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Critical analysis of naming and power in the autobiographical writing of James Baldwin

**Structured Abstract**

- **Background:** When people of European descent were enslaving people of African descent, naming and renaming were used to "suppress and erase African identity—since names not only aid in the construction of identity, but also concretize a people's collective memory" (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. ii). Slave owners felt contempt for people of color, and that contempt was nowhere more evident than in the "widely held belief among whites that slaves had neither history nor culture, and that they could not have legal right to a name . . . . This attitude reduced slaves to namelessness, and thus made them available for name re-assignment by their owners" (Mphande, 2006, p. 107). In response to this stripping away of respect and personal identity, slaves created ways of naming and giving titles to each other that reflected the honor in which they held one another. This system of conveying honor with names and titles continued long past the days of slavery and is still reflected in contemporary African American culture and in African American literature. African American slave narratives, as one might expect, directly discussed the issue of naming, unnaming, renaming, and self-naming and the relationship of those to empowerment and/or disempowerment. An understanding of naming and power as a trope in African American narratives emerged when I did a quantitative analysis of Maya Angelou's autobiographical fiction *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1979). Continued close reading analysis of other African American texts indicated that, in the cultural domain of African American literature, from post-colonial slave narratives to the most contemporary literature, naming continues to be used as a semantic means to illustrate the balance or imbalance of power in relationships.
- **Questions:** 1) How does James Baldwin use naming, unnaming, renaming, and self-naming to illustrate a balance or imbalance in power in relationships? 2) Can a basic taxonomy be developed to deepen understanding of how Baldwin uses naming to illustrate power or lack of power in relationships? 3) Can the coding then be analyzed to explore different kinds of relationships Baldwin writes about and the balance or imbalance of power in those relationships?
- **Methodology:** The proposed research project will be a lexical content analysis of a selected Baldwin text, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1995), to test the hypothesis that the link between naming and power, as seen in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1979), can be identified in Baldwin's text by using AntConc, a corpus linguistic analysis program. The first step in testing the research hypothesis will be to use AntConc for an automated analysis of preselected unigrams and their collocates. Though AntConc will be useful in locating the selected unigrams and collocates, not all instances of the unigrams will be linked to the hypothesis, so the second step will be to hand-sort the initial results to create a case-by-variable matrix. The hand-sort will also be used to study the initially

selected unigrams and collocates to see if the n-grams can be expanded to bigrams or trigrams for a second search. Results of the second search will also be hand-sorted and analyzed, and findings will be added to a case-by-case matrix.  The matrix will then be analyzed to explore the way names or naming are used in the text to illustrate a link between naming and power.  If the initial text analysis proves effective, the entire text will be analyzed, using the same steps, to locate and analyze discursive patterns that underscore a link between naming and power.

- **Results:** Initial tests of the hypothesis, using twoages of the sample text in an AntConc analysis, show that, in the sample text, Baldwin does indeed link naming to power. In the two-page sample used for an initial test of the methodology, the n-gram "nigger*" appears three times, and all of those times were linked to the lack of power black people have in relationships with white people.  The n-gram "white" appears six times, five times with the collocate "people," and all six instances of the use of the n-gram "white" were linked to the power white people have over black people.

- **Conclusions:** Interestingly, in the few pages of the text analyzed for this proposal, the way Baldwin uses naming is different from the way Angelou uses naming. In Angelou's text, when the n-gram "nigger" is used, is it used by a white person who is denigrating a black person or by the narrator when she lists all the names white people call black people.  When the n-gram "white" is used in Angelou's text, it is used to identify the skin color of the person who is exhibiting racist attitudes or showing prejudice toward people of color. In the small sample of Baldwin's text used for the preliminary AntConc analysis, the n-gram "nigger" is used by the narrator's black father, calling his son a "nigger," as the father angrily emphasizes how white people view the young child.  When the n-gram "white" is used in Baldwin's text, five times it is used by the narrator's father to warn his son about the evil things "white people" do.  The sixth time, it is used as the young narrator stands in a neighborhood occupied only by white people and watches a white man standing in front of an apartment building. The narrator has an epiphany and realizes that it would not be safe for him to enter any of the buildings in that neighborhood. In Angelou's text, the narrator already knows that white people have power over her; in Baldwin's text, the narrator is naïve and is just discovering this hard truth.

