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## The Cultivation of Black Eloquence By Means of Cultural Capital and Speech Training

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The Cultivation of Black Eloquence  
By Means of Cultural Capital and Speech Training

Senior Project submitted to  
The Divisions of Social Sciences  
of Bard College

by

Stephen Richardson

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*For my Mama and my Daddy*

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## **Introduction**

Speech is a powerful form of cultural capital that the African American community has recognized throughout its history. This thesis provides a historical overview of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) in America. It examines how, during the nineteenth century in America, understandings of cultural capital developed that included speech discrimination against Black English speakers. These biases against Black speech continued into the twentieth century, as will be shown. This study examines the concept of cultural capital defined (by some in the field) as “institutionalized, widely shared, high status cultural signals (behaviors, formal knowledge, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion, especially as it pertains to educational attainment and economic inequality.”<sup>1</sup> The social and cultural exclusion of their American experience provoked African Americans to take cultural assimilationist, cultural pluralist, or cultural nationalist approaches to adapt their speech. It is important to note that “vernacular” English replaced “Non-Standard” in the early 1970’s as a less negative way of signaling that not every variety of English spoken by African-Americans is included, that not all African-Americans speak it, and that those who speak it do not do so all of the time.<sup>2</sup> However, wherever there is a reasonable black population in America, there is surely the use of AAVE. The purpose of this historical analysis is to identify how the cultural capital placed on Standard English limits the scope of success for AAVE users. Whether assimilationism, nationalism, or/and pluralism is the best approach in establishing black identity in institutions of speech and education, and extending the bounds of education and success for the AAVE users in America will be questioned and addressed, seeing that crises surrounding

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<sup>1</sup>Lamont, Michele, and Annette Lareau. “Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments.” *Sociological Theory*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1988, p. 153

<sup>2</sup>Dressler, Wolfgang U. “African American Vernacular English.” *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, 1st ed., vol. 4, Oxford University Press, USA, 2003, p. 42.

educational achievements and English proficiency continues to persist amongst African Americans.



## The Struggle With Elocution

Historically, African Americans and slaves have displayed assimilationist, pluralist and nationalist reactions to lessen the social divide created by the dominating cultural capital of white speech and literacy in the United States. African descendants' progressive knowledge as a diaspora community of their social exclusion from mainstream white culture over the course of slavery is important. Black speakers come to understand that they must adapt to their environment and social setting, but many things prohibited them from being accepted into white social settings or even establishing a place within society for their different cultures. For one, racial discrimination prohibited most slaves and Blacks from attaining an education, nor did they have the social and economic means to establish cultural standards and institutions for themselves. Blacks becoming aware of their social exclusion and their limited opportunities in a socially white society was the catalyst for an assimilationist approach of gaining cultural capital through speech.

Early twentieth century sociologists used the term assimilation to describe how immigrants came to share American values and norms. This model assumes that incorporation into the dominant society means adopting the culture of the dominant society, which results in upward mobility.<sup>3</sup> Domination is initially gained through competitive advantages accruing to the group whose culture is best adapted to exploit the resources of the environment. But the dominant group also upholds its position and privileges through institutionalized power and outright coercion.<sup>4</sup> Advantages gained from the development of white speech and literacy, while

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<sup>3</sup>Butterfield, Sherri-Ann P. "Something in Between: Locating Identity among Second-Generation West Indians." *Mighty Change, Tall within: Black Identity in the Hudson Valley*, edited by Myra Beth Young Armstead, State University of New York Press, 2003. p. 23

<sup>4</sup>Alba, Richard, and Victor Nee. "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration." *International Migration Review*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, p. 826., doi:10.2307/2547416. Pg. 839

discriminating against Blacks and non-English speaking newcomers, helped native whites to keep their positions of privilege as they exploited Blacks and immigrants for cheap labor. Many scholars assume assimilation must be the erasure verbally of all signs of ethnic origins.<sup>5</sup> Erasing signs of the ethnic origins of minorities is done through the process of acculturation.

Acculturation is the minority group's adoption of the cultural patterns of the host society, typically comes first and is inevitable when assimilating. These patterns extend beyond the acquisition of the English language, to dress and outward emotional expression, and to personal values.<sup>6</sup> Since the newcomer or minority group "adopts" the cultural traits of the dominant other, they gradually lose those cultural patterns that mark their ethnic difference.<sup>7</sup> The American culture that would come to define the standard and represented the direction and eventual outcome of acculturation is "middle-class cultural patterns of, largely, white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins."<sup>8</sup> This standard acts as the "core culture" that opposes the cultural differences of other minorities. In speech, differences might be found in accent, pronunciation, grammar, syntax, and tone. The development of cultural capital surrounding white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon culture speech and literacy, as well as some of the initial the assimilationist approaches Black Americans took to combat their exclusion from American society will be examined through the elocution movement of the nineteenth century.

In London, 1762, during his second lecture on elocution, Thomas Sheridan took the liberty to define elocution as "the voice countenance, and gestures in speaking."<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Sheridan was largely concerned with the pronunciation, accent, emphasis, tones,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg. 829

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 829

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 834

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pg. 829

<sup>9</sup> Conquergood, Dwight. "Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech." *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2009, pp. 141–162., doi:10.4135/9781452233079.n9. pg. 148

pauses, pitch, and gesture of speech.<sup>10</sup> Of these, he singled out tone and gesture as the “pleasurable aspect of delivery,” related particularly to the emotions; the other elements he related particularly to the expression of ideas. “Tones,” Sheridan expressed, “are the auditory aspects of emotion, and gestures are the visible aspect of emotion.”<sup>11</sup> Sheridan was not the first to give his input on the way that elocution should be taken, studied and executed, but his emphasis on tone and gesture is what is important in how it will relate moving into the nineteenth century elocution movement. The two specific aspects of speech are ones that will make it especially hard for African-Americans and people of lower social classes to attain a level of speech that allowed them to fully engage in a public sphere, which for them was a disadvantageous environment. Elocution promoted a sizing up of bodies and auditing of voices, a critical scrutiny of “the grain of the voice.”<sup>12</sup> Tone, “the auditory of emotion”, was what white people would manipulate to create a distinction between themselves and other classes, while mocking and scorning the speech of African-Americans. In the same sense, gestures expressed as the “visible aspect of emotion”, would be used to express white Americans’ contempt towards African-Americans as whites discriminated against the black body and mocked the black body in aspects towards behavior and speech.

The eighteenth century term ‘elocution’ not only emphasized the classical concept of “style of composition,” but the whole conveyance of meaning through which styles of compositions were *delivered*, and it was neither “mechanical” nor a “natural” view, but simply a conventional and normative view.<sup>13</sup> Normative does not mean natural, however, and the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Pg. 148

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Pg. 148

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, Pg. 144

<sup>13</sup> Bacon, Wallace A. “The Dangerous Shores: From Elocution to Interpretation.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1960, pp. 148–152., doi:10.1080/00335636009382405. pg. 148

eighteenth and nineteenth century elocution movement was quite unnatural. This unnatural progression of speech that would ultimately serve as a mechanism for discrimination and division was groundwork for the system of speech as cultural capitalism that would dominate the country for centuries.

Dwight Conquergood's *Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and other Figures of Speech*, through which he traces the disadvantaged relationship between African-Americans and the spoken language forced upon them, will assist in explaining the formation of speech as cultural capital in the United States. Dwight Conquergood starts the exploration of his topic examining Wallace A. Bacon's argument that charted an historical course from elocution's "just and graceful management of the voice, countenance, and gesture" to a "modern view of interpretation as the study of literature through the medium of oral performance."<sup>14</sup> Bacon theorized the performance of literature as a site for encountering and developing what he called a profound "sense of the other"<sup>15</sup>. In his study, Conquergood examined the development of the performance of literature and oral performance through the perspective of the "sense of other", against whom the elocution movement "erected its protocols of taste, civility, and gentility."<sup>16</sup> The "sense of other" provides a tool for analyzing speech as cultural capital in the United States.

### *Elocution to Distinguish the Bourgeois*

Elocution developed and flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries during the period of the rise of industrial capitalism marked by advance of science, reason, engineering, and

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<sup>14</sup> Conquergood, Dwight. "Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech." *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2009, pp. 141–162., doi:10.4135/9781452233079.n9. pg. 142

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Pg. 142

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Pg. 142

commitment to progress and improvement.<sup>17</sup> In this industrial capitalistic age, elocution was expressed in another key as the body discipline developed and practiced by the bourgeoisie, a way for them to mark “distinction” from the masses.<sup>18</sup> The obstacles posed by elocution were truly great. It acted as a double-edged sword for those labeled unsophisticated or uncultured, and those contending for upward social mobility. On one hand, if elocution was not executed in the correct manner and taste, the speaker would be marked as unrefined, unnatural, and coarse. On the other hand, proper implementation of the rules and standard of elocution’s protocol by the lower classes led to charges of affectation, leaving the uncultivated marked as aberrant and unnatural. In these ways, the “upwardly mobile classes had to run an elocutionary gauntlet between awkwardness and affectation, too little or too much art.<sup>19</sup>”

Examining the ways in which the bourgeois class implemented their elocutionary customs into society will help in the understanding of how their cultural capital acts in opposition to all the “others.” One of the most important aspects of the white bourgeois’ enforcing its cultural influence on speech through elocution was by masking elocution as “natural.” The vocabulary of elocution schools would also change to match the guise of “natural” speech that the bourgeois class implemented.<sup>20</sup> As part of the same historical and cultural milieu of the industrial age, elocution drew from the same vocabulary, with one of its early formations being called the “mechanical school” of elocution.<sup>21</sup> However, as elocution became more practiced among the lives of the bourgeois, they defined elocution as natural speech as well. The “natural school” of elocution demonstrated how hegemony works: Dominant culture

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Pg. 143

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Pg. 143

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Pg. 145

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Pg. 143

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Pg. 144

masqueraded elocution as “nature,” thereby concealing its invention and artifice.<sup>22</sup> Thriving business of elocutionary lectures, training manuals, exercises, lessons, handbooks, workshops, and demonstrations flourished, as voices were “cultivated” and traded up for the acquisition of “vocal superiority”--vocal capital.<sup>23</sup> The nature of its creation and instruction would prove that elocution was definitely not natural.

The promoters of elocutionary schools, businesses and instruction books sought to disassociate themselves from “others” by conditioning themselves to speak and perform in a unnatural manner. Conquergood explains elocutionary protocols as the reiteration, “citation,” of a set of norms would rework performativity as disembodied citationality into a re-embodied *recitationality*. The normative would become naturalized through habitual performance and the hegemonic force.<sup>24</sup> “Habitual performance” is what was naturalized in contrast to the natural speech and gestures of the poor and non-white. At these schools and businesses of elocution, students would repeatedly deliver a textual reference with the protocol of the elocution schools to manage their voices and gestures, and through this repetition students were conditioned to speak and gesture in unnatural ways that would invade the most public and intimate aspects of their lives. Elocutionary practices would invade the home, schools, parlors, churches, and whatever public and private space left unbreached.

Conquergood references the artistic bedrock of “natural” expression as it is revealed through Dr. James Rush’s 1879 observation that “the world of Taste goes to the Theater to hear the purest style of Elocution.<sup>25</sup>” In 1827, Rush published *Philosophy of the Human Voice*, which

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Pg. 145

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Pg. 144

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Pg. 145

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Pg. 145

provided a “scientific” notation system of the human voice. This established his book and rules as authoritative for many teachers of elocution who followed him.<sup>26</sup> The fact that theatre performance, where theatricality and acting is brought to life, is where “natural expression” was thought to be most vivid under the bourgeois’ influential and dominate cultural capital is perhaps the best evidence of the way in which proper elocution was removed from ordinary speech. At this point we can think of elocution as the management of voice in the age of mechanical reproduction<sup>27</sup>, and even though every inch of the study disciplined in remaking the body and voice to accrue class distinction, elocution was ideologically masked as “natural language” while the poor and black were marked as transgressors of “universal” laws of “truth, propriety, and taste” that were “drawn from nature.”<sup>28</sup> While the bourgeoisie traded their voices and bodies up for elocution, they laid a strong foundations for speech as cultural capital.

When examining the history of the elocution movement in the United States and how it contributed to making speech a type of cultural capital, it is important to note that the rise and practice of elocution by the bourgeois class were not for racial reasons only. Elocution was designed to recuperate the vitality of the spoken word from rural and rough working-class contexts, (white, black, minorities and immigrants alike), by regulating and refining its “performative excess” through principles, science, systematic study, and standards of taste and criticism.<sup>29</sup> Regulating speech and establishing speaking standards were ways of imposing social order and social hierarchies. Conquergood refers to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, to highlight her expression of class distinction through speech and elocution

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<sup>26</sup> Elsie M. Wilbor, *Werner’s Directory of Elocutionists, Lecturers and Other Public Instructors and Entertainers* (New York: Edgar S. Werner, 1887), 248.

<sup>27</sup> Conquergood, Dwight. “Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech.” *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2009, pp. 141–162., doi:10.4135/9781452233079.n9. pg. 143

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Pg. 145

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Pg. 143

through several of characters. Conquergood argues that Stowe challenges the cultivated reader to “catch” the acts of class pretensions of the characters like the slave-trading Mr. Haley, as she dramatizes his slips and class-marked dialect, with such examples: “Yes, I consider religion a valeyable thing in a nigger, when it’s the genuine article, and no mistake”.

Beecher even explicitly describes Haley as someone who “slowly recited” texts, and those like him who were “low-bred” and “vulgar” with bodies that were marked by their deviancy from bourgeois standards of taste, in stark contrast to the elocutionary ability of light-skinned, genteel bodied, black young Cassy who reads “aloud, in a soft voice, and with a beauty of intonation.<sup>30</sup>” This difference that Stowe highlights between Mr. Haley and Cassy speaks to the fact that elocution movement was largely class based and that mastering it is not an obstacle posed by racial barriers, with the fictional Cassy acting as an example of a Black person mastering the art of elocution in speech.

