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The Power of Black English: From the Communicative Strategies of the Enslaved to former US President Barack Obama's Oral Performances

Relatore
Prof Anna Scacchi

Laureando
Carla Braca
n° matr. 2040568/ LMLCC

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Table of Contents

Introduction……………………………………………………………………………1

Chapter 1: Black English Language……………………………………………………4

1.1 Shifts and changes of the language…………………………………………………5

1.2 History and origins of slaves' language of resistance………………………………7

1.3 Linguistic features of "the code"……………………………………………………10

1.4 From slaves' soulful language to cultural and linguistic crossover in White America………………………………………………………………………….. 14

Chapter 2: African American Oral Tradition and socio-cultural status today…………20

2.1 Traditional Black Church and Black Music…………………………………………22

2.2 Communicative strategies of the African American Vernacular Tradition…………30

  2.2.1 Call and response, rhythmic pattern………………………………………31

  2.2.2 Tonal Semantics, sermonic tone and proverbs……………………………32

  2.2.3 Spontaneity, personalization, concreteness and authenticity..……………37

  2.2.4 Verbal games, signifying and playing the Dozen…………………………38

  2.2.5 Mimicry and *braggadocio*...44

2.3 Language prejudice, social controversies and the need for code-switching…………48

  2.3.1 The Ebonics controversy……………………………………………………52

  2.3.2 Code-switching, an ability formed out of necessity………………………54

Chapter 3: Obama dealing with race and identity………………………………………60

3.1 Obama's *double consciousness*……………………………………………………..61

3.2 Obama's identity perception changes as his language *styleshifts*……………………65

  3.2.1 Obama as the "exception to the rule"……………………………………...69

3.3 "A More Perfect Union": Obama addresses race in America while putting his own imprint on the African American Vernacular Tradition………………………………...72

  3.3.1 Obama's new jeremiad………………………………………………………75

Chapter 4: From rappers to Obama, a Black identity story of representation…………87

4.1 The perception, evolution and language of Hip Hop Culture………………………88

  4.1.1 Hip Hop resistance rhetoric and *flippin the script*…………………………93

  4.1.2 Aims, misinterpreted messages and the need for political representation…96

4.2 Obama bridging the gap between Hip Hop and politics……………………………99

  4.2.1 Obama's "Hip Hop coolness" prized by Black rappers…………………100

4.2.2 Obama’s search of balance in the political representation of Hip Hop…..102
4.2.3 Obama giving political voice to Hip Hop during his second term………105
4.3 Obama pays homage to his Black identity, from The Pound to the Mic Drop……109
4.3.1 The Pound………………………………………………………………. 109
4.3.2 The Mic Drop……………………………………………………………112
Conclusion...114
References……………………………………………………………........................116
Summary in Italian…………………………………………………..........................119

Introduction

Since I was little, I have always been fascinated by the American country and by the concept of "the land of great opportunities". Being born in 1997, I grew up watching television shows which displayed America as the country of opportunities – where great stories about realization and success in life took place. As a young girl, what I enjoyed most was the fact that I could easily envision myself being part of those stories; therefore, I decided to learn the English Language, so that I could understand that reality even more. Later, my course of studies continued along with my fascination for the American country. As a matter of fact, both my bachelor's and master's degrees have been focused on English and American Language and Culture. During my study of the American history, I unexpectedly started to realize all I was watching in those TV shows was nothing more than the "good and white" idea of America and that I was easily relating to them because they were meant to be watched by a specific audience of people, more precisely, by a white audience.

Through my studies on American History, Anglo-American Literature, Contemporary English Literature, Sociology and Human Rights, I started to understand my white privilege while discovering America's true identity as a country of great contradictions with the biggest one being slavery in the "free land". While studying these subjects, I started to uncover the many ways by which African Americans are still dealing with the consequences of being forced into slavery. In particular, my interest has been captured by how they managed to resist in a society that keeps on framing them as "second-class" citizens and that continues to prize almost exclusively whiteness. During my university curriculum, I started questioning myself on this matter, so I decided to investigate it in my thesis. Indeed, I take into account three main points: Black English Language and the African American Oral Tradition, America's contradictions and the need for Black representation. In a journey that goes from slaves' past to todays' African Americans socio-cultural conditions, I first analyse the Black Language as a means of Black resistance. The purpose of this work is to highlight the power of this meaningful, culturally rooted and resourceful language, its development inside the Black community in America and in which ways it supported this community and its aims in the last decades. These aims encompass the preservation of their cultural identity as well as the break of stereotypes and racial prejudice that keep on limiting members of the Black community to the edge of society. From this subordinate condition, I then explore Hip Hop Culture and Language as a present day means of Black representation in opposition to the white system, which ultimately found its major exponent in the First Black President of the U.S. Barack Obama.

More in detail, in Chapter 1, I discuss Black English Language, which originated within U.S. slaves' plantations where, despite the variety of West African language groups, which were deliberately mixed on the plantations, in order to foil communication and rebellion, it evolved as a common language and became the *lingua franca* of the enslaved communities. With time, the *lingua* they created acquired the status of a code, which was not accessible to their masters, and became one of slaves' main means of resistance. Thanks to "the code", sets of cultural beliefs, knowledge, artistic expressions, and ideas were preserved and transmitted by words of mouth from one generation to another. In this way, the African American Vernacular Tradition (AVT) formed and carried the cultural identity of the Black community of the U.S. until today. In Chapter 2, I analyse this tradition, which preserves the African American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race, by highlighting its constituents. The communicative practices, rhetorical strategies and gestures that are embedded in the tradition, not only are related to the past experience of slavery that African Americans have in common, but also, have evolved and adapted in order to accommodate the changing needs of Africans in America. Then, particular attention is given to the Black socio-cultural status in present day U.S. society, and on how the Black community still uses Black Language as a modern day means of Black resistance in opposition to the "American-white system". This system is responsible for what Du Bois articulated as the *double consciousness* of the Black being, that is, a condition of unease that explains African Americans feeling of being "an American" but also, "a Negro" (Du Bois, 1903). From this concept, in Chapter 3, an extensive discussion on *double consciousness,* Blackness and identity, and "the problem of race" in America takes place. The primary figure that I take into account is former U.S. President Barack Obama who is a particularly fitting example because as an African American, he has experienced *double-consciousness* and has engaged in an identity-finding journey during his adult life. In addition to this, he is the author of what today is known as the "Race Speech", which is examined in depth as an innovative rhetoric work in which Obama merged two historically opponent societies by largely drawing on rhetorical strategies that are part of the African American Vernacular Tradition. Obama is the primary focus also in Chapter 4. In this final chapter, I argue that his Black Language use and the proud display of his cultural identity through gestures and politics of representation, in particular involving the Hip Hop community, supported the advancement of the Black community in different ways, which ultimately contributed to restore the humanity of the Black being to the eyes of the mainstream.

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Chapter 1: Black English Language

With the purpose of addressing what Black Language is, Geneva Smitherman, in the introduction of her book *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner,* states what follows:

> LYIN and SIGNIFYIN… TALKIN and TESTIFIN… MARINATin and PLAYA HATin... This is the dynamic language of U.S. slave descendants, more commonly known as African Americans. Terms for this language vary—Black Talk, African American Vernacular English, Black or African American Language, Black English, Black Dialect, Ghetto Speech, Street Talk, Ebonics, and others… Speakers of U.S. Ebonics can be found in all sectors of African America, from senior citizens to HIP HOPpers, from preachers to politicians, from schoolgirls to GANGSTAS, from the AFRICAN-CENTERDto the E-LIGHT. Black Talk crosses boundaries of age, gender, region, religion, and social class because it all comes from the same source: the African American Experience and the oral tradition embedded in that experience (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.1).