## 1.0 **Introduction**

### 1.1 **How did names become such a matter of importance for African Americans?**

Prior to the Civil War, slave owners "assigned new names to their African captives or even left them nameless, as a way of subjugating and committing them to perpetual servitude" (Fitzpatrick, 2015, ii). Not only were slaves deprived of their own names and assigned new names by their masters, sometimes those names were changed several times

throughout the slaves' lives as they were sold to new owners (Fitzpatrick, 2015, p. 46). Many of the new names assigned to the slaves were derogatory and demeaning.  Sometimes slaves were called simply "wench" or "buck" or "boy" or "girl."  Long after the days of slavery had ended, even in my own childhood, people of color were still being called "boy" or "girl" by their employers or even by strangers on the street.  By denying black people titles of respect like Mrs. or Mr., white people also denied them the full rights and respect due to adults. As Joy Leary writes in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: American's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, African Americans have used various strategies to combat the verbal attacks on their identities.  She wrote:

> . . . respect has always been an essential part of African and African American culture . . . .  During slavery Africans were not given titles of respect by whites. They were never addressed as "ladies" or "gentlemen," "Sir or Ma'am", "Mister" or "Miss" or "Mrs.," so they conferred their own designations of respect.  They addressed one another as "Big Mama," and "Big Daddy," "Ma-dea," "Sister" or "Brother" to convey honor.  (qtd. in Fitzpatrick, 2015, pp. 53-54)

This system of conveying honor with these titles continued long past the days of slavery and early research indicates that the importance of names and naming, with their inevitable link to power or powerlessness, pervades African American literature.  This proposed research will study the link between power and naming, specifically in an autobiographical text by James Baldwin, using analytic techniques not previously brought to bear in the study of literature.

## 2.0 Literary Review

### 2.1 Discussion of power and naming in slave narratives

The link between names and power has its roots in slavery, so, of course, it is explored in many of the earliest slave narratives.  Given the history of slavery and the powerlessness of those slaves whose very names were stolen from them, it is not surprising that names and naming are important in African American culture and are related to a sense of power or powerlessness; nor is it surprising that names and naming should become a significant trope in African American literature.  Since names were used to "suppress and erase African identity" (Fitzpatrick, 2015, ii), it only makes sense that African Americans would use names and naming practices to reclaim their personal and cultural identity.  In "The Slave Narrative in American Literature," Lowance (2016) stated, "As in all autobiographies the primary characteristic or theme of the slave narrative is that of self-definition" (p. 676). How much more difficult was it for former slaves than for the typical writer of autobiography, to define himself or herself if the very essence of identity, the name, had been stripped away from the writer?  This was especially painful for slaves who had been ripped from their homes in Africa.  In his narrative, Equiano (1998) discussed the way he was stripped of his name and renamed in every new situation in which he found himself:

> In this place I was called Jacob; but on board the African Snow [the slave ship], I was called Michael . . . . While I was on board this ship, my captain and master called me Gustavus Vassa [after a Scandinavian chief].  I at that time began to understand him a little and refused to be called so, and told him as well as I could that I would be called Jacob, but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus, and when I refused to answer to my new name, which I at first did, it

gained me many a cut; so at length I submitted, and by which I have been known

ever since.  (Equiano, 1998)

Slave owners stripped away names that connected the enslaved to their homelands, to their families, and to the roots of their identity.  Some of the Africans who were abducted had grown up in relatively rich and powerful families, while some were sold into slavery by their own people because of family debts or personal animosities.  But whatever sense of self the newly enslaved individual had been built up during childhood or adult life, the slave master destroyed it in an attempt to assert the authority of ownership.

People born into slavery were often named by the owners of their mothers, but, occasionally, a slave was allowed to choose her own child's first name.  But even those names, because the last name was the name of the slave owner, tied children to their slave identity.  Sometimes slaves claimed their personal identities by renaming themselves after they were free or by accepting new names gifted to them.  For example, Frederick Douglass is one of the most well-known of slave narrative authors, but his name, recorded in history, was not the name given to him at birth.  As Casmier-Paz (2001) explained, "'Frederick Douglass' is an invented, recent identity whose signature seeks to evidence the death of the fugitive and the emergence of a free man. The **name** 'Frederick Douglass' is a creation that merges his given **name-**-the **name** given him by his mother--with another **name**, which is likewise 'given' to him by someone else (p. 220).  Douglass' given name (at birth) was Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey.  However, Douglas says that he had "dispensed with the two middle names long before I left slavery" (qtd. in Casmier-Paz, 2001, p. 220).  In order to escape slavery, he needed to also discard the name Bailey, which was the last name of his slave mother.  Douglass describes how he was given a forged pass with the name

Stanley, and that pass, along with his forged identity, carried him into free territory. Douglass later chose the name Frederick Johnson, but when he moved to Bedford, New York, there were so many Johnsons that he felt a lack of individual identity. An abolitionist friend suggested the name Douglass, and a new identity was forged, an identity that allowed Douglass to remain free (qtd. in Casmier-Paz, 2001, p. 220).  Casmier-Paz declared, "The fugitive who still uses his **slave name** can be found, kidnapped, and returned to slavery" (p. 220), therefore one of the most important reasons for changing a slave name was to avoid discovery by slavecatchers.

