

Geneva Smitherman: The Social Ontology of African-American Language, the Power of *Nommo*, and the Dynamics of Resistance and Identity Through Language

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It is ABSURD to assume, as has been the tendency, among a great many Western anthropologists and sociologists, that all traces of Africa were erased from the Negro's mind because he learned English. The very nature of the English the Negro spoke and still speaks drops the lie on that idea.

—LeRoi Jones

Every dialect, every language, is a way of thinking. To speak means to assume a culture.

—Frantz Fanon

The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

In order to illustrate the interpenetration between life and philosophy, I recently wrote a short and selective philosophical autobiography exploring my philosophical development (Yancy 2002).¹ In the chapter, I consciously decided to use the language of my *nurture* (African American Language), the linguistic expressions of my life-world, that language which helped to capture the mood and texture of what it was like for me to live within the heart of North Philadelphia, one of America's Black ghettos. After all, what other linguistic medium could I use to articulate the rhythm, the fluidity, the angst, the aesthetics of coolness, and the beauty involved in traversing those dangerous, challenging, and inviting ghetto streets? These streets were sites where style mattered, where respect was key, where blood was shed, where families were poor, weary, and often hopeless, where who you knew could save your life, and where you had to be bad, had to project that tough image in order to survive. Writing about the background of this existential space of anguish and hope, a background within which my philosophical self evolved, was no easy task. However, writing *in the*

language of my nurture not only helped me to remember much of what was "forgotten," but helped me to make "inroads against the established power-lines of speech" (Potter 1995, 58)

After having read my chapter, a white philosopher whom I admire came up to me at an American Philosophical Association (APA) conference and told me how he really enjoyed the piece and how he had not known so many intimate details about my life. He added: "I really enjoyed it, but why did you use *that language* [meaning African American Language]? You write very well [meaning in "Standard" American English]. You don't have to use that language to make your point." I listened in silence, realizing that he completely missed the point. Indeed, for him, African American Language was not a viable language, not a legitimate semiotic medium through which my life-world could best be represented. Rather, in his view, the language that I chose to use was slang, an ersatz form of communication that clearly should not have been used. By using African American English I had somehow fallen from the true heights of academic professionalism and broken the norms of respectable philosophy-speak. Indeed, perhaps he thought that I was being "too Black" in my speech, not white enough, not "proper" enough. As Frantz Fanon observed, "Nothing is more astonishing than to hear a black man express himself properly, for then in truth he is putting on the white world" (Fanon 1967, 36). Fanon's observations suggest deeper relationships that may exist between the function of language and a specifically racialized and racist philosophical anthropology. Again, Fanon observed:

The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real *human being*—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. I am not unaware that this is one of man's attitudes face to face with Being. A Man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power. (18, my emphasis)

Fanon's observations also contain profound implications for the specifically racial and cultural dimensions of philosophy-speak. Indeed, perhaps in the U.S. it is philosophy-speak that is "too white," creating a kind of dislocation for many Black folk who find it necessary to speak African American Language to communicate some subtle cultural experience or way of "seeing the world" philosophically. This does not mean that Anglo-American or European languages are inherently inadequate for expressing philosophical ideas *per se*; rather, the point is that these languages are presumed the normative media through which philosophy qua philosophy can best be engaged. It is the imperialist and, of course, colonialist, tendency of these languages that is being rejected. Nevertheless, in my chapter, it was not I who failed philosophy, but it was "Standard" American English—that dominant, territorial, imperial medium of philosophical expression in the U.S.—that failed to convey the logic, the horror, the humanity, the

existentially rank, the confluent, and the surreal realities embedded in my experiences in one of America's Black ghetto enclaves.

It is here that one might ask: "Are Anglo-American and European philosophical forms of discourse inadequate for re-presenting the complexity of Black experiences?" After all, not any form of discursivity will do. My experiences were in excess of what "Standard" American English could capture. Some forms of knowledge become substantially truncated and distorted, indeed, erased, if not expressed through the familiar linguistic media of those who have possession of such knowledge. In a passage rich with issues concerning the lack of power and effectiveness of "Standard" American English to capture the personal identity and personal experiences of a young Black boy, writer R. DeCoy asks:

How ... my Nigger Son, can you ever hope to express what you are, who you are or your experiences with God, in a language so limited, conceived by a people who are quite helpless in explaining themselves? How can you, my Nigger Son, find your identity, articulate your experiences, in an order of words? (quoted in Brown 2001, 59–60)

Regarding white philosophers (or even Black ones) who simply fail to understand the importance of African American Language as a rich cultural and philosophical site of expression, I believe that it is the job of knowledgeable and responsible Black philosophers—at least for those who are willing to admit that they speak both the Language of Wider Communication (or LWC) and the powerful vernacular shaped by African retentions and African American linguistic nuances—to invite them to enter African American semiotic spaces of discursive difference and overlap. We should keep in mind that being Black or African American in North America does not *ipso facto* mean that one is familiar with the subtle complexities and power of African American Language. After all, there are Black philosophers from middle-class (and lower-class) backgrounds whose linguistic assimilation of "Standard" American English, a form of cultural capital ownership and privilege, functions both as a badge of white acceptance and as an antidote for reducing white anxiety and fear. The invitation, though, should not be a plea, but an honest gesture to explore the language on its own terms. This is why it was so very important that this present article be written unapologetically in the language of my *nurture*: the medium had to be the message. Keep in mind that an invitation is not the same as a *forced* introduction. This was the situation that Blacks of African descent faced; they were forced to learn the language of the colonizer, forced to split, to multiply in so many different cultural, psychological, linguistic, and spiritual directions against their will. The fact that this article appears in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* invites a certain level of cultural and linguistic splitting on the part of

its readers, perhaps not very different from what is required when reading Kant or Heidegger, particularly given their penchant for neologism.

Let's be honest, articles that typically appear in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* have no doubt been written in "Standard" American English and by predominantly white male philosophers, philosophers who have been trained to engage in "proper" philosophical prose. I, too, can write in this language. To write in this language is to reproduce the professional culture of philosophy, to perpetuate lines of power, and to show that you have been "properly" educated and worthy of hire. Moreover, to engage in this discourse is to *perform* linguistically before an audience of gatekeepers who probably fear too much fat in their discourse, too much play, too much signifying, too much indirection, too much ambiguity, too much vagueness, too much concrete, everyday reality. Like African American Language within the larger context of "Standard" American Language, by appearing in this journal this article also enters into a space of established norms of linguistic propriety, calling into question and perhaps rupturing the authority of "Standard" philosophical prose, that *unhip* discourse of professional philosophers. Of course, having this article published in this journal could turn out to be a curse or a blessing. Realizing the degree to which "proper" philosophical discourse is required by philosophy journals, and how such discourse in turn shapes and legitimates philosophy journals, many readers of the journal may read the article with contempt. Some may approach the article as a piece of exotica. Some may even view my use of African American Language as a disgraceful "Stepin Fetchit" performance that does a disservice to Black philosophers who are all too eager to perform well in the presence of white power, to show the world that *we be* real philosophers because we speak the language of Mister Charlie. Then, of course, there are some philosophers who are open to creative possibilities, differences, and alternatives to hegemonic linguistic territorialism, who believe in plural experiences and multiple discourses for articulating them. It's here, of course, that I got to give props to my man JIS for being hip to the importance of multiple philosophical voices and the different and complex existential spaces within which they emerge. When the medium is the message, one has got to get wit da medium. It will take more than this article to create a significant impact on a certain linguistic-philosophical reference point that is buttressed by so much history and power, but the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* is a good place to begin, right in the midst of professional philosophy-speak. To best articulate that Black existential space where the *real* world (not that abstract possible world) is filled with pain, struggle, blood, tears, and laughter—where death follows a minute of joy, where so much is improvisatory and surreal, moving with the quickness, where the streets are hot, dangerous, and familial, where love is abundant and hate smiles in yo face, where melodic sounds fight to stay above the sounds of gunfire, where babies cry all night long, because mama done gone and hit the pipe, where a brotha gots to be down, where brothas be runnin game, talkin that talk, keepin it real,

and showin much loyalty—requires fluency in the language that partly grows out of the nitty-gritty core of the epistemology and ontology of that space.