The scholar continues explaining that the Black community charts word meanings within the various contexts of Black life and contrary to what many assume, the language within the African American community goes beyond mere slang, encompassing words and phrases that are common to generations, social classes, and both males and females. In this way, she emphasizes the unifying nature of "Black Talk," that will be more and more evident once she deals with the clue sections of her work. Most importantly, Smitherman maintains, "Black slang is Black Language, but all Black Language is not Black slang. (And what is Black slang today often becomes mainstream American English tomorrow)" (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.3). In light of Smitherman's words, it is important to establish that Black English is not composed only of slang and that it does not represent a dialect version of Standard English; actually, like all languages and all dialects it is a systematic means of communication. In particular, linguist Lisa Green in her book *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, specifies that such language "is different from but not a degraded version of classroom English" (Green, 2002, p.1), suggesting that it should not be qualified, as often has been, as wrong or incorrect English. Furthermore, calling Black English "slang" might suggest that it should not be taken seriously as a means of communication, conveying the idea of something only youngsters or a specific group of people use, or of something transitory and ephemeral anyway.

1.1 Shifts and changes of the language

Terms in Black English Language can be changed and do change especially when acquired by others. For example, when outsiders of the Black community, speakers of Standard English, start using Black English words and make them become part of the mainstream language, in such cases the Black community, that recognizes language as something exclusive to them, and that utilizes it to resist the “opposite” (white) society, changes or even creates new “exclusive” words. This finds explanation in paragraph 1.2 of this work, which traces back the origins of Black English to when it was a coded language and no one but the slaves could understand it.

Another occurrence that is usually cause of changes in the language is the shifting of generations. The passing of time can lead members of the community to apply changes or fashion new words because of their diverse and new experiences. Therefore, one could argue that yes, parts of the Black English language may be transitory, but they are not ephemeral, the language changes for many reasons and it finds meaning in the past and present conditions of Black Americans. Consequently, diminishing this evocative and expressive language to the status of slang, would be a mistake. This view is largely accredited by Green who maintains that the question whether Black English is a language or a dialect does not arise among linguists because both languages and dialects are equally rule governed, and because there are different views on dialects. The line of thought that Green follows is that African American English (AAE, that is her preferred way to call Black English) is a linguistic system that is not the same as classroom English (Standard English) nor is the same as other varieties of English although it may share characteristics with them (Green, 2002, p.3).

How this system works inside and for the aims of the African American community will be properly investigated in chapter 2. Within this chapter instead, are taken into account the origins of African American English, how it began, and what its historical relations are, as well as its main linguistic features. Before that though, some clarification on the terms that can be used to indicate Black English Language should be given, although in this work different names for it are used interchangeably. Actually, it is from the early

1960s that different labels have been used to refer to this variety, and the label has often been related to the social climate. For example, the period during which AAE was referred to as Negro dialect or Negro English was precisely the period during which African Americans were referred to as Negroes (Green, 2002, p.5). By and large, the labels have changed over the years, from Negro dialect to Black folk speech or Black street speech, on to many others such as Black English (BE), Afro American English (AAE), African American Language (AAL), African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Black English Vernacular. In her book, Green explains that in the end they all refer to the same language, and she is in agreement with Smitherman's view when affirming that, regardless their social position, most African Americans experience some degree of participation in the life of their community and this creates in-group crossover lingo that is understood and shared by various social groups within the race (Green, 2002, p.14). She is basically implying that it may happen at different levels but that one way or another, African American English is spoken by every member of the African American community. Therefore, however one decides to call it, respectively for Smitherman Black Talk/Black English and for Green African American English, they are referring to the same language, the one spoken by Black people in the U.S. On the other hand, Green notes that there is one term that is not interchangeable, that is, Ebonics. It was coined by Robert Williams in 1973, but received considerable attention in 1996 during the Oakland case and it has been left off the list of labels of AAE because Williams intended the term to cover the multitude of languages spoken by Black people not just in the United States but also in the Caribbean and the whole of the African diaspora (Green, 2002, p.7). Nonetheless, Smitherman avoids the possible confusion by simply adding the U.S. initials, stating that "'U.S. Ebonics' is more accurate than just 'Ebonics' because there are other Ebonic languages, such as Jamaican" (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.1). Anyway, on the naming of African American English as well as on its importance and practice, many scholars, writers and African Americans intellectuals have expressed their opinions, therefore, later in this work there will be a comeback on such matters, especially on the Ebonics case. For now, the focus will be on exploring the roots of this fascinating language.

1.2 History and origins of slaves' language of resistance

We cannot always determine the exact origin of words and phrases in African American Language. However, slaves' history of servitude and oppression clearly played a central role in fashioning their language and the one of their descendants.

To begin with, it is essential to point out that orality, the speech act, represented slaves' only way of communication, having neither the possibility nor, usually, the knowledge of writing. Therefore, sets of cultural beliefs were transmitted by words of mouth within the community and these, together with the fact that African Languages were already highly performative, emotionally charged and expressive, constituted oral tradition.

Oral tradition is a form of human communication wherein knowledge, artistic expressions, ideas and cultural material are preserved and transmitted orally from one generation to another. In this way, it is possible for a society to transmit oral history, oral literature, beliefs, customs, myths and any other knowledge across generations without a writing system, or in parallel to a writing system. In a general sense, "oral tradition" refers to the recall and transmission of a specific, preserved cultural knowledge through vocal utterance. From this, it is quite clear how important the role language has had in preserving the cultural identity of the Black community in the U.S.

On the other hand, Americas' African slave population was perceived as beasts of burden, exotic sexual objects, or curious primitives and their language was often dismissed as "no language at all" (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p.70). Thus, common belief was that of a way of "speaking negro" that did not possess any grammatical rule or syntactic structure, which, as it will become evident later in this chapter, is actually not true.

Moreover, as Smitherman points out, in Black America the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for *gittin ovuh* (getting over, resist, overcome oppression). That tradition preserves the African-American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race.

On a linguistic level, researchers do not always agree on the extent of the contribution to AAE made by African languages, creoles, and English and several hypotheses on its origins have been suggested. Lisa Green, in her chapter on African American English included in *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-first century*, illustrates the views most accepted within the linguist community.

> Substratist view: AAE is structurally similar to West African languages brought by slaves to the colonies, and it is only superficially similar to English. These West African languages are referred to as substrate languages because of the subordinate social status of their speakers with respect to social status of English speakers.
> Creolist view: AAE is related to and shares features with creoles such as Jamaican Creole and Gullah (spoken on coastal Carolinas and in Georgia). AAE may have started off as a creole given that slaves from Africa and the West Indies brought creoles with them to the colonies.
> Anglicist or dialectologist view: AAE developed from an English base, which accounts for the characteristic patterns it shares with English varieties. AAE is thus more closely related to English than to creoles or West African languages.
> Founder principle view: The language of the founders of colonial America impacted the language of Africans who came to America and their offspring. These Africans and their descendants had the goal of adapting to the norms of the colonies.
> Settler principle view: AAE was created by African slaves but did not begin as creole. Instead it developed from contact between Europeans and Africans in the seventeenth century (Green, 2004, p.79).

Whatever its origins are, in her book *Talking That Talk* (2000) Smitherman maintains that Black English is a product of the free labor system of the African slave trade and it arose as a result of two sets of factors. One was the need for a *lingua franca* in the US slave community, where it was the practice of slavers to intermingle linguistically diverse African ethnic groups so as to impede communication and hinder escape; the other was the need for a linguistic code intelligible to slaves but unintelligible to slave masters. In its formalistic dimensions, BE reflects a combination of British/US English with a West African deep structure. Its lexicon is largely English, its syntax, semantics and phonology are a mixture of both linguistic traditions (Smitherman, 2000, p.100). In other words, enslaved Africans stepped up to the challenge and made English work for them by creating a new language using the English language vocabulary. This counter-language was formed by assigning alternative, and sometimes oppositional, meanings to many English words. As Smitherman suggests, this practice is what linguists of today call loan translation, basically, using English words with an "African linguistic flava" (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.20). This oppositional language pattern was already present in African languages; a case in point is the word "bad" in Mandinka (the language spoken by the Mandingo people in West Africa) that meant "good". In this language, the phrase *a ka nyi ko-jugu* means literally "it is good badly", that means, it is very good or it is so good that it's bad! (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.20). Nowadays, this inversion of meaning is very present and of common use for most American English speakers, from the ghetto to the middle-class to the elites. Actually, the entering of an originally African and then African American expression into the mainstream language occurs quite often and it is better addressed in paragraph 1.3.

