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Geneva Smitherman  
*Michigan State University*

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## Critical Pedagogy

# Raciolinguistics, “Mis-Education,” and Language Arts Teaching in the 21st Century

GENEVA SMITHERMAN

### “English Teacher, Why You Be Doing the Thangs You Don’t Do?”

& then it was hip—it was hip  
to walk, talk & act a certain  
neighborhoodway,  
we wore 24 hr sunglasses & called our  
woman baby, our woman,  
we wished her something else,  
& she became that wish.  
she developed into what we wanted,  
she not only reflected her, but reflected us,  
was a mirror of our death-desires.  
we failed to protect or respect her  
& no one else would,  
& we didn’t understand, we didn’t  
understand.  
why,  
she be doing the things she don’t do.  
--“Blackman/An Unfinished History”

In what is now classic Hip Hop stylization, I once remixed this highly celebrated poem by Don L. Lee (now Haki Madhubuti)<sup>1</sup> to rail against those language arts teachers who succumb to what linguist Donald Lloyd called the “national mania for correctness.” As a former high school teacher of English and Latin, for several years I had borne witness to the common practice of language arts teachers who would read student essays and do nothing more than simply circle the students’ grammatical and/or spelling errors. In a moment of exasperation, I entitled my essay “English Teacher, Why You Be Doing the Thangs You Don’t Do?”<sup>2</sup> and sent it off to the *English Journal (EJ)* of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Word on the street at Harvard University (where I was a faculty

member in what was then the Department of “AfroAmerican” Studies) was that *EJ* was “nervous” about publishing my strong rebuke of English teachers. Now I didn’t have any empirical data to support that vibe from Harvard yard, but it did take two years for my article to be published.<sup>2</sup>

In that piece, I merely challenged (okay, I assailed) those elementary and secondary language arts teachers who dismiss student essays if they don’t reflect the grammar and syntax of the Language of Wider Communication (LWC; aka, “Dominant English,” “Standardized English,” “American Standard English,” “Correct English,” etc., etc.-- yall git my drift). Demonstrating how pervasive the “mania for correctness” was (is?) in our educational system, I concluded with the following essay written by a Black college student in “freshman English” (as it was called in those years) at an urban public university:

#### **[Assignment: Take a position on the war in Viet Nam and present arguments to defend your position.]**

I think the war in Viet Nam bad. Because we don’t have no business over there. My brother friend been in the war, and he say it’s hard and mean. I do not like war because it’s bad. And so I don’t think we have no business there. The reason the war in China is bad is that American boys is dying over there.

The student’s professor returned the paper with only one comment: “Correct your grammar and resubmit.” Please! All the LWC grammar in the world ain gon make this a good, or even a passable, essay. I ain dissin the student; my beef was with the teacher. And so I posed the question: “English teacher, why you be doing the thangs you don’t do?”

### The African American Language Research Tradition

Throughout the Twentieth Century, particularly in the decades of the 1950s-80s, there was an explosion of research on African American Language (AAL) such that there

now exists a large body of work on AAL. In fact, this is the most researched and studied language variety in the U.S. It has been given a variety of labels historically—ranging from “speaking negro [sic]” in the Seventeenth Century to “Negro English” in the Nineteenth Century to “Negro Dialect,” “Black Dialect,” “Black Vernacular,” and “African American Vernacular” in the Twentieth Century, to today’s “African American English,” “African American Language,” and “Ebonics.”

The work of linguists dating from 1949, the year of Black linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner’s *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, his 17-year study of Gullah-speaking communities in the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia, to the vast body of work done since the 1960’s—this voluminous research tradition clearly demonstrates the systematic, rule-governed patterns of Black speech, not only in phonology and syntax, but also in lexicon, discourse and communication patterns. In addition to Turner, see, for example: Alim (2002, 2004); Alim and Smitherman (2012); Bailey (1965); Baugh (1983, 1999); Dillard (1967, 1972, 1977); Fasold (1972, 1999); Green (2002); Labov (1969, 1972, 1982); Lanehart (2001, 2002, 2015); Morgan (2002); Rickford (1999, 2000); Smitherman (1974-76, 1977, 1981(a), 1981 (b), 2000(a), 2000(b), 2006, 2015(a), 2015(b); Spears (1982, 1998); Stewart (1967, 1968). The Black Language research tradition demonstrates that African American Language is a complex system of structure and use that is distinct from the Language of Wider Communication in the U.S. While it is true that AAL shares much of its structure with LWC, there are numerous aspects of grammar, phonology, lexicon, rhetoric, semantics, and discourse that make it distinct from LWC. While a full description of AAL is beyond the scope of this article, some examples in syntax alone include the following:

