

African-American English: From The Hood to the Amen Corner

Geneva Smitherman

*Distinguished Professor of English,
Director, African American Language and Literacy Program
Michigan State University*

*Keynote speech presented for the
Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing
1995 Conference “Linguistic Diversity and Academic Writing”*

Speaker Series

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Preface

On May 4 and 5, 1995, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing held its sixth annual colloquium, which focused on the theme of “Linguistic Diversity and Academic Writing.” The colloquium was designed as a forum for discussions of cultural diversity, multiculturalism, student language, and writing. We invited Geneva Smitherman, Distinguished Professor of English and Director of the African American Language and Literacy Program at Michigan State University, to deliver the keynote address published here.

As a scholar and as a social reformer, Professor Smitherman has blazed many trails. Her scholarship has been central in the debates, which have legitimized African American vernacular as a rule-governed, richly expressive variant of the English language. Her book *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* is the most widely cited source for linguists who have described this dialect. Fifty-two articles and nine books later, her book *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* continues to illuminate the traditions, evolution, and vitality of African American speech and rhetorical style. No other sociolinguist has established such a distinguished record on such an important topic.

Professor Smitherman’s keynote address, “African-American English: From the Hood to the Amen Corner,” provides a personal context from Smitherman’s own experience for discussions about diverse language practices. It also provides a historical overview of the evolution of African-American English and outlines options in the current debate over national language standards.

The colloquium and the publication of Professor Smitherman's speech contributes fresh perspectives that enhance the primary mission of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing—improving undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. Along with colloquia, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- characteristics of writing across the University's curriculum;
- status reports on students' writing ability and the University;
- the connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction.

We are pleased to present Professor Smitherman's keynote address as part of the ongoing discussion about linguistic diversity and the politics of teaching writing. One of the goals of all Center publications is to encourage conversations about writing; we invite you to contact the Center about this publication or other Center publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Kim Donehower, Editor
April 1996

African-American English: From the Hood to the Amen Corner

I told Professor Bridwell-Bowles that in the tradition of the traditional black church which is where my roots are, we have this saying about pin the flowers on me now, while I'm living, and I thank her again for more wonderful flowers, for that great introduction. She alluded to a speech test that got me started on this road and I just want to amplify on that experience because it really had a profound effect on me. In fact, there was a point in time I had to learn to talk about it and my students taught me to talk about it—in fact, when I was teaching in one of my first teaching jobs, they said, “you gotta tell that story because it shows what the system can do to people and it's inspiration for others.” And so I'll tell you a little bit about myself and include that story.

I was born in rural Tennessee. My parents were sharecroppers and I started school in Brownsville, Tennessee, which is about 50 miles from Memphis. My first teacher was Ms. Erline and as it turned out she ended up being the only African American teacher that I had in all my years of schooling. Those years I was basically monolingual, speaking the African American English of my traditional black church and of my family and also of Ms. Erline. I didn't have any problems in terms of language until we moved to Chicago and Detroit. Living a few years in Chicago and then Detroit, I had my first taste of linguistic attack when my European American teachers criticized my dialect. It was very interesting, too, because in those years they attributed African American English to the south but no one ever satisfactorily explained why African American people in the north talked the same way as those in the south when they'd never even been south. Because, of course, it wasn't just a southern type of speech but a speech with Africanized roots.

Those were the beginning of my days of being non-verbal. I finally managed to finish school, to graduate, in fact, from a college prep high school in Detroit by just keeping my mouth shut. In college, however, after I decided that I wanted to parlay my Sunday school teaching skills into the teaching of English and Latin, which were my undergraduate majors, I was trying to get a teaching certificate. Teacher training institutions in those years, in about 40 different states, required you to take a speech test—your speech had to be northern middle class Midwestern and white standard English.

Even though I was writing in the language of wider communication or standard English, I hadn't learned to code switch in the speech areas, so of course, I flunked the test. I went into this speech therapy class because if you fail the test you had to take speech therapy. Well, this was at the height of the black liberation movement and I figured all this really had something to do with race. I went into this speech therapy class with a serious attitude, you know. It was a small class, about 20 people, and I saw some faces that looked like mine, and I says "yea, just like I figured." And then I saw also a couple of brown faces and I had to stop for a minute, but then I said, oh yeah, but they're Spanish so they don't like the way they talk either. And then over in the corner I saw two white people. I said, "Now wait a minute, what is them white folks doing up in here cause I know they done passed this test." Well, as it turned out, them white folk, one was a speaker of what we now in linguistics call Appalachian English and the other was a person from the Bronx.

