

## **If Our Children Are Our Future, Why Are We Stuck in the Past?: Beyond the Anglicist and Creolist Debate**

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“... for those of us who live and work in the Black community, the study of African American Language is not just an academic exercise, it is our life.”  
Geneva Smitherman, “Foreword,” *Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English*

### *Introduction*

There are two dominant perspectives about the history and development of African American English held by two distinctive groups: (1) Anglicists, mostly non-African American scholars who spend much of their time trying to support their claim that African American English is a dialect of British English and that Africans in America who created African American English forgot their native culture and language upon arrival in America; and (2) Creolists, mostly African American scholars who spend much of their time arguing for and trying to support their belief that African American English derived from contact between Blacks and Whites and the cultures and languages they brought to their contact situation. In other words, the latter group believes Africans in America maintained aspects of their languages and cultures in adapting to their oppressive environment while the former believes Africans in America either did not value their cultures enough to preserve at least some aspects of them or they did not have the ability to do so.<sup>1</sup>

I find it interesting that the predominantly African American group (i.e., the Creolists) is the one that tends to apply their knowledge about African American English to educational, social, and political problems faced by African Americans while the predominantly non-African American group tends not to. This is not to say that there are no non-African American linguists

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<sup>1</sup> See G. Bailey (2001) for a review of the various positions regarding the origins of African American English. See Mufwene (2000), Poplack (2000), Rickford & Rickford (2000), Smitherman (1977), and Winford (1997, 1998) for reviews, perspectives, and examinations of the history and development of African American English.

and other scholars who contribute to improving the educational, social, and political landscape for African Americans, especially the educational landscape. I can think of several who do (e.g., William Labov, Walt Wolfram, Carolyn Temple Adger, Donna Christian, Courtney Cazden, and Shirley Brice Heath). However, I question the efficacy and intentions of the longstanding debate about the history and development of African American English when right now we have African American children who are discriminated against because of their language, the essence of who they are, while graduating with high school diplomas they cannot read. That’s not right. It is time to stop quibbling over the particulars of dialect and creole when we as linguists can contribute to a greater cause. We have a constituency that is more likely to benefit from our research on deciphering the theoretical and sociolinguistic mysteries of language use in the African American community than what has turned out to be the African American English origins debacle.

In this chapter, I offer an examination of the implications of the debate over the origins of African American English within the context of the education of Black folks and desegregation of schools with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions. Of course I do so from an African American cultural perspective—just like Docta G has raised us to view African American English (i.e., within the context of the community where it is happening). It is something I have wanted to do for a long time because it has weighed heavily on my heart and mind.

#### *What about Today?*

For as long as I can remember, I have been told about the Anglicists and the Creolists as if they were the Cowboys and the Indians or “The Good Guys” and “The Bad Guys” or The North and The South or ... you get the picture. Although there have been other “camps” in the saga of the origins of African American English and more recent ones (e.g., the Ebonicist and divergence positions), the two main positions remain the Anglicists and the Creolists. I have now been a researcher in the area of language use in the African American community long enough to have friends who are in both camps. I even have friends who are fence straddlers, who change

camp periodically, or who refuse to partake in either. I have seen this debate take place as an undergraduate student at the University of Texas, as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, and now as a faculty member in the profession at the University of Georgia. I have gone from being told about the stories to witnessing them and living them firsthand.

When I tell people outside of the field about African American English, they seem dumbfounded that anyone would believe that African American English is not historically rooted to Africa since the people who speak it are. Yet, I have tried to convince myself that it matters whether African American English is historically a dialect of British English or an English and African creole by becoming involved in research groups and projects that engage in such questions. But I digress since my point is not to prove that African American English is a creole or a dialect and since I fundamentally do not feel the evidence exists that can support either side beyond reasonable doubt. My point is that, today, it does not matter what the outcome of this storied debate is. I know that some believe that given current language policy it might be helpful to prove that African American English is an English and African creole so that it could be classified as a foreign language and receive bilingual education funding, but I do not buy that argument.

That was reportedly one strategy of the Oakland Unified School District Board in its declaration of its 1996 Ebonics Resolutions though it later denied such. But then I remember that the Gullah speakers off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina have not benefited much from that designation. In fact, during the Oakland Ebonics controversy of 1996-1997, the GeeChee people of those islands got no publicity at all even though there is no controversy among linguists about the origin, status, or nature of their language—it is an English and African creole. The point remains, what do those people need today? What do African American English-speaking children need today in terms of education and language policy? If the "great debate" were decided without question today, how would we be better off? Would we be closer to helping African American English-speaking children to learn to read and write? Would we be closer to helping African American English-speaking children learn critical thinking and literacy

skills? Would we be closer to helping African American English-speaking children have better schools with better facilities and better funding and better opportunities? I do not think so. That is a problem I cannot get past. And that is why I can no longer engage the African American English origins debate.