Anyway, African descendants in America coded a language that allowed them to talk about Black matters publicly, without being understood. They managed to "flip the script", making an alien tongue their own by imbuing "ole massa's" language with their unique, African semantics. Words came to have double meanings as their definitions shifted according to the situation and were infused with irony, metaphor, and ambiguity (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 5). These characteristics persisted in time and became part of the Black Language of today. This is why in this work the African American Language is addressed as a language of resistance, resistance to the oppressor through oral communication, which, one could argue, has been one of slaves' main ways of resistance throughout the enslavement days. They were not always able to fight, to run away, to generate an uprising but they always had their voices. Through humming, singing, preaching and storytelling, even simply talking to each other while living their life in the plantation, their voice was the voice of their struggle.

Thanks to their linguistic practice, slaves managed to avoid a cultural *tabula rasa*, which is an idea often supported by many members of the white community, who believe that because of slaves' deportation from Africa and their history of exploitation in America, African Americans completely lost their cultural heritage. However, Black scholars of the importance of Carter G. Woodson beginning in the 1920s, and W.E.B. DuBois beginning in 1903, disavowed the cultural *tabula rasa* theory as a logical impossibility for any human group, even one under enslavement and post-Emancipation poverty and degradation, because culture is not just things, objects, or material artefacts. Culture is ways of thinking, behavioural habits, patterns of conduct – and language – none of which can simply be wiped out by a journey across the Atlantic or harsh living conditions (Smitherman, 2000, p.33) believing that Africans carried their cultures over the Atlantic, scholars also started to look for evidence of Black cultural heritage; indeed, today they generally agree that the African heritage was not totally wiped out, and that both African American Language and African American Culture have roots in African patterns. (This view had also been advanced by anthropologist Melville Herskovits and linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner in the 1930s and 1940s, but they were a distinct minority in those days). The most accredited theory now is that over time, and after prolonged contact with European Americans, Africans in America adopted some Eurocentric patterns, and their African patterns of language and culture were modified—but they were not erased. African American Language and Culture thus reflects a dual heritage, part African, and part American (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 19). This is very well conveyed by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which he explained the culturally hybrid position of Blacks in America, which he identified as a double-consciousness, a sense of *doubleness*, of belonging and not belonging in the continual quest for home, search of roots and identity of the African American being, that he articulated in this terms: “One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro” (Du Bois, 1903).

What has been insofar stated, is put into evidence by past and current usage and features of African American English that are hereinafter analysed, first linguistically then culturally, even though it will soon become clear that these two aspects can never be completely separated.

1.3 Linguistic features of “the code”

In the earlier mentioned book *Black Talk*, scholar Geneva Smitherman collected African American English words and expressions and identified the main linguistic features of the language. She argues that there are correct and incorrect ways of “talking Black” thus, the knowledge of grammar and pronunciation rules in AAE together with the recognition of what to say, and when and how to say something, is what distinguishes a member of the African American English speaking community from an outsider. In addition, members of the community are particularly strict on the use of their language and are not happy when it is used wrongly or inappropriately by outsiders (actually it can happen with insiders too but it is more difficult and it is corrected right away by other inside members). In reality, they do not appreciate the assimilation (which can become appropriation) of their language (which represents their self and cultural identity) by the white society. Therefore, as it will be remarked later, once a word, a phrase or even an attitude becomes mainstream, the immediate reaction of the Black community is to generate new ones. Indeed, the cultural identity aspect of this language is essential for its survival, thus it seeks preservation through change and re-adaptation.

Taking all these factors into account, it should be clear that AAE is a distinct language and not a substandard variety of British/American English. Actually, as proven by Smitherman and Green's writings, it possesses a vocabulary, grammatical rules, lexical and syntactic structures and rules of and on performance. Moreover, Green considers the semantics and vocabulary of AAE as a component of AAE grammar that is deeply rooted in the African tradition but is also very much a part of American culture. (Green, 2002, p.14) In a way, this underlines the twoness that the African American self experiences in his/her life, which in turn reflects in their language as well.

As cases in point, a phrase from an enslaved African in America in 1776 ("Me massa name Cunney Tomsee" – My master's name is Colonel Thompson) and a statement recorded by Justice Hathorne at a Salem witch trial ("He tell me he God") (Smitherman, 2000, p.31) show a typical pattern of AAE, that of making a statement without an obligatory copula (the verb "to be"). This is one of the most frequently used and noticeable features of AAE and, as a matter of fact, is a feature of a number of West African languages, but it is not a pattern of older British English dialects. With this example, Smitherman proves that Black English is, as stated before, constituted of its own specific, inherited and new, linguistic patterns of grammar and pronunciation, and these rules are followed exactingly by its speakers.

Smitherman lists the principal linguistic features of AAE as follows:

> 1. *Final and postvocalic "r".* The "r" sound at the end of a word or after a vowel is not heard in AAL. Instead, use a vowel sound, as in "summa/ztime", as that big-city DJ instructed his caller. The expression "Sure, you're right" becomes SHO YOU RIGHT. "Torn up" would be TOE UP. Use YO instead of "your." And HIP HOP Music's popular, if controversial, word HO is the AAL pronunciation of "whore" (not to be confused with "hoe," as the white teacher in the film *House*

Party did when she asked her Black male student why he called another Black male student's mother a "garden tool").

2. *Final and medial consonants*. Reduce to a vowel sound or a single consonant sound. Thus, for example, "cold" is COAL in AAL. This can get a bit complicated if a word requires the operation of two rules simultaneously, as for example in the phrase "torn up", where the double consonant "rn" must be reduced while the "r" after the vowel sound is deleted. Applying the rules correctly gives you *toe*, not "ton", which is what one beginning student of AAL produced.

3. *Stress on first syllable*. For most words, put the stress, or emphasis, on the first syllable of the word. For example, AAL speakers say PO-leece, not po-LEECE, and DE-troit, not De-TROIT.

4. *Vowel sound in words that rhyme with "think" and "ring"*. In AAL, this vowel is pronounced like the vowel in "thank" and "rang". Thus "sing" is rendered as sang,"drink" is pronounced drank, etc. This pattern produced the "thang" in "It's a Black Thang", and the "thang" of Dr. Dre's "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang", from his 1992 album, *The Chronic*.

5. *Indicate tense (time) by context, not with an "s" or "ed"*. For example, "Mary do anythang she want to" and "They look for him everywhere but never did find him".

6. *"Be" and "Bees" to indicate continuous action or infrequently recurring activity*. For example, "Every time we see him, he be dress like that." This rule produced "It bees dat way", which may be shortened to simply BEES.

7. *Initial "th" sound, if voiced as in "that" and "the," pronounced as "d"*. This pattern accounts for the popular phrase DA BOMB.

8. *Final "th" sound, if voiceless, becomes "t" or "f"*. This pattern gives us DEF, as in "Def Comedy Jam" from the 1970s expression DO IT TO DEF, with the final "th" in "death" pronounced as an "f." This is also where WIT, as in the HIP HOP phrase GIT WIT *you*, comes from, with the final "th" in "with" rendered as a "t" sound.

9. *Is and are in sentences*. These words aren't necessary to make full statements; nor are the contracted forms of these words (that is, the "'s" for "is" and the "'re"

for "are"). This is the rule that allows WHAT UP? for "What's up?"(Smitherman, [1994] 2000, pp. 12-13).

Additionally, Green describes another set of common features of African American English.

Verbal markers:

- *BIN* (pronounced with stress) Situates an activity or state in the remote past. *They BIN sitting in the conference room; they didn't just get there.*
- *dən* (pronunced without stress) Indicates a completed activity whose resultant state holds now. *He dən read all the* Little Bill *books.*

General words and phrases:

- *ashy* Adjective. Dry appearance of the skin. *That lotion is good for ashy skin.*
- *call_self* Verb. An observation that a person is not meeting perceived standards. *He call hisself cooking.*
- *get over* Verb. Take advantage of, succeed by using wit but little effort. *The students tried to get over on the teacher.*
- *saditty* Adjective. Conceited, uppity. *Having confidence is one thing, but she is downright saditty.*
- *mannish* Adjective. (1) Said of boys who are behaving inappropriately for their ages. (2) Mature. (1) *Those three boys try to hang with those older guys; they are mannish.* (2) *Look at that way that little two year old holds his pencil and thinks about what to draw. He's just mannish.*
- *Womanish* Adjective. (1) Said of girls who are behaving inappropriately for their ages. (2) Mature. (1) *She stays out much later than a twelve-year-old should. That's just womanish.* (2) *Your little niece is so womanish. Yesterday, I watched her while she entertained all the guests at the tea party* (Green, 2004, pp.79-80).

