of many dominant argumentative norms pertaining to viciousness and politeness, are vital aspects of many Black African Americans' cultural and socio-historical understanding. This practice shapes us as much as we shape it.

Moreover, Yancy (2004) argues that his experiences as a Black man in America cannot simply be captured within Standard English: "Some forms of knowledge become substantially truncated and distorted, indeed, erased, if not expressed through the familiar

[18] Basically, we have mastered the ability to "sound white."

[19] For an analysis offering conflicting findings regarding Fordham and Ogbu's study, see Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005). For me personally, I often feel a tinge of sadness with my ability to code-switch, because I don't want it to seem as though I'm a proponent of Standard English over AAVE.

linguistic media of those who have possession of such knowledge" (p. 275). I, myself, within my own work on anti-Black oppression, specifically misogynoir, have struggled to put into words not only my experiences, but also my knowledge regarding misogynoir. Operating within the white academic framework, making particularized argumentative moves, and adhering to the norms has been a long and bumpy road. I am often misunderstood and deemed to be an ill-educated interlocutor, who is mean, brusque, and angry—reduced to yet another exemplar of the 'angry black woman.' Yancy (2004) poignantly articulates several of my sentiments in the following passage:

> To write in this language is to reproduce the professional culture of philosophy, to perpetuate lines of power, and to show that you have been 'properly' educated and worthy of hire. Moreover, to engage in this discourse is to perform linguistically before an audience of gatekeepers who probably fear too much fat in their discourse, too much play, too much signifying, too much indirection, too much ambiguity, too much vagueness, too much concrete, everyday reality (p. 276).

I urge philosophers and theorists delineating the norms of argumentation to consider alternative norms and argumentative practices. It is not merely out of my own discomfort that this call to action is made, but there are serious harms at stake, which will be outlined more explicitly within my concluding section.

6. "They don't think it be like it is, but it do"

In lieu of a traditional conclusion, I offer up some closing thoughts on the lack of research done to incorporate AAVE practices, specifically signifying, within argumentation theory. As I stated at the onset of this article, my aim is more diagnostic rather than to offer up prescriptive suggestions for moving forward. With these closing words, I hope to drive home the stakes of having this particular lacuna within the literature. A lack of robust cross-cultural engagement within the argumentation literature can contribute to what Bondy (2010) refers to as "argumentative injustice." Bondy construes argumentative injustice as "cases where an arguer's social

identity brings listeners to place too much or little credibility in an argument" (p. 265). The misconceptions pertaining to another's social identity are due to employing false stereotypes, such as Black women being angry or hostile. Particular false stereotypes such as these regarding Black women are often promoted and perpetuated within mainstream American media, which Collins (2009) denotes as "controlling images." These false stereotypes skew reality and attempt to render the falsity as natural and factual to justify Black women's oppression. Images and false external narratives depicting us as "hot-headed," "hard-headed," "rude," or "disrespectful" give way to argumentative injustice, specifically credibility deficits. When we enact certain argumentative practices, such as signification, we are no longer interpreted as giving arguments; rather, we are reduced to these controlling images. So, instead of being viewed as a reason giver, an arguer, a dissenter, we are seen as just another rude, disrespectful, uneducated Black woman/girl.

Bondy (2010) asserts that argumentative injustice is harmful in three primary ways: 1) "it undermines the rationality of the endeavour [sic]," 2) "it can distort an arguer's status in the community of arguers," and 3) "if repeated enough, credibility deficits can damage the ability of the person to whom the prejudice attaches to engage productively in arguments" (p. 266). Now, I am a bit suspicious as to how exactly Bondy is conceiving of "productive arguments," but nevertheless, the model of argumentative injustice is useful to help illustrate the importance of accurate dissemination of our argumentative practices in conjunction with greater diversity within academia's argumentative theories. Signifying, along with several of our other practices when engaging in arguments, is a means of productive argumentation. Given our approach to community-orientated discourse, we are incredibly aware of our interlocutors and overhearers.

Aikin and Talisse (2008) state, "[g]iven that arguments are designed not only to gain the truth about some matter but to resolve disagreements, both parties should contribute to the discussion in ways that promote those ends" (p. 525). Due to controlling images and misunderstandings pertaining to the practice of signifying, it commonly appears to outsiders of BAAWSC that the ways in which we argue do not contribute to disagreement resolution. But as I have

shown, it is not merely an attempt to corrupt argumentation, nor is it a corrupted argumentative practice. Such a practice is corroborative, paradoxically respectful, and celebrates our rich heritage of communication.[20]

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