I recently spoke with a non-African American researcher during a conference about their research in reading with African American English-speaking children. I commented that we are still trying to determine why African American and other inner-city children still cannot read despite all the research linguists, reading researchers, and other scholars have done. We know that theoretical linguists and sociolinguists in conjunction with reading scholars, psychologists, and other researchers can help African American English-speaking children learn to read. We have been told as much on numerous occasions at our scholarly conferences (e.g., Linguistic Society of America and New Ways of Analyzing English) by top researchers (William Labov, John Rickford, Michèle Foster, John Baugh, and Gregory Guy). Yet, instead of working together for a useful cause, we have spent a good bit of our resources working to answer a question that primarily serves to stroke the egos of a few instead of the needs of the many. This has gone on for decades and I do not really understand why, but I am greatly perplexed about it in critically viewing our educational situation.

I am reminded that a house divided cannot stand. Although there are (socio)linguists, including several African American scholars, who are engaged in research that benefits and/or directly addresses educational needs of African American English-speaking children, some of those scholars are also engaged in the African American English origins debate. That means their attention is divided. Given that we are all busy in our scholarly pursuits and we are often already over committed, does it really make sense to engage a fruitless effort when there is something more fruitful on the table?

*How Did We Get Here?*

I realize that because of either many years of neglect on the subject of language use in the African American community or poor scholarship in the area that linguists waged the origins debate as if that would legitimize the right to study the language of African Americans. However, just because that is what has been done, it does not mean that is what has to continue to be done. There is no longer a need to justify the study of language use in the African American community. There are ample reasons for researching language use in the African American community as I have already indicated. I am urging more support for such research by linguistic scholars who are currently distracted by lesser pursuits. Where we are is at a crossroads and how we got here is by lost time and lost causes. But it is not too late.

A few years before the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* was being battled, Lorenzo Dow Turner had written *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949). Of course there were less worthy writings about language use in the African American community written before that landmark decision, but this was at least a positive scholarly writing written by an in-group member unlike much of what had transpired before that time. The fact that other "scholarly" writing had been written before by non-Blacks about language use in the African American community, but this was by far one of the first that had the positive impact it did and has had such a lasting impression on the scholarship in the area as a landmark piece, reminds me of other stories. For example, people of color tell stories about dissertation directors or major professors or some other academic significant who tell them that they cannot study their community because they are too close to that community as if it will somehow taint the quality of the work produced or make it less valued—or worse, mean it should not be valued at all. I have never heard European-Americans/Whites tell me similar stories. How can only people of color be too close? I say this because that is the impression I get when I look at the research history and landscape of language use in the African American community. It is not that non-African Americans cannot investigate our community, but, as the saying goes, "nobody can tell my story like I can." (How different the stories are when the lion finally gets to tell them.)

If it is the African American scholars who have a vision for African Americans beyond what has been shown historically, what does that say about scholars and scholarship for language use in the African American community? It is not that there are no non-African American scholars interested in helping or teaching Black children (I have already told you names of some who are concerned, like Adger, Christian, & Taylor<sup>2</sup> 1999 or Labov 2001 or Wolfram, Adger, & Christian 1999), but I have to say that I think more can and will be done with African American scholars who care about their communities and children since there are obviously too many people who do not. The message I see is that if *we* do not investigate our own communities with the vision and insight we have, who will do so efficaciously? Who will teach our children to fly? One problem we have today, though, is that there are Black children who cannot spell ‘fly’. But I do not think it was always that way. My concern is that *Brown vs. Board of Education* was supposed to help, but it may have unexpectedly made it worse in some ways. But I think linguists can help—if they stop bickering and regroup against another enemy.

In *Sista, Speak! Black Women Kinfolk Talk about Language and Literacy* (Lanehart 2002), I examine the language, literacy, and uses of identity of five working- and middle-class African American women across three generations of my family. All the women were born and raised in the South. I focus on the matriarch, Maya; Maya’s fourth-oldest child, Grace; Maya’s eighth and youngest child, Reia; and Grace’s two children, Deidra and Sonja. Each narrative proceeds with the women telling about their background, education, language, literacy, and concludes with a discussion of their goals and possible selves.<sup>3</sup> I may be accused of being biased since these are stories of women in my own family and one of the stories is my own (remember I did mention that we are accused of being too close to our communities, but then who else wants to study us the way we should and can be studied—and who else can tell our stories like we

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<sup>2</sup> Adger and Christian are White, but Taylor is African American.