- copula absence, as in Barack Obama’s famous “Nah, we straight” (during his visit to Ben’s Chili Bowl early on in his first term), for LWC “Nah, we are straight”;
- stressed been to mark remote past, “I BEEN told you not to trust them” for LWC “I told you a long time ago not to trust them.”
- steady as an intensified continuative, “She steady prayin her son come back from Iraq” meaning “She is intensely, consistently and continuously praying her son comes back from Iraq”
- be done for the future or conditional perfect, “By the end of the day, I be done collected \$600!” for

LWC, “By the end of the day I will have collected \$600!”

- invariant be to convey iterativity, “He be talkin a lot in class,” meaning “He usually (or sometimes) talks a lot in class.”

The last pattern above, which reflects the AAL use of the verb be, has been called the “showcase variable” (Rickford, 1999) because of its widespread use by AAL speakers and its distinctive difference from the LWC use of be. Those who are not native speakers of AAL and therefore aren’t down with the grammar of the language often get it wrong. This happens all the time in K-12 schools. Take, for instance, the big city school administrator (who shall have to be nameless) who had gone to this fifth grade class a few times when she was in the building looking for Shenika Jones.

Administrator: “Shenika Jones - raise your hand if you’re here.”

One of Shenika’s girlz: “She not here.”

Administrator: “She is never here.”

Shenika’s girl: “She be here.”

Administrator: “Where? I thought you just said she’s not here.”

Of course what Shenika’s girl meant, in LWC, was that “Shenika is here sometimes. She just is not here today.”

Those non-native speakers (hats?) who disrespect AAL by characterizing it as “All you have to do to talk Black is just use the verb “be” a lot”—such speakers invariably use the invariant be pattern incorrectly and end up miscommunicating. Linguist Ralph Fasold had us hollin with this story during the Ebonics controversy. (See his “Ebonic Need Not Be English.”) He had seen the following sign, intended to mimic (and/or ridicule) speakers of Ebonics, in the window of a bar in Seattle: “We be non-smoking.” This sentence CANNOT be translated as—and does NOT mean-- “We are non-smoking,” that is, it does not mean that this bar is a non-smoking establishment. AAL be is not static but iterative and the LWC translation of the bar sign is “Sometimes or Usually we are non-smoking.”

## The “Mis-Education of the Negro” - and You Too

In 1933, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the African American, Harvard-trained historian, published his analysis of the education of Black people. Entitled *Mis-education of the Negro*, Woodson’s analysis was based on “forty years of experience

in the education of black, brown, yellow and white races in both hemispheres and in tropical and temperate regions... in all grades from the kindergarten to the university." The fundamental cause of mis-education was that the curriculum does not reflect the true history, sociology, politics, economics—or language—of Americans. Woodson goes on to note that: "The description of the various parts of the world was worked out according to the same plan. The parts inhabited by the Caucasian were treated in detail. Less attention was given to the yellow people, still less to the red, very little to the brown, and practically none to the black race." He asserted that "the educational process...does not hit the mark even in the case of the white man himself." (!!!) About what was then called "Negro dialect," Woodson tells us:

In the study of language in school pupils were made to scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise rather than directed to study the background of this language as a broken-down African tongue—in short to understand their own linguistic history, which is certainly more important for them than the study of French Phonetics or Historical Spanish Grammar.