Avoiding capture and return to slavery was one reason former slaves changed their names, but there were other reasons as well.  In the narratives of both Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, "the moment when freedom is finally felt to be irrevocably coincides precisely with a ceremonious exchange of slave surname for an agnomen designating a literally liberated self" (Benston, 1982, p. 3). That "simultaneous naming and unnaming" (Benson, 1982, p. 3) gave former slaves a new sense of identity, an ability to shed the shame of slavery and begin fresh with a name of their own choosing.  As Malcolm X said, "As long as you allow them to call you what they wish you don't know who you really are.  You can't lay claim to any name, any home, any destiny that will identify you as something you should become: a brother among brothers" (X, 1967, p. 14).

1.2 **Discussion of power and naming in literature:**

Historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have discussed the history of naming, unnaming, and renaming of slaves and how freed slaves wrote about those experiences in their published slave narratives.  However, the recurring trope in post-slavery African American literature, using naming to illustrate who holds power in a relationship, has (as far

as I have been able to discover) been addressed by only four scholars: Benson (1982), King (1990), Neighbors (2002), and Romigh (2016).

In "I Yam what I Am: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature," Benson (1982) explored naming and unnaming in two slave narratives: those of Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown.  Benson argued, "the moment when freedom is finally felt to be irrevocable coincides precisely with a ceremonious exchange of slave surname for an agnomen designating a literally liberated self" (Benson, 1982, p. 3).  Benson quoted Booker T. Washington who said of African American renaming, "it was far from proper for them to bear the surname of their former owners, and a great many of them took other surnames" (qtd. in Benston, 1982, p. 3). Benson (1982) stated, "The concern with naming in Afro-American literature reaches a new intensity with the rise of "black conscious- ness" in the 1960s, and he went on to discuss how naming and unnaming are addressed in the poetry of African American poets Michael Harper, Alice Walker, and Jay Wright (pp. 9-10).

Using close reading, King (1990) discussed the link between naming and power in only one text, Nora Zeale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and she particularly focused on the relationships of one woman with the men in her life. In her article, "Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God,*" King (1990) wrote, "Naming has always been an important issue" for African Americans "because of its link to the exercise of power. From their earliest experiences in America, [African Americans] have been made aware that those who name also control, and those who are named are subjugated" (p. 683).  King (1990) argued that "naming is tied to racial as well as individual identity" and that the "concern with naming . . . is evident in black literature from the earliest slave narratives to more contemporary works" (pp. 683-684).  Even the titles of well-known

works by African American authors reflect a focus on the importance of names: *Black Boy,*

*Invisible Man,* and *Nobody Knows My Name.*

The third scholar to focus on naming as it relates to African American literature was

Neighbors (2002) in his article "Plunging (outside of) History: Naming and Self-Possession

in *Invisible Man*." As the title clearly indicates, Neighbors explores this trope in only one

text.  In writing about the scene in Ellison's *Invisible Man* in which the protagonist woke

confused because he could not remember his own name, Neighbors (2002) said, "The

attempt by Invisible Man to remember a name forgotten triggers the instability of an identity

crisis" (p. 233). Though doctors attempt to spark his memory, Neighbors said, he "lay

fretting over [his] identity" (p. 242); [the protagonist] says, "When I discover who I am, I'll

be free" (cited in Neighbors, 2002, p. 243). But even after the Invisible Man is given his

name (given to him but never to the reader), he does not find the kind of stability he seeks.

Neighbors argued that there is "a juxtaposition of the desire for a stable identity and, even

after his name is given, [he continues to suffer from] the instability of a continuing identity

confusion" (pp. 233-234).