However, from Mary E. Webb’s life, it becomes clear that the the idea of elocution and its standards rendered African-Americans in the nineteenth century as crude and coarse beings by nature. Mary E. Webb (b. 1828), a woman of color, the daughter of an escaped slave and a “wealthy Spanish gentleman,” was dubbed the “Black Siddons” after a famous British actress, Sarah Siddons, who was appointed to teach King George III’s children how to speak English properly in 1783. Stowe designated Webb elocutionist for the reading of her *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.<sup>31</sup> Mary E. Webb would serve to complicate and blur the line of the racialized class politics that developed in the elocution movement, as she performed every class-inflected and racialized form of speech and dialect for each character in the novel, demonstrating her

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Pg. 144

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Pg. 151



elocutionary prowess. Despite Webb's elocutionary skills, once in her career when she sought the opportunity to perform in the theater of Charles Dickens, who "although clearly familiar with her status as a refined, trained elocutionist sponsored by British aristocrats, demeaned her. In a letter written in 1857, Dickens mocked her as a stereotypically uncultivated "Aunt Tomasina expounding King Lear," "a racially inferior outsider attempting unsuccessfully to invade the precincts of high culture and respectable public readings."<sup>32</sup> Even though Webb was an established and renowned elocutionist in her time, whites like Charles Dickens still had the cultural capital to discredit her. In this case, the discrimination was double. It was partly a negative characterizing of her elocutionary skills since he calls her "Aunt Tomasina"--wrongly comparing Webb's speech to the speech of the Uncle Tom character in Stowe's novel who speaks slave dialect. But it was also against her black body, disqualifying her presence on the legitimate stage. For whites like Dickens, she would never be able to move into the bourgeois class, represented for him by bourgeois space--the theater and middle class parlors. African-Americans' blackness was an impediment that communicated incommunicability, the antithesis to elocutionary ideals of clarity, contrast, precision, emphasis, variety, fluency, distinction, and balance on vocal as well as visual registers.<sup>33</sup> Mary E. Webb's vocal dexterity--her flexibility with class and racialized dialects--worked against her. Her visual and vocal registers were off. Her physical blackness and her ease with non-standard English did not balance with her exquisite vocal components. The rigorous rules of the proper elocution left Webb vulnerable to racial scrutiny for her speech.

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<sup>32</sup> Korobkin, Laura. Avoiding "Aunt Tomasina": Charles Dickens Responds to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Black American Reader, Mary Webb .ELH, Volume 82, Number 1, 2015, pp. 115-140.

<sup>33</sup> Conquergood, Dwight. "Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech." *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2009, pp. 141-162., doi:10.4135/9781452233079.n9. Pg. 148

In a foreign and oppressive land, African slaves and descendants were learning to communicate in a disadvantaged position, but whites would never acknowledge the fact that enslaved and other vulnerable people do not have the luxury of transparent, clear, direct, and open communication when interpersonal encounters are framed and reverberate with power.<sup>34</sup> Although the elocution movement was not constructed for purely racial biases, the white bourgeois class still controlled speech standards and African-Americans speech was deemed unnatural and uncultivated.

The elocution movement was a movement for the control of capital and influence on speech. We have seen how the bourgeois discriminated against black and vulgar bodies, traded up voices to distinguish themselves from lower classes, and analyzed and criticized the reading and oratory skills of the individual. Since elocution, at its essence, is reading and oratory through the recitation of text, textual enclosure was the technology of control; thus elocution, an art of the spoken word, was circumscribed by literacy.<sup>35</sup> Conquergood compares elocution to Ngûgi wa Thiongo's (1998) concept of "orature"-- that liminal space between speech and writing, performance and print, where these channels of communication constantly overlap, penetrate, and mutually produce one another.<sup>36</sup> For speech to be produced from writing and performance from print, the ability to read is the ultimate divider. African-Americans' history with gaining access to education has been a difficult one, and the relationship between African-Americans and literacy is one that reminds us of the oppressive and violent past of white control over black lives. Conquergood revisits the idea of the "trope of the talking book" when examining the ways

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Pg. 148

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Pg. 143

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Pg. 147

in which textual enclosure further removed Africans slaves and African-Americans from the elocution movement.

The “trope of the talking book” is a metaphor for Africans-Americans’ exclusion from interacting with literary texts because of illiteracy. More specifically and interestingly is the fact that in the early history of slavery, many slaves did not even know that they were illiterate. Henry Louis Gates, studied the trope and referenced slave narratives to highlight the ways African slaves encountered and realized the trope and their exclusion from the literary world. Through narratives such as, “*A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself 1770*” and “*The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano . . . The African: Written by Himself 1789*”, Henry Louis Gates discusses allegories for the struggle of blacks to insert their voice into white texts, to register a black presence in Western literature.<sup>37</sup> The reason that slaves like Gronniosaw and Equiano had such a struggle inserting themselves in Western literature was because, they did not know it but they were illiterate. Equiano and Gronniosaw both shared similar experiences of witnessing their white counterparts and masters interact with books and literature as they read aloud and appeared to have conversations with these writings. Gates describes these accounts but Conquergood points out the fact that Gates either ignores or is unaware of the elocutionary milieu within which printed texts were generated, received, interpreted, and *performed*, obviously missing the fact that Equiano was signifyin(g) on the widespread elocutionary practice of reading books aloud.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Pg. 147

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Pg. 147

This practice of elocution was different from oratory story-telling or oral history because of the parameter place by the essentiality of literacy. Throughout slavery, some slaves were able to overcome the “trope”, and African slaves and descendants would widely come to the knowledge of their literary disadvantage. Sadly, even after coming to this realization black people in America would have no easier time acquiring the literary competence that could help them become “naturalized” beings and citizens. Until slavery, Blacks that pursued education and reading skills were persecuted, and since Emancipation great constraints remain on African-American education. Some intellectuals have defined education as “the knowledge, attitudes, values, skills and sensibilities, which an individual, or a group, consciously or unconsciously, has internalized... it is the content of what is learned”, while teaching is “the deliberate effort, successful or not, to educate.”<sup>39</sup>

In the last three antebellum decades, about half the slaves in the United States lived in groups of twenty or more on southern plantations. Slave masters used educational tools like the whip to try to teach slaves that whites were always right, naturally superior and ordained by God to rule over blacks, and they succeeded to a small degree with nearly all slaves learning a job skill and how whites wished them to behave, fulfilling the low expectations of whites.<sup>40</sup> However, slaves learned and performed their expected jobs and behavior to avoid being whipped and punished, not because they believed the white superiority teachings of white slave masters. In the community of the slave quarters, which were set apart from whites to a degree, blacks formed and controlled a world of their own values and definitions. Blacks used those

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<sup>39</sup>Davis, Thomas J. “Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865.” *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 48, no. 4, 1979, p. 550., doi:10.2307/2295148. Pg. 550

<sup>40</sup> Idib. pg. 550

values to pass on to their children a set of unique cultural themes.<sup>41</sup> Morris Opler identifies communality, antipathy toward whites, true Christianity, black superiority, white power, family, spirit world, learning to read and write, and freedom as "Themes as Dynamic Forces in Culture."<sup>42</sup> A desire for reading and writing skills, and for freedom, would help them establish a particular American identity of their own. From within the slave quarters, the black community contradicted how the slave masters interpreted the illiteracy they forced upon their human property.—After Emancipation, freed blacks and their descendants went on to insert their voice in Western literature. But there were obstacles. Vocal performance of texts was a concrete material practice that suffused literacy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, that would determine the text in circulation, which is recited and and repeated, texts that reflect Anglo-American culture, texts that would stifle black people's inclusion into speech and literature of American culture.

Public lectures, readings, recitations, orations, lyceum debates and declamations all provided opportunities for public speaking, and in the Industrial Age these functions were held for the purpose of informative rhetoric and performative entertainment. Public elocution, however, was marketed as mainly instructional, even though it would serve to be as performative and entertaining as the theater. Because of its hegemonic reach among the bourgeois, elocution was, in a sense, pervasive, caused by the industrial "pressures towards discipline into every aspect of life: leisure, personal relationships, speech, manners."<sup>44</sup> Elocution as "the just and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pg. 552

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, pg. 551

<sup>43</sup> Conquergood, Dwight. "Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech." *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2009, pp. 141–162., doi:10.4135/9781452233079.n9. Pg. 147

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, pg. 143.

graceful management of the voice, countenance, and gesture” was taken up first by the bourgeois, allowing the bourgeois to adopt and distinctify themselves and the lower classes.

In 1878 William H. Sadlier’s published his *Sadlier's Excelsior Compendium of Literature and Elocution*. In this text he defined elocution simply as the utterance or delivery of anything spoken, noting that it may be good or bad, but the art of good elocution embraces the two general divisions of “orthoepy” and “expression<sup>45</sup>.” Orthoepy is the mechanical part of elocution focusing correct pronunciation, and embraces articulation, syllabication and accent. Articulation, the distinct utterance of the oral elements in syllables and words embracing both the oral elements and the letters which represent them; Syllable, is a word, or part of a word, uttered by a single impulse of the voice; and Accent, the peculiar force given to one or more syllables of a word are all important components of Black speech that many educators and leaders will aim to correct with the study of elocution.<sup>46</sup> Sadlier explained that expression of speech is the utterance of thought, feeling, or passion, with due significance or force.<sup>47</sup> In manuals such as Sadlier’s, rules establishing the standards of English that would contrast with Black English were explained.

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<sup>45</sup>Sadlier, William H. *Sadlier's Excelsior Compendium of Literature and Elocution: By A Catholic Teacher*. New York : W. H. Sadlier, 1878.pg. 17

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, pp. 18,34,37

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pg. 40



Elocution was in tension with black speech in America. We have seen how, the white bourgeois and middle class used elocution to discriminate against black speech and the black body. The practice of elocution was designed to exclude African Americans and impede their participation in society, and these are the reasons it was necessary for those African Americans that were educated and literate, to be acquainted with the arts of elocution. In the North, African Americans organized to participate and acquire elocutionary skills. From a January 7, 1842 publication of *The Liberator* the author reports gratitude for the elocution efforts with black youth with these words:

Some of our citizens have kindly extended their aid to the efforts of our colored youths towards self-improvement. Those who have taken such an interest will be pleased to learn that their favors have not fallen on ungrateful soil. We had the pleasure, on the evening of the 27th, to attend an exhibition of exercises in Elocution, conducted by an association who enjoyed the aid of no master in the art, but struggled forward only by their own exertion, and gained what skill they have gained, self-taught. We say we had the pleasure of witnessing this, for a pleasure of it was; we have had constant experience from youth, at many schools, of exercise in elocution, and we must say that these youths of twelve and sixteen have equalled any we have ever seen. In full understanding of their pieces, just emphasis, distinct enunciation, correct action, good management of voice, and natural, unaffected manner, they would stand a comparison with any school.<sup>48</sup>

This report is important because it shows how the small minority of free Blacks before the Civil War acquired skills of the white bourgeois themselves and went on to educate other free African Americans the art of elocution to help them assimilate. In New York, many African Americans reportedly benefited from Professor Cotesworth Pinckney Bronson's lectures on elocution.

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<sup>48</sup> *The Liberator Publication*, "Colored Youth of Boston," January 7, 1842.



Bronson was a white, Episcopal priest who was considered an authority on proper speech and a January 23, 1841 publication of the *Colored American* reported:

PROF. BRONSON.- This distinguished professor of elocution is again in our city, and intends to favor our goodly citizens with a course of lectures on oratory and music... Brethren, let us organize a class. We shall be benefited by so doing.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, black leaders urged assimilationist goals in grammar and speech upon African Americans. They were aiming to diffuse the component of speech that contribute to what we think of as Ebonics in the nineteenth century. *The Colored American*, one of the first black newspapers in the country, advised its few, free black readers in the North in 1839 to “mental and moral improvement”. To achieve that mental and moral improvement the publication stated a “necessity of an *Academy* under the control of *colored men*... In this institution should be taught reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, *grammar*, astronomy, natural, menial and moral philosophy, the *grammars* of the dead languages, algebra, geometry and other sciences should be regularly lectured upon.<sup>50</sup>” Difference between grammatical structures of Black English and standard English would continue to propagate class and race distinction. Similarly, the official newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal church, the *Christian Recorder*, printed an article in 1888 that reminded its readers against repeating common errors in speech committed even by educated whites. In Marion Harland’s 1888, *Grammar’s Broken Laws*, the author highlights rules that are often broken in the English language and that are closely associated with Ebonics. Harland pondered the strangeness of the

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<sup>49</sup> *The Colored American*, “Prof. Bronson”, January 23, 1841.

<sup>50</sup> *The Colored American Publication*, June 8, 1839.

“habitual disregard of grammatical laws and the unconsciousness of the offender”, those she described as:

People who say "he don't like it," without a suspicion that the conjoined abbreviation stands for "he do not like it." ...

People who inquire "you ready?" "you going?" and sometimes "where you been?" ...

People who consider the fact that they were born south of Mason and Dixon's line warrant for ignoring the dictum, "After the words like and unlike, the preposition to or unto is understood," and crucify our ears by telling us on all possible occasions "I feel like I should do," so-and-so, and "He looked like he meant it." Who as musically and audaciously say, "I am a heap better," or "a heap worse...."

People who slip at the opportunity of using the pronoun "they" when the antecedent noun is in the singular number. "If a person thinks they can do that." "If anybody has lost anything, they can apply at the desk." "I was talking with someone the other day, and they said...<sup>51</sup>"

Although she did not specify any one race guilty in the grammatical alterations she noted, she did display regional prejudices mentioning those born south of the Mason Dixon Line, where most Black Americans were located. Such warnings reflected the awareness of black leaders that African American speech was a target of humor and denigration by whites, even liberal whites. For example, the famous white abolitionist and women's rights advocate Lydia Maria Child observed that she had “seldom been more entertained” than by a black man’s “obvious want of education.” Her statement that “the uncouth awkwardness of his language had a sort of charm” shows her belief in the inadequacy of black speech.<sup>52</sup> Without mainstream skills, black speakers pleading real cases and offering real testimonies for important causes would be mocked and dismissed by those such as Lydia Maria Child. Citing an antislavery newspaper account, John

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<sup>51</sup> Harland, Marion. “Grammar’s broken Laws”, *The Christian Recorder*. December 6, 1888

<sup>52</sup> Conquergood, Dwight. “Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech.” *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2009, pp. 141–162., doi:10.4135/9781452233079.n9. Pg. 150

Blassingame (1977) documented that, during one of these speeches, the audience “cheered, clapped, stamped, laughed and wept, by turns”. The dismissal of the seriousness, sincerity and earnestness behind the speech of a black man does not encourage the thinking that even if African-Americans gained a platform or became educated, they would not be as effective as they could be in their communications if they could not meet and submit to the guidelines of elocution. Instead they would have to face a plethora of mocking and insults towards their speech and body and behavior. “ In fact, Frederick Douglass ironically gained fame as a speaker on the abolitionist circuit because the power of his oratorical skills stunned whites since he was a former slave who had taught himself to read and write. They were confounded by his speaking ability. Although, according to an agent of the American Anti- Slavery Society in 1842 that “the public have itching ears to hear a colored man [like fugitive slave John Collins] speak,” they considered Douglass a rare exception.