A major area of linguistic miseducation occurs in language arts classrooms where teachers be obsessed with teaching "correct" grammar, spelling and pronunciation rather than teaching students what language is and allows human beings to do, the socio-historical formation of their language, its communicative and social functions, and particularly teaching students to understand and master the power of language—which is about way more than whether *yo* verbs and subjects agree. The power of language is manifest in what speakers do with it, how they use it in rhetorical persuasion, how they manipulate it in social interaction, and deploy it to empower themselves and/or to disempower others. For example, in John Baugh's "Linguistic Profiling," he shares this narrative from a Black female doctoral student about her search for an apartment:

I went to a large apartment complex in Philadelphia to inquire about apartments. I was steered to the most expensive apartment in the building and told that this was the only apartment available for the following month and that no other apartment would be coming available. However, the next day, using my very best Standard American English on the phone and inquiring about apartments at the same complex, I discovered that, miraculously, several less expensive apartments were immediately available, and I was more than welcome to come

and see them. (p. 159).

Students will end up being mis-educated about language if they aren't taught that all human languages and language varieties (yes, even African American Language and Arabic!) have inherent grammatical patterns and are systematic and rule-governed. Even though humans are "born to speak," that is, language is a part of human beings' genetic make-up, they are not born speaking a particular language. Rather, children naturally acquire their particular language from their mothers (the mother tongue), their family and their community environment. This language acquisition process is the same around the globe. The child's particular language is intertwined with and inextricable from the child's identity, culture and way of being in and understanding of the world.

Mis-educated children grow up to be mis-educated adults. Only such mis-educated grown-ups could have called the Arabic signage in shops and businesses in Dearborn, Michigan "gibberish." I once lived in a section of the D (Detroit) that borders Dearborn, a community which had been all-White under the leadership of Mayor Orville Hubbard and was determined to stay that way. However, it was beginning to reflect the increasing presence of Arabic-speaking people. The signage of businesses began to appear in Arabic, not English, a linguistic diversity many long-time Dearborn-ites found most unwelcome. There was a donut shop in Dearborn that I used to stop at, which was owned by a middle-aged White couple. Now I knew they wahn't ready for the world, but I continued to go there because they had the best coffee in the neighborhood. One day I noticed that the cleaners across the street had a big colorful new sign in Arabic. What the new owner wanna do that for? Those White donut shop owners went ballistic! Soon as I came in to get my coffee that morning, they pointed to the cleaners and said, "Look at that! Look at that! You a professor, do you understand that gibberish!?"

Adults mis-educated about language don't know how European colonizers devalued indigenous languages throughout Africa, thus using language to wield economic and political control and to dominate what Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo calls "the mental universe" of African people. That's why stalwarts of South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle were adamant that the country's new democratic Constitution had to address the language question. Thus, Section (6), "Languages," in the South African Constitution declares the country's nine Black languages official languages in addition to Afrikaans and English which had been the only official languages of the country for centuries.

A brief word about the South African linguistic

condition, which has many parallels to African American Language dynamics here in our country. On the one hand, South Africa's eleven official languages policy strikes a victorious blow for language diversity and sets the global standard for linguistic democratization. On the other hand, South African progressives and their allies in this country and elsewhere are keenly aware of the agonizing struggle that's necessary to dismantle the painful legacy of linguistic mis-education and imperialism—even among indigenous language speakers themselves I will never forget the Xhosa-speaking domestic helper in Cape Town. My colleague, originally from Ghana, had hired this helper because he wanted her to speak Xhosa with his young children so they would learn the language. He complained to me that she refused to do so. Not only would she not speak her mother tongue, in which she was quite fluent, but her English skills left much to be desired—understandable when you consider that even today only 9.6% of the South African population has English as their mother tongue. When the helper discovered that I was traveling to the other side of Cape Town in search of a Xhosa tutor, she exclaimed, in disapproving outrage: “Ah, so you are going to pay good American dollars for this”?!

### Language Attitudes on the Homefront

Like their South African counterparts, Black people in the U.S. also reflect ambivalent attitudes about their language. In *Spoken Soul*, Rickford and Rickford describe a commencement at historically Black Howard University six months after the Oakland, California School Board set off a national firestorm with the passage of the School District's Ebonics Resolution in December, 1996.<sup>3</sup> The commencement speaker was broadcast pioneer, Carole Simpson, who took the opportunity to lecture Howard graduates and their families and guests about negativism that Black people “bring on ourselves.” One of her two examples focused on Oakland and Ebonics, which Simpson derisively called “street slang,” decrying the suggestion that Black children “cannot speak good English,” and concluding that “nobody is happier than I am that Ebonics has been stopped dead in its tracks.”