I was the fourth scholar to explore this trope, and I have not yet published my findings,

but in a conference presentation (Romigh, 2016) I used close reading to explore the

significance of naming, unnaming, renaming, and self-naming in African American literature

using examples from early slave narratives, post-modern slave narratives, and the

autobiographies and fiction of authors like Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Alex Haley,

Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and others.  In that presentation, I went beyond looking

at naming and renaming as related to slave narratives or to express power imbalances

between men and women, and I pointed out how naming has been used in African American

literature to illustrate the power dynamics in black/white relationships, male/female

relationships, family relationships, interactions between citizens and police officers, etc.

Benson (1982), King (1990), and Neighbors (2002) studied the link between power and

naming in a single African American text.  I am attempting to widen the scope of this

conversation by studying African Literature as a whole, and this will be the subject of my

dissertation. In this proposed research, I will utilize new methodologies, specifically a lexical

analysis web application, to explore the power dynamics related to naming in African

American Literature. This is a pilot study to determine if lexical analysis software can be

useful in analyzing literature, so I will be using a "purposive sampling" plan, which Bernard

(2013) argues is appropriate for this kind of research (p. 166).  Specifically, the sample I will

use is an autobiographical text by James Baldwin.  Significant findings of the research could

lead to the development of new theoretical approaches to studying literary texts.

<div align="center">2.0 **Research Plan**</div>

2.1 **Research design:**

This research will focus on the sample text, Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1995)

and use linguistic content analysis to test the hypothesis that the link between naming and

power in African American literature, which has been discussed by the authors noted earlier,

will also appear in Baldwin's work. To test the research hypothesis, I will create a

concordance with a list of n-grams previously selected during earlier hand coding of Maya

Angelou's text, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1979).  The selected n-grams include all

variations of the word "name," such as name, names, rename, unname, nickname, naming,

renaming, unnaming, etc., along with variations of the word "call," such as call, called, calls,

calling.  Most of the n-grams, for the purpose of the computer application used in this

research, can be coded as nam* or call*. Various racial terms and slurs, found in Angelou's text, which have been used to denigrate African Americans, will also be key words for the research.

2.2 **AntConc as a research tool.**

Though several computer applications are available for lexical analysis, I have selected AntConc for this research. AntConc is a free "corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis" (Anthony, 2017, n.p.). AntConc allows users to download a text or multiple texts, create concordances for search purposes, or allow the software to search the text for patterns that the researchers would not think to look for.  For preliminary research purposes, a few pages of the sample text will be downloaded into AntConc for an analysis using a concordance of pre-selected n-grams. The AntConc software will be used to locate the selected n-grams in the text and find collocates of those n-grams as well.  This initial search will allow the researcher to pretest variables and correct problems with the codes.  The original unigram list will be updated to include bi-grams or tri-grams found during the initial search and to add or remove unigrams from the search as necessary.  Once the codes are finalized, the text will be searched again using the corrected n-grams.  Also, the sentences around each n-gram will need to be reviewed to see if there are other words in the sentence that should become part of the coding, for example a nickname given to a person who is usually called by a given name. Every n-gram pile sort could lead the researcher to add additional codes to the search. Though AntConc will be useful in locating the n-grams, not all instances of the n-grams will be linked to the hypothesis; hand-sorting will allow me to set aside all uses in the text of the n-grams that have no relationship to power; for example, "His name was John," or "A woman named Ruth."

After removing any instances of n-grams use that do not relate to the hypothesis, I will hand sort initial results to create a case-by-variable matrix that will split the instances of naming into the following categories: 1) naming as it relates to relationships between African Americans and Caucasians, 2) naming as it relates to relationships between males and females, 3: naming as it relates to familial relationships, 3) naming as it relates employer/employee relationships, and 4) naming as it relates to self-definition or claiming personal agency.  Not all categories will be found in the sample text, and, in some instances, the keywords may overlap categories, and this will be indicated in the matrix.  The matrix will then be analyzed for evidence that can quantify the link between naming and power as it appears in the text.  If the initial text analysis shows significance, the entire sample text will be analyzed, using the same three step process, to expose patterns that demonstrate the link between naming and power.

2.3 **Sampling plan design:**

Since this is a pilot study, I will be using a "purposive sampling" plan (Bernard, 2013, 166). Only one text has been selected for analysis: James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1995). This text was selected because it is the most similar of Baldwin's work to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1979).  Both texts are fictionalized autobiographical stories of childhood, and because the autobiographical nature of the text, based on the lived experience of an African American male, any discursive pattern in the text that demonstrates a link between naming and power becomes more salient.