Green uses the example of a single complex sentence, *Didn't nobody ask me do I be late for class* (Nobody asked me if I am usually late for class), to sum up a number of characteristic AAE syntactic features, such as negative inversion, multiple negation and the formation of embedded yes/no questions.

Negative inversion/multiple negation involves a sentence that begins with more than one negative word – in this case, the auxiliary *didn't* and the indefinite pronoun *nobody.* This sentence type is labeled "negative inversion" because the two initial elements carry negative markers and occur in an inverted order – that is *didn't nobody ask* instead of *nobody didn't ask* (the auxiliary verb usually follows instead of precedes the subject). A second and very popular feature is the habitual *be* that always occurs in its bare form and never conjugated. Green points out that it is often mistaken by speakers of other varieties of English as incorrect English, however, the grammar of AAE does not permit habitual *be* in place of *is, am* or *are* but allows speakers to use it only to indicate habitual meaning. The third feature of the sentence, embedded inversion, *do I be late for class,* presents the characteristic of looking like a question because the auxiliary *do* precedes the subject *I*, as it would in yes-no questions. In AAE, this question can be set "embedded" within a larger declarative sentence (Green, 2004, p.81-82).

All of the above are strictly linguistic features of a language born from the common past experience of slavery that represents the cultural identity of the Black community in America. A language that carries much meaning within every expression of it. What is interesting is that such unique language has been acquired, has crossed-over into White society, generating a contradictory form of cultural assimilation, as it will be explained the following paragraph.

1.4 From slaves' soulful language to cultural and linguistic crossover in White America

In an article of *The Black Scholar* published in 1970, anthropologist Johnnetta Cole ran down some exploratory thoughts on the constituents of Black American Culture, there are inevitably represented through language. Cole initially noted that all cultures of oppression share certain commonalities, and then she argued that Black Culture shares many aspects with mainstream white culture. Finally, as the third dimension of Black culture, she contended that there are features unique to Black Americans, possible residuals of the African heritage and sensibility, and that prime among these unique components are "*soul 'nstyle*". As explained by Smitherman, *soul* is a concerned perspective for the condition of many; a world view of a God-centred universe in which Goodness and Justice is going to prevail out of human heart principles like pride, compassion, endurance, and so on. Whereas *style* is the articulation and active expression of this concern, to fight for righteous causes and doing it to the death to achieve a humanistic social order. Using one phrase to explain this all, Smitherman states, “If you got soul, yo style oughta reflect it” (Smitherman, 2000, p.344).

The combination of soul and style gives birth to the soulfulness that articulates and characterizes Black Language. In particular, this combination generates attraction into mainstream white society. The practices to endorse such attraction and make it functional for the Black struggle (which is the ultimate goal of Black Language as pointed out above) will be better addressed in chapter 2. For now, even though the concern of this chapter is primarily linguistic, it should be noted that language cannot be separated from culture. Therefore, resulting out of the strong attraction that Black Language thrives on, as Smitherman points out, is the linguistic and cultural absorption of Blackness by the dominant white American culture. This phenomenon, in the postmodern era, has been identified as “crossover” (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.27). Linguistically speaking crossover is called borrowing and is a very common phenomenon occurring between different languages, but from the perspective adopted here, it is also a matter of culture. In explaining crossover, Smitherman links the adoption of Black Talk by European Americans especially to the mass explosion of Black popular culture. The “explosion” started from the 1920s with the Harlem Renaissance, which had great impact on the new perception that Blackness acquired during that time. Then it continued till the 1960s and onwards thanks to the evolution of technology and mass media, which accelerated the linguistic assimilation of U.S. Ebonics not only in the U.S. but worldwide. On this matter, Smitherman notes that “the 1960s was a defining moment in this cultural diffusion process, with Motown, on the one hand, crossing racial lines with its music, and the Civil Rights Movement, on the other, crossing racial boundaries with its language and rhetoric of protest and moral confrontation”(Smitherman, [1994] 2000, pp. 27- 28).

Smitherman mentions one of the first scholars to note the linguistic impact of the 1960s on whites, David Claerbaut, who in his *Black Jargon in White America* (1972) commented on the absorption of “Black jargon” by white America in this way:

> A vast number of once uniquely black terms have in recent years been pirated by white society, especially by the white youth culture. Although imitation is often considered the highest form of compliment, and although a certain amount of cultural interchange is natural, such indiscriminate theft is deeply resented by many blacks. I am uncomfortable when I hear young whites glibly using originally

> black terms... as though they have been imported directly from white northern Europe along with the rest of the culture. This thievery is evident even in the media, as the use of black jargon by white entertainers is a common practice on radio and television ... much of this represents a naive attempt to identify with black people and form some sort of meaningful bond. It requires little insight, however, to understand that such practices hardly bring about this idealistic objective. Stealing a man's culture is hardly a way of befriending him. Respecting it does (quoted in Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 28).

Claerbout condemns whites adopting Black jargon. And it is plausible as the absorption of African American Language into European American culture masks its true origin and reason of being, that is, being born from a culture of struggle and functioning to end such struggle. The use of Black Language by non-black individuals instead of giving it power or prestige ends up undermining it. It deprives it of its originality and scope, devaluing it. What is even worst is that more than a crossover it is perceived as appropriation, and given African American past experience, it is easy to understand why they do not want the whites to appropriate anything that is theirs.

Moreover, as discussed before, Black Language originated as an antilanguage, therefore, when a Black Language term crosses over and gains linguistics currency in the white Language world, Black Language speakers generate a new term to take its place. This also explains why newer terms are always emerging and often (too often) dismissed as slang instead of words of opposition and rebellion to a system that keeps on stealing Black originality and appropriating what is not an original (white) creation. After all, this practice of taking the merits and enjoying the benefits of Black work seems an excessively familiar habit from the past. For example, Black slaves through their work in plantations largely contributed to the development of America's economy, yet those who benefited from that economic advancement were the whites and, one could interpret what happens within the crossover phenomenon of modern days in the same way. Cases in point are the enormous profits that industries such as film-making (*Hidden Figures*, *The Help…*), music (rap, jazz, blues and so on) and even fashion (think about the famous "street-style") have produced by appropriating the cultural work of African Americans.

In light of the above, Black Language speakers hold on to a sense of exclusivity and identity that accounts for the constant changes in the Black Lexicon. Basically, forms that gain widespread usage in the white American mainstream are no longer considered relevant in the Black community. In order to understand how widespread crossover is, Smitherman provides a list with a few famous cases in point, of whites using typical Black expressions that worked successfully as marketing strategies and more.

> A Kentucky Fried Chicken radio ad commends the fast-food diner on its "pretty, hot, and tasty" chicken, as a voice says that KFC should give out "*phat* degrees". A white female lawyer on a talk show in 1998 says, "The Monica [Lewinsky] evidence helped Republicans; they were on Clinton like white on rice". Two white females, interviewed for a 1998 New York Times Magazine article about problems encountered by professional women, both speak about being *hit on* by men on the road: "If you're attractive, you're going to get hit on". Linguist Michael Adams, in a 1998 research article in American Speech, lists several Black Language words (e.g., throw down) in the "[restaurant] server's lexicon", concluding that "it should not surprise anyone that African-American Vernacular English has lent terms to restaurant jargon, as to most other registers of American English". A white male in his early sixties, in line at the local bank, jokingly responds to a comment made by a middle-aged white female teller with "Let's not start that. Don't even go there". A high-ranking white female university administrator introduces the keynote luncheon speaker with accolades about her dedication: "She works *twenty-fourseven*." The list of crossovers is endless (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.29).

