

The Real Ebonics Debate

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*Power,
Language,
and the
Education of
African-American
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*We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language.
That may be the measure of our lives.*

Toni Morrison

Address on receipt of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature

**"I 'on Know Why They Be Trippin'": Reflections on
the Ebonics Debate**

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To say that African-American children were not achieving in the Oakland public schools would have been an understatement. Comprising 53 percent of the students enrolled in the only predominantly Black school district in the state of California, African-American children accounted for 80 percent of the school system's suspensions and 71 percent of students classified as having special needs. Their average grade point average was a D+.

These stark, painful realities, reflective of the Oakland school system's inability to ensure even a modicum of academic success for African-American children, are what motivated the school board to unanimously approve the Black Language/Ebonics resolution. Essentially, this resolution maintained that Black Language/Ebonics was a legitimate, rule-based, systematic language, and that this language was the primary language of many African-American children enrolled in the Oakland school system. The board further maintained that Ebonics, the home/community language of African-American children, should not be stigmatized, and that this language should be affirmed, maintained, and used to help African-American children acquire fluency in the standard code.

Understanding that most teachers have little, if any, accurate knowledge about Black Language and are likely to harbor negative attitudes about the language and its speakers, primarily because of their sociopolitical location, and understanding also the relationship of literacy skills to school achievement, the resolution called for the implementation of an educational program for the district's teachers that would focus on the

nature and history of Black Language/Ebonics. The assumption was that such a program would address the teachers' knowledge gap about Black Language, begin the process of changing their attitudes about the language, and help teachers figure out how to use the rich and varied linguistic abilities of African-American children to help them become fluent readers and writers.

Despite what some might consider "distracting noises" in the resolution's initial formulation, and despite the resolution's early and sustained misrepresentation in the media, this was the essence and the intent of the board's resolution. The resolution called for the same intervention that had been mandated in the historic 1978 *Martin Luther King, Jr. v. Ann Arbor School Board* case, the Black English case. Separated by almost two decades, representing different geographic regions and school districts with vastly different racial/ethnic demographics, the circumstances surrounding the school lives of African-American children in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1978, and in Oakland, California, in 1997 — circumstances that motivated both the Ann Arbor case and the Oakland resolution — were strikingly similar. Sixty-six percent of the plaintiff children in the Ann Arbor case had been classified as special needs. In this liberal, affluent college town, African Americans were also overrepresented in the number of suspensions and underrepresented in honors classes. In the predominantly white school district of Ann Arbor and in the minority/majority district of Oakland, the caste positionality of African Americans was the same. So much for the promise of multiculturalism.¹

MEDIA MISREPRESENTATIONS

With few exceptions, mainstream media² presented the Oakland resolution as a decision by the school board to abandon the teaching of Standard English and in its stead to teach Black Language/Ebonics. Not only was this not the intent of the resolution, this is not what was contained in the original resolution (see *The Oakland Ebonics Resolution*, page 143). Whether in response to the Oakland resolution and/or the media's misrepresentation of the resolution, with little or no awareness of their orchestrated movements, editorial writers, columnists, pundits, talk show

hosts, educational leaders, and spokespeople for the race (for Black people) formed a coalition of individuals who together took aim at the Oakland resolution. Black and white, members of the religious right, liberal Democrats, neoconservatives, staunch conservatives, left liberals, and the privileged — such was the reach of this unintentional coalition of individuals that, in the weeks and months after the passage of the Oakland resolution, vigorously registered their opposition to it.

The right-wing talk show hosts had a field day. The Internet hummed. Called lunatics, Afrocentrists, accused of giving up on Black kids, and of legitimizing slang — these were just some of the invectives hurled at the members of the Oakland school board. What was so disorienting for some African Americans, regardless of how they understood the board's resolution or their position on it, was this strange configuration of folks who were attacking African-American educators and community activists who obviously care deeply about the welfare of African-American children. How is it that long-time civil rights organizations and activists ended up on the same side of the barricade with their traditional and current adversaries? How did it happen that Jesse Jackson, Kwesi Mfume, and Maya Angelou joined with William Bennett, George Will, Rush Limbaugh, and Pete Wilson to take aim at the Oakland decision? Why did folks who love the language, use it exquisitely, and whose personal and political power is in no small measure tied to their use of Black Language, register ambivalence or outright rejection of the board's call for the recognition of the legitimacy of Black Language and its suggestion that it be used to help African-American children become fluent readers and writers?