<sup>3</sup> “Possible selves represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming . . . [T]he pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual’s particular sociocultural and historical context and . . . by the individual’s immediate social experiences” (Markus and Nurius 1986: 954).

can?), but I know these stories are not unique. I have seen these stories in the lives of many women and I felt they needed to be told and not forgotten.

In the telling of these stories, I learned much about the education of Black folk—and I am still learning. These stories further piqued my interest in the history of education of Africans in America—especially around the time before *Brown vs. Board of Education* and what has happened since then. The stories of my family centering around the decades of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions have provided a picture puzzle for me that oddly coincide with my Anglicist-Creolist conundrum. The narratives of Grace and Reia in particular strike me on this issue of education. Below is an excerpt from Grace’s narrative<sup>4</sup> in *Sista, Speak!* (Lanehart 2002: 47-48) about what her education was like:

During the time when I was going to school, we were not integrated back then. All of my teachers was Black. There was no White teachers at that school. All the Blacks went to school together and all the Whites went to school together. You didn’t even see a White person. You walked the streets all day going to school and coming from school. You were not gonna see a White person in that area. Because they had they own area. That’s all was out here. Black. No White people lived around us. None. They were like ten, fifteen, twenty miles away and that was a long ways because we didn’t have transportation hardly . . . .

You had your own [area]. You wasn’t going to just walk the street and see White people. You couldn’t walk out of your house and walk and see White people, unlesen they was driving a car, going to town or something like that. They wasn’t walking out there. Because that was not their area of town. Everybody had their own area of town. And that’s the way it was back then when I was growing up . . . .

And I always felt that Whites got a better education than Blacks. We always got their hand-me-down books and different stuff like that. And being Black—I think they taught different things in their school than they taught in our school. And I still say that.

And I’ma tell you another thing. I was telling that to Reia today. You know when you were talking about Simon did a better job on his test, on the English, than you did and stuff like that? And what I still can’t get her to see those

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<sup>4</sup> All the words of the narratives are by the participants except those enclosed by square brackets. Names of people and places are pseudonyms. Since each narrative is pieced from transcriptions of the participant’s speech and writings, there may seem to be inconsistencies in punctuation and spelling. This is partly due to the speech transcriptions being limited by a punctuation system meant for writing and not speech as well as a spelling system that does not necessarily reflect the way words are really said. So, how you hear the narratives in your mind may not be how they were produced. However, I did alter the spelling of some words transcribed from speech to make an alternate representation of the word appropriate (e.g., “I’ah” instead of “I’ll” to show reduction of postvocalic /l/).

tests are not designed for Black people. They're designed for [47] White people. I don't care how smart you are, they're not designed for you to pass. Now I don't know how you passed it, but I'm telling you. They design things for them. I don't know what goes on in those schools or how they're taught.

And I think a lot has to do with the teachers. I really do. I don't know if Black teachers— I'm sure they probably grew up some of them in the same manner that I did and by them not knowing I'm sure they went through a lot of hard times too and they did the best they could do. I can say my mother did the best she did raising me. I feel they did the best they could do. But I always felt that the other races got a better education than we got for some reason. And I don't know what manner it was, how they were taught or what. But we were always left behind. And I'm sure it's because of race. They will not let you catch up with them. And that's why they didn't want integration I'm sure. [48]

Next is an excerpt from Reia's narrative in *Sista, Speak!* (Lanehart 2002: 72-74, 76) about education during her youth:

I went to all Black schools until the second half of my sixth grade when we moved out to where we live now, where Maya 'nem live now. That's when I started going to interracial schools. Second half of sixth grade and then from there on I was in interracial schools. Throughout elementary they were all Black. I only had Black teachers all the way through [72] the sixth grade. Maybe when I went to the interracial school my teacher was Black, it was a Black man. From there, when I started junior high school, that's when I started White teachers.