After Simpson's speech, the Howard University Choir rendered a spiritual during the singing of which Simpson and the audience nodded and swayed approvingly. That rendition had the refrain:

Lord, I done done,  
 Lord, I done done,  
 Lord, I done done,

I done done whatcha tole me ta do.

Rickford and Rickford note that:

No one, evidently, had caught the contradiction. No one appeared to realize how odd the disdain for Ebonics (expressed by the keynote speaker and some—though not all—members of the crowd) seemed when paired with the obvious delight in such utterly idiomatic lyrics. This spiritual draws much of its poignancy and soul from the vernacular itself...But getting folks consciously to celebrate their ancestors' innovations on English—the living evidence of an African encounter with a socially and linguistically hostile New World—can be as exacerbating as getting them to confront the legacy of slavery itself. There will probably always be an astonishingly large number of blacks in this country who applaud the black vernacular only when they don't realize it is the black vernacular they're applauding. (Pp. 74-75).

The sociolinguistic and anthropological research literature is clear that language, culture and identity are intertwined, are indeed inextricable. Yet mainstream language attitudes reflect social demands on linguistically marginalized speech communities (African American, Latin@, American Indian, Arabic, LGBTQI, and others) to change their language so they don't sound like who they are. As Lippi-Green puts it in *English With an Accent*:

...[W]e regularly demand...that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world.

You may have dark skin, we tell them, but you must not sound Black.

You can wear a yarmulke if it is important to you as a Jew, but lose the accent.

Maybe you come from the Ukraine, but can't you speak real English?

If you just didn't sound so corn-pone, people would take you seriously.

You're the best salesperson we've got, but must you sound gay on the phone? (Pp. 63-64)

Similar negative language attitudes prevail in language arts classes where students are told to check their language at the door. In *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.*, Alim and I describe interviews with and observations of teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area. (See, for example, pp. 171-175). One teacher said she tells her students “Okay, when you're with your friends you can say whatever you want...I know you might speak this way at home, but not [here] in an academic

setting.” This approach can be a turn-off for students from non-mainstream speech communities. After all, the student’s mother tongue is the language of his/her mother. Dissin a student’s mother tongue can thus be perceived as talkin bout they momma. Moreover, when the language of instruction is not the student’s home language, and students are silenced because they aren’t allowed to use the language they know best, they are disadvantaged from the Git-Go. As South African linguist-revolutionary Neville Alexander put it in “The Elephant in the Room Looms Large”:

Being able to use the language(s) one has the best command of in any situation is an empowering factor and, conversely, not being able to do so is necessarily disempowering. The self-esteem, self-confidence, potential creativity and spontaneity that come with being able to use the language (s) that has or have shaped one from early childhood...is the foundation of all democratic politics and institutions. To be denied the use of these languages is the very meaning of oppression.

The complaint from our Bay Area teacher, whom Alim believes is “well-meaning,” is one that we hear over and over again from language arts teachers across the country.

Teacher: The thing that teachers work with, or combat the most...is definitely like issues with standard English versus vernacular English... one of the few goals I had this year was to get kids to stop saying, um, “he was, she was.”

Alim: Well, “she was” is right, right? You mean, like, “They was”?

Teacher: “They was.”

Alim: And “we was” and that kinda thing.

Teacher: Yeah, “we was.” Everything is just “was.”... There’s a lot of “ain’t,” “they was,” “we ain’t not.”

Despite over half a century of research by linguists, somehow or other our well-meaning teacher didn’t get that memo. She implies, for example, that African American Language has a random system of negation. However, “we ain’t not” is actually not found in AAL, nor for that matter, in any other language variety in the United States. Moreover, it is problematic that she points out “he was” and “she was” as incorrect/nonstandard English. In short, despite the vitality of Black Language, teachers continue hearing what’s not said and missing what is. Sadly, there’s “one thing we know for sure” (word to Oprah): teachers’ language attitudes have remained remarkably consistent for many decades, particularly when it comes to the language of Black students. By no means is this Bay Area teacher alone in her biases.