Now, this speech therapist, you know, she didn't really know what to do with us. She was just this poor little white girl teaching assistant type, trying to get her Ph.D., and

here she had this motley crew of 20 people who didn't have aphasia, dyslexia, didn't anybody stutter. So, she couldn't deal with that because she had been trained to deal with real speech therapies. But she somehow figured out in those days what we now know through the explosion of knowledge in linguistics. She somehow figured out that there was nothing deficient about any of us, that we were all speaking English, we were just speaking different variations of it—that we didn't have any delayed language development or any cognitive deficiencies and, in fact, that since we were speaking these languages and had spoken these variations since infancy, there was no way that we could automatically change our dialect in a matter of 16 weeks.

So what she did was she taught us the test. We simply memorized all the lists of words that they had. She set up these little exercises for each of us depending on which features of the pronunciation system on the test we hadn't mastered. I remember two of my features, which I now understand are carryovers from African languages, one was the so-called post vocalic R deletion in a word like “four,” which for me is “fo.” Or “more,” which for me is “mo,” or “sore,” which is “so.” So I was going around my neighborhood there, the 'hood, pronouncing “four, more, sore,” and all my friends would say, “What's up—that's what you do in college? What is this?” The other exercise I really worked on was the “th” sound, the so-called interdental fricative. In initial words like “then,” which for me in my native tongue is “den,” or at the end in a word like “mouth,” it's “mouf;” or “south” is “souf.” And I was later to learn that in many of the languages of West Africa that my ancestors spoke when they came here in enslavement, there is no “th” sound. So they did what speakers do, they picked the next closest sound and adapted their language

patterns to fit the new norm. So that's how I got from being a literature major to being a student of the English language.

That experience also taught me something about the misguided attitudes that Americans have toward language, and I'm very happy to say that those teacher training institutions don't require this test anymore. Fortunately because of the work that came out of sociolinguistics particularly in the late 60s and 70s, those tests have gone by the wayside. But it shows something about the sort of attitude that people have about what one linguist calls our "national mania for correctness." James Baldwin says that it has to do with the self-consciousness that Europeans in American have about their own language and culture when it's measured up against the traditions of Europe. Before we go any further, I think it's important to say too, that I don't want people to get me wrong, I am not saying that anything goes. Very often those of us in sociolinguists and linguistics in general are considered permissive—that we say, "Oh, we can talk to write any way." In fact, there are standards.

But I am saying that I want us to think about language as a source of power. And if you want to use language as a tool, as a source of power you've got to go way beyond any sort of simple notions about "fo" or "four" and simple notions of correctness. Because what great speakers and writers do is they try to use language as power. They try to move mountains. Because they know that the word, in fact, is power. And it isn't just in my tradition, in the African American tradition. I'm told that in the time of the ancient Greeks, when the orator Demosthenes spoke, the people simply applauded. But when Paracles spoke, they marched. So what we want people to do with language is to move people, and in fact to make them march.

I want to tell you another little story that helps me to explain in a quite vivid way this whole notion of permissiveness, that people say, “Well, you know, you can just say any old thing, you know, if you’re talking Black English, there aren’t any standards or conventions.” In fact there are definite standards and conventions. A white feminist linguist, a friend of mine, told this little story on herself. She had recently married an African American who was studying for the ministry. When it came time for him to give his trial sermon, he went to preach in the traditional black church, because that’s sort of like the proving ground if you’re going to be preaching. The traditional black church is the church where the content of the worship is Judeo-Christian, but the style in which people worship is very Africanized. They talk in tongues, they testify, they get the spirit, they believe in spirit possession. There’s a whole belief that the way to get the message out and to construct communities is for everybody to participate, so you have people talking back to the preacher, and talking back to anybody in the church who stands up to say something. This is a call and response kind of dynamic. So, when our novice minister was giving his sermon and he was really getting deep into it, the people over there in the amen corner, which is where the cheerleaders of the church sit, started saying, “Ah ha, watch yoself doc, take yo time, yes I hear you, come on up now.” And so my friend, the European American wife, she started feeling sort of out of it, you know, and she wanted to get into the spirit of things and so she shouted out “Now that’s a very good point.” Wrong response for this audience. She laughs about that now, herself. So, there are standards in African American English as obviously as in any language community—things that you say or don’t say at different points in time.