In addition, one of the most startling examples of crossover, Smitherman highlights, is from a 1992 book for children (illustrated throughout with white faces and playful animals), entitled *Kids Shenanigans* (by the editors of Klutz Press). The book contains illustrations for various ways of "giving five", including the old "five on the sly". The illustrations, referred to as "Hand Jive", call to mind the African language pattern of "talking" with the hands, by way of slapping palms. It is a pattern that has survived in African America and is today practiced as the high five by millions of mainstream Americans who have no idea of its origin (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 30).

Resulting from what stated above is one question. What is it about the language and culture of U.S. slave descendants, these outcasts on the margins of American life, that makes crossover so rampant, especially given the fact that the people who create the language and culture can't crossover? (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 30)

Smitherman tries to find an answer using two writers' interpretations on the matter. One is Norman Mailer's in a 1957 essay on the "language of Hip", in which he discussed the phenomenon of what he called the "white Negro". He attributed the cultural and linguistic absorption to the dynamism of Black life, its stubborn rebelliousness against societal constraints, and Blacks' fierce determination to live life on their own terms. The other is Donnell Alexander's in his 1997 article in *Might*, "Are Black People Cooler Than White People?", in which he contends that it is the "tryin-to-make-a-dollar-outa-fifteen-cent" outlook that explains the crossover: "Cool, the basic reason blacks remain in the American cultural mix is an industry of style that everyone in the world can use. It's making something out of nothing. It's the nigga metaphor. And nigga metaphor is the genius of America" (quoted in Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 31).

In a criticism to the white mainstream, Smitherman maintains that whites get the "nigga metaphor" at bargain-basement prices. They don't have to pay no dues, but reap the psychological, social, and economic benefits of a language and culture born out of enslavement, neo-enslavement, Jim Crow, U.S. apartheid, and twentieth-century hard times. Lacking the depths of this experience, sometimes whites get it all wrong, (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.32) and the list of crossovers went wrong is long as well.

One particular case Smitherman described took place in 1998 and involved a white teacher using the book *Nappy Hair*, which was written by African American writer Carolivia Herron. Smitherman observed:

> In spite of African-Centeredness, the Black community has a lingering ambivalence about nappy hair, which comes from the history of racial domination wherein white Americans' hair (straight, or non-nappy) set the standard, and Black hair (non-straight, nappy) became just another one of those features of the "inferior" race. The Sista's book intends to celebrate the value of this different kind of hair in the human family, and so by using the book, the white teacher sought to teach her Black students something about the value of and tolerance for differences. However, the African American parents knew that "nappy hair" is one of those doubleedged phrases, like H.N.I.C., and that some Blacks, still insecure about our naps, use the phrase "nappy hair" as a name-calling word.

> Perhaps it is this lingering legacy of everything white as "superior" and everything nonwhite as "inferior" that made those Black parents protest loudly and vigorously, setting off a national controversy. Whatever the motivation for crossover, one thing is certain: in these postmodern times, there is a multibillion-dollar industry based on Black Language and Culture, while at the same time, there is continued underdevelopment and deterioration among the people who produce this language and culture (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, pp.32- 33).

Additionally, Smitherman argues that putting the Black imprint on the linguistics of America can represent distinct African American values functioning as opposite and oppositional to Euro-standards. For example, "Fat" spelled phat in Hip Hop, refers to a person or thing that is excellent and desirable, reflecting the traditional African value that human body weight is a good thing, and implicitly rejecting the Euro-American mainstream, where skinny, not fat, is valued, and everybody is always on a diet. For example, Black senior citizens convey the same value with the expression "Don't nobody want no bone" (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.31).

For Smitherman, in simple words, behind white America's contradictions is the "fat and phat" price tag on U.S. Ebonics, which is used to sell everything from McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Gatorade to snow blowers, sneakers, and shampoo for white hair (Smitherman, [1994] 2000. pp.37-38). Finally, what comes out from the scholar analysis on crossover is that Black Language is still Black owned, thanks to their resourceful spirit and will to incessantly change and adapt and create. However, Black people in America, living the contradiction, need to keep pushing the linguistic envelope of Black language since they are "on a mission to work out the unfinished business of what it means to be and talk like home" (Smitherman, [1994] 2000. p. 38). Therefore, how do they use language? What strategies do they combine to have such powerful effects on mainstream society? How do they relate to the past? What effects do they have in the present and are aiming to have for the future? An analysis of the African American Oral Tradition will attempt to give answers to these questions in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: African American Oral Tradition and socio-cultural status today

In order to explore the African American Oral Tradition, that is “the Black way of speaking”, which comprehends language patterns, verbal strategies and oral performances, it will be taken into consideration once again Smitherman’s work as well as the work of John R. Rickford and Russell J. Rickford, *Spoken Soul, The Story of Black English.* Special attention should be paid to the expression ‘Spoken Soul’, first coined by scholar Claude Brown, who in a 1968 interview declared 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” (quoted in Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.3). In particular, the lyrical quality Brown talks about is central in the Black oral tradition and constitutes an essential aspect of the Black Language style, because language is not just syntax and grammar. Actually, it involves sounds and rhythm, the attitudes and the complex mix of communicative strategies that give life to the way of talking that is Black. As argued before, these attitudes, this soulful speaking, this intentional talking are an inheritance of the African oral tradition, the enslaved’s oral culture and years of oppression and resistance. On this matter, for Smitherman, what distinguishes Black English Language from Standard English is indeed the oral tradition, not just as language with its linguistic dimension but with its stylistic dimension as well. The linguistic dimension is comprised of the so-called “nonstandard” features of phonology and syntax (patterns like *dis heah* and *The coffee be cold*), and a lexicon generally equated with “slang” or hip talk. The stylistic dimension has to do with rapping, capping, jiving, etc., and with features such as cadence, rhythm, resonance, gestures, and all those other elusive, difficult-to-objectify elements that make up with what is considered a writer or speaker’s “style” (Smitherman, 2000, p.59).

Furthermore, the ever-changing socio-cultural conditions of African Americans, from slavery to Black Freedom struggle to modern and contemporary Black Pride movements, also explain why there is an ongoing debate on ways and terms for addressing both the people (African Americans, Black people, Blacks…) and, as argued before, their language. From Ebonics to African American Vernacular English, from Black Language to Black Talk and Spoken Soul (none of which is incorrect), as long as the language survives, according to the Rickfords and Lisa Green, it does not matter much how one prefers to call it. In their own words:

> 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 (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, pp.9-10).

Nonetheless, prior to the understanding of the complexity and scope of Black communication patterns, there must be a clear understanding of the oral tradition and the worldview that undergirds that tradition. The Black communication system is actualized in different ways, depending upon the sociocultural context, as for example, the "street" versus the "church". Anyway, the basic underlying structures of this communication network are essentially similar because they are grounded in the traditional African worldview. In brief, that view refers to the underlying thought patterns, belief sets, values, ways of looking at the world and the community of men and women that were shared by the Africans that were transported to the American colonies (Smitherman, 2000, p.199). About to be discussed, are the ways and the means by which Black Oral Tradition is shaped and how it was and is currently used for Black struggle and Black identity representation. Therefore, the very definition of oral tradition should be explained. It refers to verbal games, stories, proverbs, jokes, and other cultural productions that have been passed on orally from one generation to the next. In Black America, this tradition preserves and celebrates African culture, which was adapted to a new way of life in America. Because Blacks in America play with and on the word, Smitherman maintains, "good talkers become heroes and she-roes" and "Bloods who can talk and testify, preach and prophesy, lie and signify, get much props" (Smitherman, 2000, p.223). The scholar with this is implying that who is able to best use the language and the oral skills that constitute the tradition of that language are more likely to achieve their communicative goals. In the case of the African American Oral Tradition, the best "talkers" are most certainly related to and generated from Traditional Black Church and Black Music.

