

Title: Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English

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# **Part One**

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## **Introduction**



# 1

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## What's Going On?

*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?*

—Mark 8:36

*SOUL [sōl]* 1. The animating and vital principle in humans . . . 5. The central or integral part; the vital core . . . 9. A sense of ethnic pride among Black people and especially African Americans, expressed in areas such as language, social customs, religion and music.

—*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th edition, 2000)

“Spoken Soul” was the name that Claude Brown, author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, coined for black talk. In a 1968 interview he waxed eloquent in its praise, declaring that the informal speech or vernacular of many African Americans “possesses a pronounced lyrical quality which is frequently incompatible to any music other than that ceaselessly and relentlessly driving rhythm that flows from poignantly spent lives.” A decade later, James Baldwin, legendary author of *The Fire Next Time*, described black English as “this passion, this skill . . . this incredible music.”

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Spoken Soul these writers exalted is battered by controversy, its very existence called into question. Though belittled and denied, however, it lives on authentically. In homes, schools, and churches, on streets, stages, and the airwaves, you can hear soul spoken every day. Most African Americans—including millions who, like Brown and Baldwin, are

fluent speakers of Standard English—still invoke Spoken Soul as we have for hundreds of years, to laugh or cry, to preach and praise, to shuck and jive, to sing, to rap, to shout, to style, to express our individual personas and our ethnic identities (“’spress yo’self!” as James Brown put it), to confide in and commiserate with friends, to chastise, to cuss, to act, to act the fool, to get by and get over, to pass secrets, to make jokes, to mock and mimic, to tell stories, to reflect and philosophize, to create authentic characters and voices in novels, poems, and plays, to survive in the streets, to relax at home and recreate in playgrounds, to render our deepest emotions and embody our vital core.

The fact is that most African Americans *do* talk differently from whites and Americans of other ethnic groups, or at least most of us can when we want to. And the fact is that most Americans, black and white, know this to be true.

In this book, we will explore the vibrancy and vitality of Spoken Soul as an expressive instrument in American literature, religion, entertainment, and everyday life. We will detail the features and history of Spoken Soul. We will then return to the Ebonics firestorm that flared up at century’s end, considering its spark (the Oakland, California, School District’s resolutions and their educational significance), its fuel (media coverage), and its embers (Ebonics “humor”). In the final chapter we will reflect on the vernacular’s role in American life and society, and seek the truth about the dizzying love-hate relationship with black talk that is as old and new as the nation itself. Who needs this information and insight? We all do, because Spoken Soul is an inescapable vessel of American history, literature, society, and popular culture. Regardless of its status, we need to come to terms with this beloved and beleaguered language.

In coming to terms with Spoken Soul, what it is and why it matters, the first thing to know is how high it ranks in the esteem of its maestros. Echoing the sentiments of Claude Brown and James Baldwin, Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison insisted in 1981 that the distinctive ingredient of her fiction was

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. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It's terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. He may never know the etymology of Africanisms in his language, not even know that "hip" is a real word or that "the dozens" meant something. This is a really cruel fallout of racism. I know the standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language, the *lingua franca*.

June Jordan, celebrated essayist and poet, in 1985 identified "three qualities of Black English—the presence of life, voice and clarity—that testify to a distinctive Black value system." Jordan, then a professor at Stony Brook College, chided her students for their uneasiness about the colloquial language in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, and went on to teach them about the art of the vernacular.

The second thing to bear in mind is that between the 1960s and 1990s, a dramatic shift occurred. By the end of the 1990s, we could find scarcely a spokesman or spokeswoman for the race who had anything flattering to say about Spoken Soul. In response to the Oakland school board's December 18, 1996, resolution to recognize "Ebonics" as the primary language of African American students in that California district, poet Maya Angelou told the *Wichita Eagle* that she was "incensed" and found the idea "very threatening." NAACP president Kweisi Mfume denounced the measure as "a cruel joke," and although he later adopted a friendlier stance, the Reverend Jesse Jackson on national television initially called it "an unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace." Jackson found himself curiously aligned with Ward Connerly, the black University of California regent whose ultimately successful efforts to end affirmative action on University of California campuses and in the state as a whole Jackson had vigorously opposed. Connerly called the Oakland proposal "tragic," and went on to argue, "These are not kids who came from Africa last year. . . . These are kids that have had every opportunity to acclimate themselves to American society, and they have gotten themselves into this trap of speaking this language—this slang, really, that people can't understand. Now we're going to legitimize it."