It is my contention that African American linguist Geneva Smitherman is working within the rich situated practices of Africana philosophy and should be acknowledged as such. She is self-consciously aware of the metareflective analysis that is necessary to make sense of what it means for Black people to have forged an identity through the muck and mire of white racism. After all, Black folk were deemed inherently inferior, cultureless, without *Geist*. Yet, Black agency survived the tortuous African blood-stained water of the Atlantic. Like Jazz (with its improvisatory structure and chromatic form), the Blues (with its ontology of lyrically holding at a distance incredible pain and sorrow), and rap music (with its *phat* beats, lyrical braggadocio, and in yo face street reality), African American Language is a significant site of Black cultural innovation, syncretism, and survival, laden with situated epistemological insights. There is no other way to honor the work of Geneva Smitherman, to explore the "language-gaming" of everyday Black folk, without directly and unapologetically entering into the dynamic, rhythmic, ritual, and cognitive spaces of African American linguistic expressiveness.

Hence, from the very giddyup, that is, befo I bees gittin into some really dope cultural, historical, philosophical, and linguistic analyses, let's engage in a lil bit of naming and claiming. Word! The power of *Nommo*. Geneva Smitherman (a.k.a. Docta G) is an educational activist, a word warrior, a language rights fighter, a linguist-activist, and a linguistic democratizer. Can I get a witness? Yeah, that's right. She is the legitimizer of African American Language (AAL) (Smitherman 2001, 347). The shonuff sista from the hood who is cognizant of what it means to be a New World African, to be linked to that shonuff Black space of talkin and testifyin, stylin and profilin. AAL is the language of her nurture (343). She was, after all, baptized "in the linguistic fire of Black Folk" (Smitherman 1997, 242). Believe me, for if I'm lyin, I'm flyin, she knows the source of those deleted copulas ("The coffee cold"), those post-vocalic-r sounds ("My feet be *tied*," not "tired"), redundant past tense markings ("I likeded her," not "liked"), few consonant pairs ("Those tesses was hard," not "tests"), stylizations, and rhetorical devices.

Docta G operates within that unique African American space of performative "languageing," a space of agency, contestation, self-definition, poesis, and hermeneutic combat. She is all up in the cultural sphere of ashy knees, nappy hair, and how we be actin so saddity. Ah, yes, and she knows about the hot comb as a cultural artifact of self-hatred, a form of hatred instilled through the power of colonial white aesthetics. She *member* where she come from. She got no desire to front. Docta G's medium *is* the message. She avoids what linguist-philosopher John L. Austin refers to as the "descriptive fallacy," which involves the assumption that the main function of language is to describe things. Through the incorporation of AAL *flava* in her written works (and no doubt in

her lectures), Docta G is *doing something* with those words and phrases. Her writings, in short, are demonstrative enactments of the historical, stylistic, political, communicative, cognitive, and social ontological power of African American Language. Docta G is the lion who has learned how to write, how to narrate a counterhistorical narrative, and how to recognize and theorize a counterlanguage. A metalinguist, she is a cultural, ethical, and political theorist. If push comes to shove, she'll "choose goodness over grammar" (349). She knows that the politics of language policy is a larger question of the politics of reality construction, historical structuring of society, race, class, and Anglo-linguistic imperialism. As such, she moves between both the sociolinguists (who stress social and ethnic language) and the Cartesian or Chomskyan linguists (who stress "ideally competent" language). She knows that the right to speak AAL is a question of linguistic freedom, agency, and justice. A womanist, moving within that bold, self-assertive, and *we-affirming* space of sistas like Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman, Docta G is responsible, in charge, and serious. She's no prisoner of the academy; rather, she is existentially and politically committed to the Black community, its survival, and the continual actualization of its cultural generative force. Smitherman maintains that a womanist denotes an "African-American woman who is rooted in the Black community and committed to the development of herself and the entire community" (Smitherman 1996, 104). African American women, empowered by their womanist consciousness, were well-aware that white feminists had failed to critique, self-reflexively, the normativity of their own whiteness. Epistemologically, Black womanists occupied their own subject positions, positions that did not square with the theorizations of white middle-class women. You dig (Wolof: *dega*) what I'm sayin? Can I get an Amen?

Docta G, "daughter of the hood," raised in Brownsville, Tennessee, was culturally immersed in the rich locutionary acts of Black folk (Smitherman 2000, xiii). Y'all wit me? I'm pointing to the significant links between Docta G's biographical *location* and how this influenced her later theorizations about AAL. Consistent with feminist, womanist, social constructionist, and postmodernist insights, one's social location is a significant hermeneutic lens through which to understand one's theorizations. By emphasizing one's social location, one is able to avoid the obfuscating process of reification. As social constructionists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann maintain, "Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly suprahuman terms" (Berger and Luckmann 1995, 36). In short, the lived-context, as existential phenomenology stresses, is always already presupposed in relationship to epistemological claims.

Docta G, daughter of the Black ghetto, daughter of Reverend Napoleon, was an early witness to the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of a linguistically rich Black family, a sharecropping community, and a Traditional Black Church. For example, she knows the power of tonal semantics, a significant

feature of AAL that moves the listener through melodic structure and poignant rhetorical configuration. She relates that her father once expressed the following theme in one of his sermons: "I am nobody talking to Somebody Who can help anybody" (Smitherman 2001, 222). Geneva, monolingual and from the sociolinguistic margins, was well-aware of what it meant to be deemed a problem, to endure the pain of being told that her speech was "pathological," "wrong," "inferior," "bad," and "derelict." Having gone North (or was it simply up South?) where she attended college, Geneva had to pass a test "in order to qualify for the teacher preparation program" (1). Given the then oppressive and racist language policy, a policy that stressed the importance of teachers being able to speak the language of those who "carry on the affairs of the English-speaking people" (2), Geneva did not pass the speech test. Docta G explains:

We found ourselves in a classroom with a speech therapist who wasn't sure what to do with us. Nobody was dyslexic. No one was aphasic. There was not even a stutterer among us. I mean here was this young white girl, a teaching assistant at the university, who was just trying to get her Ph.D., and she was presented with this perplexing problem of people who didn't have any of the communication disorders she had been trained to deal with. (2)

Although Geneva eventually passed the test by simply memorizing the pronunciation of particular sounds she needed to focus on, she came to interpret this experience as key to stimulating her politico-linguistic consciousness. She relates that "it aroused the fighting spirit in me, sent me off into critical linguistics and I eventually entered the lists of the language wars" (3). Clearly, this experience created in Geneva a powerful sense of agency and praxis. On the strength! You know it. As Kenyan philosopher and literary figure Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues, "There is no history which is purely and for all time that of actors and those always acted upon" (Thiong'o 1993, 131). Uhm talkin bout a Womanist, Docta G. You know, the chief expert *witness* for the linguistic intelligence of Black children, the one who has made it her political project to challenge effectively the totalizing systems of Euro/Anglo-linguistic cultural normativity. You betta act like you know. She fightin against African American *linguistic* erasure. Naw, even more so, she fightin *for* African American hue-manity.

Docta G reveals that AAL is not some broken, ersatz sign system relegated to the confines of ghetto life; rather, AAL is the language of Black America (Smitherman 2001, 350). Docta G is up on it; she operates in that deeply deep space of African American signs and symbols, a semiotic space where individual words and phrases carry the weight of an entire world-view. As Frantz Fanon asserts, "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (Fanon 1967, 38). I'm talkin bout an entire life-world where folk gotta live under conditions of much oppression, at the bottom, where Black bodies and souls constantly struggle to move within a compressing and collapsing social cosmos.