Let me give a definition of African American English—and I’m talking about it from the ’hood to the amen corner, which is my way of trying to say there is no rigid division between what happens in the street or the church or between the sacred or the secular. There are not these rigid sorts of divisions. I would define it as the result of the mixture of African language patterns with English words and patterns. Some linguists in fact refer to this as Ebonics—ebony for black and phonics for sound. It developed, this language mixture, from two different linguistic traditions. It developed during enslavement, so we’re talking about a language that came out of enslavement. With no enslavement, there would be no African American English, nor for that matter African American Dutch or Portuguese or French.

First of all it served as a transactional language between the master and the slave or between the master and those who were selling other Africans into enslavement. That’s a part of Africans’ history that we don’t often want to acknowledge, but in fact, that is exactly what happened. It’s also a standard process whenever two groups of people come together and they can’t speak each other’s language. They develop something in between that they use for very limited purposes of communication.

There was one purpose. But the more important purpose that African American English served in these slave communities is that it was a counter language, a bond of solidarity between Africans from different ethnic groups. It was, in fact, a very conscious attempt on the part of those in enslavement to represent an alternative or a different reality through language—through a language which is based a lot on irony, on ambiguity, on what Henry Lewis Gates calls “double voicedness.” In this sense, it became the *lingua franca* of all of those in the enslavement communities. It was very

interesting, because one of the things that the slavers did was to mix Africans from different ethnic groups in the same slave community so as to foil communication. The use of African American English effectively negated that, because they used this new language to talk among themselves and also to talk about the massa right in front of his face, using his same language but with this double sort of meaning. I think it's this function, this tradition of it of being a counter language, that explains why when a word crosses over into the general white mainstream then it becomes wac, no longer useful, no longer having linguistic currency in the black community.

Before going a little further talking about Ebonics, it would be useful to review some of the general principles about language that also apply to speakers of African American English. For one thing, we know that humans are the only members of the so-called animal kingdom—I hate saying “animal kingdom”—but they're the only animals that actually possess a language system in the sense of putting together sentences and statements in novel and new ways. What animals do when they communicate is mimic and imitate, but humans create totally new and different thoughts with language.

It is language, then, that makes us human. In the 17th century Descartes said it was thought. But I don't think it's really thought, I think language is the thing that makes us human. A child comes into the world born to speak. Think about the fact that before you know it, children are going through these steady stages where they coo and they babble and then they'll say one word and then all of a sudden the all-hell-breaks-loose stage of language takes place. At about 18 months or so they're just talking all over the place. You don't have to teach people to talk. You send them to school to learn the three Rs but you don't have to send them to school to learn speech. They will learn it and pick

it up because of this language acquisition device, this sort of microchip in the brain that they have. They'll learn it and they'll pick up the language or the dialect version of speech that they hear in their speech community. It works the same way for every human being on the planet, regardless of what their race is or their skin color or their gender or whether they grow up in a community with, as Fishman said, "little languages spoken by little people," or whether they're speaking a dominant language.

What we also know about language is that it's a bond of solidarity. It's this sense in which the counter language of African American English developed and existed. In fact, what you can do with language is send a message about how loyal you are to a particular cultural group. In my analysis of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas phenomenon, I try to figure out why was it that in all the public opinion polls Anita Hill was not rated very high—she wasn't rated as credible by black people and even by black women. What I looked at, in all the transcripts and all the videotapes we were able to get from the research archives, was the rhetorical style that she used during those hearings and the style that Clarence Thomas used. She used this so-called objective impersonal style, the real language of wider communication that she had been trained in at Yale. One thing about that language is that it distances people; it creates social distance. Thomas, even though he was also trained at Yale as she was, used the discourse style of African American English. That's a style that's hot, it's emotional, it's personalized. You'll remember that he talked about things like the personal effect of all this on him, how he hadn't slept in a thousand nights. He even used all the hyperbole of the vernacular, saying what his mother thought and how she was ill because of all this. He pimped the tradition, because he's not really "black" at all in his decisions. His decisions as a supreme court

justice have in fact shown that. Hill, unfortunately, by failing to plug into the black verbal traditions, distanced herself from her audience.