The Virginia Minstrels troupe, credited with developing the standard format for the full-fledged minstrel show, formed in the winter of 1842–43 and perpetuated the idea of stumbling, hopelessly and comically ungrammatical black talk.<sup>53</sup> Minstrelsy was the most popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth century. Minstrelsy was theater performances that consisted of comedy routines on demeaning racial caricatures of African- American people that would usually portray black males as dull-witted and gullible, while depicting black women as matronly and unattractive. It is important to note that it was whites who performed in most minstrel shows. Wearing blackface makeup, they parodied black speech, asserting their power to define and belittle black vocality.<sup>54</sup> Peaking in the late 1800s and remaining a popular form of

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Pg. 150

<sup>54</sup> Barlow, Bill: Minstrelsy BILL C. MALONE; The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 12: Music University of North Carolina Press. (2008)

entertainment until the 1920s, minstrelsy consistently displayed African American life and behavior in the ugliest of lights. Because of the stark contrast between elocution and minstrelsy, the two existed in tension with one another, opposing and playing off one another in a striking and complex comparisons enormously invested in voice, demeanor, and class difference.<sup>55</sup> It is important to remember that elocution was as much of a performative art as its counterpart, minstrelsy. However, unlike minstrelsy, the whole idea and motive for attending an elocutionary performance was to identify with, imitate, and extend the platform model of performance into social performance and the everyday performativity of whiteness, where as the audience sought theatrically framed mimicry and parody of blackness when attending a minstrel show.<sup>56</sup> The stigmatization of black speech, character, and body propagated by minstrelsy and accentuated by elocution would carry over into the twentieth century.

With the exception of touring spiritual choirs celebrated for their natural power, black artists were largely invisible to white Americans until the mid-1890s when ragtime exploded, black ragtime musicians sold millions of copies of their sheet music, black minstrel stars became popular, and Paul Laurence Dunbar rose to national prominence.<sup>57</sup> Because minstrelsy was popular, it was lucrative. The profitability of black dialect as entertainment was an incentive for some African American writers to use it. Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) and James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) are examples of black poets, novelists and song writers who used black speech during their careers. Although Dunbar was born after the Civil War and lived his entire life in northern cities, he became the poet of southern, rural black folk.<sup>58</sup> Inheriting the racist

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<sup>55</sup>Conquergood, Dwight. "Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech." *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2009, pp. 141–162., doi:10.4135/9781452233079.n9. pg. 149

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 149

<sup>57</sup>Daigle, Jonathan. "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism." *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2009, pp. 633–654., doi:10.1353/afa.2009.0066. p. 633

<sup>58</sup>Cohen, Michael. "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Genres of Dialect." *African American Review*, 41, no. 2, 2007.p. 248

setting of the American stage, Dunbar spent much of his career questioning how can black artists address the stultifying force of racism without reducing black culture to an effect of white power?<sup>59</sup> In his exploration of black expression Dunbar found himself engaging with popular plantation motifs and developing an extremely subtle mode of black-on-white signifying.<sup>60</sup> Dunbar did not allow racist expectations trap him; rather, they prompted his remarkable movement across genres and forms. By working within and against conventional black representations in poetry and song, Dunbar reached diverse black audiences, achieved politically “representative” success, and contributed to emergent cultural forms.<sup>61</sup>

Upon facing the dilemma of the deliberate exclusion of black voices from white America, Dunbar began to work toward a new black naturalism that would analyze the interlocking relationships among racism, life chances in the South and North, and black self-fashioning.<sup>62</sup> Most of this Dunbar accomplished through his poetry and songs written in Black dialect. An example is his poem, “Negro Love Song”:

Seen my lady home las' night,  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.  
 Hel' huh han' an' sque'z it tight,  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh,  
 Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye,  
 An' a smile go flittin' by —  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

Hyeahd de win' blow thoo de pine,  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.  
 Mockin'-bird was singin' fine,  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

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<sup>59</sup>Daigle, Jonathan. “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism.” *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2009, pp. 633–654., doi:10.1353/afa.2009.0066. p. 642

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, p. 634

<sup>61</sup>Ibid, p. 633

<sup>62</sup>Ibid, p. 642

An' my hea't was beatin' so,  
 When I reached my lady's do',  
 Dat I could n't ba' to go —  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

Put my ahm aroun' huh wais',  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.  
 Raised huh lips an' took a tase,  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

Love me, honey, love me true?  
 Love me well ez I love you?  
 An' she answe'd, "'Cose I do"—  
 Jump back, honey, jump back.

The dropped final consonants, the phonetical spelling of vowel sounds, the phonetical spelling of mispronunciations, and the use of African-American figures of speech were meant to represent southern, rural black dialect at the time.

James Weldon Johnson was a contemporary of Dunbar who sometimes used black dialect, too, in his creative writing. In addition to his careers as professor of creative literature, music composer, and lyricist, though, Johnson had multiple careers that took him out of the artistic world and into the world of social service and politics. At various points, Johnson was a public school teacher and principal, lawyer, diplomat, and official in the newly organized National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (begun in 1909). It was probably Johnson's involvement with this kind of work that led him to abandon Black dialect for a more faithful rendition of social truth as he saw it, which is seldom evident in Dunbar's plantation tradition poems.<sup>63</sup>

Some of Johnson's early poems were written in Black dialect, a form he later dropped. One example is his poem, "An Explanation":

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<sup>63</sup>Collier, Eugenia W. "James Weldon Johnson: Mirror of Change." *Phylon* (1960-), vol. 21, no. 4, 1960, pp. 351., doi:10.2307/273979. p.351

Look heah! 'Splain to me de reason  
 Why you said to Squire Lee,  
 Der wuz twelve ole chicken thieves  
 In dis heah town, includin' me.  
 Ef he tole you dat, my brudder,  
 He said sump'n dat warn't true;  
 W'at I said wuz dis, dat der wuz  
 Twelve, *widout* includin' you.

Oh! . . . !—

Johnson would claim to come to the “realization of the artificiality of conventionalized Negro dialect poetry; of its exaggerated geniality, childish optimism, forced comicality, and mawkish sentiment; of its limitation as an instrument of expression to but two emotions, pathos and humor, thereby making every poem only sad or funny.<sup>64</sup>” The shift in his mentality reflects the opinions of many black leaders of the time, and Johnson would abandon the use of dialect in his work. In fact, Johnson is probably best known for writing the so-called Negro national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” first written in 1917 and memorized and sung by black people in America even today. The style of those lyrics use the kind of English prose found in the King James Bible (1611):

Lift every voice and sing,  
 Till earth and heaven ring,  
 Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
 Let our rejoicing rise  
 High as the list'ning skies,  
 Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.  
 Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
 Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;  
 Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,  
 Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,  
 Bitter the chast'ning rod,

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid, p.354

Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
 Yet with a steady beat,  
 Have not our weary feet  
 Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
 We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.  
 We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,  
 Out from the gloomy past,  
 Till now we stand at last  
 Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,  
 God of our silent tears,  
 Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;  
 Thou who hast by Thy might,  
 Led us into the light,  
 Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
 Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,  
 Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;  
 Shadowed beneath Thy hand,  
 May we forever stand,  
 True to our God,  
 True to our native land.

In contrast to Johnson's total shift, in a 1902 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Paul Laurence Dunbar responded when asked, "And when you do write have you more pleasure in negro songs or in others?" that he saw pros and cons to using black dialect. He responded, "Sometimes I am fascinated by the negro song. It carries me along— writes or sings itself. But the form is so purely lyrical that it is limited. . . . The negro song must be sentimental—it must be a love song or a lullaby, or a song of home longing, or something of that sort."<sup>65</sup> In fact, Dunbar also wrote a great deal in standard English, as we can see with this short poem called "The Debt":

This is the debt I pay  
 Just for one riotous day,  
 Years of regret and grief,

<sup>65</sup> Cohen, Michael. "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Genres of Dialect." *African American Review*, 41, no. 2, 2007, p. 247



Sorrow without relief.

Pay it I will to the end —  
 Until the grave, my friend,  
 Gives me a true release —  
 Gives me the clasp of peace.

Slight was the thing I bought,  
 Small was the debt I thought,  
 Poor was the loan at best —  
 God! but the interest!

Dunbar's subtlety in his writing towards the racism and discrimination flooding the country at the time did not prevent him from accruing charges from other black educators and leaders such as James Weldon Johnson of exploitation and opportunism of the lucrative minstrelsy.<sup>66</sup> Johnson argues Dunbar was “dominated by his [white] audience . . . [and therefore] wrote mainly for the delectation of . . . an outside group”, while Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines Dunbar as “an important poet who was neither bold nor talented enough to explore the full potential of black vernacular— a “[black man who] eventually gives up his black identity.”<sup>67</sup> Considering the way that Blacks and Whites had been conditioned to think of minstrel performances as jestful pieces aimed to defame the African American race, it is no surprise that even intellectuals like Gates and Johnson would dismiss subtle, yet powerful, message concerning race and black naturalism. While Dunbar was definitely read within the valence of minstrelsy, his popularity as a dialect poet derived more particularly from the ways that his poems were understood to supersede minstrelsy by providing a authentic look at “the real black folk.”<sup>68</sup> This authenticity reached a

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<sup>66</sup>Daigle, Jonathan. “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism.” *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2009, pp. 633–654., doi:10.1353/afa.2009.0066. p. 642

<sup>67</sup>Ibid, p. 634

<sup>68</sup> Cohen, Michael. “Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Genres of Dialect.” *African American Review*, 41, no. 2, 2007, p. 248

wide range of African Americans despite what Gates, Johnson, and the likes thought of Dunbar's work.

Through Dunbar's work to authenticate and naturalize the black presence to build up a African American consciousness in America, the artist was able to connect people beyond the class line, contributing greatly to intraracial bonds within the black community. Dunbar was the artist most effective in connecting the Talented Tenth, the small population of Black intellectuals and leaders, to the Black masses. By 1907, a year after his death from tuberculosis at thirty-three, eight hundred literary societies carried his name, and in 1951, over three hundred schools were named after Dunbar. Generations of African Americans used Dunbar's name to represent themselves and their institutions for several reasons, including his undeniable blackness and his combination of accessibility and virtuosity.<sup>69</sup> There was a relatability between Paul Laurence Dunbar and the general masses. He was also able to begin to bridge a gap that between the Black race and the spoken word.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, along with a number of other poets and elocutionists would perform his work throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth century. As evident from the many institutions and literary group named after him, many educators, intellectuals, and leaders, looked at Dunbar's works as a tool for naturalizing blackness, as it concerns the culture, history, and presence in America, as Dunbar had intended. In this way, Dunbar represented a pluralist approach to black speech.

Pluralism is an alternative to the assimilationism model. In *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism* Crawford Young defines three basic components of cultural pluralism that will help us

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<sup>69</sup>Daigle, Jonathan. "Paul Laurence Dunbar and the Marshall Circle: Racial Representation from Blackface to Black Naturalism." *African American Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2009, pp. 633–654., doi:10.1353/afa.2009.0066. p. 634

understand Dunbar's battle to naturalize blackness. First, Young identifies plurality with relationship to an authoritative arena. Within sovereign territorial states, solidarity groupings based on commonalities or affinities of ethnicity, language, race, caste, assumed blood tie, custom, and/or territory provides sharply demarcated boundaries with which groups define themselves and each other, and their interaction occurs.<sup>70</sup> Cultural pluralism occurs when those socially and politically groupings, competitions, interactions, and conflicts are resolved as a means of inclusion and acceptance rather than dismissal or rejection, allowing minorities to contribute to the overall patterns of political and cultural transactions in society.<sup>71</sup> Although whites did not welcome fair inclusion of all ethnicities, Paul L. Dunbar and many more took it upon themselves to write, recite, and compete for cultural representation in society.

A very prominent performer of Paul Laurence Dunbar's works was the Black female elocutionist Hallie Quinn Brown (1849-1949). Hallie Quinn Brown's performances of Dunbar's work, in a time when upper and middle class white women could hardly find a stage for their voices, indicates a great progression that will help African Americans in their battle of cultural capital and speech discrimination. In this way, it could be argued that a pluralistic approach to Black dialect, represented by Dunbar and his Quinn, was an improvement in the quest of African Americans to gain cultural capital in the area of speech and language. It represented a slight victory over the strict rules of elocution since it provided a public platform for mainstream, white audiences and for black audiences as well to receive black speech in a respectful way.

Brown received her Bachelor of Science in 1873 from Wilberforce University in Ohio. After receiving her degree, Brown would teach at several plantations, schools, and colleges in

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<sup>70</sup> Young, Crawford. *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*. University of Wisconsin, 1979. pg. 12

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid* pg. 12

the South, including professing at Allen University and acting as principal of the Tuskegee Institutes the year 1882-1893. Brown became professor of elocution at Wilberforce after leaving Tuskegee, but her professorship would often be interrupted by her travels as a lecturer and speaker for African American culture and temperance.<sup>72</sup>

The time of Brown's rising career has been described as a period of "mingling of writing and speech, of literature and oral modes."<sup>73</sup> This partially helps to explain dialect poetry's popularity, and Hallie Quinn Brown's recitation of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Often billed as an interpreter of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry, Brown's exquisite performance of Dunbar's work began in August of 1898. Throughout her career she would become known as "probably the best interpreter of Dunbar in the world" and as the "first professional reader to make popular the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar [sic], the Negro Poet."<sup>74</sup> By the 1910s Brown was performing Dunbar's poems at almost every recital, and she overwhelmingly presented his dialect poetry rather than his poems written in standard English.

Brown's performances of Dunbar's dialect poems to primarily African American audiences help us understand how Dunbar's depictions of antebellum African Americans were meaningful for black, urban audiences during his lifetime and the decades directly following his death.<sup>75</sup> For example, in poems such as the seemingly nostalgic "The Party", Dunbar in the text and Brown in the performance were able to draw out subtle critiques of the antebellum, commenting on the increasingly rigid segregation Dunbar's and Brown's audiences faced at the

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<sup>72</sup>Berce, Ali, et al. "Hallie Quinn Brown." [https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/166107/Brown, Hallie Quinn.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/166107/Brown,_Hallie_Quinn.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y), University of Minnesota, 26 Aug. 2004.

<sup>73</sup> Harri, Amy Hobbs. "The Sole Province of the Public Reader": Elocutionist Hallie Quinn Browns Performances of the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar." *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, p. 36., doi:10.5325/reception.9.1.0036. p. 37

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p.38

turn of the century.<sup>76</sup> Also, Brown's public readings of his dialect poetry not only brought literature to illiterate audiences, but also enhanced the enjoyment of dialect poetry for literate audiences by enhancing and complementing their silent reading. As Elizabeth McHenry notes, African American literacy rates rose from thirty percent in 1880 to seventy percent in 1910. Emancipation and increased cultural representation helped in the rise of African American literacy.

Elocutionists, such as Brown, would often compile collections of stories, poems, and speeches for practice and performance, commonly called "reciter texts"<sup>77</sup>. The articles included in these collections for recitation reinforced the white cultural patterns and Standard English. However, Brown's reciter text, *Bits and Odds*, diverged sharply from the tradition set by other elocutionary theorists by including passages in African-American Vernacular English. While she also includes pieces found in more traditional styles of reciter texts, the presence of pieces written in African-American Vernacular English represents a recognition of the relationship between local communities and elocution that is absent in other reciter texts<sup>78</sup>. This kind of inclusion suggests that Brown valued her linguistic heritage in ways that white elocutionists did not or could not and she believed it was important to instill linguistic pride in the African-American community.