2.4 **Analytic technique:**

After the initial text run using two pages of the text, I will enter the full text of James

Baldwin's autobiographical novel into the AntConc corpus.  I will then create a concordance

of n-grams that will be used in the initial search.  All n-grams to be used, which are drawn

from Angelou's text, are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Concordance

| n-gram | Code |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| *nam* | Mention of naming in text |
| call* | Alternative verb for name |
| Mr. | Title of respect |
| Mrs. | Title of respect |
| Miss | Title of respect |
| Sir | Title of respect |
| Ma'am | Title of respect |
| Negro | Racial designation |
| Caucasian | Racial designation |
| black | Racial designation |
| white | Racial designation |
| boy | Denial of adult privilege |
| girl | Denial of adult privilege |
| Uncle Tom | Negative term (sellout) |
| nigger* | Racial slur |
| jig* | Racial slur |
| dinge* | Racial slur |
| blackbird* | Racial slur |

| | |
|---|---|
| crow* | Racial slur |
| boot* | Racial slur |
| spook* | Racial slur |
| buck* | Racial slur |
| wench* | Racial slur |
| they | Identifies "otherness" |
| them | Identifies "otherness" |

These n-grams were selected because they either specifically identify racial differences or they are used in Angelou's text by characters who seek to abase African Americans, or in Angelou's text the words are used in such a way that they indicate power or lack of power in relationships.  The initial test search also identified at least one collocate of the n-gram "white, so the bi-gram "white people" will also be added to the concordance.
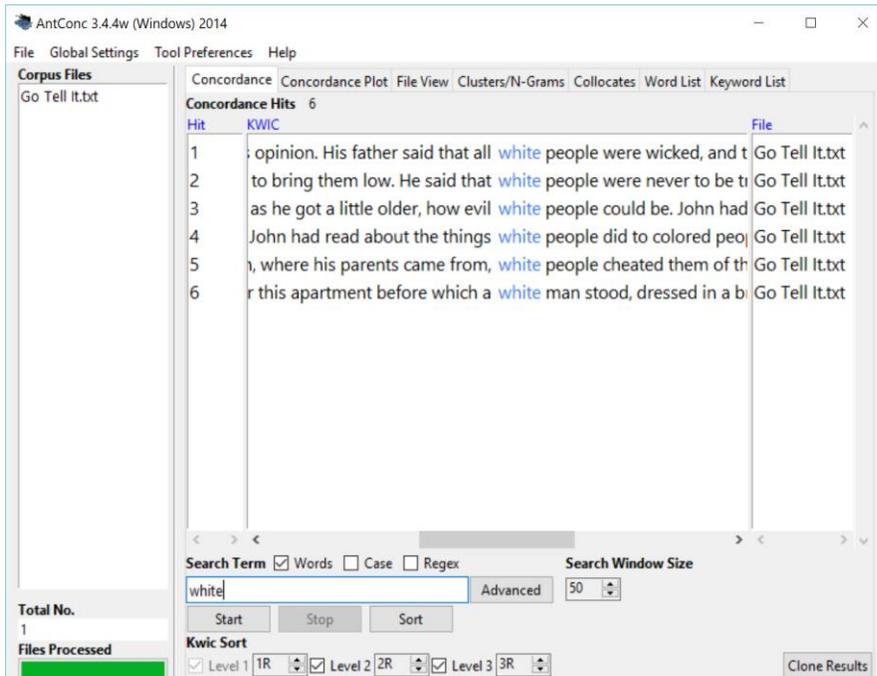
2.5 **Process**:

Each of the n-grams from the above list will be tested against the entire text of Baldwin's autobiographical fiction.  A screen shot in Table 2 below shows results from searching for the n-gram "nigger*" in just two pages of the text.