Sendin out an S.O.S. call. There appears to be a blue shift in the Black existential universe. But as we move to the center of it all, to the heart and soul of these historicizing, proud Black people, we notice a dynamic process of reconstitution, reinterpretation, being, and becoming. We be a praxis oriented people who are defined by our communicative acts, our existential improvisatory modes of being, forms of world-making, and ways of re-narrating, over and over again, our historical and spiritual links to Africa and the Americas.

Toasts. Yo mamma! Some Baaaaad people we be. Coded language. Gangsta limp. Bloods and Crips. Lightin up that spliff. Yo, it's a Philly blunt! Catchin the spirit. Is it glossolalia or scatting? The Amen corner. Bench walkin preachers. "This ain no prayin church." "Naw, we a prayin church, Reb. Preach Brotha!" Call and response. Moans, shouts, and groans. All of these significations are capable of establishing a psychocognitive communal dynamic of shared cultural, religious, and intrapsychological meaningfulness (Smitherman 2001, 222). In the fields, in the storefront church, or from the lips of the Godfather of funk, it's all good. The sacred and secular always already organically fused. As Docta G notes, "It is, after all, only a short distance from 'sacred' Clara Ward's 'I'm climbin high mountains tryin to git Home' to 'secular' Curtis Mayfield's 'keep on pushin / can't stop me now / move up a little higher / someway or somehow'" (Smitherman 1977, 56). Tarrying all night long. Those Black bod-ies, forming a deep and harmonious *Mitsein*, will move and groove until the break of dawn. These Bluesified, Jazzified, funkified, spiritualized, and aestheticized sites of existence.

Damn she slammin! She's a brick. Uhm talkin bootylicious. Shakin that jelly. Ask Destiny's Child. Movin those hips. You know it didn't start with Elvis. Bootylicious! Aesthetics? Erotica? You tell me. I gots to come clean. Does the French naturalist Georges Cuvier fall within the same capha with Sir Mix-A-Lot? Baby Got Back. Steatopygia? Cuvier came with all his racist porno-tropes, gazing with those medical eyes that saw a collage of "abnormal" buttocks and genitalia. Big ups to Sarah Bartmann. They called her "Hottentot Venus." Josephine Baker knew how to *work it*. Sistas know *Cosmo* ain representin. Big ups to the sistas who realize that aesthetics is political. The Sistas got some high standards, too. They ain no skeezers. You know you gotta show respect. Industry funded, paid for images got U hooked, Brotha. Believein all that hype, throwin all that chedda, tryin to bling bling yo way to a piece of that pie. Do I see Cuvier behind yo gaze? Brothas gotta come real, his shit gotta be tight, no wack raps allowed. It ain all bout the benjamins! Is it Johnny Walker Red or a forty-ounce? Let's pour a lil bit for the brothas who ain heah. Singin doo-wop in some back ally. That's the way it usta be. Or rappin, freestylin, on some urban street corner. Even the Hawk, you know, Joe Chilly, don't stop these Brothas from talkin that talk. Yo, you gotta represent. The power of *Nommo* within these tight, fluctuatn, surreal, invitn and dangerous streets can save yo life. Ask Malcolm, not X, but Little. He was out there. You know, my man Detroit Red. He was tryin to make

that chedda. The trickster. You've got to be improvisational on these chocolate city streets, constantly in existential negotiation, takin no shorts. In these streets, somethin always bout to kick off. It's summahtime and brothas be rollin tough, posse-style. Many, they be frontin, though. Whether duping Mister Charlie, ole Massa, or The Man, Black folk be flippin the script. The power of improvisatorial negotiation. Thelonius Monk, he is a child of the first twenty Africans to arrive. The Middle Passage. Negotiating. Creating. Makin somethin outta nothin. Learning how to play those microtones and enact those microdisturbances of white hegemonic power. Black folk bees some BaddDDD people, all decked out in their marvelousness, their terribleness, contradictoriness, pains and pleasures. Ask DMX, he know WHO WE BE. From Africa to America, Black people bees tellin stories within stories. The African Griot. Field holler. A Blues song. A Jazz improvisation. Reb in the house! Revolutionary politico-poetics. Rap music. Big Momma's linguistic and paralinguistic style. And you know she got much Mother-wit. This is a complex, continuous, and contiguous historical capha. The power of *Nommo* as both constant and constative. Sonia Sanchez shonuff knows this; Larry Neal and surrealist Ted Joans *still* knows it; and Amiri Baraka's vociferations tell it all. Yo, Docta G, kick the ballistics:

The emergence of the Black Freedom Struggle marked a fundamental shift in linguistic consciousness as Black intellectuals, scholar-activists, and writers deliberately and consciously engaged in an unprecedented search for a language to express Black identity and the Black condition. (Smitherman 2000, 4)

The entire cadre of the Black Arts Movement knew a change had to come. This ain just braggadocio, though we can do that, too. You smell me? Hips in motion with some serious attitude. Deconstructed linearity. Cakewalking. Swingin (just to stay alive), bopping, grooving, hip hopping, and Harlem shakin. Cool and hot expressiveness ever so fused. Talkin shit. Sometimes wino-style. Richard Pryor had a comedic-dramatic feel for all this *marvelous* Black everydayness; he was all up in the *Lebenswelt* of Black folk. Playin some craps. Heah come the PO-ice! Multiple sites of keepin it real: the Amen corner, barbershops, hair salons, the safe space of the kitchen, pool halls, clubs, street corners, and back allies. Cell phones and pagers in this postmodern urban space. Boody call. "It's my shorty, I gotta go. Shoot some hoops later. Peace out." "Damn, dog. I think you must be whupped." These are the speech acts of everydayness, the lingua franca of so many of my peeps. But not everything is linguistically permissible within this space. Within the framework of speech act theory, there are definite *felicity conditions*. Black people be movin in that rich semiotic space, suspended and immersed in webs of meaning, as Max Weber and Clifford Geertz would say. You might ask, why the delineation of the above culturally thick, multiply semiotic, and intertextually rich streams? Answer: Docta G's work demands it! She writes:

In my own work, I have very consciously sought to present the whole of Black Life, and the rich continuum of African American speech from the secular semantics of the street and the basketball court to the talkin and testifyin of the family reunion and the Black Church. (Smitherman 2001, 8)

This cultural space is thick, hypertextual, protean, and diachronic. It is a cultural semiotic tale, a narrative force, told and lived by a people who, despite their horrendous experiences during the Middle Passage, the failures of Reconstruction, the presence of lynched Black bodies (or strange fruit), the water hoses, and "Nigger dogs" during the sixties, see it as they duty to keep keepin on, keepin their "eye on the sparrow," and gittin ovuh. That's right: *AND STILL WE RISE!* Docta G knows that "niggers is more than deleted copulas" (58). To get a clear sense of the diachronic structure of AAL, it is important to understand the historicity and dynamic remaking of African folk in racist America; indeed, there is the need to be fully cognizant of what America bees puttin Black folk through. As I have suggested, Docta G is hip to the particular forms of life of so many African Americans. She is all up in the epistemological, ontological, and cultural "language-gaming" of Black folk, from the pulpit, within the everyday urban and rural spaces of African American linguistic performativity, to the complexity and aesthetics of talkin shit, to rapese. She recognizes that it is not simply an issue of getting at the lexical core of what makes AAL unique and legitimate, but it is an issue of "whose culture?" and "whose values?" and "whose identity?" Peep the insightful lines where she elaborates, "The moment is not which dialect, but which culture, not whose vocabulary but whose values, not *I* vs. *I be*, but WHO DO I BE?" (66). It is a question of the axiological, linguistic, and cultural ontology of identity. But to get at "WHO DO I BE" involves moving beyond the discourse of pathology and what W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as our being defined as a *problem vis-à-vis* white folk. Therefore, Docta G is engaged in a project that is fueled by depathologization, celebration, and reclamation of African American humanity and identity. In sum, then, Ima have to continue writin a *responsible* article that captures the broad scope of what Docta G bees droppin.