Modern twentieth century theorists have grappled with solutions to the dilemma of inclusion for those who historically have been ostracized from society. Many have offered pluralist views, proposing the deliberate cultivation of ethnic and national differences, and that America should become a federation of distinct nationalities, using English as "the language of

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 47

<sup>77</sup> Kates, Susan. "The Embodied Rhetoric of Hallie Quinn Brown." *College English*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1997, p. 59., doi:10.2307/378798. p. 59

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 62

its great tradition," but preserving the distinct contributions of each nationality's dialect or speech.<sup>79</sup> Brown's early approach to elocution reflects the need for traditional English, but also emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural distinctiveness that presents itself in America. Cornel West recognizes the importance of acknowledging the "distinctive cultural and political practices of oppressed people" without highlighting their marginality in such a way as to further marginalize them.<sup>80</sup> Hallie Quinn Brown implemented these pluralist approaches by including distinct recitations in Black English, reciting them eloquently, highlighting the culture and history of African Americans instead of further marginalizing them from the ranks of society. Brown also reappropriates the vernacular for the unique and specific purpose of critiquing American racism through the revised language of the dominant culture; a technique Henry Louis Gates calls "Signifying."<sup>81</sup> Confrontation between African-American culture and racism manifested itself through the inventive linguistic choices of Brown. Her emphasis on black cultural and linguistics heritage prove strategic as it fuels her pedagogical goals, which were to instill a sense of social responsibility in her audience for the sake of cultural pride and social and political action.<sup>82</sup>

Opportunities for rhetoric and elocution was not widely available for women during post antebellum America. As a black woman, finding a purpose and place to practice her elocutionary skills would prove challenging for Brown. However, in education, she was able to present her pieces in ways that educated and challenged her students within modes of rhetoric permitted by

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<sup>79</sup>Chametzky, Jules. "Beyond Melting Pots, Cultural Pluralism, Ethnicity: Or, Deja Vu All over Again." *Melus*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1989, p. 3., doi:10.2307/467098. p. 8

<sup>80</sup>Greene, Maxine. "The Passions of Pluralism Multiculturalism and the Expanding Community." *Educational Researcher*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1993, pp. 13–18., doi:10.3102/0013189x022001013.

<sup>81</sup>Kates, Susan. "The Embodied Rhetoric of Hallie Quinn Brown." *College English*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1997, p. 59., doi:10.2307/378798. p. 64

<sup>82</sup>Harris, Amy Hobbs. "'The Sole Province of the Public Reader': Elocutionist Hallie Quinn Brown's Performances of the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar." *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, p. 36., doi:10.5325/reception.9.1.0036. p. 37

white society that could still reflect their culture and heritage.<sup>83</sup> She raised questions about the relationship between schooling and social responsibility, using and transforming mainstream elocution theory in order to address social and race issues. Brown attempted to meet the educational needs of the African-American communities in turn-of-the-century America by resisting certain practices of noted mainstream elocutionary pedagogues, leaving her signature on elocutionary theory and curricula in the texts she directed to the African-American community. Because these academic textbooks survive, and because there are early twentieth-century recollections of school recitations, elocution is mostly remembered as a school activity.<sup>84</sup> In texts like *Bits and Odds-A Choice Selection of Recitations* (1880), Brown champions elocution for the moral transformation she believed it could bring both to individual character and to the community: elocutionary education, she stresses, heightens social consciousness.<sup>85</sup> Similar to Paul L. Dunbar, she was able to relate across class lines, from the college to communities by her curricular choices of African American Vernacular recitations and history, widely spreading cultural pride and moral pedagogy. Hallie Quinn Brown teachings of English, history, and ethics worked on many levels to preserve a sense of black identity that survives even today.

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<sup>83</sup> Kates, Susan. "The Embodied Rhetoric of Hallie Quinn Brown." *College English*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1997, p. 59., doi:10.2307/378798. p. 62

<sup>84</sup> Harris, Amy Hobbs. "'The Sole Province of the Public Reader': Elocutionist Hallie Quinn Browns Performances of the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar." *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, p. 36., doi:10.5325/reception.9.1.0036. p. 39

<sup>85</sup> Kates, Susan. "The Embodied Rhetoric of Hallie Quinn Brown." *College English*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1997, p. 59., doi:10.2307/378798. p. 62

### **Elocution for Black Women in College: Everyone Finding A Voice**

African American women were affected by the rules of elocution in two ways. Unless they were exceptional like Mary E. Webb and Hallie Quinn Brown, they were kept from the halls of proper speech by the fact that they were Black, and they were held back from public speaking because they were women. Under the guise of “natural” speech, “elocution was an all-encompassing style of speaking and deportment that extended from the public sphere into the habitus of the home; hence the elocutionary training for “ladies,” who otherwise were not



encouraged to speak in public.<sup>86</sup> However, because of the conservative view that the domestic rhetorical domain was reserved for women, a popular ideology lasting well into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, middle-class white, poor, and minority women were denied the space to publicly speak. Elocution and speaker manuals complicated the promise to provide equivalent rhetorical training for one and all by associating rhetorical performance for women primarily with parlor activities that centered on domestic themes or entertainment and thereby continuing a long standing pedagogical tradition that linked oratory and argumentation only to white men.<sup>87</sup> In postbellum America, while men were learning to preach, practice law, and set political policies, women were reading elocution manuals, letter-writing handbooks, and other conduct literature. These texts reinforced the conservative message that women's word mattered, but mattered mostly in the home.<sup>88</sup>

Elocution would prove to provided women with a more broad entrance to the public and social arena, as they took advantage of the performative and domestic nature of elocution. The gateways that elocution provide for women also worked in great favor for the African-American community, as it was closely related to education and moral pedagogy. Through the career of Gertrude Buck we will analyze what the elocution movement meant for women, and how her approach to elocution, rights, and education as a white woman could have shaped the cultural capital that interrogates black speech and African-Americans approach to speaking and learning. Last the works of Adrienne Herndon will further reveal elocution as a gateway for women's progression, and her lasting impact on higher learning and black speech through her use of elocution. Upon the conclusion of Adrienne Herndon's impact on elocution and black speech, a

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Pg. 149

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, Nan. *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life, 1866-1910*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2002. pg. 16

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, pg. 16

further analysis will be conducted to draw conclusion on the impact of white cultural capital on black speech by comparing English departments and speech courses of Vassar College, Atlanta University and Spelman College.

### *The Work of Gertrude Buck*

Women have contributed greatly in the struggle towards freedom and equality for the undermined and disadvantaged throughout the history of America. Elocution provides a fabulous lens through which we can look at the social impacts on communities, education, race relations, and power dynamics. A woman that marked a lasting impression on the pedagogies of rhetoric and elocution was Gertrude Buck. Gertrude Buck, a white woman, was born on July 14, 1871 in Kalamazoo, Michigan and acquired her Bachelors, Masters, and Doctorate degrees in Rhetoric and Composition from the University of Michigan, completing her education in 1898. She joined the Vassar faculty in 1897 as an English instructor, and rose quickly within the department, becoming an Associate Professor in 1901 and a Professor in 1907. She taught at Vassar until her death in 1922, and she revolutionized the English department while also making a name for herself as a talented rhetorician.<sup>89</sup>

Gertrude Buck was not an African-American, nor did she come from a low socio-economic background. However, for the purpose of studying how white standards influenced the cultivation of black speech entering into the twentieth century, it will be beneficial to look at how white standards were transmitted and replicated through educational institutions. The study of elocution has been and was closely link to education and the social sphere. Therefore it will be helpful to examine the pedagogies and curriculum that Gertrude Buck

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<sup>89</sup>Gertrude Buck - Vassar College Encyclopedia - Vassar College, [vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/faculty/prominent-faculty/gertrude-buck.html](http://vcencyclopedia.vassar.edu/faculty/prominent-faculty/gertrude-buck.html).

developed around rhetoric and elocution because she is the example of the affluent white person who possessed the social clout to inform the cultural capital of speech in America.

Unlike like the feminist movement of her time, which refers to those theorists, whether liberal or radical, who argue against patriarchal domination, for equal rights, a just and fair distribution of scarce resources, the “feminine” framework she worked through contributes to Gertrude Buck’s relevance in this conversation on African American speech.<sup>90</sup> Buck’s was a “feminist” in that she emphasized an ethic of care built on co- operation and the centrality of relationships.<sup>91</sup> Buck’s “feminine” identity led her to search for women’s unique voice and most often, the advocacy of an ethic of care that includes nurturance, support, compassion, and networks of communications, instead of the joining the feminist fight for white women’s rights.<sup>92</sup> Buck worked to find women’s voice and creating a more inclusive community by utilizing rhetoric and pedagogy to foster the types of relationships that she felt would enhance a democratic society.<sup>93</sup> Since Buck viewed humans as inherently “social,” she saw rhetoric as the means by which people could develop equality in their relationships.<sup>94</sup> As Vickie Ricks points out, by focusing on issues of power and the need to equalize the communicative process, Buck’s social view of rhetoric “raises hope for the oppressed of our own day as well as for hers, hope for those marginal groups—such as women, immigrants, blacks, children, and the elderly—who posit an alternative to the universal male voice.<sup>95</sup>”

Buck’s greatest legacies would be made and left at Vassar College and in the greater surrounding area Poughkeepsie, NY. Although there were multiple layers of contradictions in

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<sup>90</sup>Bordelon, Suzanne. *A Feminist Legacy: the Rhetoric and Pedagogy of Gertrude Buck*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2011. 19

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, pg. 20

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, pg. 19

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, pg. 11

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, pg. 20

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, pg. 20

their attempts, what emerges through Buck and close colleagues is a pattern, an approach to rhetoric and pedagogy that was imbued with a democratic spirit that sharply contrasted with dominant rhetorical theories in the late-nineteenth and very early-twentieth centuries.<sup>96</sup> For example, Vassar College officials were clear in the fact they felt that the presence of African-American women, even those with a slight tinge of black blood, would detract from the image it sought to project as an institution for the aristocratic and genteel woman,” and it was not until 1940, well after the death of Buck, that Vassar changed its policy to formally admit students of color.<sup>97</sup> However, Buck did not allow the the bigotry of her colleagues to influence her work to extend the pedagogies of elocution and rhetoric beyond the set lines of race and class.

Literary scholar Susan Kates describes her notion of “activist rhetoric instruction” partly by pointing to Gertrude Buck’s “social perspective” pedagogies as an example. Focusing on middle-class white women, African Americans, and members of the working class three student groups often excluded from traditional higher-education instruction, Kates’ activist rhetoric instruction is unlike “mainstream pedagogies” by stressing the following features:

1. a profound respect for and awareness of the relationship between language and identity and a desire to integrate that awareness into the curriculum;
2. politicized writing and speaking assignments designed to help students interrogate their marginalized standing in the larger culture in terms of their gender, race, or class; and
3. an emphasis on service and responsibility” (*Activist* 1–2)<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, pg. 10

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, pg. 9

<sup>98</sup>Ibid, pg. 23

As a Socialist and Progressive, Buck believed that her social and English pedagogies would help create a society based on balanced communication and mutual understanding. At Vassar, Buck trained what she hoped would be active, thoughtful, and vocal leaders who would break down the barriers between the college and Buck extended the influence of rhetoric and elocution to the working class community and people of color works to incorporate a voice in America for those who were previously excluded. She believed that theater provided the opportunity for individual self-expression across classes and introduced the first playwriting courses at Vassar, the first theater workshop at Vassar, and founded the Poughkeepsie Community Theater as a way “to fuse her campus and community efforts.” Buck’s work literally gave a public voice not only to unmarried, single women but to ordinary community members.

Being aware that language contributes greatly to one’s identity and incorporating that identical component into the curriculum, Buck used a pluralistic approach to spread her pedagogy to lower class Americans through the Little Theater Movement, which was a national movement that included African Americans. This trend took off around 1915 and pushed a change from melodramatic themes in playwriting to realistic themes dealing with actual social problems. Dialogue and speech in these plays had to be authentic, not artificial and stylized.<sup>99</sup> This does not mean that Buck didn’t teach Standard English. She did. But her activist curricula addressed issues discounted mainstream approaches, which included courses “in which instructors and students had no pressing needs to understand the politics, ethics, and social organization implicit in language acquisition and linguistic forms<sup>100</sup>”.

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<sup>99</sup> Gertrude Buck - Vassar College Encyclopedia - Vassar College, [vcyclopedia.vassar.edu/faculty/prominent-faculty/gertrude-buck.html](http://vcyclopedia.vassar.edu/faculty/prominent-faculty/gertrude-buck.html).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, pg. 23

Gertrude Buck's combination of assimilationist and pluralist pedagogies on speech and rhetoric contributed to the progressive approaches in finding a voice for women, but for African Americans and minorities as well. However, it is important to note that the parameters that Gertrude Buck would be restricted to as a white woman would differ greatly from African American women striving to accomplish the same work. They would have to work within a more stringent framework of racial discrimination.

*The Works of Adrienne McNeil Herndon*

A black female elocutionist who had to work within more rigid frameworks of gender and race was Adrienne McNeil Herndon. Herndon, born Elizabeth A. Stephens on July 22, 1869, in Augusta, Georgia, to a slave-born, fair-skinned mother, Martha Fleming, a seamstress and domestic servant.<sup>101</sup> Herndon's father was also fair-skinned. As a result, Herndon was light enough to pass for white. She was abandoned by her fair-skinned father while she was still an infant, resulting in a relocation to Savannah, Georgia after her mother remarried to Archibald James McNeil. In 1886, Herndon left Savannah to enter Atlanta University as a student in the Normal Department. From the educational effort of former slaves James Tate and Grandison B. Daniels, Atlanta University emerged in 1867 as a institution of higher learning to train talented "Negro youth" and teachers with the help of the American Missionary Association and white teachers from the North.<sup>102</sup> Herndon would go on to study and eventually teach at Atlanta University contributing greatly to the development of the study of elocution and drama at the university.