Other African Americans from different ends of the ideological spectrum fell into step. Black conservative academic and author Shelby Steele characterized the Oakland proposal as just another “gimmick” to enhance black self-esteem, while black liberal academic and author Henry Louis Gates Jr., chairman of Afro-American Studies at Harvard, dismissed it as “obviously stupid and ridiculous.” Former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver agreed, as did entertainer Bill Cosby.

The virtual consensus blurred political lines among white pundits as well. Conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh assailed the Ebonics resolution, while leading Republican William Bennett, former U.S. secretary of education, described it as “multiculturalism gone haywire.” Leading liberal Mario Cuomo, former governor of New York, called it a “bad mistake,” and Secretary of Education Richard Riley, a member of President Clinton’s Democratic cabinet, declared that Ebonics programs would not be eligible for federal bilingual education dollars, maintaining that “elevating black English to the status of a language is not the way to raise standards of achievement in our schools and for our students.” At the state level, anti-Ebonics legislation was introduced both by Republicans, such as Representative Mark Ogles of Florida, and by Democrats, such as Georgia state senator Ralph Abernathy III.

Millions of other people across the United States and around the world rushed in to express their vociferous condemnation of Ebonics and the proposal to take it into account in schools. (“Ebonics” in fact quickly became a stand-in for the language variety and for Oakland’s proposal, so the recurrent question “What do you think about Ebonics?” elicited reactions to both topics.) Animated conversations sprang up in homes and workplaces and at holiday gatherings, as well as on television and radio programs, in letters to the editor, and on electronic bulletin boards that were deluged after the Oakland decision. According to *Newsweek*, “An America Online poll about Ebonics drew more responses than the one asking people whether O. J. Simpson was guilty.”

The vast majority of those America Online responses were not just negative. They were caustic. Ebonics was vilified as “disgusting black street slang,” “incorrect and substandard,” “nothing more than ignorance,” “lazy English,” “bastardized English,” “the language of illiteracy,” and “this utmost ridiculous made-up language.” And Oakland’s resolution, almost always misunderstood as a proposal to teach Ebon-

ics instead of as a plan to use Ebonics as a springboard to Standard English, elicited superlatives of disdain, disbelief, and derision:

“Idiocy of the highest form.” (December 21, 1996)

“Man, 'ubonics will take me far back to de jongo!” (December 21, 1996)

“I think it be da dumbest thing I'd eber heard be.” (December 23, 1996)

These comments, dripping with scorn, are far removed from the tributes that Brown, Baldwin, Morrison, and Jordan had paid to the African American vernacular in earlier decades. Why the about-face? What had happened to transform Spoken Soul from an object of praise to an object of ridicule?

For one thing, the focus was different. The Ebonics controversy of the 1990s was about the use of the vernacular in school, while the earlier commentaries were more about the expressiveness of the vernacular itself in literature and informal settings.

Moreover, the general misconception that the Oakland school board intended to teach and accept Ebonics rather than English in the classroom—perhaps assisted by the resolution's vague wording and the media's voracious coverage—made matters worse. Most of the fuming and fulminating about Ebonics stemmed from the mistaken belief that it was to replace Standard English as a medium of instruction and a target for success.

This misunderstanding was not new, nor was it unique to the United States. The 1979 ruling by Michigan Supreme Court justice Charles Joiner that the negative attitudes of Ann Arbor teachers toward the home language of their black students represented a barrier to the students' academic success was similarly misinterpreted as a plan “to teach ghetto children in ‘black English’” (in the words of columnist Carl Rowan). And from the 1950s on, proposals by Caribbean linguists to take students' Creole English into account to improve the teaching of Standard English (in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana) have been similarly misinterpreted and condemned as attempts to “settle” for Creole instead of English.

But the backlash against Ebonics in the 1990s was certainly fueled by new elements, and by considerations unique to the contemporary United States. There is more concern today about what we have in common as Americans, including English. Some who thrashed Ebonics in Internet forums voiced this concern:

There seems to be a movement with the cultural diversity, bilingualism, and quota-oriented affirmative action campaigns to balkanize the country and build walls between people and dissolve the concept of being an American. This Ebonics . . . will . . . keep a segment of the black community in ghetto mode. (December 20, 1996)

As in this case, critiques of Ebonics were often couched in larger objections to bilingual education, affirmative action, and any measure that seemed to offer special “advantages” to ethnic minorities and women—despite the centuries of disadvantage these groups have endured. A month before Oakland passed its Ebonics resolution, Californians endorsed Proposition 209, outlawing affirmative action in education and employment, and in June 1998, they approved Proposition 227, prohibiting most forms of bilingual education. Many states passed English-only legislation in the 1980s and 1990s, and lawmakers continue to lobby for similar legislation at the federal level.

