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## MEDIATING EBONICS

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**On December 18, 1996**, the Oakland, California Board of Education (OCBE) passed the now infamous Ebonics resolution as proposed by the Oakland Task Force on the Education of African American Students. Subsequently, throughout the last few days of 1996, as well as January and February of 1997, the mass mediation of Ebonics gave further testament to the truth found in W.E.B. DuBois' statement that "the question of the twentieth century is the question of the color line" (DuBois, 1969). Since the arrival of Africans as slaves in America, there has been an ebb and flow of informed, misinformed, and ill-informed views regarding Africans' variations of the illusive notion of *standard English*, as spoken by White Americans in various geographical regions of the country. Herein, we discuss how this myopia with African Americans' language is associated directly with the "color line" in America.

Notwithstanding a voluminous scholarly literature on what has been termed *Ebonics*, *Black English*, *Black English Vernacular*, *Black Language*, *Black Dialect*, and *Nonstandard English* (Abrahams, 1964/1970; Dalby, 1972; Dandy, 1991; Dillard, 1973; Gates, 1988; Hoover, Dabney, & Lewis, 1990; Labov, 1970; Turner, 1949; Smitherman, 1977; & Williams, 1975), there remains those who wish to locate African American varieties of spoken English in the realm of the "deficient" as opposed to "different." Deficient explanations place an emphasis on the varieties of African American language as a function of factors such as African Americans' social class, educational backgrounds, and biological inheritance, with a

particular emphasis on African Americans' alleged deficient brains and related cognitive capabilities. Difference explanations locate varieties of African American language as a function of African cultural continuities (Herskovits, 1958; Turner, 1949), and the results of the specific linguistic continuities forged by American circumstances (Daniel & Smitherman, 1976).

Ebonics, an amalgam of the terms *ebony* and *phonics*, was first coined in 1973 by psychologist Robert L. Williams, who 2 years later published his book, *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks*. According to Williams, whose original research focused on African American children, Ebonics describes certain linguistic patterns and codes that house a distinguishable and distinctive grammatical and lexicological base employed by some African Americans (Fields, 1997). It is this term, *Ebonics*, which became the mass media's most recent bete noire (black beast) to be detested and destroyed.

Within 24 hours, and in the weeks following the OCBE's December 18, 1996, unanimous adoption of the controversially worded Ebonics resolution, America Online and other Internet chat lines, a plethora of broadcast television and radio talk shows, news programs, and cable networks across the nation engaged in a feeding frenzy related to Ebonics. In addition to countless letters to print media editors, newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*; magazines such as *Newsweek*, the *New Republic*, the *New Yorker*, and *Jet*; and educational literature such as *Black Issues in Higher Education* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* all featured discussions on Ebonics. Short of the O. J. Simpson trials, Ebonics was one of the most mass-mediated phenomena during January and February of 1997.

What shall we make of the enormity of media attention paid to a local school board resolution? How should we interpret the mediated discourse surrounding the subject of Ebonics? What meanings can be assigned to the manner in which the issue of Ebonics, and subsequently Ebonics speakers, is presented in media? In sum, since the passing of the OCBE Ebonics resolution through February of 1997, why was there a seemingly insatiable appetite that got

Americans “hooked on Ebonics” to an extent similar to which they were already hooked on O. J. Simpson? Our view is that significant answers can be found by analyzing how African Americans and the linguistic patterns of some African Americans were mediated or depicted in mass media. We address these issues starting from the vantage point that Ebonics has been mediated in ways that reveal quite clearly American racial politics that remain hostile to African Americans. Herein, we also describe the dominant strategies used to mediate Ebonics and locate these media strategies within the cultural context of current racist circumstances, the racist political history of Africans, and African Americans’ linguistic heritage in America. We begin by first considering the historical background of Africans’ linguistic heritage in America.

#### THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN SLAVE MAKING

Perhaps one of America’s greatest contradictions is that those who sought the most basic of human dignities—freedom from oppression, as so elegantly articulated in America’s founding document—are those who became the paragons of perfecting one of the worst forms of human degradation known to the world. Having reduced the sons and daughters of Africa to chattel slavery, those who sought for themselves freedom from oppression had a great need to justify the unjustifiable. Some American slave holders sought refuge in what they alleged to be the biblical basis for slavery<sup>1</sup>: “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart” (New King James, Ephesians, 6:5). Hiding behind loose biblical interpretations and bolstered by enacting various forms of physical and psychological oppression, slave holders extended and reinforced their domination by attempting to sever Africans’ linguistic roots and by exploiting the links between language and human status.

Fundamentally, language is the great demarcation between those life forms deemed to be human and those deemed not to be human. As indicated by Stockman and Vaughn-Cooke, “language

is recognized as a central and pervasive force in the organization and evolution of all human communities" (1992, p. 82). Thus, to facilitate the process of "slave making" (Malcolm X, 1990, pp. 42-46), the slave masters immediately denounced the fact that African slaves spoke human languages. Rather, notwithstanding the reality that Africa is one of the most linguistically plural land masses in the world, the slave masters advanced (and attempted to convince themselves) that Africans spoke some sort of primitive "savage gibberish," likening it to monkey talk. Indeed, there were pseudoscientific studies of apes as the progenitors of African Americans (Gould, 1981, pp. 32-72).

Because they were also concerned with facts such as the slaves' ability to communicate among themselves for purposes of solidarity and rebellion, slave masters also employed divisive tactics such as (a) mixing slaves from different linguistic-cultural regions of Africa to impede communication; (b) forbidding Africans from speaking their indigenous languages or passing it along to others; (c) at birth, separating children from their mothers; and (d) making it illegal for slaves to be taught to read or write the English language. Consequently, African slaves in America, in dire communicative straits, were reduced to clandestine tactics such as participating in meetings in which they used their indigenous languages, using an array of nonverbal modes of communication, and inverting and subverting the Christian songs and biblical verses taught to them (Lovell, 1972). Also emergent from African American adaptation communication strategies was a creolization process in which aspects of African languages such as Hausa, Mandingo, Vai, and Wolof merged with the English spoken by Southern White slave holders.

To appreciate fully the early 1997 mediation of Ebonics, it is essential that the reader keep in mind the nexus between what White racists have said and done regarding the language of Africans in America and their justifications of African Americans' oppressed existential circumstances. We must be conscious of Stephen Jay Gould's (1981) notion of biological determinism—that is, "the notion that people at the bottom are constructed of intrinsically inferior material (poor brains, bad genes, or whatever)," and there-

fore deserving of their poor conditions (p. 31). In this instance, what is allegedly inferior is African Americans' language, which contributes to their cognitive deficiencies, inability to succeed in public schools, failures on standardized tests, aberrant moral morass, and licentious behavior.

Given that the likes of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Charles Darwin, David Hume, and the authors of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, Herrnstein and Murray (1994), each articulated biological bases for the adverse conditions of non-Whites, it came as no surprise that the mass media "mind managers" (Schiller, 1973) opted to mediate Ebonics as a manifestation of the worst in African Americans. More specifically, the intellectual inferiority of African Americans as justification for their unequal participation in American society constituted the ideological basis for much of the mediation of Ebonics.

The January and February 1997 mediation of Ebonics took two primary frontal attacks on African Americans. The first attack was a matter of distortion and misinformation. The second attack extended the historical pattern of *reductio ad absurdum* when it comes to depicting African Americans. Beginning with the latter strategy of equating Ebonics and African Americans with absurdity, it is noteworthy that the initial round of media misinformation was facilitated by "experts" who were African American civil rights leaders and other public figures, rather than scholars and practitioners with considerable expertise related to Ebonics.