At this juncture, I will briefly explore, in an expository, synthetic, and interpretive fashion, various aspects of Docta G's critical corpus: (1) the significance of the existentially terrifying journey from Africa, through the Middle Passage, and to the so-called New World, which will provide historical insight into the psycholinguistic rupture, though not resulting in a complete cultural severance, caused by the malicious regime of white racism; (2) the significance of *Nommo* or the Word for Africans in America, and how *Nommo* is linked to the protean and resistant/resilient power of African/African American identity; and, (3) the structure of AAL in terms of significant lexical, phonological, stylistic, and semantic features, and what this means in terms of resisting/combatting Euro/Anglo linguistic imperialism and hegemony.

Throughout Docta G's critical oeuvre she makes constant reference to 1619. For example, she notes:

The first cargo of African slaves to be deposited in what would become the United States of America arrived at Jamestown in 1619. From that point until the beginnings of the movement to abolish slavery in the nineteenth century, whites, by and large, perceived of America's African slave population as beasts of burden, exotic sexual objects, or curious primitives. (70)

In short, within the epistemological regime of white racism, these Africans were not *different*, but were deemed as constituting an *ontological deficiency* (71). "We are trapped," according to Docta G, "in our own historical moment and wish to understand that" (113). In order to understand this historical moment, however, and Docta G is well-aware of this, Black folk must understand their historical journey across space and time. It involves the narrative of Black folk's "unfinished business of what it means to be and talk like home" (Smitherman 2000, 113). Again, back to the connection between ontology, identity, and language. Docta G agrees with Fanon that white colonialism forces Black folk to question their sense of identity: "Who am I?" (Smitherman 2001, 317). After all, the institution of American and European slavery, with its disciplinary strategies and practices, was designed to instill in Africans a sense of inferiority and ontological servitude, to deracinate any sense of African pride, cultural identity, and home. This motif of "home" has been a rich trope for Black folk in America; for in their various stages of identity formation (African, Colored, Negro, Black, African American) they have sought ways of negotiating a sense of themselves and a sense of *place* and *reality*. Docta G writes, "The societal complexity of the Black condition continues to necessitate a self-conscious construction of reality" (43).

Africans were taught to internalize negative images of themselves, to "know" themselves as chattel and property. This process was evident during the Middle Passage. During the voyage, Africans (Ashantis, Ibos, Fulanis, Yorubas, Hausas, and others) were subjected to tight forms of spatialization. The Middle Passage was itself part and parcel of a disciplinary practice to construct the Black body/self as a *thing*, to encourage Africans to begin thinking of themselves in subhuman terms. Black bodies were herded into suffocating spaces of confinement. Think here of the physically tight, economically impoverished spaces of contemporary urban Black America. On the slave ship Pongas, for example, 250 women, many of whom were pregnant, were forced into a space of 16 by 18 feet. Feminist and cultural theorist bell hooks writes:

The women who survived the initial stages of pregnancy gave birth aboard the ship with their bodies exposed to either the scorching sun or the freezing cold. The number of black women who died during childbirth or the number of

stillborn children will never be known. Black women with children on board the slave ships were ridiculed, mocked, and treated contemptuously by the slaver crew. Often the slavers brutalized children to watch the anguish of their mothers. (hooks 1981, 18–19)

An African slave trader tells of 108 boys and girls who were packed into a small hole:

I returned on board to aid in stowing [on the slave ship] one hundred and eight boys and girls, the eldest of whom did not exceed fifteen years' [old]. As I crawled between decks, I confess I could not imagine how this little army was to be packed or draw breath in a hole but twenty-two inches high! (Asante 1995, 61)

And Molefi Asante captures the terror of the Middle Passage where he writes:

Imagine crossing the ocean abroad a small ship made to hold 200 people but packed with 1,000 weeping and crying men, women, and children. Each African was forced to fit into a space no more than 55.9 centimeters (22 inches) high, roughly the height of a single gym locker, and 61 centimeters (24 inches) wide, scarcely an arm's length. There were no lights aboard the ships, little food, and no toilet facilities. (59)

The Middle Passage was a voyage of death, bodily objectification, humiliation, dehumanization, geographical and psychological dislocation. It was a process of cultural disruption, which involved a profound sense of religious, aesthetic, *linguistic*, teleological, and cosmological disorientation. In the "New World," we were sold from auction blocks; the Black body/self became a blood-and-flesh text upon which whites could project all of their fears, desires, *ressentiment*, fantasies, myths, and lies. For example, white fears and perversions created the myth of the so-called Negro rapist. In 1903, Dr. William Lee Howard argued that Negro males attack innocent white women because of "racial instincts that are about as amenable to ethical culture as is the inherent odor of the race" (Frederickson 1971, 279). In 1900, Charles Carroll supported the pre-Adamite beliefs of Dr. Samuel Cartwright. The Negro was described as an ape and was said to be the actual "tempter of Eve" (277). The so-called sciences of physiognomy and phrenology, with their emphasis on the prognathous jaw of Negroes, were said to clearly support the "primitive" nature of African people. In short, the Black body/self, within the scientific discursive space of whiteness, which embodied a racist epistemology, was constructed as a mere object of the white racist gaze. The Black body/self was subjected to the tactics of what philosopher Michel Foucault termed *anatomo-politics*, that is, those disciplines that operated on the body, regulating and subjecting the Black body/self

to white racist theorizations (Foucault 1990, 139). Docta G is well-aware of the historical existence of scientific racism where she notes:

In the years just before the Civil War (roughly the 1840s and 1850s), scientific theories of racial superiority located social and behavioral differences between members of the human species in genetic factors, which became the basis of studies of black slaves. (Smitherman 2001, 71)

Through the powerful structuration of the white gaze, the Black body/self was codified and typified as a subhuman, savage beast devoid of culture. Dr. Paul B. Barringer drew from the Darwinian emphasis on heredity. According to the insights of historian George M. Fredrickson, Barringer argued:

The inborn characteristics of the Negro had been formed by natural selection during "ages of degradation" in Africa and his savage traits could not have been altered in any significant way by a mere two centuries of proximity to Caucasian civilization in America. (Fredrickson 1971, 256)

The historian Joseph A. Tillinghast also theorized within the framework of Darwinian theory. For Tillinghast, "The Negro character had been formed in Africa, a region which supposedly showed an uninterrupted history of stagnation, inefficiency, ignorance, cannibalism, sexual licence, and superstition" (253). And Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76), in his "Of National Characters," maintains:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one Negro as a man of learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. (West 1999, 83)

The idea was to "demonstrate" (though we know it was to rationalize white wicked deeds) that Africans had *no* language (perhaps a few words only), *no* history, *no* identity, and *no* peoplehood. But I/we must admit that them white boys was droppin some weak, mythical, indefensible, pseudoscientific shit.