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<sup>101</sup> Henderson, Alexa Benson. "The Work and Legacy of Adrienne Elizabeth McNeil Herndon at Atlanta University, 1895–1910." *Phylon*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 80–101. Pg. 81

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 82

“Black performance studies” reveals that young black children raised in the post-slavery southern culture of apartheid were taught to appreciate and participate in “live arts,” with organized stage shows of dramatic readings of poetry, monologues, or plays performed in churches or schools being the primary places where African American youth were encouraged to display their talents.<sup>103</sup> In a 1924 essay published in *The Crisis*, Du Bois noted that ‘any mention of Negro blood or Negro life in America for a century has been an occasion for an ugly picture, a dirty allusion, a nasty comment or a pessimistic forecast.’<sup>104</sup> Du Bois looked to the stage as offering a corrective to this stereotypical view, and he called for an African-American theatre that was ‘for us, by us, about us and near us.’<sup>105</sup> Adrienne Herndon was at work in this mission well before Du Bois’ call to action. Throughout her years as a student at Atlanta University Adrienne Herndon excelled in drama and expression. In a 1904 interview with the *Boston Traveler*, Adrienne recalled that instead of receiving praise for her recitative and declamation skills, her mother often voiced the opinion that if only Adrienne had been a boy, she ‘then could make us proud by your oratory’<sup>106</sup>.” The social sphere was more closed to women, making it harder for women to find a space for their voice in heavily politicized or socialized settings of rhetoric. Therefore Martha McNeil was pessimistic about her daughter having the opportunity to excel in her oratory skills. However, Adrienne Herndon navigated the bounds of performance, elocution, and drama, as opportunities to exercise her talents, develop her career and cultivate the speech and image of the black speaker.

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<sup>103</sup> Conquergood, Dwight. “Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech.” *Opening Acts: Performance in/as Communication and Cultural Studies*, 2009, pp. 141–162., doi:10.4135/9781452233079.n9. Pg. 155

<sup>104</sup> Henderson, Alexa Benson. “The Work and Legacy of Adrienne Elizabeth McNeil Herndon at Atlanta University, 1895–1910.” *Phylon*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 80–101. Pg. 80

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 80

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 81

Herndon, like many other black intellectuals of the time, believed in and struggled for racial uplift by cultivating and presenting civilized, disciplined, intelligent, creative, and virtuous forms of speech through elocution and drama.<sup>107</sup> Her professional, civic and community work demonstrated her desire for improving cultural and social life for all social classes in her surroundings.<sup>108</sup> Similar to the ideologies Gertrude Buck developed at Vassar, Herndon intended for the study and practice of elocution at Atlanta University to serve to “mediate the divide between literate elite and illiterate laborers,” and prepare its graduates to share the cultural and intellectual legacies within and beyond the walls of the university.<sup>109</sup> However, working within the guidelines set by her white superiors, and being totally conscious of her white audience’s negative views on black speakers, pushed Herndon to rely heavily on assimilationist approaches in cultivating the speech of African Americans. She passed for white when she could. We can imagine the social pressures that Herndon was under as a white passing elocutionist at the time. Preferring anonymity to public recognition for her work in education or the arts, she declined the invitation of the notable Booker T. Washington to include her among black women he planned to highlight in an article out of fear of ridicule from malicious southern whites who refused to accept black achievement in the same manner as white accomplishment.<sup>110</sup> On February 12, 1907 Herndon wrote Washington in response, “I thank you for the honor you confer upon me by selecting me among the women for your magazine article. I appreciate it most highly, but I have

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<sup>107</sup> Newman, Adam Perry. “Shakespeare in Black and White: Atlanta, 1916.” *Atlanta Studies*, 25 Feb. 2018, [www.atlantastudies.org/2017/02/28/shakespeare-in-black-and-white-atlanta-1916/](http://www.atlantastudies.org/2017/02/28/shakespeare-in-black-and-white-atlanta-1916/).

<sup>108</sup> Henderson, Alexa Benson. “The Work and Legacy of Adrienne Elizabeth McNeil Herndon at Atlanta University, 1895–1910.” *Phylon*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 80–101. Pg. 92

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 87

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 82



come to feel that I should like to hide from the eyes of the Southern white man the things I, as a Negro woman hold most sacred for fear they pause and look to jeer and ridicule.<sup>111</sup>

Besides being marginalized in society by her white audiences, Herndon had to comply to the vision of her white superiors at Atlanta University. Historians have noted that at several historically black colleges and universities white trustees, presidents and deans of institutions like Atlanta University rigidly controlled the curricula, faculty, and student life. On every level, Adrienne Herndon was met with white encounters when trying to cultivate positive images of blackness through elocution and drama<sup>112</sup>.

Still, despite her obstacles, Adrienne Herndon was responsible for introducing elocution and Shakespeare into the University curriculum in 1895<sup>113</sup> when she worked as the lone black female faculty members, along with Professor George A. Towns, the only other black faculty member of Atlanta University at the time<sup>114</sup>. Faculty like Herndon and Towns recognized how the stigmatization of Black speech and class-marked dialects, dramatized by the minstrel performances used to widely demean and deviate others from the acceptable bourgeois standards, was detrimental to the Black image in America. Herndon situated elocution and its pedagogical aspects into the curriculum, giving emphasis to performance in the form of classical plays, reading, and monologues<sup>115</sup>. In *The Voice of the Negro*, Herndon explains why she would come to look to drama and elocution as means to bridge social and cultural gap based on race and class as she writes:

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, pg. 82

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, pg. 88

<sup>113</sup>Newman, Adam Perry. "Shakespeare in Black and White: Atlanta, 1916." *Atlanta Studies*, 25 Feb. 2018, [www.atlantastudies.org/2017/02/28/shakespeare-in-black-and-white-atlanta-1916/](http://www.atlantastudies.org/2017/02/28/shakespeare-in-black-and-white-atlanta-1916/).

<sup>114</sup> Henderson, Alexa Benson. "The Work and Legacy of Adrienne Elizabeth McNeil Herndon at Atlanta University, 1895–1910." *Phylon*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 80–101. Pg. 81

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, pg. 81

The highest form of drama... is the artistic representation of suffering. Then is it not natural to feel that a people who have suffered so much... whose very culture spells suppression, ... will produce in the future some of the world's greatest dramatic artists? ... To interpret the depth of the human heart and to bring it into another consciousness, one must have lived and suffered... who among the negro race has not received this sympathetic touch and insight as a birthright. A more dramatic life than the one given the American Negro can hardly be imagined.<sup>116</sup>

The idea of turning African American suffering into the most beautiful, authentic form of drama is truly a creative and empowering method of encouraging African Americans to take up the study of elocution and acquire Standard English skills. Relying on the trying history of African Americans is very much a pluralistic and nationalistic approach by Herndon to cultivate Black speech, but these efforts are whitewashed by the more aggressive assimilationist means of achieving her goals. In her estimation, even Shakespeare, the preeminent white literary artist, could and ought to be included in efforts to re-imagine what it means to be Black in the new century. Herndon reinvented ideas of blackness so that black culture was a beautiful, productive, and viable part of the American dream<sup>117</sup>. Instead of learning Shakespeare as cultural capital to help bridge the gap and relatability between race and classes, Herndon wanted African Americans to reinvent and reimagine *themselves* through white literature and characters. Using their history and suffering to reinvent Blacks through white literature and characters seems contradictory because it would ultimately erase the African American identity and history that they are working through. This suggests that Herndon settled for an assimilated views of Blacks,

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, pg. 86

<sup>117</sup>Newman, Adam Perry. "Shakespeare in Black and White: Atlanta, 1916." *Atlanta Studies*, 25 Feb. 2018, [www.atlantastudies.org/2017/02/28/shakespeare-in-black-and-white-atlanta-1916/](http://www.atlantastudies.org/2017/02/28/shakespeare-in-black-and-white-atlanta-1916/).

rather than a distinguished and accepted image of Blacks in America. Herndon assimilationist techniques surely encouraged Georgia's Board of Visitors and other officials to easily offer commendations. To say this is not to insult or dismiss Adrienne Herndon attempts in closing cultural gaps, but to highlight the pressure that cultural capital placed on Herndon to assimilate especially in her case where colorism played so heavily in her situation. If Herndon had been unambiguously and consistently read as black and had faced the ridicule that other African Americans faced, she might not have tried to reinvent the black experience through white culture. Knowing full exclusion from the white ranking of society, she would probably would have been less optimistic about this approach.

#### *A Quick Spelman and Vassar Comparison*

A comparison of some college course catalogs will help draw correlations between the white northern institutions of black institutions of learning, where those northerners often times sent teachers to the South in efforts to establish those black institutions. Along with Vassar's and Atlanta University's English catalogs, a look at Spelman College's will also be helpful to determine the influence of the dominant cultural capital of Standard Speech and white culture in black institutions of higher learning. Spelman College (est. 1881) and Atlanta University (est. 1865), along with Morehouse College (est. 1867) and Clark College (est. 1869)--all historically black colleges and universities--came together to form the Atlanta University Center Consortium in 1929. Although separate, these institutions were in such close proximity that certain services and resources were shared among them, and the Atlanta University Center served to coordinate collaborative efforts and to manage and administer programs and services that are offered to the

institutions.<sup>118</sup> The curricula between these institutions reflect each other to the point that Spelman can be seen as the Black-female counterpart to the White-female Vassar College.

### **List of Course Catalogs**

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<sup>118c</sup>Atlanta University Center." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, [www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/education/atlanta-university-center](http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/education/atlanta-university-center).



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(Vassar College. *Vassar College catalogs*. Retrieved from  
[https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/ls?a=srchls&anyall1=all&q1=vassar&field1=author&op2=AND&anyall2=all&q2=annual+catalogue&field2=title&op3=AND&lmt=ft&yop=after&facet\\_lang=&facet\\_format=](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/ls?a=srchls&anyall1=all&q1=vassar&field1=author&op2=AND&anyall2=all&q2=annual+catalogue&field2=title&op3=AND&lmt=ft&yop=after&facet_lang=&facet_format=))















(Clark Atlanta University. *Clark Atlanta University catalogs*.)

Retrieved from <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/ls?field1=ocr;q1=clark%20atlanta%20university;a=srchls;lmt=ft>









Retrieved from Spelman Archives.)

(Spelman College. *Spelman College catalog*.)



In 1885-86, when Herndon was entering Atlanta University and before Buck arrived at Vassar, neither of the course catalogs were extensively developed, and the same goes for Spelman College. Enlisted with the most basic course descriptions, Vassar College and Spelman did require elocution course in their 1885-86 Normal course list, while Atlanta University required only English courses. However, we can see that Herndon required College course students to complete a course in elocution during each of their four years, and students for Normal course of study three courses by the turn of the century. Under Herndon's direction, elocution represented the whole of dramatic delivery, including pantomimic training, articulation, voice drill, and vocal expression.<sup>119</sup> There had not been course in elocution at Atlanta University while Herndon attended or when she entered as a professor. With the influx of white northern educators in the Georgia, as other Atlanta University Centers institutions were established, dominant features of white cultural capital found themselves more prevalent in Black curricula. Through the connection of the Atlanta University Consortium Center, Adrienne Herndon would have found approval and support to introduce elocution course at the Atlanta University.

Elocution remained evident in Spelman's courses as well, but in Vassar's specificity in elocution disappeared during the turn of the century. In a 1910 course catalog, Vassar advertises "Spoken English" as an elective, and expounds on their "Spoken English" courses by 1915-16 to include courses in public speaking and drama in oral presentation. This is the beginning of Buck's impact on Vassar beyond the English department. In 1915, Buck participated in George Baker's 47 Workshop at Radcliffe College, the playwriting course that is considered the

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<sup>119</sup> Henderson, Alexa Benson. "The Work and Legacy of Adrienne Elizabeth McNeil Herndon at Atlanta University, 1895-1910." *Phylon*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2016, pp. 80-101. Pg. 87

beginning of the student theater movement. Upon her return, she created the first playwriting course at Vassar, and, in 1916, guided the Vassar Dramatic Workshop into existence. Though a Drama Department did not exist during Miss Buck's time at Vassar, the workshop, grants, and her hard efforts laid the foundation for the Division of Drama that would be established in 1934.

<sup>120</sup> It is also important to note that Vassar's early catalogs included a large amount of Shakespeare and other Modern and Middle English plays and poems. Andrienne Herndon reserved a large portion of her curriculum and racial uplifting to the exploration and study of white literature. While her assimilationist actions of implementing of elocution and Shakespeare (and the likes) into curriculum at Atlanta were influenced by the cultural capital of Standard English, Herndon's development of drama was likely in the black community. As mentioned before, the stage was the one of few places that Blacks could display their oratory talent, and considering Africans and African descendants' reliance on verbal culture and history it seems natural that theater and drama would develop to empower African Americans through speech.

Spelman's and Atlanta University's 1915-16 course catalog shows them also transitioning from using the outdated stigmatizing term elocution to course names like "Expression", which had the same description of elocution years before. Spelman replaced elocution with "Voice Training". In the 1940's, Marcus H. Boulware observed that black speech was not the "characteristic speech of the educated colored person", noting that college students were "responsive to the idea that they must learn to adapt their speech to that which prevails in the best professional, regional, or social situation<sup>121</sup>." Through Atlanta University's and

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<sup>120</sup> Bordelon, Suzanne. *A Feminist Legacy: the Rhetoric and Pedagogy of Gertrude Buck*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2011. pg. 27

<sup>121</sup> Boulware, Marcus H. "Speech Training in Negro Colleges." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1947, doi:10.1080/00335634709381344. Pg. 116

Spelman's course catalogs, we see that these actions had been taking place decades before Boulware's observation. During the time Boulware noted, Spelman's 1942-43 would offers "Voice and Diction" to establish "good habits of diction", but mostly courses aimed at stage and performance development as means of speech training. The development of drama may have been natural in African American curricula, and elocution was necessary in rising the social ranking. However, culturally white course material used at these black institutions of higher learning, which was so essential in the recreating and reinventing the images and ideas of blackness in America for Herndon, was definitely influenced by white cultural capital and promoted assimilation.

Differences giving rise to social distances are created and sustained symbolically through the practice of classifying and ranking.<sup>122</sup> The practice of elocution was the way that the white bourgeois classified and ranked and ultimately discriminate against Black English speakers.<sup>123</sup> The social distance that arise thereby are the fundament of the color line that segregates minorities and impedes assimilation.<sup>124</sup> Although many African Americans mastered the art of elocution, this did not grant them access to the upper tier of the social arena. No matter how much of the cultural patterns African Americans acquired from whites through acculturation, they were never fully structurally assimilated into white society. This proves that although acculturation may be achieved to a large degree, most social scientist do not see structural assimilation as similarly foreordained.<sup>125</sup> Defined as "entrance of the minority group into the social cliques, clubs, and instructions of the core society at the primary group level", structural

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<sup>122</sup> Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration Richard Alba; Victor Nee International Migration Review, Vol. 31, No. 4, Special Issue: Immigrant Adaptation and Native-Born Responses in the Making of Americans. (Winter, 1997), pp. 826-874. Pg. 838

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, pg. 838

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, pg. 838

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, pg. 830

assimilation is a more complete and holistic form of assimilation. Individuals may be structurally assimilated, but prejudices and discrimination can still be widespread.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, denial of the African American race as a whole trickles down even to the structurally assimilated individual. For example, Mary E. Webb and Adrienne Herndon were minority group members who achieved social mobility and gained economic parity, but as exception to the rule.<sup>127</sup> Such upwardly mobile individuals, often of mixed race such as Webb and Herndon, acquire a marginal status that gives them a modicum of privilege and respect, but they would never be fully accepted into the white bourgeois class. Although the denial of complete assimilation of the Blacks may seem as a disappointment to some, cultural enthusiasts might be grateful for the great magnitude of discrimination against Black English speakers, as it resulted in the opportunity for the development of cultural pluralist and nationalist approaches to define identity and culture for themselves.