### MISINFORMATION AND DISTORTION

As the Oakland Unified School District prepared to close for the winter recess and with much of its changing board already dispersed, it was suddenly thrust into the national media spotlight. Only 3 days had elapsed since the passing of the resolution, and many of Oakland's parents, students, and teachers had never heard of Ebonics. They were also unfamiliar with the School District's resolution. Nevertheless, it was this unsuspecting population that

was descended upon by media representatives to speak on complex issues related to the resolution. This selective use of ill-informed people became an important first step toward providing misinformation regarding the OCBE's intent as well as distorting America's dilemma surrounding race and education. In short, at the outset, the Ebonics issue was shaped and defined by media representations without interpretation and clarification from the school board (e.g., Chairperson of the Board Toni Cook) regarding intent, from individual Ebonics scholars, or from professional associations that had position statements on Ebonics—experts who could make the appropriate distinction between Ebonics as a rule-governed linguistic phenomenon as opposed to profane slang.

The *New York Times*' December 21, 1996, story serves as the perfect exemplar of the media's disingenuous presentation of Ebonics. In the lead sentence of the article, "Board's Decision on Black English Stirs Debate," the *Times* erroneously filtered the news by reducing the complex resolution to one that declares Black English as the primary language of Black students. The *Times* reporter then turned to 16-year-old high school sophomores who had never heard of Black English and who were incapable of distinguishing it from slang to (a) define Ebonics, (b) provide (inaccurate) examples of the linguistic pattern, and (c) address the notion that "they were somehow suddenly bilingual" (McKinley, 1996). Within this ill-informed context, the Oakland Unified School District's plan was blasted by the students and their parents. By contrast, it is doubtful that the same reporter would have asked a group of White high school sophomores to demonstrate their use of standard English by defining grammatical concepts such as *case*, *tense*, and *mood*.

It was under these similar conditions, lack of school board clarification, the absence of experts to discuss Ebonics, and a redirection away from the crucial issue of educating children marred by low achievement, while favoring the fallacy that Ebonics would be the primary language used in the classroom, that Black leaders Jesse Jackson, Maya Angelou, and Kwesi Mfume offered their lay analyses. Inevitably, all three would denounce the resolution citing the need for African American children to master English to

become thriving, productive members of American citizenry. Of course, it was nothing new that, in the true sense of Carter G. Woodson's (1977) "Miseducation of the Negro," it was not hard to find African Americans who would "scoff at the Negro dialect as some peculiar possession of the Negro which they should despise" (p. 619).

On December 22, just 4 days after the board's vote and with the district closed for the holidays, the Reverend Jesse Jackson (a master of using Ebonic intonation patterns and rhythmic discourse) appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press" (Nathan, 1996) disproving the resolution for its "unacceptable surrender, borderlining on disgrace." He also chided the school board for declaring Ebonics a second language as a ploy to obtain additional federal monies. Jackson's statements were largely supported by "Meet by Press" copanelists: conservative former Education Secretary William Bennett and other nonexperts, such as former New York Governor Mario Cuomo and Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut. Within approximately 24 hours of Jackson's appearance on "Meet the Press," where the Reverend advanced the argument that Ebonics speakers should not be eligible for bilingual education federal support, the Clinton administration deployed a "pre-emptive strike" (Bennett, 1996) by issuing an official statement on the subject of Ebonics in response— according to David Frank, Department of Education spokesperson— to public speculation (as fed by media coverage) that Ebonics may be eligible for federal financing. The Department of Education effectively joined in on the mediation of Ebonics by releasing to the press its position:

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. . . . The administration's policy is that Ebonics is a nonstandard form of English and not a foreign language. (Bennett, 1996)

Within less than 6 days of the board's vote, Ebonics would dominate media and, subsequently, public discourse with some fact and much more fallacy and misinterpretation grossly intermingled. It was at this time, Christmas Eve, that the OCBE finally offered up



spokesperson Darolyn Davis to address and clarify a debate that had hopped across the country, being literally dumped into the laps of the public as well as prominent, albeit less knowledgeable, talking heads of the news talk show circuits. Davis issued her own official statement on behalf of the Oakland Unified School District: "We have come under attack . . . under a barrage from people all over the world . . . but it's all been a rush to judgment, a knee-jerk reaction based on misinformation" (Entous, 1996, p. A8). Davis made clear that contrary to reports and due to a misunderstanding of the resolution, the district would not teach Ebonics in place of standard English, they would not attempt to classify Ebonics speakers as bilingual to secure ("pilfer") more federal funding, nor would they back down in their acknowledgment that some in the African American community employ culturally-specific speech patterns that are different from slang.