What is clear is that the newly arrived Africans found themselves in a hostile and dangerous world of anti-Blackness, a world that refused to recognize the complex cultural and subjective *here* from which Africans viewed the world and hated their captivity and oppression. "It was the practice of slavers to mix up Africans from different tribes" (Smitherman 1997, 7). Africans were forced into unfamiliar groupings so as to eliminate any sense of community, cultural, *linguistic*, or otherwise. The objective, despite, paradoxically, the rac-

ist belief that Africans were devoid of any complex linguistic-communicative practices, was to prevent them from communicating, from gaining any sense of group identity, and, hence, suppressing any possibility of rebellion/overthrow. Consistent with Hume's belief that Africans spoke "a few words plainly," Docta G notes that in 1884, J. A. Harrison held that African American speech was "based on African genetic inferiority" (Smitherman 2001, 72). For Harrison, much of Negro talk was "baby-talk" (72). Docta G concludes:

Blinded by the science of biological determinism, early twentieth-century white linguistic scholars followed Harrison's lead, taking hold of his baby-talk theory of African American speech and widely disseminating it in academic discourse. The child language explanation of Black Language is linguistic racism that corresponds to the biological determinist assumption that blacks are lower forms of the human species whose evolution is incomplete. (73)

Such beliefs, however, were not limited to white racist "academics." As African American linguist and anthropologist John Baugh correctly points out:

The racist literature about blacks and black speech in particular should, of course, be dismissed in any serious analysis of the subject, but we must appreciate that the opinions expressed by white supremacists—while often absurd—reflected the feelings of a majority of white Americans. (Baugh 1983, 14)

Finding themselves within this colonial context, a space of white supremacy (read: anti-Blackness), what were Africans to do? Torn from their own rich soil, and transplanted within this blood-soaked soil of America, Africans, with their magnificent oral tradition, rich cultural modes of being, non-white constructions of reality, and their own conception of what it meant *to be*, had to make sense out of this imposed and absurd situation. *They had to survive* the existential horror and meaninglessness of white America. "But that is the essence of the Black experience: to make a way out of no way" (Smitherman 2001, 240). Keep in mind that American slavery was also reinforced through the use of nondiscursive forms of brutality and oppression. It wasn't all about white racist abstract theory. Frederick Douglass knew all too well of the physical horrors of plantation life. He was torn from his mother at a very young age. The idea here was to eliminate any sense of biological and familial continuity, to attempt to break the spirit of oneness. In terms of sheer physical brutality, Douglass, who Docta G groups within the Black intellectual tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Lorenzo Turner, given his understanding of the rich oral/aural tradition of Black people, tells of the story of old Barney receiving thirty lashes on his Black flesh by Colonel Lloyd (Douglass 1993, 49). He tells of Demby, who disobeyed an order given by Mr. Gore and was shot in the head as a result. Douglass says that "his mangled body sank out of sight,

and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood" (52). Or, think of the young Black girl, Douglass' wife's cousin, who had fallen asleep while watching Mrs. Hick's baby. Mrs. Hick "jumped from her bed, seized an oak stick of wood by the fireplace, and with it broke the girl's nose and breastbone, and thus ended her life" (53).

To be enslaved was to be subjected to terror. You had your teeth knocked out, you were permanently separated from your family, burned to death, castrated, lynched; you watched your mother or sister raped, beaten, and shackled. This was an everyday reality and a constant live possibility for Africans bought to the "New World." But this is the historical space that must be explored, if only briefly, to understand the force of our *linguaging*. Docta G is mindful of this: "I say ... we can not talk about Black Idiom apart from Black culture and the Black experience" (Smitherman 2001, 57) Continuing with Douglass, Smitherman locates a significant aspect of our oral, aural, musical, and narrative motifs, viz., the use of song as a counterhegemonic expression. These Black bodies, locked down, with very little space within which to move, must have had rich (Ghanaian, Dahomeyan, etc.) musical fire shut up in their bones. Memory. Retentions. Identity. Douglass dispels the false notion that enslaved Africans were "happy dorkies" who sung their time away. Indeed, on the contrary, singing, which was a powerful semiotic marker of our enduring ability to create visions of counterreality, solidarity, memory, and agency, was an illocutionary form of expression, communicating discontentment and protestation, which had a significant perlocutionary impact on the psychology of the enslaved. Douglass:

The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears ... [the songs] told a tale of woe ... they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.... To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery.... Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. (Smitherman 1977, 48–49)

Hence, even our "musicizing" was a form of communication. But there were times when we had to code our language from the ofay. This is just one, though very important, semantic register of the Africans creation of a counterlanguage (Smitherman 2001, 19). Docta G points to an example of a stanza from an old Black folk song that includes the expression "not turn her." This was a brilliant coded way of referring to the revolutionary freedom fighter "Nat-Tur-ner." Docta G goes on to argue that many of the Negro spirituals were not speaking about other-worldly affairs, but about the historically concrete affairs of Black people, in the here and now of their servitude. Hence, though the lyrics (overheard by

whites) suggested a *vertical* metaphysics that spoke to God, the lyrics contained a powerful social and political *horizontal* message that spoke to the urgency of escape. Docta G:

The slaves used other-worldly lyrics, yes, but the spirituals had for them this-worldly meanings [What I be callin a "horizontal message."]. They moaned "steal away to Jesus" to mean stealing away FROM the plantation and TO freedom (that is, "Jesus"). They sang triumphantly "this train is bound for Glory," but the train they were really talking about was the "freedom train" that ran on the Underground Railroad. The symbolic Underground Railroad was actually a revolutionary network of escape routes and schemes devised to assist slaves fleeing to the "glory" of freedom in Canada and the North. "Go down, Moses, and tell Ole Pharaoh to let my people go." Moses—black freedom fighter Harriet Tubman, the "conductor" of the Underground Railroad, who in her lifetime assisted more than 300 slaves to escape. She would "go down" South and by her actions "tell" white slavers (Ole Pharaoh) to let her people go. (Smitherman 1977, 48)

This is one example of what I mean by the dynamics of linguistic resistance. Africans were able to use the language of white folk, curving it, warping it, and twisting it against them. This was/is a form of linguistic resistance/combust and overthrow. In yo face style. Swish, two points! Docta G notes:

When an enslaved African said, "Eve'body talkin bout Heaben ain goin dere," it was a double-voiced form of speech that *signified* on the slaveholders who professed Christianity but practiced slavery. This Africanized form of speaking became a code for Africans in America to talk about Black business, publicly or privately, and in the enslavement period, even to talk about "ole Massa" himself right in front of his face! (Smitherman 2001, 19)

Of course, when the ofay caught on, Black folk had to change the word, expression. We talkin bout a dynamic process heah. Concerning the two-pronged dimensions of language, Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues:

Every language has two aspects. One aspect is its role as an agent that enables us to communicate with one another in our struggle to find the means for survival. The other is its role as a carrier of the history and the culture built into the process of that communication over time. (Thiong'o 1993, 30)

Thiong'o sees these two aspects of language as forming a kind of dialectical unity.

Despite the long journey across the Middle Passage, one way that Africans were able to negotiate ways of surviving was through dynamic semiotic

and linguistic modalities, to communicate with one another (in Pidgin and Creole) in a common struggle to stay alive. As Marlene Nourbese Philip notes:

In the vortex of New World slavery, the African forged new and different words, developed strategies to impress her experience on the language. The formal standard language was subverted, turned upside down, inside out, and sometimes erased. Nouns became strangers to verbs and vice versa; tonal accentuation took the place of several words at a time; rhythms held sway. (Potter 1995, 57)

Africanized "Standard" American English also functioned as a medium of Black culture and reminded Black folk of the historicity of their African identity. Hence, the complete cultural rupture that was intended for enslaved Africans simply failed. "Using elements of the white man's speech, in combination with their own linguistic patterns and practices, enslaved Africans developed an oppositional way of speaking" (Smitherman 2001, 19). I see this as a dynamic process of sublation, which understands the African experience in America as a process of negation and preservation. No matter how much of WHO WE BE was negated, through a disruptive and colonialist "synthesis," we preserved significant and powerful elements of our rich historical past. *Hallelujah, thank the Lord!* Yes, we got soul and we SUPER BAD! Soul, according to Docta G, involves "a world view that is not only God-centered, but includes the vision that Goodness and Justice is gon prevail" (344). She links soul with the dynamic philosophical category of style, which is rich with aesthetic, political, and ontological overtones. In other words, style is the dynamic expression or articulation of the motif of overcoming. She concludes: "If you got soul, yo style oughta reflect it" (344). But whassup wit all dis philosophical talk? Well, it's bout Black folk. Their linguistic preservation and combativeness constitutes their style, which is deeply reflective of their souls. Yes, the souls of Black folk. Du Bois be down wit it. Therefore, we need to move within that space of soul and style where our collective languaging is a commentary on both.