I often say that language is like a marked deck of cards. I think of old time poker players who hold their cards close to their chests, but have these little markings on them and only the people who knew just where to look could tell whether it was a jack or a king. I say language is like that; it's a marked deck of cards if you know what to listen for.

When it comes to Black English we do know what to listen for now, but this was not always the case. Before the research work that was done in the 60s and early 70s, people said things like this: (These are some exact phrases quoted from scholars and writers who talked about the speech of the Negro.) It was baby talk. Some attributed it to the jungle tongue of Africans, flat noses, thick lips and so on. Even in the enlightened 60s, some speakers of black talk were forced to take speech therapy as in fact I was. Now we know what to listen for.

So what are the things that we look for? What are the features of African American English? There are three dimensions: a system of grammar and pronunciation, verbal traditions, and a system of semantics. For an example of the system of grammar, I like this story that I heard just a couple of weeks ago at a hair braiding shop. A woman was talking about her significant other and she said "the brother be looking good." We were just sitting around a hair braiding shop, you know, and she was using "be" here in the way that many languages of West Africa convey meaning. That is, the verbs don't necessarily have anything to do with whether it's past, present or future tense but with the quality or essence of something. In fact when she said "the brother be looking good," she

didn't mean the brother looking good but he be looking good, which is to say, something that's repeated over time. He looked good last week, he's looking good today and he's going to be looking good tomorrow, 'cause he be looking good. Many of the languages of West Africa have this sort of grammatical pattern.

[Regarding] the pronunciation system, I mentioned my own experience with the "th" sound and the post-vocalic R deletion. Another interesting feature is the tendency to end all syllables with a vowel sound. For instance, in the Yoruba language, the consonants at the ends of words are not sounded. Some people may be familiar with the hip hop group called "Soul For Real." I heard them explaining their name on a radio show. One of them said "well we're soulful and we're really for real" and the interviewer said, "oh, yeah." Of course he didn't get it but I went right out and bought their CD and it's Soul for Real. Since the "l" sounds don't sound in black vernacular, they've got the play on "so" for real—we're for real, we're soulful and we're so for real. Of course, it went right over the head of the person that was interviewing them.

That's one kind of example. I mentioned the "th" sound and I think this accounts for something like "Def Comedy Jam." Because the word "def" is really "death" and it comes from a phrase in the 1960s, "doing it to def." If you do something to death you do it to the max, to the superb, to the height. So that's how "def" gets to mean something that's really superb, really excellent, really great and that's where Def Comedy Jam on television takes its name.

I think where the real action lies in black talk is really in the verbal traditions and in the semantics. That's where you really see the richness of the language. By black verbal traditions, I mean linguistic practices like the dozens, or playing the dozens. Now

on the east coast, they call it snapping. It has rules, these ritual insults where you talk about a person or you talk about your mother, and the whole idea of this game is to say something really funny, really humorous, hyperbole, exaggerated. It's play back and forth of one-upsmanship. You know: "Your mother looks so ugly, she look like nine miles of bad road with a detour at the end." One of the rules of the dozens that people forget—I'm telling you all these things have rules just like my feminist friend there in the church—one of the real basic rules of playing the dozens is that what you say cannot be literally true. That's why it's a game, because you play it. If you say something that's literally true about a person, then it ain't play anymore.

This really came home to me once when I was still in graduate school and my son Tony and his little partners were into this game of the dozens. One of the boys was from a family where his mother had about ten children and she wasn't married. So one of the kids, when he couldn't think of anything else to say, said to Ralph, "yo momma needs to take birth control pills." Now they're getting mad, because it's getting into the truth. So Ralph says to Tony, "don't you say nothing cause least my momma don't buy her furniture from the Goodwill." Now Tony and I had had this big debate about a television table that I had bought for him from the Goodwill. I was a struggling graduate student, I didn't have any money, what's wrong with the Goodwill? Here his momma is getting a Ph.D., and he's got to get furniture from the Goodwill. So that broke the whole game up, of course. I had to intervene at that point.