Indeed, Oakland had employed a public relations expert to explicate their intent to the mass media, and in turn have their intent passed along to the public. Seemingly, the district thought their own media consultant could communicate with other media, "hermana y hermano," thereby attempting to take part in the (more accurate) mediation of their own event. This effort, however, would not meet with success. To begin, despite the vigorous efforts of the board's media consultant, the discourse surrounding the Ebonics resolution would remain largely negative and would continue to circulate inaccuracies. For example, well after the board sought to clarify its intent, *The Sewickley Herald*, a paper serving a small suburban, wealthy, conservative Western Pennsylvania community, carried a special article titled, "Should Teachers and Students Be Made to Learn Ebonics?" (1997, p. 7). The paper went on to incorrectly summarize the event: "The latest issue facing American education is the teaching of Ebonics, a language used by many inner-city youth. One California school is trying it." Clearly, little had changed since the first group of high school students and African American leaders had been similarly quizzed and, most obviously, the board's explanations had been ignored.

In fact, each attempt at clarification on the part of the school board was shunned by many media representatives. When the Oak-

land Unified School District (1997) detailed on its Internet homepage their legislative intent<sup>2</sup>, the initiative was cast as farcical. The *San Francisco Chronicle* laid out the original resolution passed December 18 in its entirety, comparing its points to the board's clarification ("Ebonics—The Oakland Resolution," 1997, p. A18). Dismissing Oakland's explanations, the board itself, not the media furor, was cited for muddying the debate over Ebonics.

According to Fay Vaughn Cooke, chair of Language and Communication Disorders at the University of the District of Columbia, the board could have avoided controversy by consulting with Black English experts, thereby eliminating "inaccurate linguistic statements" (Fields, 1997, p. 21). Regardless of the causes, from a poorly drafted resolution to Oakland's slow response and inability to mediate the media, what is clear is that the issue of Ebonics in the media no longer (if ever) had as its focus the education of African American youth. One *San Francisco Examiner* columnist lamented how Ebonics has become little more than a joke: "Just say 'Ebonics' and add 'be'." This same reporter also wrote that someone, in response to seeing Oakland's media consultant Darolyn Davis, sent him a note saying, "we be PR" (Morse, 1997, p. A3). The issue of Ebonics, it seems, has become one of racial politics where that which is associated with Blackness is distorted and caricatured to the absurd.

Indeed, no better witness to this charade could have been found than in the *New Pittsburgh Courier*, an African American publication. James E. Alsbrook (1997a) penned an Op-Ed article in which the headline read, "Black English is Produced by Stupidity" (p. A6). This leading African American publication extended its mockery of Ebonics with a cartoon featuring a teacher stating that the "Oakland School Board, a.k.a., The African American Cultural Legitimization Council" had several "newly justified terms," including, "ebonkie—refers to only brothers and sisters hooked on hard drugs," "emonancy—refers to Black teenage pregnancy only," and ebonstitute refers to Black sidewalk hostesses only (Carr, 1997, p. A6). On February 12, 1997, The *New Pittsburgh Courier* featured another James E. Alsbrook (1997b) article titled, "Black English Was Conceived by Racism and Pseudo Intellectualism"

(p. A6). We note that Alsbrook's review of the relevant "intellectual" literatures consisted of a discussion of what was and was not in several dictionaries. Although he wrote of "sloppy thinking" and "ill-defined-research," not one Ebonics research study or one Ebonics scholar's name was mentioned in the article.

### REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM

The relevance of the amount of attention paid to the distortions and the misinformation surrounding the mediation of Ebonics extends well beyond ubiquitous issues of timing or the use of certain terms in the OCBE resolution. Rather, this event is significant because it is born out of and illuminates the problems found within America's racial politics. It distinguishes itself as appropriate of critique because the media's presentation of Ebonics reflects the larger society's perceptions (so often negative) of that which is Black. This is evidenced by associating Ebonics, this "Black thing," with all that is simplistic, aberrant, and maladaptive—a reduction to the absurd.