Contrary to the white colonialist view, Africans did not get off that Dutch ship in Jamestown without any sense of identity and culture as manifested in and structured through language. The many millions that were brought over in chains after 1619 also arrived with their nuanced cultural practices and religious world-views as mediated through unique linguistic rules and styles. As *homo narrans* (creators of their own meaningful oral-narrative existence) and *homo significans* (creators of signs and symbols that ordered their reality), Africans already had their language and hence their own theory of reality. On this score, language is the medium through which reality is constructed. Language, then, shapes the contours of one's metaphysics. Africans had to feel a profound sense of cognitive and metaphysical dissonance within the white colonial order of things in America, with its strange language, and hence, its imposing and extra-

neous view of reality. As Docta G reminds us, "Language represents a society's theory of reality. It not only reflects that theory of reality, it explains, interprets, constructs, and reproduces that reality" (99). Although Docta G thinks that the Whorfians (followers of B. L. Whorf) overstate the importance of language vis-à-vis the construction of reality, she maintains:

Reality is not merely *socially*, but *sociolinguistically* constructed. Real-world experience and phenomena do not exist in some raw, undifferentiated form. Rather, reality is always filtered, apprehended, encoded, codified, and conveyed via some linguistic shape. (43)

So as to clarify the sociolinguistic "determinist" implications of Docta G's position, it is important to note that she *does not* say that consciousness and ideology are supervenient upon sociolinguistic factors. She is careful to say that it is her "contention that ideology and consciousness are *largely* [my emphasis] the products of what I call the 'sociolinguistic construction of reality'" (96)

Attempting to understand this new colonial reality within the framework of their understanding of *Nommo*, the power of the word, Black folk had to feel a sense of double-consciousness or what Docta G refers to as the phenomenon of "linguistic push-pull" (146). Through the power of *Nommo*, Black folk *performatively* spoke (and continue to speak) a new reality and a new sense of identity into existence. Crossing the horror of the Middle Passage—which could take anywhere from thirty-five to ninety days, and having to contend with feces, lice, fleas, rats, disease, and dying Black bodies—failed to break the power of the African spirit; failed to silence the power of *Nommo*, which said "NO!" to white imperialism, "NO!" to white cultural hegemony, "NO!" to colonial brainwashing, and "NO!" to linguistic-cultural dispossession. There was a "deep structural" cultural awareness that the *word* can radically alter the *world* (54). Docta G notes:

The oral tradition, then, is part of the cultural baggage the African brought to America. The pre-slavery background was one in which the concept of *Nommo*, the magic power of the Word, was believed necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things. (203)

She further notes:

In traditional African culture, a newborn child is a mere thing until his father gives and speaks his name. No medicine, potion, or magic of any sort is considered effective without accompanying words. So strong is the African belief in the power and absolute necessity of *Nommo* that all craftsmanship must be accompanied by speech. (203)

Nommo is an essential ontological register of WHO WE BE. *Nommo* is capable of concretizing the Black spirit in the form of action, action that is necessary within the framework of a contentious and oppressive alien cultural environment. It was imperative that Diasporic Africans create *syncretistic constructions of reality vis-à-vis* "deep structural" linguistic-cultural (African) patterns and practices acting as the general framework through which new cultural elements were absorbed, synthesized, and reconfigured. This process is less like a Kuhnian paradigm-shift and more like a form of "adaptive fusion." It is a fusion (don't let the Jazz motif pass you by) that bespeaks the ability of Black folk to keep keepin' on in the face of oppression and white terror. This process of fusion is indicative of the fact that Black folk live their lives within a *subjunctive* (indicative of our *possibilities*) ontological mode of ex-istence. Docta G observes that African American Language (or what she also variously refers to as Black English, Black Idiom, African American English, African American Vernacular English, and Ebonics) "reflects the modal experiences of African Americans and the continuing quest for freedom" (101). Given the above emphasis on the power of *Nommo* and the sheer protean and metastable force of African linguistic-cultural, psychological, and existential endurance, what then is African American Language? The Docta is worth quoting in full:

THE EBONICS SPOKEN in the US is rooted in the Black American Oral Tradition, reflecting the combination of African languages (Niger-Congo) and Euro American English. It is a language forged in the crucible of enslavement, US-style apartheid, and the struggle to survive and thrive in the face of domination. Ebonics is emphatically *not* "broken" English, nor "sloppy" speech. Nor is it merely "slang." Nor is it some bizarre form of language spoken by baggy-pants-wearing Black youth. Ebonics is a set of communication patterns and practices resulting from Africans' appropriation and transformation of a foreign tongue during the African Holocaust. (19)

From jump street, let's dispel certain assumptions. AAL ain no slang. "True, Black slang is Black Language, but all Black Language is not Black slang" (Smitherman 2000, 2). Also, we must not conflate AAL with Nonstandard American English. As for the latter, examples are "the pronunciation of 'ask' as 'axe,' use of double negatives, as in 'They don't know nothing,' and the use of 'ain't.' Such features of American English are often *erroneously* characterized as Ebonics. They are not" (Smitherman 2001, 20). Keep in mind that Ebonics is known for its multiple negatives (this really frustrates the gatekeepers of European American Language), not simply the double negatives disapproved of by European American Language (EAL). Docta G provides an example of multiple negation from a member of the Traditional Black Church sometime during the sixties: "Don't nobody don't know God can't tell me nothin'!" And drawing from Lonne Elder's play, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, Docta G provides an-

other example: "Don't nobody pay no attention to no nigger that ain't crazy!" Multiple negation, in this example, signifies a form of linguistic, sociopsychological resistance. Docta G explains:

Because "nigger" is a racialized epithet in EAL, AAL embraces its usage, encoding a variety of unique Black meanings. And "crazy niggas" are the rebellious ones, who resist racial supremacist domination and draw attention to their cause because they act in ways contrary to the inscribed role for Africans in America. (272)

Another point to keep in mind is that "US Ebonics, aka African American Vernacular English, did not completely originate in British English, nor in other white-immigrant dialects from the seventeenth century" (20). For those who are proponents of Euro/Anglo linguistic hegemony, the state Anglicist ideologues, those who control the army, navy, major television stations, major news outlets, major publishing houses, curriculum planning, legal and corporate language, educational policy/policing, it's all about the politics of erasure, rejecting Africanized linguistic-cultural legitimacy and the impact of the Africanist influence in America. In short, Euro/Anglo linguistic hegemony (*the* hegemonic tongue) is a form of colonialism and linguistic racism. As Docta G points out, however, there are syntactic patterns that are not to be found in older Anglicized syntax, but are found in West African languages. She gives as an example, "Me massa name Cunney Tomsee." The linguistic phenomenon of making a statement without the obligatory copula "is not a pattern of older British English dialects" (31). Docta G provides another example of a sentential construction without the use of the verb "to be," which is required in English, given by an enslaved African who was located in the Dutch colony of Suriname in South America: "Me bella well" ("I am very well"). "He tall," "She my lady," and "She real phat" (no copulas) are also allowable forms of expression in West African languages.