It is, of course, easy to blame the media for creating these strange bedfellows.

The media deserve blame for their gross misrepresentation of the resolution and their failure to capture the resolution's essential elements. Even after the spokespeople for the Oakland school board, the superintendent, and members of the school board had asserted over and over again that the school system was not abandoning the teaching of Standard English, TV news accounts continued to lead with this claim. Reporters

continued to ask Black spokespeople what they thought about the Oakland decision to teach Ebonics. One had to search long and hard in the print media for the full text of the board's resolution. Instead, one found phrases, sentences taken out of context, and outright distortions of the original resolution.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN RESPONSE

It is also easy, as I initially did, to blame African Americans for internalized racism, for colonized consciousness. Early on, while trying to make sense of this strange configuration of allies, to interpret the remarks of Jesse Jackson, Maya Angelou, and other Black talking heads, I offered my analysis: "Black Language is the last uncontested arena of Black shame," I argued. "We have let go of a good deal of the shame attached to Black hair. Not that it is all gone. Black soap opera and singing stars as well as Black academics now proudly sport dreads, braids, Afros, natural hair styles. Black Language is largely an uncontested arena of Black shame." The media's misrepresentation of the case, as well as the sense of shame some African Americans have about the use of certain varieties of Black Language in certain contexts, may have contributed to this strange configuration of allies. These variables alone, however, cannot explain why so many African Americans were tentative, ambivalent, or even downright opposed to the Oakland resolution.

At the close of the twentieth century, African Americans have become quite adept at reading the media, its text, and subtext. We did not need anybody to tell us what the O. J. Simpson case was really about. We read its coded meanings. In spite of the mainstream media's hegemonic narrative, we knew the narrative surrounding the case and its aftermath was not simply or primarily about O. J. Simpson, a batterer, who in a jealous rage allegedly murdered his wife and her suspected lover. We didn't even need clarity about the person of O. J. Simpson to deconstruct the narrative. We didn't have to erase from our consciousness the knowledge of O. J.'s tenuous relationship to the Black community and to Black women before we would distrust the police and the criminal justice system. The brother on the corner, the college professor, the high school student, the

abused wife read the media's narrative about the case and its submerged meaning long before Toni Morrison registered her assessment:

The official story has thrown Mr. Simpson into that representative role. He is not an individual who underwent and was acquitted from a murder trial. He has become the whole race needing correction, incarceration, censoring, silencing; the race that needs its civil rights disassembled; the race that is sign and symbol of domestic violence; the race that has made trial by jury a luxury rather than a right and placed affirmative action legislation in even greater jeopardy. This is the consequence and function of official stories: to impose the will of a dominant culture (Morrison, 1997, p. xxviii).

Why were we as a people able to read the O. J. Simpson case but not the Black Language/Ebonics resolution? Why were so many African Americans unable to get to the core of the resolution, to read against the hegemonic narrative? It is indeed curious that so many African Americans missed the point — even if you consider the media's misrepresentation of the case and our ambivalencies about the use of certain varieties of Black Language in a given context.

What, in contrast, is there about our material condition in America in relationship to the criminal justice system that has produced such shared consciousness about the Simpson case? How does this relationship contrast with the relationship of African Americans to the public school system in the post-civil rights era?

In one week, in late November 1996, I encountered or heard about four African-American males who were involved with the criminal justice system. On Monday, a colleague, a faculty member at a well-known university, canceled our five o'clock appointment. He had to be in court with his 16-year-old son; it was his son's third court appearance on charges that were all eventually dropped. On Tuesday, in the midst of my work with a young African-American man on his college applications, this young man, quite abruptly, stood up and told me he had to leave to go with his family to visit an older brother who was in jail. On Wednesday, while

speaking with another colleague on the telephone, he asked me if I had heard the news. Bracing myself, he told me that his two sons had been arrested over the weekend. Later that same week, my daughter told me about an African-American friend of hers, a law student, who, when he goes to record stores, walks fast, up and down the aisles, to disorient the clerks who are following him.