I didn't notice any difference [between Black teachers and White teachers] until I got in high school. Cause even in junior high school it was probably half and half— half Black teachers half [White teachers]— because there were a lot of Black teachers teaching at that junior high school and I had quite a few Black teachers there, but I did have some White teachers. And I really didn't see any blatant differences, to be truthfully honest with you, until I got to high school and it was really for the most part just one of my math teachers where there was a blatant difference in the way she treated Black students and the Whi[te students]. She was very prejudiced obviously. That wasn't very subtle with her. It was pretty obvious that she treated the White students [different] and she helped 'em out more. Like when they came up to her desk to ask questions or if they asked questions while she was standing at the board, she answered their questions and seemed that [she] really enjoyed answering. But like if we raised our hand [or] didn't understand something, she'd get an attitude and kinda like she made you feel dumb and stupid. And that was in Geometry and I had taken Algebra One and I made straight 'A's in Algebra One. I was halfway teaching the class in Algebra One and that was under a White teacher. But when I took Geometry, by the end of the first school year, that first half of the school year, I had a 'D' in Geometry. I got a 'D' in Geometry for the first half of the school year. And the woman— this was God sent. But she got sick or something happened where she couldn't finish off the rest of the school year so we had to get transferred and I was transferred back to the Algebra teacher that I had and I ended up getting a 'B' in Geometry

for that school year. But it's like I didn't even get the foundations. My foundation wasn't really established that well but I still got in there and did well and I know I woulda made straight As in Geometry. I would have liked Geometry a lot better if I'da had a teacher that wasn't like her— that wasn't prejudiced and thought we were all stupid and dumb.

And I had her for English too. I had her for one of my English classes. And I was an honor roll student. I was on the Dean's list. Took her for English. I think it was my first nine weeks or something, or second, but it may have been the first nine weeks, and I got a 'C' in her class. All the White kids got 'A's and 'B's in the class. Everybody Black got a 'C' and below. I got the highest grade in the class and it was a 'C'. And there was one girl who made st[r]aight 'A's. She gave the girl a 'F'. You got straight 'A's [73] and you got a 'F' in English. In English? Excuse me, for crying out loud. I mean English is not that hard. But that's what I mean about it was a blatant difference. [74] . . . For the most part [I think the schools that I went to were good schools for learning and that they prepared me for my road to college]. I mean even Roosevelt, the all Black school. I went to two different elementary schools. The first school I went to, I forget the name of it, but it was over there by where Anne 'nem live. I started Roosevelt in the third grade. So I was there until sixth grade, until half of sixth grade. But I thought they were good schools. And you know, I'm glad I went to all-Black schools to be truthfully honest with you. I'm glad I did because I didn't have to deal with any racial issues per se cause all my teachers were Black; all the students were Black. [76]

I told you these stories are not unique. Grace went to school before, during, and after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions. She talks about how she wanted a better education than what she was getting in the South, an equal education to the Whites, but she did not really want to go to school with Whites. That should not be a surprise since all her life during her schooling she was not in the company of Whites. Her generation did not have a problem being segregated, they had a problem being dehumanized, mistreated, and taken for granted.

Reia went to school a decade after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions. However, she still went to all-Black schools during elementary school because she always lived in all-Black neighborhoods during her school years. Her situation changed because she took advantage of the desegregation opportunities the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions provided by going to magnet schools and the like because she was also a very bright student.

In comparing the narratives of Grace and Reia, both Grace and Reia preferred segregated Black schools. The difference was that Grace did not have a choice in the matter. Also, Grace

wanted better schools and could not get them. Reia had access to better schools and did get them. However, there was a catch that put a spin on what 'better' meant and was a result of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions.

In his latest book, *Beyond Ebonics* (2000), sociolinguist John Baugh relates a statement made by Professor Richard Wright of Howard University during a guest appearance on the Gordon Elliot television show in January 1997 that echoes what Grace and Reia say in their narratives about race in schools that is relevant to the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions:

I wanted to make a statement that the whole problem of black children going to school and not learning standard English is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is not the case that black people used to go to school came out the way they went in, okay? I went to school during the 1940s and 50s. We didn't go to school as speakers of black English. We went to school understanding that the purpose of school was to clean up whatever you took in. . . . Since desegregation you've had to deal with the weight of color. When we went to school, we just went to school. You didn't go to school as a black child, you just went to school as a child. . . . The weight of race is something black people have to carry today. When I went to school I did not carry the weight of race. [109] . . . During the period of segregation there was not such a thing in your mind as you were going to a black school. . . . You were simply going to school and the assumption was that you were going to school to learn because you had something to do there you couldn't do away from school, and that's learn something. [110]

This excerpt reinforces a recurring message in Baugh's *Beyond Ebonics* (2000): this nation will not heal and cannot move forward educationally, socially, or politically until it redresses not only the linguistic consequences of slavery in America, but all consequences. In other words, as long as there is racism and its ill effects, there will be those who will continue to question the efficacy of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions because of the rise of racialization in schools after them and, as a result, about the potential benefits of educational resegregation for Black students in K-12 that Reia describes she enjoyed or that Professor Wright describes as a haven of resilience-building for Blacks.