The 1990s also saw internal divisions within the African American population—by socioeconomic class, generation, and gender—grow more pronounced than they had been in the 1960s. This accounts for some of the stinging criticism of Ebonics that originated “within the race.” While the 1960s featured “*The March on Washington*,” a united protest by African Americans and others against racial and economic inequality, blacks in the 1990s participated in separate “Million Man” and “Million Woman” marches, and competing “Million Youth” marches. While the proportion of African Americans earning more than \$100,000 (in 1989 dollars) tripled between 1969 and 1989 (from 0.3 percent to about 1 percent of all African American households), the proportion earning below \$15,000 remained the same (about 43 percent of all African American households), and the mean income actually dropped in the interim (from \$9,300 to \$8,520). When we consider that Ebonics pronunciation and grammar are used most frequently by poor and working-class African Americans, and that it was primarily the comments of middle- and upper-middle class African Americans heard over the airwaves and read on the Internet in 1996 and 1997, their disdain is not surprising.

What’s more, the distance between the younger hip-hop generation and older African American generations—marked by the politics of dress, music, and slang—has in various ways also grown more stark in the 1990s. Some middle-aged and elderly black folk have increasingly come to view baggy-jeans-and-boot-wearing, freestylin’ youth as

hoodlums who are squandering the gains of the civil rights movement. Not entirely coincidentally, most of the publicly aired comments on Ebonics came from black baby boomers (now in their forties and fifties) or older African Americans. When discussing the slang of hip-hop youth—which they (mis)identified with Ebonics—they often bristled with indignation. So did others, of other races, who vented their prejudices quite openly.

While today's debate is charged with new elements, the question of the role of the vernacular in African American life and literature has been a source of debate among African Americans for more than a century. When Paul Laurence Dunbar was establishing his reputation as a dialect poet in the late 1800s, James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the lyrics to "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (long hailed as "The Negro National Anthem"), chose to render the seven African American sermons of *God's Trombones* in standard English because he felt that the dialect of "old-time" preachers might pigeonhole the book. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, a similar debate raged among the black intelligentsia, with Langston Hughes endorsing and exemplifying the use of vernacular, and Alain Locke and others suggesting that African Americans ought to put the quaintness of the idiom behind them and offer the world a more "refined" view of their culture. These enduring attitudes reflect the attraction-repulsion dynamic, the oscillation between black and white (or mainstream) poles that W. E. B. Du Bois defined a century ago as "double-consciousness."

This century marks a watershed for the vernacular. One purpose of this book is to help rescue Spoken Soul from the negativity and ignorance in which it became mired during the Ebonics debate, and to correct the many misconceptions people have about black talk. Another is to offer a fresh way to think and talk about Spoken Soul that does justice to its persistence and potency.

Like virtually everyone else, we acknowledge that African Americans must master Standard English, corporate English, mainstream English, the language of wider communication, or whatever you want to call the variety of English needed for school, formal occasions, and success in the business world. But we also believe that Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, Black English, Spoken Soul, or whatever you want to call the informal variety spoken by many black people, plays an essential, valuable role in our lives and in the life of the larger society to which we all belong.

The reasons for the persistence and vitality of Spoken Soul are manifold: it marks black identity; it is the symbol of a culture and a life-style that have had and continue to have a profound impact on American popular life; it retains the associations of warmth and closeness for the many blacks who first learn it from their mothers and fathers and other family members; it expresses camaraderie and solidarity among friends; it establishes rapport among blacks; and it serves as a creative and expressive instrument in the present and as a vibrant link with this nation's past.

If we lost all of that in the heady pursuit of Standard English and the world of opportunities it offers, we would indeed have lost our soul. We are not convinced that African Americans want to abandon "down-home" speech in order to become one-dimensional speakers. Nor—to judge from the ubiquity of the distinctive linguistic style of African American music, literature, and popular culture—do whites and other people in this country and around the world want to see it abandoned either, quiet as that viewpoint is kept. Certainly it is not necessary to abandon Spoken Soul to master Standard English, any more than it is necessary to abandon English to learn French, or to deprecate jazz to appreciate classical music.

Moreover, suggesting, as some do, that we abandon Spoken Soul and cleave only to Standard English is like proposing that we play only the white keys of a piano. The fact is that for many of our most beautiful melodies, we need both the white keys and the black, in the same way that, in the Chinese dualistic philosophy, the *yin* is as essential to the whole as the *yang*. Bear in mind that language is an inescapable element in almost everyone's daily life, and an integral element of human identity. If for that and no other reason, we would all do well to heed the still-evolving truth of the black language experience. That truth promises to help us confront one of the most critical questions of our day: Can one succeed in the wider world of economic and social power without surrendering one's distinctive identity? We hope to transform the conventional wisdom.