Reducing African Americans, their life, culture, and language, to the depths of the ridiculous has a long history in mass media. For example, early radio (1926) offered a peek into African American life through the "Black voice" of "Sam 'n' Henry" (later "Amos 'n' Andy"). Mocking the great migration of African Americans in search of employment who moved from the South (Birmingham, Alabama) to the North (Chicago, Illinois), "Sam 'n' Henry" relied upon a caricatured version of what Black language was purported to be:

Sam: Henry, did you evah see a mule as slow as dis one?

Henry: Oh, dis mule is fas' enough. We gonna git to de depot alright.

Sam: You know dat Chicago train don't wait fo' nobody—it jes' goes on—jes' stops and goes right on.

Henry: Well, we ain't got but two mo' blocks to go—don't be so 'patient, don't be so 'patient.

Sam: I hope dey got fastah mules dan dis up in Chicago. (Wertheim, 1979, p. 30)

Similarly, early television would offer Black life through Black voice and "Black face," straight from the minstrel stage show (with a stop on radio), with "Amos 'n' Andy" (1951). This time, speech connoting a lack of education, such as "I'se regusted" and "now ain't that sumpin'," were coupled with lazy, shiftless behaviors to signify the harmless coon persona.

Early film also set the agenda for how society should regard African Americans. D. W. Griffith's (1915) silent Civil War drama, "Birth of a Nation," glorified the rise of the Klan as a sort of necessary collective action to restore Whites to government in response to raping, marauding, infantile Blacks who were in power in the South. Griffith also set African Americans apart as abnormal through language. Through printed on-screen dialogue, Southern Whites were cast as representing normalcy through the speaking of standard English, whereas African Americans were barely literate: "Dem free-niggers f'um de N' of am sho crazy" and "Ef I doan' get 'nuf franchise to fill mah bucket, I doan' want it nohow."

It should be made clear that entertainment media's early symbolic racism would set the stage, with some lasting permanence, for an "anti-black effect" (Sears, 1988) that would dominate all forms of media and the treatment of African Americans and Black issues. Even contemporary television series such as "The Fresh Prince of Bel Air," in "Sam 'n' Henry" fashion, continued to bastardize the Black voice. In one episode, the lead character, Carlton, ventures into the "hood" on a bet:

Homeboy: Whazzup?

Carlton: Oh, don't mind me. I'm just here on a bet. Just give me a little time to acclimate myself.

Homeboy: Applegate? Yo, that sound like a school word. You know, I don't like school words. I can't applegate myself to 'em.

Carlton: That's very funny.

Homeboy: It ain't suppose to be.

What our readers should take away from this summary of African American representations in entertainment media is that historically, African American language patterns are often the sites for ridicule. According to Dates and Barlow (1990), such stereotyping remains so deeply entrenched in American media because such depictions are “frozen, incapable of growth, change, innovation, or transformation” (p. 5). It is not surprising, then, that Ebonics through mainstream media’s odd, even racist lens would be similarly cast as worthy of contempt, with the ample employment of Black voice malapropisms and the comedic to ensure that the subject is met with public scorn. We posit that the continued discussion of Ebonics in media is offered not as a key educational issue, but mediated to display the worst in African Americans by ridiculously caricaturing their language; truly a reduction to the absurd.

#### EBONICS: MORONS, BEAVIS & BUTT-HEAD, AND HAMLET

To date, many of the headlines, commentaries, reports, and even political cartoons, as offered by mass media, reveal a treatment of Black language that is an extension of the racist stereotypes as detailed above. We provide several examples. *San Francisco Examiner* contributor Carlos A. Bonilla writes under the headline, “A Proposal for ‘Bobonics’.” Bonilla aids the reader by writing, “in Spanish, bobo is a fool, a moronic individual, one who has trouble learning and adapting, or one who does not see the need to do so” (Bonilla, 1997, p. A23). He goes on to equate African Americans who speak Black English to bobos. Ebonics becomes Bobonics—a reduction to the foolish and moronic, rather than a debate over educating our society’s children or a discussion on America’s racist linguistic legacy from which Ebonics speakers were born.