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<sup>126</sup> Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration Richard Alba; Victor Nee *International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Special Issue: Immigrant Adaptation and Native-Born Responses in the Making of Americans. (Winter, 1997), pp. 826-874. Pg. 830

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 839

## The Black Power Movement

African Americans continued on an assimilationist track throughout the first half of the twentieth century. However the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 70s introduced a new wave of politicized and cultured voice of African-Americans. The Black Power Movement was based on solid foundations in black culture, and both pluralists and nationalists contributed to the ongoing work of the Black Power Movement<sup>128</sup>. Until the 1960's there was no widespread unified support of African American Vernacular English. However, unlike the the earlier twentieth century when only so few blacks were able to advocate for their race, African Americans in many different fields of profession had found their places in society to preserve, practice, and petition for African American rights, culture, and values during the Black Power Movement. Black people gained access to cultural and political platforms, and worked through pluralist and nationalist frameworks to achieve their goals. Black leaders, educators, and performers would show how they valued Black speech despite the fluctuating cultural capital replaced the vernacular by the dominant white culture of America.

### *Black Speech in the Cultural Arena*

The linguistic heritage of the African American race exhibited itself interestingly in the Black Arts Movement, which emerged in the wake of the Black Power Movement as its sister. Having declared the oppressor's aesthetic to be clinically dead, Black Arts writers abandoned proper literary style, creating their own communicative medium.<sup>129</sup> Instead of white or

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<sup>128</sup>William L. VanDeburg, *New Day in Babylon the Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993.

pg. 12

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, pg. 12

reappropriated forms of art, during the Black Power era everybody was “talkin ‘bout *Soul*”<sup>130</sup>. Musical tributes were given to Soul Power, and to the Soul Brother and Soul Sisters, most visibly infused with “Soul Pride.”<sup>131</sup> Both black and white musical groups sang about the joys listening to a Soul Serenade, leaving entranced whites longing to get down with the “nitty-gritty” and become one of the Soul People.<sup>132</sup> However, while they tried to become one of the Soul People whites were content to boogaloo blindly to the beat, while Blacks listened to the empowering message in the songs.<sup>133</sup> The lyrics of the soul songs compromised a veritable lexicon of mid-sixties street talk and slang. Black performers imploring the audiences to “get down” , “tell it like it is”, “dig it”, sought to establish a rapport based upon shared linguistic understanding and in-group dialogue, inextricably connected to other forms of urban black folk expression.<sup>134</sup> Transcending the medium of entertainment, soul music provided a ritual in song with which blacks could identify and through which they could convey important in-group symbols. To some it was the poetry of the black revolution.<sup>135</sup> Poets, in fact, captured the flavor of black American speech- its sound, rhythms, and style- in verses that were written for performance.

While some white participants had blind ambitions in their indulgence of Soul music, select colloquialisms were “borrowed” by other outsiders, filtered through public culture, and eventually treated as part of the public domain.<sup>136</sup> Hoping to win the loyalty of black consumers, advertisers claimed that Eve menthol cigarettes could “cool a stone fox;” that L&M Super Kings tasted so good they were “Super Bad;” and that one sip of Johnnie Walker Red Label could

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, pg. 205

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, pg. 205

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, pg. 205

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, pg. 205

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, pg. 216

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, pg. 205

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, pg. 216



convince any whiskey drinker that “Red is Beautiful too.” Even the U.S. military eventually climbed on this new marketing bandwagon with ads informing prospective recruits that, “You can be Black and Navy too” because the Navy “lets you do your own thing.<sup>137</sup>” African Americans witnessed the passage of black talk from the streets of Harlem to the Manhattan offices of account executives and then on to the sound stages of Hollywood and into mainstream society<sup>138</sup>.

In this manner, commercial exploitation of black Vernacular shows the difference in cultural capital that is placed on the African American Vernacular at the convenience of whites. One minute they were bad mouthing the black vernacular as a social deficit-- part of the supposedly pathological “culture of poverty” -- and the next they were slurring their syllables and “gettin’ down” in a vain attempt to be “with it.<sup>139</sup>” The appropriation of black speech by the average white citizen, white entertainers, advertisers, and social and political actors placed high cultural capital in the use of AAVE for topics pertaining to mere enjoyment, servitude, or consumption. However, in any other context, Black speech and culture was still deemed unacceptable and distasteful.

To preserve essential elements and prevent whites opportunists from taking advantage of the once “hidden” language, black artists made the black vernacular a moving target-- frustrating and confusing whites by refusing to play by the rules of assimilationist gamesmanship.<sup>140</sup> If there were rules to preserve the linguistic distinction, it would consist of pluralist and separatist ideals such as:

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, pg. 217

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, pg. 217

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, pg. 222

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, pg. 219

1. Alter the meaning of Standard English words and phrases, placing them in a black controlled context whenever possible, for example, disregarding the deprecatory connotation of the word “nigger”. Do not disregard the word itself, as it is capable of conveying either sentiments of hostility or of fondness between soulful people under the proper nuance and context.
2. Abandon the use of a term if it consistently has been misused, skewed, and made part of the whites’ “rhetoric of oppression”.
3. Avoid white folks’ hang ups with diction. If they insisted on saying “my” instead of “mah”, “your” instead of “yo”, or man instead of “maee-yun,” let them. But don’t copy their style.
4. Define white people just as they have defined you. Use names they wouldn’t be caught dead using themselves like blue eyed devil, cracker, The Man, redneck, beast, Chuck.
5. Employ a judicious amount of violent and/or profane language in oral expression. Like “soul” itself, impassioned speech conveys genuine emotions. Besides profanity always frustrated and confuses mainstream print and broadcast editors.
6. Reform literary expression. Spell Phonetically. Capitalize “We” and use a lower case I to emphasize that community is more important than the individual.
7. Finally, never never allow non blacks to define key concepts such as freedom integration, or Black Power for you. Why not? If you don’t know, you either haven’t been paying enough attention or you are one of “them.”<sup>141</sup>

These bases helps separate black linguistic practices from whites’ and to preserve linguistic distinctions. They also give advice on how blacks should maintain their racial confidence when speaking among whites. Abandoning skewed vernacular vocabulary, violent and profane language, and implementing white racial slurs in the reappropriated speech disinvites whites to the lexicon of blacks. Conversely, the adaption of the use of the word “nigger”, emphasis on “We”, dismissal of white diction and definitions helps to build a unified language and mentality between African-American communities. African-American artists’ separatist, yet pluralist approaches to preserve their vernacular and enrich their community linguistically exhibited a level of autonomy and pride not previously attained. Hence, the exclusionary power of cultural

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid, pg. 186

capital was placed on black speech from within the black community, taking power from the exploitive white community. Unfortunately, the battle of cultural capital placed on black speech in the cultural arena would be more formidable in the political arena of speech.

### *Black Speech in the Political Arena*

Black political pluralists and nationalists focused on many issues stifling the black community, including problems of speech and linguistics. Both pluralist and nationalists recognized that language was an indispensable vehicle for the transmission of a social more<sup>142</sup>. To achieve a social more, these political nationalists and pluralists saw community control as an important factor. It was a thin line that divided pluralist from nationalist on the issue of community control. During the Black Power years, this narrow demarcation was crossed so many times as it became muddied and indistinct.<sup>143</sup> However, the end resolution diverged greatly, and is represented through the approach they took to battle the dominant cultural capital of standard English.

Pluralists concentrated their efforts in an area broadly defined as community control.<sup>144</sup> They hoped to generate Black Power within the economic, educational, and political institutions of their communities. Noting the civil rights movement's lack of success in alleviating the problems of de facto segregation, many blacks saw little hope of improving their lot without altering power relationships within the existing system- a system over which they had little influence.<sup>145</sup> Angry blacks saw existing establishments as "neo-colonization of non white human

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, pg. 219

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, pg. 129

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, pg. 112

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, pg. 114

capital.<sup>146</sup> Black urbanites began to organize within their neighborhoods, working to completely reorient the institutions that were most central to their daily living. They sought to bring schools, hospitals, and government agencies closer to the people by atomizing existing centers of power.<sup>147</sup> Pluralists negotiated a viable existence for themselves through self-directed action, hoping that subgroups within the body politic should be allowed to exercise as much self-rule as possible. They also rejected the notion that community control was a separatist program, believing instead that the government should be kept as close to the people as possible.<sup>148</sup>

Pluralists tended to focus on African-American vernacular as an issue concerning education. Because the schools were structured to meet white needs, black students were treated as if they were out of place. The traditional melting pot approach had emphasized similarities and downplayed differences. Educators had to recognize that schools which promoted cultural homogeneity could not adequately meet the needs of students growing up in multicultural society.<sup>149</sup> Given their determination to to define both self and society in their own terms, they questioned how much longer African-Americans would continue to accept the imposition of “standard English” in inner city classrooms. For some, supplementary African language study provided the necessary psychological and cultural distancing from white linguistic imperatives. But for others not even this would suffice. Claiming that “the masses of black people have never spoken the European’s languages,” they demanded that “black English” be recognized as the lingua franca of the black nation.<sup>150</sup> They desired separatism not for the sake of total political self-rule, but because of blacks neither wanted to be patronized nor dominated.<sup>151</sup> Black

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, pg. 215

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, pg. 115

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, pg. 116

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, pg. 121

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, pg. 222

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, pg. 117

pluralists wanted separation to establish their own cultural autonomy, while staying close to the government hoping to eventually assert power from the state and national levels. These approaches differed greatly from nationalist tactics.

Nationalists often were at debate over doctrine and strategy, but they all shared a common perspective of black fatalism. Among the three major factions of national camps, the territorial separatists, revolutionary nationalists, and cultural nationalist, none believed that there was any immediate prospect of blacks gaining significant decision-making power within white American institutions.<sup>152</sup> Nationalist would abandon all efforts to operate within a political system that they viewed as being inherently racist and irredeemably insensitive to human needs. Instead, they would adopt a political stance oriented toward the creation of an independent state or some still unspecified form of local self-government. Community control had grown fangs.<sup>153</sup>

In broad terms, different black nationalisms have been defined by a relationship to a dominant or notable area of emphasis: politics, economics, culture, and religion.<sup>154</sup> Black cultural nationalism has been broadly defined as the view that African Americans possess a distinct aesthetic sense of values, and communal ethos emerging from either, or both, their contemporary folkways and continental African heritage. This collective identity informs, from a cultural nationalist perspective, African Americans' historical and prospective mission and unique contribution to humanity.<sup>155</sup> Black nationalists held African Americans as a race in the highest esteem, but they recognized that there was much work to be done in African American communities. Nationalist leaders saw their role as a "duty to lead the way on a new path, to

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, pg. 130

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, pg. 130

<sup>154</sup> Brown, Scot. *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism*. New York University Press, 2003.

pg. 6

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, pg. 6

restore order to the chaos of acculturation and bring their subjugated people back to life”, and identified cultural restoration as a mandate for African American liberation.<sup>156</sup> They declared that you must have a cultural revolution before the violent, political, economic, and social revolution, situating culture as the pivotal factor that gives identity, purpose, and direction to meaningful, larger change.<sup>157</sup> Full membership into nationalist groups often required the complete acceptance of an alternative cultural lifestyle, consisting of a change of dress, mannerisms, and entire social life of a given member that was extremely different from that of mainstream African American culture.<sup>158</sup>

Those who did not accept the nationalists’ ways of life, including the adoption of the Pan-African language, Swahili, were seen as exhibiting the general backwardness of mentality plaguing African-Americans. The use of non-Western languages in the course of nation building spoke directly to nationalists’ postcolonial need to replace the domination-laden lexicon of the colonial era.<sup>159</sup> The black nationalist Ron Everett, later known as Maulana Karenga began teaching Swahili to African Americans in an adult education class in Los Angeles in 1964. Swahili, had a special appeal to him and eventually to other African American cultural nationalists, as it is a “Pan-African language” spoken across a broad range of ethnicities and regions throughout eastern and central Africa. The benefits of blacks learning Swahili worked in tandem with arguments presented by continental African supporters of pan-Africanism’s search for an African lingua franca to accommodate strides toward economic and political unification.<sup>160</sup> Position statements made at the Second Congress of African Writers held in Rome in 1966 called

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid, pg. 13

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, pg. 23

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, pg. 23

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, pg. 16

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, pg. 11

for a continent wide adoption of a single African language, Swahili.<sup>161</sup> Black nationalists abandoned the English language in a whole, even dismissing African American vernacular as a means to cope with the cultural exclusion from white America. The movement in support of Swahili persisted well into the 1970s and brought together a diverse body of African intellectuals, but it would never gain enough momentum to alter the nation.

Lack of government support, lack of community support, financial issues, being silenced. There were many reason that nationalists' and pluralists' vision could not fully manifest in the United States. The main reason was that they went against the “melting pot”/assimilationist version of America envisioned for all ethnicities and races. Seeing that pluralism threatens the existence of the pre-existing cultural norms intended to transcend all differences and assimilate Americans into one middle-class white blend, it shatters the forced commitments between the dominant white group and minorities in America.<sup>162</sup> Such a strong, nationalized stance against standard English and white norms would surely make it more difficult in the future for blacks to assert their cultural identity in other media and platform, except mainstream. As a result, it threatened the pre-existing dominant white standards of speech and language, and prompted a hostile reception of similar black proposals in the decades following. As it can be seen through American history, whites have striven mightily to make proud, self-directed blacks invisible.<sup>163</sup> In the following decade African-Americans would receive much backlash as they attempted to implore policies and curricula in educational systems that included Black English.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, pg. 11

<sup>162</sup> Maxine Greene. “The Passions of Pluralism Multiculturalism and the Expanding Community.” *Educational Researcher*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1993, pp. 13–18., doi:10.3102/0013189x022001013. p. 251

<sup>163</sup> VanDeburg, *New Day in Babylon*, pg. 15

## The Oakland Ebonics Controversy of 1996-97

Just forty years ago, debates on the subject of AAVE surfaced very publicly. The summer of 1979 became heated when controversy over the ability of Ann Arbor, MI schools to identify the use of “Black English” amongst African American children and their lack of proficiency in Standard English was addressed and settled in federal court. When a group of highly concerned and active African-American mothers sued the local Ann Arbor, MI school board in federal court for failing to recognize that their elementary school aged children used, “black vernacular, thus denying them equal educational opportunity<sup>164</sup>”, the national attention of many educators and political actors were turned to the problem of black speech and African American illiteracy. Under the protection of the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974, which outlawed discrimination against faculty, staff, and students on accounts of race, sex, religion or nationality, and required educational agencies to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs,<sup>165</sup> these black mothers’ lawsuit demanded the court to intervene on the children's behalf and require the defendant School District Board to take appropriate action to teach them to read in the standard English of the school and of the commercial world.<sup>166</sup> Clearly, the ultimate goals of the Ann Arbor black parents were assimilationist.