Indeed, one in four Black men — and virtually all Black families via relatives and extended family members — are involved with the criminal justice system. The courts, the criminal justice system, surveillance have become part of the collective consciousness of African Americans. Our stance towards the criminal justice system, our shared consciousness, has been influenced by these material realities, consolidated by national, galvanizing events such as the Rodney King case.

VARIETY OF FACTORS

Indeed, many factors contributed to the unpredictable, confused, and confusing alliances of African Americans in reaction to the Oakland resolution. Not the least of these is the existence of a dominant, powerful conversation about schooling that is shaped by white businessmen, white reformers, and white scholars and is predicated on “generic solutions to broken schools.” At the same time, there is the absence of a public counternarrative about the education of African Americans, framed by African Americans themselves and predicated on an acknowledgment of our continuing position as a historically oppressed people. There has always been a dominant narrative about public education and the education of African Americans. However, in the post-civil rights era, perhaps for the first time in history, African American scholars, educators, and political activists have not shaped a public counterconversation with contested and uncontested domains. Furthermore, while race significantly affects the school lives of virtually all African-American children, the way that this occurs varies, depending on the school’s demographics and geographic location and the child’s social position. This variation (a few children acquire a high level of skills, some acquire minimal skills, and some none; the racist violence perpetrated against children is subtle in some schools,

overt in others), as well as the absence of a public discourse about race and achievement, effectively camouflages the oppressive force of school in contemporary Black life, thus militating against the formation of a collective consciousness.

In my estimation, too many African Americans sided with our traditional adversaries in attacking the Oakland resolution because of the hegemonic character of the national discourse about education and the corresponding absence of a counterconversation led by African Americans — a counterconversation that refuses to disconnect discussions of education from our sociopolitical position in the larger society, our cultural formations, our position as a racial caste group.

The way the Ebonics case was coded in TV news accounts also played an important role in generating negative reactions from African Americans. As TV commentators and reporters talked about the resolution, the image that was projected over and over again was that of a Black male speaking Black slang in a school context. Besides equating Black Language with slang, TV news accounts presented the image of Black students speaking this informal variety of Black Language in a school context. It is important to note that the church and the school are both formal institutional settings in the African-American community. To say that school was a formal institution for African Americans is not to imply that children at no time were allowed to speak their home/community language. It is to say that school was conceptualized as a place where children were expected to work on, practice, and demonstrate competency in Standard English. It is to acknowledge that in these schools there were speech acts, routines, and rituals, when a student was expected to perform in Standard English, as well as occasions when they were not because this expectation would have constrained teaching and learning.

A friend of mine, who loves Black Language in all of its varieties — vernacular, literary, and standard — was adamant that while the “shame explanation” could account for some of the negative reactions of African Americans to the Oakland resolution, it did not capture the complexities embedded in the response of African Americans. On more than one occasion, he said, “I don’t know, Theresa. They (the media) are not talking

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about what we are talking about when they say 'Black Language.' As I spoke with him and with other African Americans, I began to understand that his ambivalence about the Oakland resolution was rooted in concern about the narrow definition of Black Language being represented in the media in discussions and commentaries about the Oakland resolution, and his fear that this would be the understanding of Black Language that the public would be left with. As I spoke with other African Americans who were also ambivalent about the Oakland resolution, and for whom it would have been a stretch for me to say that their ambivalence was primarily attributable to their shame about our language, I began to understand that besides being bothered by the equation of Black Language with one of its most informal varieties, these individuals were also concerned about the implication that Black Language doesn't have multiple varieties, oral and written, formal and informal, vernacular and literary, as well as the excision from the public conversation of the notion that for African Americans, language use is fundamentally and exquisitely contextual.

A community leader and scholar weighed in on the Oakland resolution when she heard that I was working on a special issue of *Rethinking Schools* on Black Language/Ebonics. Without strong feelings, in a calm, centered manner, she recalled how her deceased father, a Black college president, in the evenings would read to her the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, commenting on its beauty. She went on to note that in her community and family, it was expected that you would have fluency in and see the beauty, power, and possibilities in the formal and informal registers of Black Language (the language of the blues, the narrative of Frederick Douglass, the poetry of Langston Hughes, the narrative of Weldon Johnson and Howard Thurman). It was also expected that you would have fluency in the so-called white Standard English.