With the implementation of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the desegregation of schools, I think education opened up more for non-European Americans, but it did not care about them and accept them and teach them in as nourishing, supportive environment as they may have

been accustomed to and needed—like all children. As Grace has said on many occasions, Blacks did not mind being in segregated schools, they just wanted good schools. And as can be extrapolated from the controversy over the divergence hypothesis,<sup>5</sup> it is not that Blacks needed to be in integrated schools to get a good education, they just needed to be in good schools—and those schools *can* have all Blacks.

In “Directness in the Use of African American English” (2001: 251-252, 254-255), Arthur Spears talks about his experience growing up in all-Black neighborhoods and going to all-Black schools in those neighborhoods, the “Golden ghettos”:

*Golden ghetto* is a term that brings out the positive aspects of large Black communities during segregation and has been used by prominent Black social [251] scientists, such as St. Clair Drake (1945), who wanted to focus attention on the vibrant, positive impact of businesses, organizations, and institutions in such communities. Golden ghettos were multi-class, so at least one of their features was that Black children growing up had an abundance of role models. [252] . . .

The high school was excellent in terms of the education it provided students. It ranked with celebrated all-Black high schools, of which there were many, such as Dunbar in Washington, D.C. Classes were often named by the professions conspicuously taken up by their members. For example, the class right behind me was the “doctor class” (roughly 6% of the class became [254] physicians). All of the teachers and administrators were quite willing to insert themselves into students’ lives to make sure they succeeded. When students who were thought to have great potential were backsliding, they were often called out in public and talked to with directness.<sup>6</sup> Most important is that teachers knew how to get and keep students’ attention and respect. They knew what kind of speech would be effective and the specific situations in which it would be effective. There was never a dull moment because all the faculty, administrators, and staff accessed regularly a wide range of Black speech genres to do their job and often employed them theatrically.

Persons who did not grow up in these communities would find the teachers’ and administrators’ behavior scandalous; cause for contract termination if not lawsuits. None of the students thought their behavior was anything out of the ordinary and it would never have occurred to us to complain to parents about it. The parents, had we done so, would have asked what we had done to elicit that behavior. Since such direct speech behavior was always purposeful, the parents

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<sup>5</sup> See G Bailey & Maynor 1989 and Fasold et al. 1987 for more information about the divergence controversy.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Directness’ in speech has several characteristics: aggressiveness, candor, dysphemism, negative criticism, upbraiding, conflict, abuse, insult, and obscenity—all of which are frequently deployed in the context of consciously manipulated interpersonal drama. Spears argues that these characteristics reflect the inherent cultural bias, or cultural loadedness, of a significant portion of the mainstream American English lexicon (Lanehart 2001: 14).

would have agreed with the school teachers and administrators. Indeed, the parents engaged in the same kinds of speech behavior themselves. [255]

Not only can segregated schools work, the language, the discourse patterns of Blacks in those segregated schools can work as Michèle Foster (2001) has shown. So, why don't they work now? Why did we have *Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School vs. Ann Arbor School District* (1979), a.k.a. the Black English Trial,<sup>7</sup> and the Oakland Ebonics controversy of 1996-1997<sup>8</sup> if it really is OK to talk to Black children using the language of their home in their schools? Why did teachers before *Brown vs. Board of Education* know that was OK but teachers after *Brown vs. Board of Education* do not? Is it really about the language? Or, as usual, is it about the people who speak the language?

The controversy over the divergence hypothesis also indicated that the problem was not that African American English speakers needed to learn a language of wider communication from Whites, they could just as well learn it from Blacks who spoke a language of wider communication. I mean, in those Golden ghettos, where else did those "doctor," "lawyer," etc., classes learn to speak a language of wider communication if they were segregated? That is why this is not just about the education of African Americans, but their language as well. That is why the role of sociolinguists and linguists of all kinds is important. The language and discourse patterns of African Americans matter as shown by Geneva Smitherman (1977, 1984, 2000), Lisa Delpit (1995), Michèle Foster (2001), and many others. How could it not matter since the students in the classrooms talk and they obviously talk their talk. And if something about the way even a preschool African American boy walks alerts a non-African American teacher that he is too aggressive and should be in special education as University of Texas researcher Audrey McCray suggests, what do you think the language suggests?<sup>9</sup> It is no secret that African

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<sup>7</sup> See R. Bailey (1983) for more information about this trial.