Let's move to the aspectual verb. Docta G kicks it this way:

This use of the verb "to be" [in AAL] derives from an aspectual verb system that is also found in many African languages, in Creole language forms of the Caribbean, in West African Pidgin English, and in the Gullah Creole spoken by blacks living on the Sea Island along the southeastern seaboard of the United States. Its use conveys the speaker's meaning with reference to qualitative character and distribution of an action over time. (136-37)

As an example, she provides, "He be hollin at us." This is the durative use of "to be"; it indicates iterativity or actions that are ongoing. "The sista be lookin fly" is also illustrative of iterativity. Docta G argues that the use of the verb system here demonstrates an "implied racial resistance," particularly in the light of the

racist control of AAL by white America's linguistic rejection of such a verb system (272). The "Standard English" verb system does not capture past, present and future tense all at the same time. Consider the expression, "It bees dat way sometime." Here we have two African language features. First, "bees" is used as a habitual condition; and, second, "dat" is used instead of "that," because West African languages do not have a "th" sound; that is, the initial voiced *th* is realized as *d*. The reader will also note that in AAL the final *th* is realized as *f*, *t*, or *d* (for example, "up souf" for "up south," and "wit" or "wid" for "with"). Wid regard to the expression "It bees dat way sometime," however, Docta G draws a very interesting distinction that has rich philosophical implications. She distinguishes between "language" and "style." In the above example, language points to "bees" as an instance of iterativity. Style, however, points to a *Weltbild*, a way of picturing the world or a world-picture. She argues that if we take the expression ("It bees dat way sometime") as "the total expression," then "the statement suggests a point of view, a way of looking at life, and a method of adapting to life's realities" (Smitherman 1977, 3). Her point here is well-taken. When Nina Simone sings "It bees dat way sometime," there is the sense that life just ain't fair. Docta G explains: "To live by the philosophy of 'It bees dat way sometime' is to come to grips with the changes that life bees puttin us through, and to accept the changes and bad times as a constant, ever-present reality" (3). I would only add that this expression is explosive with a surplus of significations. In this single locutionary act, we find a rich narrative of Black existence in America. It is not only descriptive, but prescriptive, suggesting how life ought to be approached. Implicit in its description is the power of the reality of existential fissure and fracture.

From what has been delineated above, it is clear that as a people we are capable of living through white hatred, improvising our way in and out of American existential angst, and embracing and transcending our existential blues precisely by singing (language) them. The point here is that *Norimo* is operative here as a site of rupture. "It bees dat way sometime" expresses the power of the word to move Black folk toward a greater sense of community and collective hope and resistance. It's important that we recognize the symbolic weight of the locutionary act, for it speaks to the power of our ancestors to cope, endure, and survive. In other words, "It bees dat way sometime" points to the heteronomy of oppressive forces that attempt to subdue Black people, but the logic of the expression also sounds a clarion call for autonomy and is indicative of an existential transversal process that moves Black people closer to a sense of home. Docta G is all up in the deep epistemological implications of this African American linguistic thang where she states:

What uhm runnin on you is bout a cognitive linguistic style whose semantics bees grounded not only in words but in the socio-psychological space between the words. In sum: a Black-based communications system derived from the

oppressor's tongue—the words is Euro-American, the meanings, nuances and tone African American. (Smitherman 2001, 351)

It is precisely these meanings, nuances, and tone that are a threat to white America. For to control our own language is to control how we see ourselves, it is to some extent to explode the pathology of our double-consciousness. Psychologist Robert Williams, who actually coined the term "Ebonics," states:

I think that Ebonics is a threat to white supremacy in this society because it means that we have invoked the Second Principle of the *Nguzo Saba*, *Kujichagulia* or self-determination, in that we are creating and defining our own reality so that that becomes threatening to white America.²

Another important point regarding the verb system of AAL can be examined in relationship to Docta G's contention that we should refer to Black English as a "language" as opposed to a "dialect." The importance of this insight, and, hence, her re-conceptualization of Black English, is important in terms of African American praxis. The reader will note that I have used African American *Language* throughout the article, because I believe that this is the position that Docta G has come to embrace. However, in 1970, Docta G thought that the Black English sentential construction, "The coffee cold" was not very different from the white English version, "The coffee is cold." This was because Docta G relied upon the explanatory rules provided by the Transformational-Generative grammar framework whereby a deletion rule, permissible in English, "had been applied, so that the speaker went from 'The coffee is cold' to 'The coffee's cold,' to dropping the /s/ 'in pronunciation, thereby producing 'The coffee cold'" (Smitherman 2001, 15). Docta G realized that even the distinctiveness of Black English's rhetorical style and communication patterns failed to get at the distinction in meaning between "The coffee cold" and "The coffee be cold" (15). Later realizing the insights of linguist Sista Beryl Bailey, Docta G came to understand that:

There are indeed deep-structural linguistic differences, in addition to "deep" differences in rhetorical style and strategies of discourse. I began to speak of the "language," not the "dialect," of Black America. In time, I came to think of this linguistic phenomenon not only as a "language," but as a language that could be a vehicle for unifying America's outsiders and consequently as a tool for social transformation. (16)

Always with her eye on the larger political ramifications of language, Docta G insightfully notes:

Since linguistics cannot offer the definitive word on language-dialect differentiation, it ultimately comes down to who has the power to define; or as Max

Weinreich once put it, the difference between a language and a dialect is who's got the army. (139)

My sense is that when Docta G uses the expression "deep-structure," she should not be taken to mean that speakers of EAL and AAL are somehow constituted by *racially distinct* bioprograms. My sense is that, for Docta G, AAL has a deep-structural component in that African American languaging (as in the example, "The coffee be cold") should not be reduced to mere surface features of English, that is, that sentential constructions in AAL are merely surface representations of other sentential constructions in English. *Africanized* English is so deeply sedimented with African conceptions of the self, reality, time, norms of social interaction, and other modes of spiritual and cultural comportment, that there is something radically distinct—perhaps at the very psycholinguistic (cultural) deep structural level—about AAL vis-à-vis EAL. Docta G, she postulating "that the two different speech communities employ differing thought patterns and conceptions of reality and that these differences are reflected in different styles of discourse" (140). Take for example the speech act, "What's happenin'?" The expression is not simply indexed to the present moment. The question could refer to what happened already or what might be kickin' off later. The point here is that the question "What's happenin'?" assumes a culture, a fluid nexus of meanings, norms, and philosophical conceptions. Docta G advises that you got to get down wit the symbolic system at work here. She notes:

See, in the Traditional African World View, time is cyclical, and verb structure is not concerned with tense, but modality or aspect. So "What's happenin'?" could mean what happened in the past, what's happenin now, as well as what's gon happen in the future. (358)

Nevertheless, to refer to AAL as a *language*, to buttress this claim with solid historical and linguistic-cultural research, legal and institutional support, is a danger to white America; for to use the term "language" is to suggest an entire cultural identity, a co-equal language (vis-à-vis EAL), and a legitimate mode of reality construction. (Whether it's AAL or Gikũyũ, it's all about the activity of self-empowerment and self-definition.) It is to put to rest the deficit model of African American speech events, and, by implication, to put to rest the deficit model that links AAL to inferior cognition, and, indeed, to call attention to the fact that we as a people constitute a NATION. Big Ups to our Nation Language advocates and theorists;³ they deserve their *propers*. By the way, are you *down* with AAL as a Nation Language?