Throughout the lawsuit, investigations in the educational process of the plaintiffs’ children revealed that the students and teachers communicated with oral efficiently using

<sup>164</sup>*EBONICS*, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm). Pg. 2

<sup>165</sup>“20 U.S. Code § 1703 - Denial of Equal Educational Opportunity Prohibited.” *LII / Legal Information Institute*, [www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/1703](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/1703).

<sup>166</sup>*The Ann Arbor Black English Case MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., ETC. v. Ann Arbor Sch. Dist., 473 F. Supp. 1371 (1979)*. University of Illinois, [www.english.illinois.edu/~people/~faculty/debaron/380/380powerpoint/ebonics.pdf](http://www.english.illinois.edu/~people/~faculty/debaron/380/380powerpoint/ebonics.pdf), Slide 2



Standard English. However, students' inability to read on grade level was due to the fact that the Ann Arbor school district did not acknowledge the fact that faculty and staff were "requiring a student to switch from Black English, the home language of the children, to Standard English without even recognizing that he or she switching impedes the learning of reading standard English<sup>167</sup>". At the close of the case, on July 12, 1979, seeing that they could not find evidence of the Ann Arbor School Board taking actions to ensure that "Black English"-speaking students surpassed barriers that prevented equal participation were taken--which included helping the teachers understand the problem, helping provide them with knowledge about the children's use of a "black English" language system, and suggesting ways and means of using that knowledge in teaching the students to read<sup>168</sup>--that the federal court found in the mother's favor, and "without ordering any specific remedy said that there ought to be something done about that process<sup>169</sup>."

Considering the federal court's ruling one would think that plans committed to confront the issue of Black English speaking students' struggle to master standard English would be constructed and adapted for different school districts and communities throughout the nation. However, that was not the case. One of the reason may be because the Ann Arbor school could not explicitly link the children's improvement to resolution from the Ann Arbor decision. The Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School teachers noted that "the five black children who were at the center of the dispute seem to be doing better in school, but no one knows whether to credit the court decision, the extra attention they got or normal educational growth<sup>170</sup>." No matter

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, Slide 6;7

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, Slide 7

<sup>169</sup> *EBONICS*, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm). Pg. 2

<sup>170</sup> Fiske, E. B. "Education; Black English Debate Fades In Ann Arbor Where It Began." *New York Times*, 1981.

if due to the lack of positive evidence in or a lack of investment towards the special training of teachers in Black English or any other curricular adjustments to accommodate for Black English-speaking children following the Ann Arbor decision, public concern about Black English seems to have faded from the scene until the ebonics controversy of 1996-97.

Although nearly two decades had passed, the ebonics controversy of 1996-97 was very similar to the Ann Arbor case in some ways, except that the government was reticent to support black parents calling for curricular adjustments to Black English and there was more public criticism on a larger debate platform than in the 1970s. In December 1996, the Oakland Unified School District in California approved a resolution “recognizing the legitimacy of Ebonics and calling for teachers in the district to be better educated about the rules governing the variety, with the goal of improving the teaching of standard English to Ebonics speakers<sup>171</sup>”. Maxine Waters, Congresswoman and chairperson of the Congressional Black Caucus, held fast to the fact that “too many African-American children have been entering school year in and year out speaking different language patterns, something other than standard English”, which ultimately results in the obstruction of their ability to learn in ways that teachers would have them learn<sup>172</sup>. Speakers at the Congressional Session Hearing 105-20 pulled from a plethora of statistics to stress the fact that African American students underachieved academically compared to other racial groups and that there had to be underlying reasons for the matter. It is important to note that at the time the Oakland school district was the only one in California where black students were the majority<sup>173</sup>, making up 52 percent of one of the most diverse public school systems in the country<sup>174</sup>.

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<sup>171</sup>Weldon, T. L. “Reflections On The Ebonics Controversy.” *American Speech*, vol. 75, no. 3, Jan. 2000, pp. 275–277., doi:10.1215/00031283-75-3-275. pg. 275

<sup>172</sup>- *EBONICS*, www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm. Pg. 4

<sup>173</sup>“Oakland School Board Amends Ebonics Policy.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 16 Jan. 1997, www.cnn.com/US/9701/16/black.english/.

<sup>174</sup>- *EBONICS*, www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm. Pg. 13

According to the California State Department of Education, in the Oakland Unified School District, African-American students had a dropout rate of 7.6 percent, compared to 2.7 percent for whites, and that African-American students had an average grade point average of 1.8, the lowest of any racial or ethnic group<sup>175</sup>. Seeing the need to help black children bridge the gap between the language patterns that so many of them knew and standard English, Maxine Waters labeled the predicament an educational crisis, and the Oakland community sought new alternatives for bringing all black children into the educational and professional language mainstream by using new instructional strategies<sup>176</sup>, instead of ignoring language structures that prevented children from learning math, science, communications, and other subject which enhance their future prospects.<sup>177</sup>

### *Original Resolve*

The Oakland School Board set up a District African-American Task Force, whose focus was on African-American speech<sup>178</sup>, and after 18 months of research and recommendations, the school board moved to support policy statements from the Task Force and to make very bold claims that proved to be more detrimental in their cause than helpful. Firstly, the Oakland school board recognized that the English language acquisition and improvement skills of African-American students are as fundamental as is application of bilingual or second language learner principles for others whose primary languages are other than English<sup>179</sup>". This statement marked African-American students as equally disadvantaged as other bilingual students in the

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<sup>175</sup>Ibid. Pg. 6

<sup>176</sup>Ibid. Pg. 8

<sup>177</sup>Ibid. Pg. 6

<sup>178</sup> "8.53, Disc: Ebonics: Orig. Board Resolution Dec 12." *NAU Jan.ucc.nau.edu Web Server*, 12 Dec. 1997, [jan.ucc.nau.edu/jmw22/1stOaklandRes.html](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/jmw22/1stOaklandRes.html).

<sup>179</sup> Ibid

subject of English proficiency. Also, by recognizing the “existence and the cultural and historic bases of West and Niger-Congo African Language Systems, and that these are the language patterns that many African-American students bring to school<sup>180</sup>”, the Oakland School District Board labeled Ebonics a language in its own right. Considering the fact that they considered the primary language of the students to be the language of the home, this meant that Standard English was the secondary language of African American children and that African American Ebonic users were bilingual as well. The proponents of Ebonics seemed to operate from a pluralist view of language that recognized black speech as a distinct linguistic system.

Settled on the claim that Ebonics stands as its own language based on its historical African origins, the Superintendent sought to respect and embrace the “legitimacy and richness of the language patterns” associated with Ebonics, also identified as, “African Language Systems” or “Pan African Communication Behaviors<sup>181</sup>”. The intentions were to implement Ebonics in classroom training and instruction for the “purposes of facilitating the acquisition and mastery of English language skills<sup>182</sup>”.

The final, misconstrued resolve of the 1996 Oakland Ebonics Resolution was its use and request of federal funding. How the Oakland board’s standing on funding was mistaken is confusing because it clearly stated that its plans were to “ earmark District general and special funding as is reasonably necessary and appropriate to enable the Superintendent and her staff” to accomplish the task<sup>183</sup>. The idea that funds would be used towards African American students’ linguistic and literary needs in this fashion was not received well by many political and

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid

<sup>181</sup> Ibid

<sup>182</sup> Ibid

<sup>183</sup> Ibid

community actor in Senate and the Oakland school district. As a matter of fact, most of the original resolves were dismissed by the general population, as this controversy around Ebonics came to national attention. In the end, the Oakland Board came under heavy questioning for “first, whether ebonics is a language or a dialect of English; second, whether Federal funds earmarked for bilingual education should be made available for ebonics-based programs; and third, whether ebonics was to be taught in classes.<sup>184</sup>”

*Mis-Phrasing, Criticism, and Misunderstanding*

A “nationwide storm of criticism” is how one CNN news report described the frenzy that the Oakland Ebonics controversy was generating. However, the Oakland School Board did not stand alone in support of its plans. In January 1997, the Linguistic Society of America “concluded that the Oakland School Board decision is linguistically sound and a proper teaching method”, while many other linguists stated that Oakland’s Language Arts Curriculum and Instruction Implementation Plan was “credible, rational, and a potentially effective way to improve the academic standards of its students.<sup>185</sup>” Though the Oakland board resolve found some support on an institutional and community level, it was not enough to combat the barrage of criticism coming from all angles around the Ebonics issue.

Even leading African American figures expressed their concern, mostly about how the acceptance of Ebonics as a language and implementing its use in the classroom would affect the younger generation but some of these ultimately sided with the Oakland board. Maya Angelou argued that, “the very idea that African-American language is a language separate and apart

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<sup>184</sup> *EBONICS*, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm).

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 2

could encourage young black students not to learn standard English.<sup>186</sup> Maya Angelou's concern lay in the possibility of African American students rejecting standard English after the formal introduction of Ebonics in the class, thereby further delaying their grasp of standard English. Angelou understood that Oakland's implementation plan did not mean to teach Ebonics or replace Standard English with Ebonics, but to help African American student understand and master the English language through their understanding of the familiar Ebonic language patterns and syntax. Even Jesse Jackson came, who first described the Oakland board resolution as, "making slang talk a second language," "teaching down" to students, and "an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace"<sup>187</sup>, before coming to understand that "just as you go from Spanish to English, you must go from improper grammar (ebonics) to English"<sup>188</sup>. What was emerging were concerns about whether a pluralistic approach to AAVE would undermine or prevent assimilationist goals for black children.

Although Jesse Jackson realized the mistake in his interpretation of the Oakland Resolution intentions with Ebonics use, others never acknowledged the good that Ebonics were meant to do for African American students. The Oakland Board Resolution faced national opposition by other conservative states passing house bills that denounced Ebonics as illegitimate practice. On February 27, 1997, the Georgia state Senate passed a bill sponsored by Senator Ralph Abernathy III, an African American, saying, "No course of study which teaches Ebonics as a distinct language shall receive state funds"[Bill S.B. 51].<sup>189</sup> South Carolina's House passed a bill stating, "The teaching of Ebonics is prohibited in the public elementary and

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<sup>186</sup> *What Happened in Oakland? The Ebonics Controversy of 1996-97*. [www.english.illinois.edu/~people-/faculty/debaron/403/403mne/ebonics.pdf](http://www.english.illinois.edu/~people-/faculty/debaron/403/403mne/ebonics.pdf). Slide 16

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.* Slide 15

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.* Slide 28

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.* Slide 23

secondary schools of this State, and in the state-supported institutions of higher learning” [H.B. 3145].<sup>190</sup> These examples serve to illustrate the national opposition that the Ebonics controversy generally received. Both bills presumed that Ebonics will be taught or promoted in the classroom. These bills were unnecessary because the students did not have to be taught to use ebonics, seeing that they come to school using it. At the same time neither bill acknowledged the fact that Ebonics was intended to be an instructional tool that would propel student towards academic success and master of the English language. In other words, the goals of Ebonics supporters were always assimilationist. It is also important to note that the Georgia bill passing revealed the issue many conservative Representatives and Senators used to fight against the formation of the Ebonics program in Oakland--funding.

### *Funding*

During the time of the Ebonics controversy, about \$156.7 million in federal monies under Title 1 “for education for the disadvantaged” were being used towards the bilingual education program for “limited English proficient students” with \$598.4 million being sponsored by the Office of Education Research, which studies and evaluates innovative educational techniques, and another \$1.42 billion being assigned for school improvement programs “addressing the particular needs of each school district and finding innovative methods of learning”.<sup>191</sup> Even though the aim the Oakland School District Resolution seems to match with the stated purpose of the Title I funding, elected officials were highly opposed to the allocation of funding towards an Ebonics program.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid. Slide 23

<sup>191</sup> S. HRG. 105–20. *Ebonics. Hearing Before A Subcommittee on Appropriations United States One Hundred Fifth Congress First Session. 1997*, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm). Pg. 2

One angle of attack that officials took to weaken the stance of the Oakland resolution was to raise the notion that by establishing Ebonics as a separate language, the school district and Superintendent were trying to acquire extra federal bilingual funding. Richard Riley, Secretary of Education, issued a statement on December 24, 1996 after the submission of the original resolve stating that “elevating black English to the status of a language is not our way to raise standards of achievement in our schools for our students”.<sup>192</sup> Riley’s statement is the predecessor to the bills passed by South Carolina and Georgia that presumed Ebonics would be raised to a level of a language intended to be taught and replace standard English, which was not the case. He continues to say, “It has been determined by the United States Department of Education and the Clinton administration that the use of Federal bilingual educational funds for what has been called black English for ebonics is not permitted.” At the January 23, 1997 Senate Hearing, Carolyn M. Gettridge, Oakland Unified School District Superintendent” found it most necessary to clarify that the Oakland district had not requested state or federal funds for their purpose of implement district wide reforms which guarantee all of our students the opportunity for academic success, and were fully committed to the reallocation of current resources to fund a comprehensive array of strategies to achieve their cause.<sup>193</sup> However, it seems that this point never became clear as Senator Specter found the need to continue to question Ms. Gettridge in such manners:

Senator SPECTER. Thank you very much, Senator Craig.

Before turning to the next panel, Ms. Gettridge, I would like to ask you just one more question about a bit of your testimony where you said that none of

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<sup>192</sup>Ibid. Pg. 2

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. Pg. 9



the Federal funds were used on this program. Do you segregate the funds?

You do receive title I funds and other Federal funds in a variety of ways, do you not?

And Ms. Gettridge responds as follows:

Ms. GETRIDGE. “My comment was that we have not requested State or Federal funds for this purpose. The standard English proficiency program does include some use of title I funds on a school site basis. Those decisions are made by the School Site Councils at the respective schools as a part of their overall planning process. The decision as to whether or not these resources are appropriate for those students is made at the local level<sup>194</sup>”.

After the criticism, ridicule, and insinuation of Ebonics being used as a gimmick to obtain additional federal and state funding diminished, these attacks had the effect of tainting the bold, courageous goals of the Oakland school board.