Another kind of example of a black verbal tradition is the tradition of braggadocio—high talk, fancy talk, really bragging boastful kinds of talk, where a person, in very exaggerated language, celebrates their accomplishments or the

accomplishments of somebody else. It's what you hear in rap music today. My favorite example that I want to share with you is from the first black female rapper, at least the first to go public, and it goes back to the 1960s. The rapper is Nikki Giovanni, a poet. The rap that she is doing, which is done to drums in the background in the recordings that she made, is in a poem called "Ego Tripping." What's she's doing in "Ego Tripping" is braggadocio—she's celebrating that female principle of creativity in Africa and herself.

Here's some lines from it:

I was born in the Congo,

I walked to the fertile crescent and built the sphinx.

I designed a pyramid so tough that a star that only glows every 100 years falls into the center giving divine perfect light.

I am bad.

I sowed diamonds in my back yard.

My bowels deliver uranium.

The filings from my fingers nails are semiprecious jewels

On a trip north I caught a cold and blew my nose giving oil to the Arab world.

I am so hip even my errors are correct.

I sailed west to reach east and had to round off the earth as I went

The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid across three continents.

I am so perfect, so divine, so ethereal, so surreal, I can not be comprehended except by my permission.

I mean I can fly like a bird in the sky"

Another verbal tradition that shows the richness of black talk is the toast. A toast is a long epic story that's told in rhyming couplet form, and it's all about powerful strong, super bad Africans. In fact, the toast recalls the role of the African griot who was responsible for preserving the legacy and the history of the group. To engage in this type of linguistic practice you have to have a phenomenal memory. You have to have a sharp, fluent way with words, because if you forget some of the lines, you have to be able to make other up.

This was a dying art form, actually, until the 90s when the rap artists recovered the toast tradition. My favorite toasts are things like the signifying monkey and Staggerlee. My favorite toast, though, is Shine and the sinking of the Titanic. As the story goes in the black tradition, the fighter Jack Johnson tried to get passage on the Titanic and was refused. So a whole story developed around a legendary stoker on the Titanic who didn't actually exist, of course. But the story was that there was only one black person on the ship and that was a person named Shine, appropriately. And he's the only person who survives.

Shine knows that the ship is sinking, and he run on up to the captain and he say:

“Captain, Captain, I was down in the hole looking for something to eat

And you know what the water rose above my feet.”

The captain say, “Shine, Shine, boy have no doubt

We got 99 pumps to pump the water out.

Now boy you get on back down in the hole

And you start shoveling some more coal.”

(By the way, people who know versions of this will notice that I've cleaned it up a bit. We use this for a reading series for advanced adolescent readers who were too advanced for the Dick and Jane kind of thing, so we cleaned it up.) So:

Shine went on back down in the hole,

He started to shoveling coal and singing,

“Lord, Lord, please have mercy on my soul.”

As Shine was singing, “Lord, Lord, please. . .”

The water it rose above his knees.

Shine split back up on deck and he say,

“Captain, Captain, I was down in the hole,

I was shoveling coal and singing, ‘Lord, Lord, please,’

And you know what? The water it rose above my knees.”

The captain told Shine that all was cool.

He say, “Shine, Shine, I done told you to have no doubt,

We got 99 pumps to pump that water out.

Now you get on back down in that hole

And you just keep on shoveling coal.”

Shine went on back down in the hole,

He kept on shoveling coal,

He stopped to wipe the sweat off his face,

That’s when the water rose above his waist.

Shine run back up on deck, he say, “Captain, Captain, I was down in the hole

Just shoveling coal

And when I stopped to wipe the sweat off my face

The water it rose above my waist.”

The captain say, “Shine, Shine, boy now many times do I have to tell you to have no doubt

If I done told you once I done told you a hundred times, We have 99 pumps to pump the water out.

Now boy, don’t you trust your captain?

I don’t want to see you on deck again, you hear?”

Shine went on back down in the hole,

He kept on shoveling coal.

He stopped to eat a piece of bread,

That’s went the water rose above the brother’s head.

Shine split back up on deck,

He say, “Captain, Captain, you speak well and your words, they sound true,

But this time captain your words just ain’t going to do.

This here ship is sinking.

Little fishes, big fishes, whales and sharks get out my way, cause I’m coming through.”