Let's talk a lil mow bout *AALanguagin*, some of its rhetorical devices. Take *call and response*. Here we have a powerful communication device utilized in both "secular" and "sacred" spheres of communication-interaction. In the latter case, in the Traditional Black Church, I recall my uncle, Reverend Matt,

preachin: "Church, y'all don't beah me today!" The church folk would respond, "Preach!" Indeed, it was deemed a "dead" church if this dynamic of call and response, this *co-signing* and *co-narrating* of a shared communicative reality, failed to take place. There were even times when the music played by the pianist would seem to respond to his homiletic call. In the secular sphere (keeping in mind that the sacred and the secular constitute an organic unity in much of the African American life-world) "the audience might manifest its response in giving skin (fives) when a really down verbal point is scored. Other approval responses include laughter and phrases like 'Oh, you mean, nigger,' 'Get back, nigger,' 'Git down baby,' etc." (64). Cognizant of our Passage, our power to Africanize and reconfigure American and European physical and cultural spaces, Docta G notes that call and response "is a basic organizing principle of Black American culture generally, for it enables traditional black folk to achieve the unified state of balance or harmony which is fundamental to the traditional African world view" (Smitherman 1977, 104). Indeed, call and response is symbolic of a profound level of intersubjectivity and linguistic-communal performativity that acknowledges the *ex-istence* (not locked in a private Cartesian sphere) of both speaker and listener. *Rhythmic pattern* is also a key feature of AAL. Again, let's return to Reverend Matt. After walking the benches (I mean, he be done got the spirit), and while the church folk up on they feet, he might say, rhythmically and melodically, in an almost "singing voice," "I-I-I-I-I-KNOOOOW. YESSSS-I-I-I-KNOOOOW." The perlocutionary force of this form of languaging would set the church off. Half the church would git happy, deacons, members of the choir, even ushers would be dancin and shoutin in the aisles. And in a *proverbial* speech act, someone might shout, "My name is written on high," liquid joy flowin and streamin down they face. Docta G is on it: "The preacher will get a rhythm going, conveying his message through sound rather than depending on sheer semantic import" (Smitherman 2001, 64). The power of sound. System. Sound reasoning. Don't you go *soundin* on me. The power of an elongated *hum* can carry the pain and suffering of an entire people or signify a nod of epistemic approval.

Semantic inversion is similar in intent to the use of coded language. The idea here is to take familiar words from EAL and superimpose radically different meanings on them. For example, to be *down* with something is actually to be *up* with it, in support of it. To be *bad* is to be *good*. This linguistic practice is the same whether in Wolof, Mandingo, Ibo, or Yoruba. Docta G points out that it's the same linguistic process, but a different language (Smitherman 1977, 44). She elaborates: "This linguistic reversal process, using negative terms with positive meanings, is present in a number of African languages—for example, the Mandingo *a ka nyi ko-jugu*, which literally means "it is good badly," that is, "it is very good" (44). Again, here we have an instance of Black folk in America exercising linguistic resistance and agency, a practice of baffling and excluding the oppressive ofay.

Indirection is a linguistic species of coded language and semantic inversion. It thrives off of circumlocutory rhetoric. You know Black folk gotta move in nonlinear lines lest the evil spirits catch them. Docta G points to an example where Malcolm X gave a speech in which he opens by acknowledging his friends, sisters, brothers, and others, but goes on to acknowledge his enemies. "Not only is Malcolm neatly putting down his enemies in the audience without a direct frontal attack," according to Docta G, "he is also sending a hidden message (to those hip enough to dig it)" (Smitherman 2001, 220). Malcolm, in other words, is *signifyin* on those possible Black traitors ("Black Judases") sitting right there in his midst. But not only is circumlocutory rhetoric an important attribute of AAL, our language soars to the heights of *exaggeration*, another AAL discursive marker. Yo, we bees all up in the bombastic, grandiloquent, magniloquent, highfalutin, sonorous realm of talkin that talk. MLK Jr. once referred to an issue as being "incandescently clear" (217). Docta G:

Sometime the whole syntax of a sentence may be expressed in an elevated, formal manner, as in this invitation from a working-class black male: "My dear, would you care to dine with me tonight on some delectable red beans and rice?" (217)

And then there is that space of *braggadocio*. There are multiple signifiers within this space. "I'm the greatest!" Ali in the cultural mix. Stag-O-Lee. Jack Johnson. Rap ciphars where brothas be droppin some serious science, cultural codes, and philosophy. There are powerful tales of African folklores that narrate great escapes. Shine. Toasts. The Bad Nigga. Keepin Mista Charlie, Massa, or Miss Ann on they toes. Docta G: "Whether referring to physical badness, fighting ability, lovemanship, coolness (that is, "grace under pressure"), the aim is to convey the image of an omnipotent fearless being, capable of doing the undoable" (219). The dynamic of *narrativizing* is also a salient feature of AAL discursivity. It involves explicating some event, some situation, in the style of the traditional African griot. The point here is that such existential events are constructed within a narrative structure, moving within a deep cultural semiotic space of familiarity. As contemporary philosophers begin to reassess the significance of the epistemological explanatory power of narrative, we been done engaged in this hermeneutic process. Peep Ice Cube's narrative flow, talkin wid dat AAL flava:

How you like me now? I'm in the mix, it's 1986, and I got the fix.../Dropped out the 12th cause my welfare's shorter than a midget on his knees.../Fucked up in the pen, now it's '94, back in L.A. and I'm fallin in the door/Everybody know I got to start from scratch.../No skills to pay the bills/Talkin bout education to battle inflation/No college degree, just a dumb-ass G.../I got a baby on the way/Damn, it's a mess/Have you ever been convicted of a felony? - Yes!/Took some advice from my Uncle Fester, all dressed up in polyester/"Well-come to McDonald's. May I please help you?"/Shit, what can I do? (275)

Some just don't want to recognize that rap is the next step in our historical journey as masters of the Word. Rap ain no aberration. These complex brothas and sistas, engagin and pushin the discursive boundaries of what is said/sayable, articulating, through *Nommo*, what is beautiful, marvelous, mendacious, ugly, corrupt, fucked up, and surreal, are still moving Black folk in the direction of *home*. Docta G knows that rap and Hip Hop bees part of that *Nommo* continuum, that African sense of existential and communal balance. Those stylizations (linguistic, bodily, aesthetic, sonic, spiritual, metaphysical) coming out of those hood spaces/places and hooded faces, they must be reflections of soul. And U know yo style oughta reflect it. Word! Docta G:

Rap music is rooted in the Black Oral Tradition of tonal semantics, narrativizing, signification/signifyin, the Dozens/playin the Dozens, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices. The Oral Tradition itself is rooted in the surviving African tradition of "Nommo" and the power of the word in human life. (269)

Let's rap/wrap it up. Docta G has shown that Black folk have always already been pushin the language envelope. Black folk have been fightin on all fronts, the physical, geopolitical, metaphysical, philosophical, aesthetic, religious, political, ideological, psychological, spiritual, symbolic, economic, hermeneutic, academic, linguistic, iconic, and more. Through all of these wars, we have managed to maintain a sense of ethics, humanity, dignity, and sanity. Damn! We talkin bout folk who simply refuse to die. Don't even talk about givin up! What manner of people DO WE BE? Protean. Always already in struggle, always already beginning some new shit, conceptualizing some new order of things, some other/alternative/unheard of/unimagined/unexplored reality and mode of being. We bees doin da unthinkable. Must be *magical* and *real*. We always pushin. Whether its remaking and reconfiguring some superimposed language, creating musical instruments from some old found object, doctoring up a traditional instrument, because you know we gotta hear that twang and chromatic sound, or pushin the bounds of what it means to be human and democratic, we up on it, way out in front. Blusing. Bopping. Moving. Rapping. Hip Hopping. Historicizing. Morphing. Always in the process of red-shifting, even when we be down. And, yes, *LANGUAGING*. We are still in process. What next? Can't be sho. But I'll C U when WE get there. As Docta G says, stay tuned.⁴

Notes

1. Also see my articles "Ebonics Went to Court in Michigan, And Won! A White Judge Ruled in 1979 that Black English was More than Faulty Dialect" (1997); "U.S. Founders Began Suppression of Our African Speech Patterns" (1996); "Among Ourselves, the 'N' Word Carries Warmth" (1995); and "Nigger": Not What's Said, But Who and How" (1993).
2. This statement appears in the Author's unpublished interview with Robert Williams, Feb. 1, 1997.
3. For example, see Brathwaite (1984).

4. I would like to thank Geneva Smitherman for her rigorous philosophical and political contributions to Africana philosophy through her work in linguistics. There is a need for more African American philosophers to explore her work in terms of its significance for and impact on Africana philosophy. I would also like to thank African American linguists John Baugh and H. Samy Alim for encouraging me to write this article and for recognizing the importance of Smitherman's work in linguistics, philosophy, education, politics, cultural studies and psychology.

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