2.1 Traditional Black Church and Black Music

Smitherman argues that four critical forces played a role in shaping the direction and evolution of the Black way of talking. The first two are, as previously said, the influence of African languages and the need of linguistic adaptation because of servitude and oppression; the other two are Traditional Black Church and Black Music (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.17). As it is proved by the many examples within the following pages, traditional Black church and Black music have shaped and continue to shape African Americans' communicative strategies. In the Rickfords' view, for example, the way in which a sermon is presented becomes almost as crucial as its content. Worshippers must be cued to stand or clap or sway or say "Amen" or wave their palms in testimony through a variety of rhetorical strategies that work them up and draw them in, including innovative metaphors and similes, apt narratives and quotations, appropriate variation in voice quality, gesture, pace, pitch, and volume; and skilful deployment of alliteration, improvisation, humor, repetition, and rhyme. However, most African American preachers use primarily Standard English in their sermons, making deliberate or not so deliberate excursions into the Black vernacular from time to time. Therefore, when talking about Spoken Soul in preaching, the Rickfords are talking less about a vernacular spree and more about a rhetorical style, an aggregation of vocal and body techniques that overlaps class, geographical region, and denomination (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.40). In particular, the scholars make reference to the "soulful preaching tradition" that one will inevitably find in any Black church, regardless of the educational background of the preacher and the extent to which he or she uses the vernacular itself. In reference to oral performances happening in Black churches, they write:

> With its quavering falsettos and sonorous baritones, purposeful stuttering, fetching snarls and whispers, singsong melody, rhymes and half-rhymes, interjected exclamations of "hunh," and other trademarks, black preaching is hard to miss and impossible to dismiss. When we examine its themes, functions, and

> form, we gain precious insight into the souls of black folk, and draw closer to understanding why many of their churches rock like Jericho… Worship among black folk is often characterized by expressiveness rather than solemnity (though not necessarily *unrestrained* expressiveness) (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.41, 44).

Moreover, as scholars have demonstrated (e.g., Du Bois, [1903] 1961; Woodson, 1921; Mitchell, 1970; Lincoln, 1990), the Traditional Black Church has had a profound impact and influence on the African American Experience. For example, all Black (male) leaders have come out of the Church, either the Christian or the Muslim, such as Reverend Jesse Jackson and Minister Louis Farrakhan. Being not simply a religious unit but the center of social life, the church has very much influenced the development of the African American Oral Tradition. In it, ordinary statements take on the tone of pronouncements and are given the force of the moral high ground; they are proclaimed with the profundity and moral sobriety of divinely inspired truth. For Smitherman, this is what has given Black speech its elevated, "fancy talk" quality (Smitherman, 2000, p.260).

On this matter, the Rickfords advance the example of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—a reverend, a scholar, and a prodigy of Southern Baptist preaching that "delighted in euphony, the sweet sound of words and rhythms" (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.46). The two scholars think that the public today tends to consider Dr. King as a dreamer, and to remember him primarily in terms of the constantly recycled conclusion of his "I Have a Dream" speech, while few recall the philosopher, the social engineer, and the Christian warrior that he actually was. Even fewer still acknowledge the preaching phenomenon who was reared in the Black church and who relied on, and even perfected, the rhetorical strategies of the Black preaching tradition. One such strategy is repetition (a feature embedded in African American Oral Tradition that is further discussed later in) evident in this passage from one of Dr. King's sermons: "Sir, we would see Jesus, the light of the world. We know about Plato, but we want to see Jesus. We know about Aristotle, but we want to see Jesus. We know about Homer, but we want to see Jesus" (quoted in Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.46). From the Rickfords' point of view, Dr. King probably could not have become such a trusted national spokesman for the Black masses, and might not have been able to lead garbagemen and porters and church mothers as effectively as he did, if he had not had control over not only Standard English, but also the pauses, inflections, cadences, and other devices of the Black rhetorical and preaching tradition (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p. 46). Indeed, in the African American community, the oral tradition served as an essential vehicle for their struggle. It was not only the way to express their pain and to protest about it, it was also the way in which they found strength to fight for that pain. Fundamental to this view is the unity of the sacred and secular worlds that Smitherman proposes, the precedence of the spiritual over the material, the certainty that "there is a God on high who may not move the mountain, but will give you strength to climb" (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.21). Through oral tradition, that includes ritualistic performances with rich verbal interplay among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival are handed down from generation to generation, preserving in this way the African American heritage and reflecting the collective spirit of the race. In addition, the structural underpinnings of the oral tradition remain basically intact even as each new generation makes verbal adaptations within the tradition. Indeed, the core strength of this tradition lies in its capacity to accommodate new situations and changing realities (Smitherman, 2000, p.199), something to which the Black community is used to since undergoing slavery upon their arrival in America and experiencing numerous processes of adaptation during their life there (language, culture, customs ext.). Above all, Smitherman states:

> In the process of adaptation of language is embedded the process of adaptation of culture as well. For example, enslaved Africans adopted ole massa's religion, but they Africanized this religion into spirit-gittin, tongue-speakin, vision-receivin, amen-sayin, singsong preachin, holy-dancin worship. The Church, with its preservation of Africanisms, has had an impact on Black Culture at large (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p.21).

In addition, Smitherman maintains that over the centuries, the Traditional Black Church has functioned as a social as well as a religious unit, and it has stood as a rich reservoir of terms and expressions in Black Language. A few examples are: Sista and Brotha (as generic terms for any African American); proverbs such as God don't like ugly and What go round come round; the ritual of shouting and "gittin the Spirit" when moved by the musical "spirit" even at a secular concert. What is more, a major reason for the paramount position of the Church in the Black Experience is that it is the only independent African American institution, "an institution for Black folk which is solely supported by donations from the folk. This independence and autonomy has meant that it has not had to capitulate to the sociocultural pressure of Eurocentric culture and the language of white folk" (Smitherman, [1999], 2000, p.21).

According to Holt, the Black church "was born out of necessity" but it has developed routines and rituals that have become traditions. Actually, what developed as a necessary mode of communication has become an integral part of the language system of Blacks, though the necessity is not as great as it was in the beginning. This communication behaviour is still prevalent even in the nonreligious society of today's Blacks (Holt, 1972, p. 190).

Furthermore, Lisa Green explains that speech events and language use in African American church services, in particular Baptist, are composed of musical devotions, ritual programs and celebrations, dedications, sermons, prayers, testimonials and weekly announcements. Green points out that members of the congregation, including those leading the service, may engage in nonverbal communication such as head-nodding, feet-patting, hand-waving and clapping, body-swaying and standing to express agreement with the message or acknowledgment of spiritual feeling inspired by the sermon and music. This verbal and nonverbal participation is a unique form of expression and a tradition deeply rooted in African American culture. To an onlooker who is not familiar with this type of service, the participation may appear to be overly exuberant (Green, 2002, p.146). Nevertheless, for members of the Black community it is the only way of communication: ritualistic, physical, spirit driven and most importantly interactive. What is more is that similar exchanges, which are often referred to as backchanneling, can be heard in day-to-day informal interaction. Backchanneling occurs in form of short responses to parts of conversations, and it encourages speakers to continue because the listeners are totally engaged in the conversation, in agreement with the speaker's point of view or in awe of it (Green, 2002, p.155). This is also often displayed in the media, in movies and comedies that are intended to represent some part of African American life or experience. Smitherman describes these kinds of common interactions when discussing Black strategies of communication (explanation of such strategies is provided in the following paragraph).

On another note, what still needs to be addressed here is the close relation between Traditional Black Music and church performances, in which the spiritual self, the soul and faith are central. As the Rickfords argue, many a slave master must have dismissed the ditties and dirges of his bondmen and bondwomen as wishful thinking, as cryptic pleas for the deliverance of death, or as quaint noise-making, never suspecting that his singing slaves were tacitly resisting psychological bondage, concealing subversive messages, possibly plotting uprisings or escape (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.79). Indeed, most spirituals can be linked to philosophies of liberation, and their genealogy traced to the first moment a kidnapped African paused from the labor imposed by the whites to observe, "the ancient custom of chanting one's discontent". Consequently, the Rickfords maintain, makers of Black music have always defined themselves with the gloss of Spoken Soul. They have always used their music to project themselves into a place where they are in control, where they do not have their humanity gouged out for their having been born Black, a place where they overcome, or get even (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.79, 80).