MISREPRESENTING EBONICS

What I came to understand is that many factors contributed to the negative reaction of many African Americans to the Oakland resolution. These

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include TV images representing Black Language/Ebonics as the equivalent of Black slang, the positioning of Black children speaking this variety in school (which is perceived by African Americans as a formal environment), and the media's framing and coding of the case in a way that was antithetical to the notion that language use is contextual (almost a truism of African Americans). For many African Americans, this resolution stood in opposition to their historic stance of wanting their children to gain oral and written competence in the formal and informal varieties of Black Language and "white" Standard English. And thus the Oakland resolution, contrary to its enormous possibilities, threatened to be another instance of the narrowing of options for African-American children.

There were other African Americans who strongly supported the Oakland resolution and yet equivocated, wondering if this was a conversation that African Americans could have productively in public. Instinctively, they knew that the Oakland resolution would precipitate a national conversation about race, specifically about the mental and moral capacities of Black people. They were right. White Americans had a field day. On TV programs, in the halls of Congress, and on the infamous talk shows circuit, white Americans made pronouncements: African Americans were too stupid to learn the language. The media's fictive and stereotypic version of Black Language became the butt of jokes. White person after white person opined that if others could learn the language, why couldn't African Americans? U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley called Black Language a "nonstandard form of English." President Clinton termed it slang. State and federal legislators drafted legislation to prevent federal and state moneys from being used on any educational program based on Black Language. The quintessential liberal columnist Ellen Goodman registered her outrage. To her, Black Language was nothing but a "second-class language for a second-class life." She was more than exercised by the thought that the Oakland school board had made "I be' the equivalent of 'Je suis.'"

While I fully understood that in America any conversation about Afri-

can Americans always threatens to careen out of control, to become a coded and sometimes not-so-coded conversation about race, I applauded and continue to applaud the courageous stance of the Oakland school board and their steadfastness in the face of the force and reach of the opposition.

And for a moment I was naively hopeful that despite the opposition and the racist discourse about the resolution, the resolution would also generate a discussion about Black Language that would be as complex, sophisticated, and nuanced as the language itself. This was not to be. Where were the essays, op-ed pieces, magazine stories, or panel discussions that systematically laid open the power, beauty, complexities, and pedagogical possibilities embedded in Black Language? With anxious anticipation, I waited for just one careful conversation in the mainstream media about the power African Americans attach to the spoken word, and how this power is necessarily linked to an understanding (cognitively, emotionally, and socially) of audience and context. Did not the late Malcolm X remind us of this when, as he committed himself to copying the entire dictionary, memorizing the meaning of the words he did not know, he said that he wanted to be as articulate in his communication with the late Elijah Muhammed as he had been when he was working the streets as a hustler? None of the talking heads bothered to make a connection between Black Language/Ebonics and the way rhythm, rhyme, metaphor, repetition are and were used by Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. William Borders, and African-American preachers all over this country. None bothered to explore the relationship between Toni Morrison's use of the call and response sequence in her award-winning novel, *Beloved*, or the artistic use of the Black vernacular forms by Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Oakland resolution, which instructed the superintendent to "implement the best possible academic program for imparting instruction to African-American students in their primary language for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language . . . and to facilitate the acquisition and mastery of English language skills." (Emphasis added.)

WHAT WASN'T SAID

Indeed, in trying to understand the reactions to the Oakland resolution, what was not said — the conversations that did not occur, the topics left unexplored, the voices not heard — is as important as what was said.

No one interviewed or talked to even a handful of those tens of thousands of African Americans who grew up speaking Black Language as their home and community language and who have become fluent in the standard code. Nobody thought it worthwhile to try and find out about those "best practices," the rituals, routines, and practices institutionalized in historically Black schools, churches, and communities that helped Black Language speakers become fluent readers, writers, and powerful speakers. If they had, they would have heard stories similar to one Oprah recalled on the air (interestingly, not in response to the Black Language/Ebonics debate), about how, when she was growing up, she knew by heart every one of the sermons from James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombone*, and must have performed them all in every church in her hometown.