<sup>8</sup> See Perry & Delpit (1998) for a critique of the Ebonics controversy. See Baugh (2000) for a detailed exegesis of the controversy.

<sup>9</sup> A conference paper at the 2000 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association by educator Audrey McCray titled "There's Something about the Way He Walks" addressed the problems African American males have in schools and how something as innocuous as the way they walk is enough to contribute to the conflict between them and school. I would suggest you could do a similar study entitled, "There's Something about the Way He [or She] Talks"--though, of course, language is not innocuous.

American English-speaking children get put in special education routinely because of the way they talk. Don't you know linguists can do something about that because even if the teachers do not know any better, we do? We know that the language used in the African American community does not mean the people are stupid and that their children should be put in special education. And you know what: the teachers from those segregated African American communities who taught their African American English-speaking children—and taught them a language of wider of communication—and cared for them and did “the best they could” before the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions knew it too. So why don't teachers know it now?

*Conclusions: How Ya Gonna Be?*

I still have more questions than answers as you can plainly see. But I want you to have some (new) questions too—because, as I tell my students doing research, you need a question before you do your research and determine your research methods and methodologies. In a recent excerpted article appearing in *The Chronicle Review* (2001: B12) from Jack Balkin's new book, *What Brown vs. Board of Education Should Have Said: The Nation's Top Legal Experts Rewrite America's Landmark Civil Rights Decision* (2001), he says something that cannot go unexamined:

The effective compromise reached in the United States at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that schools may be segregated by race as long as the segregation is not due to direct government fiat. Furthermore, although *Brown I* [there is a second decision in *Brown* a year later referred to as *Brown II*] emphasized that equal educational opportunity was a crucial component of citizenship, there is no federal constitutional requirement that pupils in predominantly minority school districts receive the same quality of education as students in wealthier, largely all-white districts. [B12]

After reading Balkin's assessment, there was no doubt in my mind that a decision needed to be made. How could it not be about the quality of education? Was that not the whole point from the get go? If it was not about the quality of education as Grace clearly says in her narrative, then that makes *Brown vs. Board of Education* about Black people wanting to be closer to White

people or something. I don't think so. I do not think Black people or people of color overall have such an inferiority complex that they cared more about wanting to be with White people and were desperate for their company than being desperate for the quality education they needed then and still need now—and deserve. We are still at a crossroads and it is time once again to make a change—to make a real difference.

As much as I would like to think that this chapter makes a dent in the death of the African American English origins “war” that rages on, I would hope that it at least opens eyes to the possibilities that things have been better for African American English-speaking children, for culturally-Black children, and that they can be. African American English-speaking children should be able to go to schools where teachers know their language and discourse patterns and recognize them for the rich resources they are and not as deficits or signs of mental deficiencies that they are not. Culturally-Black parents should be able to go to visit their child's school and not be afraid that the teachers will shame them because of their educational level or culture which the teacher may not share or understand. As Baugh (2001) has indicated, it takes the cooperation of adult advocates (i.e., parents), educators (e.g., teachers), and students to make education work well. That will not happen if *all* parties are not valued and respected.

Without question there is much to glean from the Golden ghettos. Clearly that is somewhere to look for the better. But I also think Grace's and Reia's narratives are places to look for the better too. Although Grace tells of growing up with inferior schools, she also tells of growing up in a community of people she wanted to be among. Reia tells of something similar. The people were not the problem. Equality and access were problems. The better they talk about and I allude to are not the educations they received—it is obvious they could have had better—it is the community of caring, understanding, nurturing, camaraderie, and all that makes a community a community that makes what Grace, Reia, Arthur Spears, and Richard Wright describe what they lived as better than what I see today—despite the progress we are supposed to have made. We can do better.

I want those reading this chapter to know that linguists can use their resources to make a difference in letting other scholars and educators and the public know that language use in the African American community is vibrant, it is here to stay, and that most of its speakers do not care if it is a dialect of British English or an English and African creole. Linguists can use their resources to help culturally-Black, African American English-speaking children to learn to read and write, excel in critical literacy and thinking skills, as well as other creative endeavors if they choose to accept that mission and give up the ghost of the origins debate. What matters is right here and right now—and what any of us have done for the plight of the communities of African American English-speakers lately.

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