Shine yanked off his clothes.

In a flash he jumped in the water and started to splash.

The captain saw the water rise out the hole and he started thinking,

“That boy is right. This here ship is sinking.”

He called out to Shine, “Shine, Mr. Shine, please save me,

I'll make you master of the sea."

And Shine say, "Master on land, master on sea.

If you want to live, captain, better jump in here and swim like me."

Then the captain's wife ran out on deck in her nightgown with her fine, fine self
and she called out to Shine,

"Shine, Shine, please save poor me.

I give you more loving than you ever did see."

Shine say, "Loving ain't nothing but hugging and squeezing.

Sometimes it be tiring sometimes it be pleasing.

I can swim but I ain't no fish.

I like loving but not like this."

Then a old fat banker came up on deck carrying his money bags and he called out
to Shine,

"Shine, Shine, please save me.

I'll make you richer than any man could be."

Shine say, "Money's good on land but it's a weight in the sea.

If you want to live fatty better jump in here and swim like me."

Shine took one stroke

And shot on off through the water like a motor boat.

And then he met up with this here shark.

And the shark say, 'Shine, Shine, you swim so fine

But if you miss one stroke your butt is mine."

Shine say, "I swims the ocean, I swims the sea,

There just ain't no shark that can out swim me."

Shine outswimmed the shark.

After a while Shine met up with this here whale.

And the whale say, "I'm king of the ocean and I'm king of the sea."

And Shine say, "You may be king of the ocean,

And you just may be king of the sea,

But you got to be a swimming sucker to outswim me."

Shine outswimmed the whale.

Now check this out.

When news reached land that the great Titanic had sunk

Shine was down on a corner halfway drunk.

Semantics is the third dimension of African American English. I think what you have in semantics is this: Contrary to popular notion, these words are not just slang. Some of them are slang in the sense that their life is transitory, that they won't be around for long. But I think you have at root the semantics of a counter language. That is, enduring words and phrases, widespread words and phrases that go across generations, go across classes, that have been around for a long time and that in fact reflect the reality of the African American experience. The semantics is what I've tried to capture in this latest book, *Black Talk*. I'm looking at African American English not just as, "What do the words mean," but asking, "What is the cultural situation and the historical background of some of these words?"

Some terms have their origins in African languages. Think of a word like "bug" from the Mandingo, "bag of" from the Wolof word "bugo," which means literally to

annoy. And then in current hip hop talk we have the phrase “buggin out,” which means to act crazy, often in an annoying manner. [Consider] the term “jazz” from the Mandingo language, meaning to act out of the ordinary, to act uninhibited, or even the good old term “bad,” which everybody knows now means “good.” But in the Mandingo language, you have a phrase, which means something is so good badly or so good that it’s bad. This whole idea of taking a term and turning it into the opposite is a feature of many of those African languages. That’s one source of the semantics. But obviously not all.

There are some words and phrases that come out of the traditional black church, which is a significant social force in the African American experience. I’m thinking of terms like the “amen corner,” which James Baldwin titled a play of his, and which in fact has moved totally out of the church and into non-church situations. I’m also thinking of a term not so complimentary, like “jack leg.” A jackleg was the unprofessional or dishonest preacher, and by extension then the term got to refer to anybody who was pretending to be something they weren’t. So you can have a jack leg plumber, a jack leg carpenter, jack leg mechanic, whatever. Anybody who is pretending to be a professional in a certain area that they’re not.

Some of the words in the semantics have to do with physical characteristics that normally wouldn’t make any difference except in a racist society. In this category, I think of the term “Ann” or “Miss Ann,” a negative term for a white woman actually going all the way back to the 19th century and probably even the 18th. We have documentation at least to the 19th. There is the term “color struck,” referring to an African American person who thinks that light skin is the very best. Or the term

“kitchen,” which is not where you cook. In black talk, the kitchen is the hair at the nape of the neck, which is the most African, the kinkiest part of the hair.