Rob Morse, also of the *Examiner*, provided his readers this headline: “1996: E Coli, Odwalla, ebola, Ebonics.” With this lead-in, Morse asks, “Ebonics? What was that all about? Ebonics isn’t a language. It isn’t even a good invented word.” Morse then too reduces Ebonics, which he describes as a “plague” (likening it to ebola), to the absurd by writing, “why not go all the way and concoct it from ‘onyx’ instead of ‘ebony’ and call it ‘onyxonics’?” (Morse, 1997a,

p. A3). Two days later, Morse would offer another scathing column, "Beach Blanket Babblebonics" (Morse, 1997b, p. A3). Here he proposes new "languages" such as Hollywood Dealobonics, Beavis and Butt-Head's prepubonics, and the NFL's Cowbonics.

Other writers so burlesqued the subject of Ebonics that synopses of the articles are unnecessary as the headlines speak for themselves. The *Economist* also likened this Black issue to some sort of disease, describing Black English in its headline as "The Ebonics Virus" (1997, p. 26). The *New York Times* aligned Ebonics with the down-trodden image of Richard Nixon with its story "Ebonics, language of Richard Nixon" (DeWitt, 1997). William Raspberry, a conservative, syndicated African American columnist asked in his satirical *Washington Post* piece, "To Throw in a lot of 'Bes,' or not?" (Raspberry, 1996, p. A27). Finally, there was *Time* magazine's disparaging "Ebonics According to Buckwheat" (White, 1997).

Absent from many of the outrageous media headlines was serious discussion and debate surrounding (a) the role and/or relevancy of Ebonics in the classroom, (b) the tools needed to move students toward improved English literacy, and (c) the education of African American children (the average grade point average of students in Oakland is a D+). The Oakland School Board, in clarifying its position (*Newsweek* called it "hedging"; see Leland & Joseph, 1997, p. 79), centered the discussion of Ebonics on the goal of improving academic achievement in African American students through an emphasis upon translating Black English into standard English. Jesse Jackson, after meeting with the board, withdrew his denouncement (some characterized Jackson as waffling and indecisive) and emphasized a key educational issue: "detect the problem without demeaning the student, and build a bridge to English proficiency" (Fields, 1997, p. 21). Toni Cook, now former chair of the Oakland School Board, standing behind the resolution and its purpose to bridge the gaps between home languages other than English and to make sure children learn, stated, "we can agree to disagree" (Entous, 1996, p. A8).

During the early 1996-1997 mediation of Ebonics, media, we argue, paid little attention to discussions focusing on educative

dilemmas, much in the same way it historically has ignored African Americans in political, government, and human interest arenas. Rather, the media set the tone or agenda for Ebonics by relying upon headline stories that presented crass, racist discourse to its public. Initially, the majority media as well as African American publications such as the *New Pittsburgh Courier* opted to ignore opportunities to explore and debate the historical, cultural, and educative significance of Ebonics, pursuing instead demeaning stereotypes to characterize this “Black thing.” In addition to the troubling headlines, the media also used political cartooning to bastardize Ebonics. By presenting Ebonics through truncated caricatured images and dialogue, this latest comedic presentation of African Americans is strikingly similar to the buffoonery and malapropisms employed throughout entertainment media’s history of Black representations. These editorial cartoon presentations in some ways may be regarded as the most degrading “comedies” based upon the Black situation.

A *Christian Science Monitor* cartoon titled “Chillin in Ebonics With my Main Man Hamlet” (Danziger, 1997) depicts an African American male standing atop a castle wall while clad in a dark, hooded sweat jacket. As he peers over the wall into the horizon, this Black Hamlet proclaims, “I be. Or, I don’t be. Dat’s whazzup. Nome Sane?” This translates to, “To be or not to be. That is what is up. Do you know what I am saying?”

*Newsweek* (Anderson, 1997, p. 23) featured an even less subtle illustration that reduced Ebonics to the absurd. Pictured are MTV’s resident idiots Beavis and Butt-Head entering a Department of Education funding office. The Department’s administrator, a White male, plaintively asks, “Now what?” as the popular duo laughs their trademark “heh-heh” and offers their language for federal funding: “Moron + Phonics = Moronics.”