In line with the above, from the hummin tones of slaves' resistance, Black voices arrived in churches and shifted their status creating actual musical performances. One would immediately think of Gospel music, which is the musical style most used in Black churches anyway, but there are many genres of Black music and many artists that have come out of the church experience. A perfect case in point is Aretha Franklin, who started singing and playing piano in her father's church at a very young age and went on to make record hits in the secular (experiential, non-sacred) world, but returned to the church to record Gospel songs and albums (for example, *Amazing Grace*, with the late Reverend James Cleveland). Another example involving a different genre of music is 1990s Hip Hop artist Faith Evans, who talks about her early years singing in church, where she began at the age of two (Smitherman, [1999] 2000, p.21).

A genre famous for its explicit lyrics and expressiveness that none would believe to have anything in common with church performances is indeed rap music. Rappers take from the Black preaching style features like repetitions, strong tones and spontaneity. In particular, what really makes the difference in the Black way of talking, singing, making music and in this case of rapping, is the underlying tone of resistance in every word and speech act. Especially in sermons, prayers, songs and even proverbs and poetry. In the words of Smitherman, "today's most effective black preachers, leaders, politicians, writers are those who rap in the black expressive style, appropriating the ritual framework of the oral tradition as vehicle for the conveyance of the political ideologies" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 66). In addition, Smitherman elaborates on rap and hip-hop music in relation to both Black oral tradition and African American socio-cultural status through time, therefore the following paragraphs largely cover such matters. For now, what should be underlined is the close relation between Black music and oral tradition. Some critics of rap music, for example, have argued that the use of lyrics and melodies from older work in the Black musical tradition demonstrates that rap is not innovative, that it merely imitates rather than creates. Yet, what rappers are doing when they sample is revisiting and revising earlier musical work. The same thing that contemporary Black writers, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others are doing: "They are indirectly commenting on the work of earlier Black writers within the narrative structure of their own literary productions" (Smitherman, 2000, p 278). This, for Smitherman, demonstrates the relation that every genre of music, even rap, can have with the tradition, especially since the Black oral tradition is always evolving with the evolving of its speakers' stories and experiences. Basically, this could be interpreted as a prove of resistance through time since the tradition is able to change; indeed thanks to its speakers, musicians, writers, rappers and so on, that keep on readapting and creating, the tradition is able to never-age, to be always actual, all the while still carrying significance from the past.

What is more, Smitherman maintains that classic Black musicians' musical style has been Africanized to the core with funky beats, much drum and rhythm, blues notes, antiphonal melodies, and raw lyrics about love, sex, "empty-bed blues" and a man or woman "who done me wrong". Therefore, from an historical perspective, the scholar locates rap and Hip Hop, with their bustin rhymes about hard times, life on the raw edge, rappin "ruffneck" and gangsta lyrics over funky beats, squarely within the tradition of Black music (Smitherman, [1999], 2000, p.23).

Moreover, a defining feature that links with one another the many traditional Black musical genres such as gospel, blues, jazz, swing, rock and roll, soul, funk, rap and reggae, is the abundance of their soul—that gift for articulating the most intimate spiritual and aesthetic selves of African America, with all its drama, irony, and poignancy. The Rickfords point out that the idea of "soul" reached new heights in the 1960s (when Blacks became "soul brothas and sistahs"), and found a champion in James Brown. Wrapped in bodysuits and capes, Brown would tattoo the stage with magical feet, slinging sweat and exchanging indecipherable *calls and responses* (see paragraph 2.2) with his band. As the Rickfords write, "that sapsucker had him some soul", a fact that he articulated succinctly in his 1971 hit "Soul Power" singing "I got something that makes me wanna shout, I got something that tell me what it's all about, I got *soul,* and I'm supa-bad". When Brown did his "thang", he impressed even himself, and would exclaim "Good God! I gotta jump back and kiss myself!", such is the exuberance of soul power. Moreover, Brown had fifty-six R&B top-ten hits, eighteen number-ones and more than forty million-plus sellers, Americans of all colors went wild for the audacious, outrageous performer who dripped attitude and unleashed dialect. Actually, this is a phenomenon still happening today. As a matter of fact, music that draws heavily on Black English (meaning almost all popular music, including jazz, blues, rock and roll, soul, and rhythm and blues) has generally been embraced by the mainstream. Though its lexicon and sensibilities have seeped into mainstream talk for centuries, nonstandard English itself has generally been scorned or ridiculed by the dominant culture (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.76). The amount of popularity (and assimilation) Black music and Black Talk have gained into white society is quite contradictory to the marginal living conditions that the majority of Black folk still lives in, considering that Black Language is often dismissed as "wrong English" or "ghetto dialect" and used to raise even higher barriers between white and Black communities. On this matter, the Rickfords explain:

> Some Americans embrace Spoken Soul (albeit subconsciously) only when it's delivered over the FM dial, crooned in a ballad, or draped atop the *thud-thud* of a funky baseline. Not that vernacular pronunciation and syntax are obscured when set to music, for they often take on an even grander flavor—becoming even more evocative and "in your face"—when jazzed up for twelve bars or worked over a catchy hook. It is then that Spoken Soul's aptness for expressing the exotic in the plainest of terms, for expressing the unremarkable with the greatest flamboyance, and occasionally, for expressing concepts that Standard English simply cannot becomes most obvious. Duke Ellington might have meant this, in part, when he observed in 1932 that "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." With that pronouncement, Ellington lent the era its jingle and proclaimed mainstream America square. And she *was* square when compared with the dancing, jazzing culture then emerging from New York and other cities, a culture in which black

> vernacular was the parlance of the hip. Americans of all types tend to bad-talk soul talk, even though it is the guts of the black music they so relish, and even though this would be a much duller country without it. It is an absurd contradiction… one that often goes unnoticed (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.73-74).

An additional example of Black Language (in music) being highly appreciated by the mainstream is put forth when the Rickfords maintain that the original "I Gotta Move", the infamous song by the Rolling Stones, was sung in Black churches for years particularly on the Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands and elsewhere in the South, and is likely still being sung there. It contains many of the classic characteristics of ring shouts, the praise sessions of slaves who rekindled faith and resisted misery by drawing themselves into animated worship circles. Therefore, the two scholars maintain that the band became famous by borrowing Black styles and Black talk, and often without attribution. In addition, several of their hits can be loosely traced to Black standards of the South, actually, a few are "plain knock-offs". For example, when recording "You Gotta Move" in 1971, the band did nothing more than lay a grinding electric guitar behind old African American lyrics: "You gotta move, you gotta move, child, Oh, when the Lord gets ready, You gotta move" (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.77, 78).

Another genre of Black music that the Rickfords discuss is the blues. With the title "Mannish Boy" for his song Muddy Waters was playing on an expression organic to African American childhood, used for example when a black youngster is acting up, or generally behaving "too grown" for his own good, a behaviour likely to be defined as mannish. The Rickfords point out that it is easy to hear this song and attribute it just to braggadocio. But between the ecstatic cries from the audience heard on the original recording, beneath the gusto of the legendary voice and the virility with which Waters growls "I'm a mah-yun", a deeper message percolates. Indeed, at the time of this recording (1955), Black men were still being called "boy" well into their advanced years, an indignity that Waters—born the son of a Mississippi sharecropper in 1915— was no doubt all too familiar with. Stripped to its core, then, "Mannish Boy" is a rousing affirmation of black manhood, the unequivocal resolution to the slave plea: "Am I not a man and a brother?" (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.81).

What Waters’s song is doing, then, is resisting. Similarly, singer Mahalia Jackson, often hailed as the world’s greatest gospel singer, recorded “I Will Move On Up a Little Higher” in 1947. The song explores the exhilarating conviction that Black folk will shed earthly constraints and be richly rewarded on that “great gittin’-up morning” when they see Christ and are reunited with long-gone kinfolk. An end to the toil of slavery and poverty is envisioned, and the spiritual metaphors of “goin’ home”, walking without weariness, and drinking from the fountain, as the Rickfords highlight, become sweet music for the thirsty, the dispossessed, the displaced and overworked. These are powerful Christian ideas, and Jackson expresses them with every ounce of her sanctified self. The phrase “get me a crown”, for example, conveys a sense of entitlement and self-righteousness that the Standard English translation (“I’m going to get a crown for myself”) cannot (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.80).