Even a term that’s moved into the public culture, the “N” word, the term “nigger,” even this word in black talk has at least six different meanings and only one of them is a negative sort of meaning, as when used by whites. It can mean, for example a black person, who is fearless or rebellious. In this sense Barkley, when he was playing with the 76ers, referred to himself as a “90s nigger.” Spike Lee calls himself a “90s nigger”—somebody who goes against the grain. And actually, that goes all the way back to the 18th century and the tradition of the “bad nigger,” who was the one who didn’t take no shit from nobody, black or white. The term could also mean generically any person of African descent. So is they’re talking about a party and somebody says, “It was wall to wall niggers there,” which just means lots of black people were there. There are at least six different meanings of this controversial word, all of which show that you’ve got to be into the cultural context.

One of my favorite expressions coming out of the racist context is the phrase “40 acres and a mule.” Now Spike Lee named his film company Forty Acres and a Mule, and that phrase has been around in African American community for generations. If you look up that phrase in a dictionary of Americanisms, it will simply say it is a slogan to inflame the slaves. But “40 acres and a mule” has a whole long history. In *Black Talk*, I give it almost two pages, because it has to do with the promise of land for reparations that came out in the 1866 bill which was passed by both houses of congress but vetoed by Andrew Johnson. So the whole concept of 40 acres and a mule has been around in the

African American speech community for generations as the notion of a failed promise. It's something much more significant than a slogan to inflame the slaves.

Now, slaving and racism notwithstanding, a lot of black talk in the semantic realm has nothing to do with race, but with everyday common experiences that happen to black people just as to white people. My favorite expression in this category is “the nose open.” You can also say, “she got his nose,” or, “he got her nose,” or, “somebody got a nose job,” all of which refers to a person being vulnerably in love—so openly in love that they can be manipulated or exploited. In this context I can't resist telling again what is probably my favorite story. A few years ago when Marion Barry, the mayor of Washington DC, was having his drug trouble and was being followed by the FBI and wiretapped and videotaped, there was a scene where he was in a hotel room with his ex-girl friend Rasheeda Moore. He was admiring this watch she had on, a Rolex or something, and she said that her new boyfriend had given it to her. And he says, “Oh, I guess you got his nose open, huh?” The FBI watching the videotape thought they were talking about snorting cocaine.

Some words are older terms, which get recycled in a different form. I'm thinking the term “homey,” which is just a variation of the old term “homes”—“down home,” “home slice,” “home folks”—all of which were used generations ago to refer to black people. If you hear older black people talk, you will still hear these same terms. Today your best friend is called “ace cool.” It used to be, “ace boon coon,” so it's just a variation on that. Today they talk about “chilling;” that's just a variation on the older form, “cool.” Terms like “salty,” which means to get angry, or “copacetic,” which means something is OK or cool, are terms that are used today that all appeared in the late Cab

Calloway's 1938 *Hepster's Dictionary*. That is the first black talk dictionary that we have. At some point in the 1930s, Zora Neale Hurston also published part of the beginnings of a dictionary which she called the *Dictionary of Harlem Jive*. She also lists terms like "salty," "copacetic," and also the term "ig," which means to deliberately ignore somebody. It was kind of a dis when you ig somebody.

One important outcome of the work that came out of the 60s and 70s on Ebonics is that it's clearly demonstrated that this is a language that, because of crossover, has enriched the public language of the whole U.S. Words like "hip," "homey," "chill," "bad," "yam," are now part of the common language of all Americans and no longer even marginalized as slang. European Americans all over the country know about and use the high five, which is a tradition straight out of Africa. In many West African languages there is the phrase that when you make a statement and you want the person to agree with you, you add a phrase onto your statement that says put your hand in my hand indicating that, in fact, you agree.

An interesting thing about crossover, though, is that when sometimes when words cross over the meaning changes. A really excellent example of this is the term "rap." In its original black meaning, rap meant romantic talk from a man, usually from a man to a woman. It had sexual overtones; it was the language of love. When it crossed over, it got to mean any kind of strong talk. In fact, that's basically the meaning that is used in rap music today. In the black speech community today you see both meanings and both uses of the term "rap" existing, kind of a reverse crossover.

Where am I going with these two decades of work on African American English? Where I would like to go for the 21st century is to a national language policy for this

country that would emphasize the importance of multilingualism for everybody. You see there was a time in the 60s and 70s, particularly in the 70s, when the notion was: “If you speak African American English you need also to be able to speak the language of wider communication or so-called standard English.” One linguist called this the linguistics of white supremacy because he said, well, black people have to learn two languages, the white people only have to learn one.