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* presents “Speaking Ebonics” (Oliphant, 1997, p. E1), a conversation between a duck and a cat named Socks:

Duck: Socks, did you know that our early German immigrants learned English by the use of germonics?

Socks: I didn't know that.

Duck: Then, for the Italians there was eye-tonics. For the Swedes there was Swedonics. For the French, frogonics.

Socks: Well.

Duck: Now, for Blacks we be havin' ee-bonics.

Duck and Socks: (pause to ponder 'ee-bonics')

Duck: Oh . . . and for the Irish, there was ironics.

Socks: Ain't it though.

*USA Today's* editorial page cartoon trivialized Ebonics by proposing a language, again, far removed from the central issue. Here a White, male attorney is seen sitting at a desk in his law office. He is talking on the telephone saying, "and heretofore, the aforementioned clause, as it relates to sub-paragraph B, section 4A, title 9, forces said party, heretofore having been referred to as..." The punchline reads: "while we're at it, let's declare this distinctly different version of English a separate language" (Smith, 1997, A12).

Ebonics quickly became the butt of jokes in other media forums. Jay Leno featured it in his "The Tonight Show" (Vickers, 1997) monologue by chiding, "Susan B. Anthony is Ebonics for a sex change." On America Online, listings emerged which offered Ebonics-style jokes. A notable trend among the fun-making online was that a caricatured version of Black language was located within other stereotypes associated with Black America, such as the male brute, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, cognitive inferiority, and so forth. The following one-liner serves as an illustration: "They could not get a complete Black Miss America contest because nobody wanted to be 'Miss I DA HO!'"

Ebonics, as we have argued here, was presented in such a distorted, absurd manner that the public largely received gross misinformation surrounding the matter. Furthermore, media can be cited for (re)producing negative, racialized interpretations of Ebonics. Such racist stereotyping has been documented as even presenting itself in public discourse. *USA Today* reported the following:

Ebonics Clash: A Monmouth Beach, N.J., lawyer who wrote a letter parodying Ebonics in the newsletter of a local business group said he'll meet with NAACP officials to explain that he meant it as a joke.



Not everyone got it—several members of the Monmouth Beach Business Association quit. “We ain gone have no mo dope peddlin’, hangin’ n’ gangin’ in dis town,” the letter read in part. The Oakland Calif., school board sparked nationwide debate in December when it recognized Ebonics as a second language. (“Ebonics Clash,” 1997, p. 3A)

### **A CALL FOR A MORE RESPONSIVE MEDIA**

A fundamental supposition to the study and critique of mass media is that communication is unnatural. That is, the dissemination and presentation of information, ideas, beliefs, and even cultural norms are offered in a conscious, purposeful manner that is often congruent with the operating dominant ideology. From this vantage point, we see these media messages as encoded with social and ideological codes that shape the presentation of events or phenomena. When that which is represented falls outside the dominant or mainstream, it is often offered up as part of a dichotomy that represents the lower limit. Thus, standard or, in effect, White English becomes the shared norm, the good, the privileged, and the acceptable against which Ebonics is held. As predicted, Ebonics becomes the abnormal for a marginal few situated outside a shared standard, or White commonness. The language assigned to African Americans, Black English, becomes the bad, the yardstick for a race’s linguistic and cultural failure.

Understanding that media operates with intention, scope, and goal, we should not be surprised that the purposeful nature in mediation of Ebonics is set apart by an antagonistic American ideology regarding races of color that firmly situate their culture at the margin. The result is Ebonics coverage that omits useful, far less inflammatory information from experts and scholars. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1996) adopted a November 1995 policy statement, “Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity—Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education.” Therein, NAEYC stated,

For optimal development and learning of all children, educators must accept the legitimacy of children's home language, respect (hold in high regard) and value (esteem, appreciate) the home culture, and promote and encourage the active involvement and support of all families, including extended and nontraditional family units. (p. 5)

Predating the NAEYC initiative was a 1979 Ann Arbor Federal Court ruling that stipulated that courts should intervene on children's behalf to require the school district board to teach them to read in standard English, and that the teachers had to be trained about Black English to be able to assist African American students in learning standard English (Smitherman, 1981). Neither the NAEYC position statements or references to the important Ann Arbor decision were cited in media we reviewed.