Table 2:
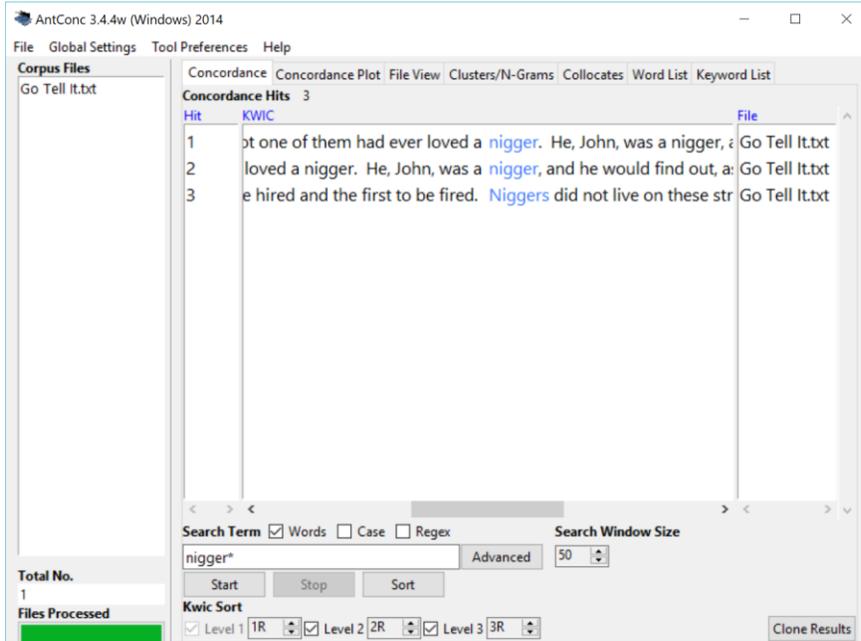


The screen shot in Table 3 show results from searching the same two pages of sample

text for the n-gram "white."

Table 3:

With the results seen in Table 2 and Table 3, it is clear that AntConc will be a useful tool for locating the n-grams of the concordance in Baldwin's full text. Results of the initial test of AntConc for this purpose, also show that hand-sorting the results to look for collocates and context can lead to finding bi-grams such as "white people" that can help to expand the concordance.

3.5 **Possible problems:**

One obvious problem the researcher will encounter is that the first two unigrams, "name" and "call," are quite commonly used without any reference to relationships or to inequity in the balance of power. Another problem is that some of the racial slurs that were used in the time and place of Baldwin's experience may not appear in Angelou's text, so some key n-grams may be missed. A third potential problem would be a matter of fairness, that the researcher's modern sensibilities may cause her to misunderstand terms (for example, "colored") that today would be considered inappropriate but in a different age might have been standard usage by people of all ethnicities. A fourth problem may be that, because the researcher is white, she may not fully understand all of the terms that would be considered insults to African American people.

3.6 **Potential solutions:**

To address the first problem, care will be needed, after the first list is obtained using AntConc, to sort it to factor out any use of the n-grams that do not directly relate to naming, unnaming, or renaming in a way that illustrates a balance or an imbalance of power in the relationship, with strict attention paid to avoid any bias in the assessment. To address the second problem, searching for common collocates of the selected n-grams will help me to find some of the racial slurs that were not included in the initials n-grams list, but this

problem may not be able to be fully resolved without a quantitative close reading of the text.

The third problem will require me to remain aware of that the cultural norms of the time

period the author of the text will be different from her own. All decisions about whether an

act of naming or unnaming or renaming in the text is linked to power must be based on the

words of the author, not the assumptions of the researcher. To address the fourth, and

probably most important problem, I will collaborate with well-known African American

scholar and author, Gary Lemons, who is currently a Visiting Professor at the University of

South Florida.

## 4.0 Timeline

If significant, the results of this research are intended to become a section of my dissertation.  If

there are actionable findings in the initial pilot run, I will include texts of other African American

authors in the research, and the results of the study will become part of the early drafts of my

dissertation in 2019.  The timeline for the initial pilot run can be seen in Table 4 below:

| Table 4 | |
|---|---|
| Create Concordance in AntConc and run initial sample of text | 11/8/2017 |
| Hand-sort initial results and update concordance in AntConc | 11/10/2017 |
| Hand sort secondary results | 11/12/2017 |
| Create matrix and analyze results | 11/17/2017 |
| Approval of proposal | 11/17/2018 |
| Run entire text | 1/30/2018 |
| Hand-sort results from full text | 2/30/2018 |
| Update concordance in AntConc | 3/15/2018 |
| Hand-sort secondary results | 4/15/2018 |
| Update matrix | 4/30/2018 |
| Analyze results | 5/15/2018 |
| Report results | 5/30/2018 |

## 5.0 Significance

This critical discourse analysis is intended to help outsiders understand the historical use of language, particularly naming, to enforce cultural hegemony and to denigrate and suppress people of color. The content analysis will also help readers to become aware of patterns of naming that are still in use to empower or disempower individuals in an American society still rife with prejudice and discrimination and to recognize ways that African Americans resist that cultural hegemony. Because this research will use new methodologies in the analysis of English literature, if the research produces actionable findings, this research method has the potential to become a model for using AntConc or other computer applications for quantitative lexical analysis. This would be a fresh scholarly approach to the analysis of literature, and it could lead to the development of new theoretical approaches in the study of English Literature as a whole.

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