We’ve moved beyond that. We’ve moved beyond the bi-dialectal stage just for folks of color to a stage where the whole country needs to be able to speak more than just the standard language. In fact, the National Language Policy of the Conference of College Composition and Communication is a policy that would be started in school now for kids beginning in elementary school, and it would make them at least tri-lingual. There are a number of groups that talk about English Plus. I think people need English plus something else—for everybody, not just people of color. Three languages are stipulated in the National Language Policy of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, which is a very large group of people who teach English and composition and communication in colleges. They’re saying everybody needs to be at least tri-lingual. One language would be the so-called “Standard English” or the language of wider communication. (We’re trying to get away from saying “standard,” because if there’s standard, that means there’s non-standard, and so on. We like the term which the linguist Joshua Fishman coined, the “language of wider communication,” which is to say, the language that helps people communicate in a broad spectrum outside their own particular sphere, outside their own particular community.) I have this program in Detroit at the Malcolm X Academy, where I deal with seventh and eighth grade young males,

you know, they're all strutting, and they're all real nationalistic, and I always have to tell them that I'm saying "wider" communication not "whiter" communication. I'm saying *wider*, so we can talk outside the 'hood.

But this would still be linguistically deficient. The second language that every person needs is to become more versatile and more proficient in whatever their native language or native dialect is. For African American English speakers, that would be African American English, so that they could produce a text like Alice Walker's *Color Purple*, in which they could manipulate the language in such rich creative ways as to write a novel. They could verbally become so adept that they wouldn't do what my son and his little seven- and eight-year-old friends did, ran out of rich metaphors in playing the dozens and had to resort to the truth. In Michigan, where there are 90,000 people who speak Polish and some people in that community are worried that it's not being passed on to other generations, there would be a chance for people in the Polish communities to recover their language. The second language, the home language, would differ according to different communities in the country.

A third language that a person needs is something that for them would be a totally foreign language. At the Malcolm X Academy, the kids are studying Swahili and Spanish in addition to the language of wider communication and their own language.

That's where I would like to go with all of this research, all of this information, this legitimating of African American English. I'd like to go to the something called the National Language Policy that would say everybody in the country needs English plus something else.

I want to close out with an example of signifying as probably the most crucial verbal tradition. I save the best for last. Signifying, in black talk, is a verbal insult too, but unlike the dozens. What you do when you signify is you're leveling a social critique. You're using language to comment in a critical way on either something somebody said or something that they've done. It requires, as with all other verbal traditions, using stunning, clever language. It works because it's indirect and because it has humor. It's a way of using one statement to communicate on two different levels at the same time.

Signifying has been recognized in current literary critical theory as a major trope in African American literature. It's what Gates and others talk about when they talk about the speakerly text. There's a lot of the use of signifying in African American literature, particularly that by women. So I'm going to let a woman have the last word, and the last word's going to be signifying. It's from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Now Zora Neale, as we know, was both a writer and actually also a linguist of sorts, a linguistic anthropologist. She interviewed real people and studied the language of real people and recorded their conversations and wrote this into her fiction as well as into some of her nonfiction.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, there's a scene that marks the beginning of Janie's empowerment. She's married to Jody, who owns a store in this little small town in Georgia or Florida, and the black people of the town come to their little store to just sit around and talk stuff—they lie and signify and tell stories and tall tales. Usually it's an all-male focus and Janie, even though she's the woman of the store, doesn't have much to say. This scene is the beginning of her breaking out of that.

Jody is fussing at her because she hasn't cut a plug of tobacco right, and he says, "A woman that stay around 'till she get old as Methuselah and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco...woman don't stand there rolling your pop eyes at me with your rump hanging nearly to your knees."

And Janie says, "Stop mixing up my doings with my looks, Jody. When you get through telling me how to cut a plug of tobacco then you can tell me whether my behind is on straight or not." And Jody, of course, is shocked because she's never talked like this, right? "You must be out your head, talking language like that." And she says "You the one started talking other people's clothes, not me." And Jody says, "Well, what's the matter with you anyhow, you ain't no young girl to be getting all insulted about your looks, you ain't no young colting gal, you an old woman, nearly 40." And Janie says "Yea, I'm nearly 40 but you is already 50 and you talk about me looking old, when you pull down you britches, you look like the change of life."