More egregious was the *San Francisco Examiner's* glaring omission of its own front page, a two-part series story that detailed the area's 2-year Ebonics pilot program. Cited in the article, "Schooled in Black Culture," is a 10-year-old who offered, "We can speak Black English in front of you [their teachers] . . . but when we're around people who don't know [Black English] we'll speak mainstream English" (Wagner, 1996, p. A1). Just 8 months later, with the passing of the resolution, the *Examiner* would lead the charge against Ebonics with its "Bobonics," "Babblebonics," and "Ebola, Ebonics" stories.

Mass media opted to attend the ridiculous and overlook the more relevant and reliable in sources. It was not until very late, when Ebonics was no longer headline, front-page, and top story news, that experts were called upon. Many linguists and scholars found themselves addressing the issues and other Black topics a full 3 months after the story broke (and had waned) for Black history month. Other than these rare expert appearances, far more media outlets relied on "the person on the street" format and ideologues with varying agendas to inform the public about Ebonics.

## CONCLUSION

We have argued here that the mediation of Ebonics, while disturbing, is not unusual when much of mass media's presentation of Black issues, life, and culture is considered. As detailed in this article, Blackness has long been defined by media as that which is absurd and aberrant. Ebonics was offered to the public in a manner that remarkably resembled fictional representations of Black language where cacology and malapropisms abound.

By approaching Ebonics from the absurd, media failed to acknowledge two key issues: First, the relevance of the historical, linguistic roots of Ebonics—slavery, and second, the need for aggressive, improved education efforts for African American children. Had the historical and the educative been the starting points for media coverage, a more informed, useful debate could have ensued over the (dis)advantages of Ebonics as a tool for moving African American children toward standard English. The end result may have been the nation's schools receiving intensive, pertinent attention to how to best educate our children. Instead, because Ebonics was mediated as comedic and ridiculous, we came away with little more than a cache of racist wordplay and jokes, thereby effectively eliminating communicative space for remedies and solutions.

The mass media have long been cited as antagonistic to African Americans. Attacks on perceived African American behaviors, intellect, and morals are commonplace with a legacy that extends back beyond the minstrel stage. The mediation of Ebonics similarly relied upon stereotypes of African American "voice" honed virtually two centuries earlier on theater stages.

The absence of wisdom, sensitivity, or expertise in Ebonics coverage reveals a pervasive racist politics that condones Black America's representation in media as oddity. Thus, we see a local educational issue catapulted into national racial controversy, right alongside another heavily mediated oddity, the O. J. Simpson trials.

Together, mediated accounts of Ebonics and O. J. would inform a racialized discourse in which African Americans, be they jurors, or be it their language, would appear to be deserving of reproach.

The mediation of Ebonics, then, should not be seen as a single lapse in more responsible reporting but as part of an unchanging mistreatment of African Americans. The repercussions for Black America becomes a worrisome bind where Ebony people, regardless of their phonics, are cast as cognitively deficient—as morons. To escape such ridicule, some African Americans find themselves moved to renounce historical theories of language oppression and those who speak Ebonics. Thus, it is expected that some African Americans (e.g., Alsbrook) would snap to dismissive judgment, whereas others, once informed outside of mainstream media, would reverse their criticisms (e.g., Jesse Jackson). Hence, situated within the context of racist portrayals, the Ebonics controversy serves as a disappointing marker for a widening color line that continues to divide America.

### NOTES

1. Conveniently, verses six to nine were overlooked, “not as . . . menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ . . . with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men . . . do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening; knowing that your Master also is in heaven . . . (New King James, Ephesians 6: 5).

2. In part, the Oakland Unified School District Board clarified that teaching English is their mission, not the teaching of Ebonics. Ebonics speakers would not be classified as bilingual, nor would special government funds be sought. The term *genetically based* does not refer to human biology but is synonymous with *genesis*.

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