In President Barack Obama’s *Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, he provides insightful commentary on this national raciolinguistic phenomenon:

None of us—black, white, Latino, or Asian-- is immune to the stereotypes that our culture continues to feed us, especially stereotypes about black criminality, black intelligence, or the black work ethic. In general, members of every minority group continue to be measured largely by the degree of our assimilation—how closely speech patterns, dress, or demeanor conform to the dominant white culture—and the more that a minority strays from these external markers, the more he or she is subject to negative assumptions. (p. 235)

### The Way Forward

Mis-education about AAL, as well as about other varieties and languages continues. In fact, things seem to be going back to from where some folk ain nevah left. These antagonisms and cleavages are coming at a time when there are large communities of Color, and we’re seeing in our language arts classrooms larger numbers of both immigrant and native-born students of Color. In this post-Civil Rights period, there are laws against racial discrimination and social taboos against using racialized epithets to refer to various race/ethnic groups. But it’s okay to criticize somebody’s pronunciation, slam them when they “break” a verb, low-rate they use of language. What really lies behind comments like “Black Language is nothing but a lazy, ignorant way of speaking” or the Arabic language is nothing but “gibberish” are racist beliefs about Black people themselves as “lazy” and “ignorant” and speakers of Arabic as “backwards and uncivilized.” As Michael Eric Dyson put it in his Foreword to *Articulate While Black*: “Every conversation about black speech is a conversation about black intelligence and ultimately black humanity.”

Language is a proxy for race and racial stereotypes. Hat in on a particular language is linked to hat in the speakers of that language. In *Articulate While Black*, we call it “language-ing race” and “racing language.” More recently, Alim created the term “raciolinguistics” conceptualizing, theorizing and analyzing race and language together. In his recent book, *Raciolinguistics* (Oxford University Press, 2016), Alim and his co-authors, Rickford and Ball, with a critical mass of sociologists, linguists and other scholars theorize and integrate the knowledge from race/ethnic studies with work in language studies. They offer up a comparative, look at raciolinguistic phenomena in classrooms and social life across

the U.S., in a variety of communities of Color—Black, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, and Asian. Significantly but not surprising, the work of these scholars demonstrates that raciolinguistics is not peculiar to the U.S. It is a global phenomenon as demonstrated by research studies in Europe, South Africa, Brazil, and Israel. More research within the paradigm of Raciolinguistics is needed. This represents one dimension of the Way Forward.

Another important dimension of the Way Forward is multilingualism which characterizes speakers who have multiple languages and/or multiple language varieties at their command. Multilingualism is the way of our global world. For several years UNESCO has promoted this policy platform. According to Director-General Irina Bokova in her “Message for International Mother Language Day,” Multilingualism is our ally in ensuring quality education for all, in promoting inclusion and in combating discrimination.”

I herein issue a clarion call to language arts teachers to support the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s (a.k.a. 4 Cs) National Language Policy (NLP). This organizational policy not only advocates multilingualism, it also calls for support for native languages and dialects. Being able to speak more than one language is critical in preparing our students for world citizenship. The U.S. lags behind other countries in this respect. Indeed, language activists signify on monolinguals with this oft-told joke:

What do you call a person who speaks three languages?

Answer: Tri-lingual.

What do you call a person who speaks two languages?

Answer: Bi-lingual.

What do you call a person who speaks one language?

Answer: American.

The 4 C’s National Language Policy has three inseparable parts:

1. To provide resources to enable native and nonnative speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English, the language of wider communication;
2. To support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in one’s mother tongue will not be lost;
3. To foster the teaching of languages other than Eng-

lish so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language.

(Revised 2015; extended statement on CCCC website.)

Another strategic dimension of The Way Forward is

for language arts teachers to implement pedagogies of Critical Language Awareness (CLA). While policy legislation and research are long-range strategies, teachers can begin tomorrow to engage their students in lessons and activities to teach toward CLA. This is an area where my comrades and I fell short in our early 1970s struggle for the CCCC language policy that became “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (*SRTOL*, 1974).

This controversial and famous (or

infamous, depending on where you come from) language policy was first passed by our Executive Committee in 1972 in the form of a one-paragraph resolution:

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

Passage of *SRTOL* at the EC level was followed by an additional two years of work by a separate committee (on which I also served) which expanded the resolution into a monograph that was published by College Composition and Communication in 1974, the year that CCCC membership passed the resolution. (Many years later, it was also passed by the membership of the National Council of Teachers of English.)

