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Analytical Essay 3 – Heavy (48-103)

In his work, “*Richard Wright’s Blues*”, Ralph Ellison states that Negroes were lynched for innocent expressions of individualism like painting their homes. The notion that white people did not want colored folk to discover an identity separate from being a nigger was very predominant in the South. However, efforts to strip individuality did not affect the ways in which black people talked to each other. In his book, “*Heavy*”, Kiese Laymon details his experience with “black vocabulary” and I find it fit to engage the greater context and applications of this language. In the following text, I will analyze Laymon’s presentation and utilization of vocabulary and slang, depicting language as the most important part of black boy’s identities.

Very early in the text, Laymon’s mother states: “Excellence, education, and accountability were requirements for keeping the insides of black boys healthy and safe from the white folk.” Deliberately, Kiese’s mannerisms and diction reflect his mother’s beliefs. The emphasis on proper vocabulary sets up the idea that grammar and dialect are of the utmost importance and must be held to the highest standard. Immediately upon the commencement of chapter 2, “black abundance” is demonstrated in the form of dialogue as Kiese opined, “We intentionally used and misused last year’s vocabulary words”. Utilizing words nobody around could understand, this scene also demonstrated his acknowledgment that they were in an unfamiliar space and must find unity as black kids’. This idea is supported by the text when Kiese states “‘Preposterous-er than a mug’ I told Mr. Reeves, looking directly at Jabari, the only other Holy Family blackboy in homeroom.” His intentional mention of looking at Jabari whilst using slang is indicative that slang expressed their identity and brought black people together in a setting where (as previously alluded to by Ralph Ellison’s work) they didn’t have many vessels to do so. The drastic shift between speaking proper grammar around his family, to slang vocabulary as Kiese grew older demonstrates a hidden value to be found in using slang.

Black people utilized slang as a means of escape from the ideas presented by words that white people used. This is made apparent when Kiese and LaThon joyfully refer to each other as “nigga”. Kiese previously stated in the book, “Feeling like a nigger made my heart, and lungs... feel like they were melting and dripping out the ends of my toenails”. The transformation of the white man’s word “nigger”, to the black man’s word “nigga” was an effective ploy to attenuate the derogatory meaning employed by the word. As Kiese asked, “What word can I use to make the white boy feel what we felt” his grandmother replied, “It ain’t about wanting to make white folk feel what you feel, it’s about not feeling what they want you to feel”. This dialogue between Kiese and his grandmother jibes with the notion that black people created their own language to form sanctuary; to deflect the maliciousness behind what white folk say and from white abundance; this theme is then reinstated as Kiese states, “creating lyrical forcefields from the police.” They needn’t create their own derogatory terms for others but rather, find strength fostering a sense of community and communal expression through their own language which is demonstrated by the black abundance rhetoric of chapter two.

Although these boys met repercussions for their slang, Laymon stated that anytime he saw LaThon he would ask, “It’s still that black abundance?” to which LaThon would answer, “You already know”. Laymon’s inclusion of this engagement brings forward the idea that their slang is an expression of identity and creativity that could not be taken away from them. Regardless of his mother’s advice, Kiese retreats from white abundance by speaking his own language. Furthermore, this is a reoccurring thread as we know slaves would oftentimes sing songs to conspire and unite undetected by white folk. The importance of slang vocabulary is greater than what meets the eye, and the analysis of Laymon’s presentation and utilization of vocabulary might have contemporary application as language remains a very critical factor in culture and society today.