### *Amendments*

It was, in fact, at the January 23, 1997 Senate Hearing where a full amendment of the original Oakland Resolution was presented. After facing the massive national opposition to the original Oakland Ebonics resolution, the school board and Task Force found themselves retracting many of their original bold claims towards Ebonics and providing clarity for some of the issues raised with the original proposal. Addressing the three major issues from the original resolution, the amendment modified the previous stance on Ebonics. First, what the Task Force and district board described as a speech pattern that is “genetically based” now was seen

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<sup>194</sup>Ibid. Pg. 58

to “have origins in” African language. Second, the definition of “primary language” was clarified to strictly mean the language a child brings from home. Lastly, the phrase “instruction in their primary language” was replaced with the intended meaning of “to move students from the language pattern they bring to school to English proficiency<sup>195</sup>”. The intention of the amended resolution was to plainly express that the Oakland school district did not want teachers to teach ebonics, “but to employ “*instructional* assistants, who are certified in the methodology of African Language Systems principles used to transition students from the language patterns they bring to school to English<sup>196</sup>”. In other boards, the Task Force was now making clear that assimilation to Standard English was the preeminent goal behind the recognition of Ebonics. Oakland’s amendment also set critical points of strategy to improve, not only students’ English proficiency, but their overall academic achievement so that they could enter college and the world of meaningful, well-paying, mainstream work. The board program aimed to:

- Set high standards for English language proficiency and link together effective instructional practices in a comprehensive program;
- Enhance and broaden early childhood education programs which have a nationally demonstrated positive educational return for the dollars invested;
- Actively recruit minority teachers and strengthen the professional development for teachers;
- Organize parents and the community in ways that support high levels of student achievement; and
- Revise District procedures and services to reduce the number of African-American students in our Special Education classes, and increase the number of our Gifted and Talented classes.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup>Ibid. Pg. 11

<sup>196</sup>*What Happened in Oakland? The Ebonics Controversy of 1996-97.* www.english.illinois.edu/-people-/faculty/debaron/403/403mne/ebonics.pdf. Slide 16.

<sup>197</sup>S. HRG. 105–20. *Ebonics. Hearing Before A Subcommittee on Appropriations United States One Hundred Fifth Congress First Session.* 1997, www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-105shrg39641/html/CHRG-105shrg39641.htm. Pg. 12

It is important to be thorough in an analysis behind the motive and objectives of the 1996-97 Oakland School Districts Ebonics Resolution because an examination of the intentions of Oakland and the criticism of Oakland exposes the essence of the underlying roots of the opposition. In the end, what could have been a “radical, separatist move shifted to a conservative, assimilationist one, as in Oakland retracted its declaration of linguistic independence and reaffirmed the traditional pedagogical goal of teaching students standard English<sup>198</sup>”. Some may argue that the Senate and Representatives were mostly opposed because they felt the resolution was a maneuver to allocate extra bilingual federal and state funding, which tarnished the board’s position in the public view. Others would argue that the resolution failed because it was too radical and sparked concern in even some teachers and administrators, causing them to adopt their opponents’ outlook towards the ebonics resolution. The conservative public view prevailed--one that focuses, in the end, not on the language students bring to school.<sup>199</sup> Regardless, “the Oakland Ebonics controversy reminds us that, although the English of former British colonies has come into its own in the literary, cultural, and political scene, to the point where we speak of World Englishes, the English varieties of what may be regarded as internal colonies, inner cities and the socially disenfranchised, continue to be stigmatized by speakers of more esteemed varieties”<sup>200</sup>, and ultimately that is the reason the Oakland Ebonics Resolution failed.

*Speech as Cultural Capital*

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid. Slide 2

<sup>199</sup> Ibid. Slide 42

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. Slide 4

The Senate and House used their cultural capital, of a “dominant” culture in fact, to discredit and disapprove Ebonics in institutions, while asserting that African American students’ academic underachievement were held on account of a difference in ability, and not cultural. Because exclusions of different social classes are seen by high status classes as matters of working and low class members’ ability or competence, instead as matters of cultural resources transmitted by their associated class, “social transmissions of privileges are legitimized”.<sup>201</sup> In fact, behaviors representing social transmissions of privileges have been legitimized and perpetuated since the times of slavery, yet African Americans have always strived for not only literacy, but eloquence on par or finer than those members of high social status. Marcus H. Boulware observation that black speech was not the “characteristic speech of the educated colored person”, reiterates that black college students learned to adapt their speech to that which prevails in the best professional, regional, or social situation. For that reason, Historically Black Colleges and Universities introduced speech departments and oral English departments in their curriculum and course catalog throughout the early-twentieth century. My earlier focus on the introduction of speech departments in HBCUs in the early twentieth century and the rationale for them expressed by their founders, using Andrienne Herndon as an example, showed how cultural capitalism affected Black speech in ways that the Ebonics controversy of 1996-97 repeated on a national, political platform.

The first attempt to teach AAVE in Ann Arbor during the 1970s probably reflected the cultural nationalism that gained ground in the African-American community of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Becoming conscious of the African American linguistic heritage that conflicted

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid. Pg. 155

with Standard English taught in the classroom, black parents saw the need to nationalize the vernacular. However, the Ann Arbor parents fell short of following through on strict cultural nationalism. Instead, what they suggested was a modified form--temporary pluralism for the sake of long-term assimilationism. Although, their dedication to Ebonics was stronger in the Oakland Ebonics controversy, this pluralist to assimilationist approach was repeated in the Oakland Ebonic case. Although these cases outcomes were not very progressive in black's rise above their racial issues and oppressive white cultural capital, the Ann Arbor case and Oakland case show the possible role that education can play in the cultural recognition of AAVE and alleviating black from speech discrimination.

Linguistic anthropologists have made "education," with its implicit assumption of a confrontation with "ignorance," their central antiracist strategy<sup>202</sup>. What Ebonics advocates rarely consider is that to argue that black children are barred from reading by their home dialect while children around the world sail effortlessly over similar or larger dialect gaps implies that black children are not very bright<sup>203</sup>. Researchers have frequently argued that second generation immigrants often “do better” than those born to native-born Americans, and attributes this success to the fact that the immigrants instill a drive and achievement orientation in the children that is not present in native-born Americans<sup>204</sup>. On the other hand, research also asserts that those in the second generation whose parental generation lacks the degree of social capital to provide opportunities and protection for them are likely to develop an “adversarial stance” that American minorities such as poor African Americans and Latinos hold toward the dominant white society.

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<sup>202</sup>Hill, Jane H. “Language, Race, and White Public Space.” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 100, no. 3, 1998, pp. 680–689. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/682046](http://www.jstor.org/stable/682046). pg. 680

<sup>203</sup> Filmer, Alice Ashton. “African-American Vernacular English: Ethics, Ideology, and Pedagogy in the Conflict between Identity and Power.” *World Englishes*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2003, pp. 253–270., doi:10.1111/1467-971x.00295. p. 264

<sup>204</sup> Butterfield, Sherri-Ann P. “Something in Between: Locating Identity among Second-Generation West Indians.” *Mighty Change, Tall within: Black Identity in the Hudson Valley*, edited by Myra Beth Young Armstead, State University of New York Press, 2003. p. 237

This adversarial stance stresses that discrimination in the United States is very strong and devalues education as a vehicle of advancement<sup>205</sup>. Therefore, it should come as little surprise that as a people whose linguistic and cultural creativity has been historically marginalized and whose participation as full citizens of a purportedly democratic society has been legally disenfranchised or otherwise discouraged for generations, many speakers of AAVE want nothing to do with SAE<sup>206</sup>. In many poor and underdeveloped communities, African-Americans have been raised to reject and undermine the notion of most things associated with white cultural capital, including school and other educational opportunities, while other “black” ethnic immigrants and second-generations come to America with a “go-get-it” mentality. While some immigrants identify with native born black Americans, it is important to note that blacks’ rejection of American values do not stem from a generation or two, but from centuries of slavery, oppression, and exclusion. Therefore, using AAVE could act as a method of giving African-Americans that “go-get-it” attitude academically.

What black student must come to understand is acquiring the ability to function in a dominant white discourse does not need to mean that one must reject his home identity and values, for discourses are not static, but are shaped, however reluctantly, by those who participate within them<sup>207</sup>. Educators and leaders could assist black student to come to this understanding by recognizing that cultural representation in the classroom could create a new mentality and experience for black and minority children towards education. It could be the catalyst that inspires high academic achievement. It is important to remember that AAVE was

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, p. 239

<sup>206</sup> Filmer, Alice Ashton. “African-American Vernacular English: Ethics, Ideology, and Pedagogy in the Conflict between Identity and Power.” *World Englishes*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2003, pp. 253–270., doi:10.1111/1467-971x.00295.p. 264

<sup>207</sup> Ibid, p. 267

intended to do more than transition black students to standard English during the time of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Hallie Quinn Brown. Dunbar and Quinn aimed to preserve the history and moral lessons of African Americans by exploring their linguistic heritage. They hoped that implementing black speech into their poetry, recitations, and educational curricula would heighten social consciousness. Educators today should wonder if AAVE could instill a passion for English Language Arts and history within the African-American race that would also impact their performance in math, sciences, and the arts. Cultural representation could work to diminish the generations of African-American resentment and rejection of institutions of white cultural capital. Standard English should serve as the common national language, and that should be represented in schools. However, AAVE should be recognized and manifest as a supplement tool of comparison and relatability for the African-American community and other minorities to help them learn, and love to learn. This pluralist approach would work better than a strictly assimilationist and nationalist approach. It speaks most realistically to Americans maintaining cultural difference, while providing the means for them to operate in a white society without feeling the need to resent or separate from institutions that discriminated against black cultural capital.

## Epilogue- The New Black English Poets

In 2016, after a three-year period of incarceration, the East Atlanta rapper, Gucci Mane, booked his return concert at Atlanta's grandest venue, the Fox Theatre, which holds nearly five thousand seats, all of which sold soon after the concert was announced. "Wsappenin'," he said, grinning as he walk on the stage. "It's Gucci, bitch!" Then beat dropped, but for a few minutes he barely rapped, patrolling the stage while the crowd shouted his lyrics back at him<sup>208</sup>. He along with other popular artists like T.I. and Young Dro helped establish "Trap Music" as an eventually multi-billion dollar genre of hip-hop. "Trap" refers to drug houses, defining trap music as the form of rap that spawned from within them. His lyrics reflect the crime, drugs, addictions, and incarceration that he faced in real life. He expresses that pain and struggle of operating within a racist environment. On the other hand, his success reflects the the aspirations of many black individuals, as Gucci also talks about entrepreneurship, economic independence, and even sobriety after his latest release from prison. Even better, Gucci Mane would speak all of his truths in African American vernacular and dialect. To his audience, and on his tracks, Gucci would deliver his words in an unhurried slur: his warm Southern accent and peculiar enunciation soften the percussive force of his syllables, as if he were drumming with brushes. For example, a hard word like "straight" might come out as something gentler: "shkray." The combination of menace and whimsy that characterize him as a performer and person, turned Gucci into something more than a fairly popular rapper: he became a folk hero, the kind of performer who is almost as much fun to talk about as to listen to<sup>209</sup>.

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<sup>208</sup>Sanneh, Kelefa. "Out of the Trap: Can Gucci Mane Survive His Legacy." *THE NEW YORKER*, 15 Aug. 2016.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid



Hip-hop in 2017 was certainly no stranger to academia. New courses on Georgia college campuses covering the trap and OutKast emerged. Migos members, Quavo and Takeoff, also subjected themselves to two hours of Q&A at NYU, claiming they did it for the *CULTURE*. However, at home in their current cultural capital, hip-hop and trap music do not delve deeply enough to reckon with such systemic failures such as an Atlanta Public Schools cheating scandal that has left behind a whole generation of students; an income inequality gap ranked No. 1 in the nation by the Brookings Institute two years in a row (2014-2015); and an upward mobility deficit that determines metro Atlanta children have a smaller chance of moving out of poverty than those born on the bottom rungs of any other major urban region in the country, according to the Harvard University-backed Equality of Opportunity Project<sup>210</sup>. These deterrent to black success contributed to the rise of the “Traplanta” Movement. It is a direct reflection of the inequality that we keep hearing about in the nation: the lack of equity, the lack of inclusion, the income differential that we see between those who have and those who have not.

Increasingly, outsiders are embracing the culture. But closer to home, Traplanta is saddled with too much of the same racial baggage and class exclusion that criminalizes the music in the eyes and ears of many in power. However, Atlanta City Councilman Kwanza Hall recognize that, "We're creating a culture that's going all around the world." "So consequently, we have influence," he continues, "How we leverage that influence could mean economic opportunity or it could mean strife and civil war. It's that powerful."<sup>211</sup> Generation X rappers of the 1980's and Hip-Hop Nation rappers of the 1990's lacked the support of a national movement

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<sup>210</sup> Rodney Carmichael, "Culture Wars." *NPR*, NPR, 15 Mar. 2017, [www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/03/15/520133445/culture-wars-trap-innovation-atlanta-hip-hop](http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/03/15/520133445/culture-wars-trap-innovation-atlanta-hip-hop).

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*

to provide a cohesive political framework, such as that which emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, leaving rappers grappling with the contradictions that they lack the political experience to create solutions.<sup>212</sup> Considering the accumulation of cultural capital that Atlanta artists like Gucci Mane, Outkast, T.I., and Migos have accumulated on the cultural stage, it is interesting to imagine how the leverage gained on the cultural stage could change the current political situations if back with a national movement of black consciousness.

The communicative practices of hip-hop are firmly rooted in the African American speech community. The rich history of black English and more recently, the heavy influence of hip-hop culture has created a strong connection and code of communication for members of its speech community, and beyond.<sup>213</sup> It is improbable that most of Gucci Mane's July 2016 Fox Atlanta audience was black. Even with the back-and-forth between Gucci and the crowd, it is also improbable that participants know the history and moral lesson in the language that they regurgitate back to the performer. Black English is America's only English dialect that combines being strikingly unlike standard English, centuries old, embraced by an ever wider spectrum of people, and represented in an ever-growing written literature<sup>214</sup>. The question is how could the recognition of black English, as it resonates with so many people across class and racial divides, play its part in political and educational systems to undo the ills that continue to inflict the black community. It would be marvelous if the new generation could learn of heroes of the past through the shared linguistic heritage linking old heroes to modern day folk heroes like Gucci Mane. The ways Gucci Mane's profane and violent language relates to the 60's and

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<sup>212</sup>Geneva Smitherman, "The Chains Remain the Same': Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Sept. 1997), Pg. 21

<sup>213</sup>Jackson, Kanika Nicole, "Speaking the part - is black english in the workplace a detriment to climbing the corporate ladder? a sociolinguistic study regarding black english in the workplace" (2011). Wayne State University eses. Paper 124. P. 28

<sup>214</sup>McWhorter, John H. *Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths about America's Lingua Franca*. Bellevue Literary Press, 2017. Pg. 167

70's cultural and political soulsters could inspire political teachings and action. Linking Gucci Mane's expressions as a black man facing discrimination and exclusion from society could introduce the black learner to the moral lessons and history of Gucci's forefathers, like Paul Laurence Dunbar. The benefits and lessons that black speech will provide for generations to come will only manifest and be fruitful if we face the future fearlessly opening our ears and hearts to the suppressed English vernaculars and dialects that exist today and may develop in the future.

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