While I stand by our work and struggle and know that it was the correct, principled pedagogical move, in the spirit of criticism and self-criticism that I learned in the



*A Pair of Shoes by Vincent van Gogh, 1866*

Black Liberation Movement, I repeat here a critique of our work that I have noted elsewhere. Although the *SRTOL* was solidly grounded in the 1960s theoretical advancement in linguistics by Chomsky, Hymes and other linguists, our work fell short in terms of linking language theory to teaching practice. Thus it has become the calling of a succeeding generation of teacher-scholars to develop pedagogy, curricula and classroom practices for implementing the theory of student language rights in Composition Studies and language arts classrooms. Conducting this kind of innovative work are such teacher-scholars as Dr. H. Samy Alim (2012); Dr. April Baker-Bell (2013); Dr. Shenika Hankerson (2016); Dr. David Kirkland (2013); Dr. Stacy Perryman-Clark (2013); Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young (2014)—all are doing Critical Language Awareness (CLA) work in public school language arts classrooms and/or in first-year college composition classrooms. Critical Language Awareness pedagogy seeks to develop in students a critical consciousness about language, power, and society. It seeks to heighten their awareness of the stakes involved in language attitude and policies of correctness and strives to impart knowledge about their own language, its social and linguistic rules, its history and cultural connection. Instead of just accepting language as a gate-keeping check on race and ethnicity, instead of capitulating to “that’s just the way things are,” as one of our Bay Area teachers put it. Critical Language Awareness pedagogy helps students examine and account for why things are the way they are. As one student asked, “Who says this is Standard English? Did it come from God?”

Using CLA strategies and teaching lessons, some teacher-scholars are teaching their students how to conduct research on and examine their own language and their home speech communities. Importantly also, they are teaching them how to critically analyze language policies and language attitudes that could lead to the students’ and their communities’ disempowerment.

### Keepin it 100

This historical moment calls for language arts teachers to be bold and courageous; to talk more and teach more about language and/as race—i.e., raciolinguistics—and to recognize students’ right to their own language as well as they right to choose the pronoun which they want you to use when you refer to or address them. Language arts teachers are ideally positioned to exert leadership in the rejection of English-only and Standard English-only policies and practices, with all their negative consequences for our 21st Century multilingual, multicultural students.

I conclude with the words of Nobel Prize winner, Toni Morrison—whose message about Black people’s African American Language applies to ALL marginalized speakers and their languages: “The language, only the language... It is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It’s a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher’s to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language.” (Interview by Thomas LeClaire, *The New Republic*, March 21, 1981)

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Blackman/an unfinished history” is from Don L. Lee’s *We Walk the Way of the New World*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970. Lee is now known as Haki Madhubuti.

<sup>2</sup>“English Teacher, Why You Be Doing the Thangs You Don’t Do” was published in the *English Journal* in January, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> The term “Ebonics” was coined in 1973 by Black psychologist and head of the Institute of Black Studies, Dr. Robert Williams during a caucus of Black scholars at a national conference (of Black and White scholars) which Dr. Williams had convened in St. Louis, Missouri. The theme of the conference focused on language and the urban child, and at their Black family style meeting, Black scholars expressed profound disdain for the term “Black English” as well as for the way Black speech had been conventionally addressed by White scholars. “Ebonics” and the theoretical framework advanced by these scholars linked African American speech to African languages and to African-European language mixtures on the African Continent, in the Caribbean, and in other parts of the so-called historical “New World.” In 1975, Dr. Williams published the conference papers in his book, *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks*. In the introduction, Williams states:

[Ebonics] may be defined as the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin. It includes the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects, and social dialects of Black people, especially those who have been forced to adapt to colonial circumstances. Ebonics derives its form from ebony



(black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound) and refers to the study of the language of Black people in all its cultural uniqueness.

Owing to scholarly elitism—and yes, racism—“Ebonics” never gained widespread academic/scholarly currency until it was resurrected by the Oakland, California School Board in its “Resolution on Ebonics” in 1996. The Resolution noted that Ebonics was the primary language of Oakland’s Black students and that it would be used as the language of instruction to teach Oakland’s children Standard English.

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**Geneva Smitherman** is Emeritus professor of English at Michigan State University and the author of several books and dozens of articles on African American English.