They would have heard stories similar in theme if not in detail to that of Skip Griffin (a leader of the Black Student Movement at Harvard College in the late 1960s and early 1970s and currently director of community affairs at the *Boston Globe*), about how he and his buddies, for whom life outside school was always more interesting than life inside, became motivated to become learned. According to him, their experience of the power of the word, that is, how teachers and preachers were able to use the word, to instruct, to inspire hope, to comfort, to expose social injustices, and to mobilize people into a movement, made them want to become educated. About his decision to become a committed student, he said, "I wanted to get me some big words." This sentiment is strikingly similar to that expressed by Richard Lischer in his discussion of Martin Luther King's self-consciousness about his development as a preacher (1995) and by Malcolm X himself. For Malcolm X, it was Bimbi, a fellow prisoner and the first person he met for whom words were power, who motivated him to want to become literate.

They would have heard the stories similar to those of bell hooks, Marva Perry, Nancy Hughes,³ about how as children and adolescents they worked diligently, throughout the year, with their Sunday school teachers on presentations for the many seasonal programs, constitutive of Black church life in the pre-civil rights era; how, after these presentations had been made to Sunday school classes and had met the required standard of excellence, they would be performed for the entire church. We would have heard about the corpus of Freedom Speeches from the African-American, American, and European traditions that were routinely performed at school assemblies and in local, regional, and national oratorical contests; how these speeches were read, reread, analyzed, memorized; about the many hours spent preparing to deliver these speeches, to interpret them such that they would capture the writer's intent and speak to the African-American community.

Perhaps the most significant omission in discussions about Black Language/Ebonics in the aftermath of the Oakland resolution, particularly if what is at issue is African-American school achievement, was the failure to examine the meaning and function of the literacy acts — speaking, reading, and writing — in the African-American community: the failure to see these literacy acts as distinct, interconnected, and interdependent moments that are most powerful when they function for freedom, for racial uplift, leadership, citizenship (Anderson, 1988; Cornelius, 1991; Gates, 1991; Perry, 1996; Shaw, 1996; Steptoe, 1979).

HOW WHITENESS FUNCTIONS

In the aftermath of the Oakland resolution, the silence of white school reformers, white progressive educators, and their organizations was deafening. These individuals and organizations did not lead or follow the lead of the Linguistic Society of America and issue statements in support of the Oakland resolution. Their avowed understandings about the role of prior knowledge in teaching and learning, about the importance of meeting students where they are, about antiracist multicultural education, about “whiteness” — none of these understandings were seemingly compelling

enough to motivate them or their organizations to publicly enter the debate.

It underconceptualizes what occurred to simply label the discourse of the mainstream media about the Oakland resolution as racist. The media's reaction to the Oakland resolution provides us with a powerful, contemporary example of how whiteness functions in the American society. The social historian David Roediger (1991) defines whiteness as that complex admixture of longing and hate that white people have for African Americans, their cultural formations, and their cultural products. White America, particularly the educated elite, embrace African American writers — Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou. August Wilson was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Liberals and left liberals may still remember Jesse Jackson's moving speech at the 1988 Democratic national convention, framed by the formulaic Black refrain, “they catch the early bus.” College and university campuses around this country can't get enough of Cornel West. White Americans are attracted to, embrace, at least superficially, African Americans who would not be the kind of writers, dramatists, or scholars they are if they were not rooted in and operating out of African-American linguistic traditions. And at the same time, these same opinion makers are repulsed by the people, by Black people, their language, their aesthetics, their rhythms, their history, that is represented, symbolized, interpreted in the African-American literary and scholarly traditions and commodified in popular culture.

No, Black Language/Ebonics is not merely a pass-through language, only to be used to get to Standard English. The members of the Oakland school board had it right in their initial resolution when they affirmed the importance of fluency in Black Language and Standard English. They knew that fluency in the standard code can never be the singular goal if, and this is a big if, our schools are to participate in the creation of the next generation of African-American scholars, preachers, dramatists, writers, blues men and women — African-American leaders.