Hereinabove are all good examples of the power that the Black oral tradition (represented through music and church performances) possesses in conveying meaning. It may be because slaves and their descendants are adept signifiers, smartly using their language for what they need to say, concealing a deeper meaning behind every word than anyone else would (non-oppressed society members). Signifying is in fact one of the communicative strategies that Black Oral Tradition plays with in order to achieve social reform. The collection of strategies, attitudes and styles that characterize Black talk are discussed in the following paragraph.

2.2 Communicative strategies of the African American Vernacular Tradition

The stylistic dimension of Black language previously addressed and explained by Smitherman exists on a sacred/secular continuum, and it is in this way split into two distinct styles, the sacred and the secular. The sacred style is rural and Southern. It is the style of the Black preacher and is associated with the Black church tradition. It tends to be more emotive and highly charged than the secular style. The secular style is urban and Northern, but since it probably had its beginnings in Black folktales and proverbs, its *roots* are Southern and rural. This is the street culture style, the style found in barbershops and on street corners in the black ghettos and it tends to be more cool, more emotionally restrained (Smitherman, 2000, p.63, 64). Both the sacred and the secular styles share characteristics which constitute the essence of Black talk or, as Smitherman writes, of the

African American Vernacular Tradition (AVT) - another way to address what insofar has been called the African American Oral Tradition. The main characteristics that the scholar identifies are Call and response, Rhythmic pattern, Spontaneity, Concreteness and Signifying. Additionally, the language and style that comprise the sacred-secular oral tradition can be further characterized in a number of ways in terms of what Smitherman identifies as rhetorical qualities and Green as verbal strategies. Exaggerated language and loud-talking, mimicry and marking, proverbial statement and aphoristic phrasing, punning and play on words, spontaneity and improvisation, image-making and metaphor, braggadocio, indirection and tonal semantics are all strategies that consist of words, phrases, sentences and gestures that are used to impress, persuade, manipulate or even control. Some of these strategies require direct interaction between a speaker and listener, while others involve indirect interaction. In addition, speaking of rhetorical qualities, it should be highlighted that rhetoric is considered the art of persuasion and its study is the study of the techniques that speakers or writers use to inform, persuade, and motivate their audiences. Rhetoric is also the means for understanding, discovering, and developing arguments for particular situations, to pursue certain aims, which is what African Americans do through language and style, and this will become more and more evident within this paragraph.

2.2.1 Call and response, rhythmic pattern

The first quality that Smitherman addresses is call and response. It is a practice basic to Black oral tradition, therefore it is a pattern in both Black speaking style and Black musical style. It implies that the speaker's solo voice alternates with or is intermingled by the audience's response (Smitherman, 2000, p. 64). Taking gospel music for example, it is normal for members of the audience to join in the performance, adding his/her own voice and words the choir. Another example is the church, when the preacher issues the initial call: *My theme for today is Waiting on the Lord*, his congregation responds with: *Take your time! Amen!* etc. The same communication pattern goes down in non-ritualistic, secular, plain ordinary Black conversations too. The speaker says ("calls"): *Hey, the other day, I was …* The listener responds: *Un-huh… yeah ... I hear you*; he gives skin, slaps the wall or back of a chair, laughs, shouts, etc. Thus as listener, your participation/interaction is necessary to co-sign what is being run on you (Smitherman, 2000, p. 352).

Additionally, call and response can often be cause for an interesting case of cross-cultural communication interference. In a Black-white conversation, the white person obviously does not engage in this process since it is not part of their culture. Judging then, from the white person's passivity or maybe an occasional low voiced "mmmmmhhhmm", the Black person may get the feeling that the white is not listening to him. On the other hand, when the white is speaking, the Black typically responds according to the Black call-response pattern. Thus, the white person may get the feeling that the Black person is not listening to him because he "keeps interrupting" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 352). As discussed before, a similar example is proposed by Green when addressing the ritual of church services maintaining that outsiders of the Black community cannot quite understand the rich interplay that occurs and might be overwhelmed by it (Green, 2002, p.146).

Before proceeding to other features of AVT, it is essential to understand that all of them are fundamental components not only of Black Language in general, but also of Rap and Hip Hop, so much so that Smitherman refers to speakers of Black Language also as "rappers", therefore, their speech acts become *raps*. In particular, Smitherman identifies tone and musical quality of raps as having a rhythmic pattern. This pattern is lyrical, sonorous, and generally emphasizing sound apart from sense. It is often established through repetition, either of certain sounds or of words. The preacher for example will get a rhythm going, conveying his message through sound rather than depending on sheer semantic import and it would sound something like this: "I-I-I-I-I-Oh, yeah, Lord- I-I-heard the voice of Jesus saying…" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 64). Additionally, Smitherman points out, even though the speaker tone is characterized by rapidity it stays on rhythm and maintains a musical quality. What is more, Smitherman addresses rhythmic patterns as an important part of what she identifies as tonal semantics.

2.2.2 Tonal Semantics, sermonic tone and proverbs

Tonal semantics indicate that verbal power can be achieved through the use of words and phrases carefully chosen for sound effects. This can be either a line or a persuasive structure in a rap. In employing tonal semantics, the rapper gets meaning and rhetorical mileage by triggering a familiar sound chord in the listener's ear. The words may or may not make sense; what is crucial is the rapper's ability to make the words *sound* good. Thus, they will use rhyme, voice rhythm, repetition of key sounds and letters (Smitherman, 2000, p.222). Essentially, tonal semantics refer to the use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in Black communication. In using the semantics of tone, the voice is employed like a musical instrument, the rhythmic pattern becomes a kind of acoustical phonetic alphabet and gives Black speech its musical quality. For example, preachers rely a lot on tonal semantics in order to reinforce the high-spirited, emotional, expressive intensity of their sermons' language. For example, Smitherman's father, Reverend Napoleon, during a sermon: "I am nobody talking to Somebody Who can help anybody". She adds that the "church folks" also use tonal semantics, for example they will moan to trigger a responsive chord, establishing a kind of "psycho-cognitive reality of one who knows the Lord", uttering a: "Hmmmmmmm-mmmmmmmmmmmmmm" or "HHHHHHHHH-mmmmmmmm" (Smitherman, 2000, p.222). It could be argued that this is probably inherited from the "hummin" that the slaves once performed and it possess the same capability of reuniting brothers and sisters under one big community, once again sharing their struggle and supporting each other.

On this matter, inspired by language and tones adopted during sermons, Smitherman adds *sermonic tone* to the features of the African American Verbal Tradition as performed in churches as well as by any other member of the community in many other contexts. The sermonic tone has the ability to give ordinary statements the tone of pronouncements and makes them gain the "force of the moral high ground; they are proclaimed with the profundity and moral sobriety of divinely inspired truth. This gives Black speech its elevated, 'fancy talk' quality" (Smitherman, 2000, p.260). This also gives Black spokesmen and women their boldness, proudness and confidence when speaking thus gifting their speeches with effectiveness. This has been discussed in reference to King's tones and powerful language in paragraph 2.1, and will be brought up again in chapter 3 when addressing former U.S. president Barack Obama's confident speaking style.

Returning to tonal semantics, there is a significant possibility of Black-white communication conflict because, as Kochman explains, "the black mode…is high-keyed: animated, interpersonal, and confrontational. The white mode… is relatively low-keyed: dispassionate, impersonal, and non-challenging. The first is characteristic of involvement;

it is heated, loud, and generates affect. The second is characteristic of detachment and is cool, quiet, and without affect" (quoted in Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.62).

Furthermore, under the spectrum of tonal semantics and sermonic tones the Rickfords identify alliteration, which is in their own words "another 'sweet sound' rolling down from the black pulpit" (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.46). Indeed, the scholars maintain that alliteration is not an isolated trick, but the genius of Black preachers lies in their ability to use many tools of language simultaneously and alliteration is part of them. Alliteration is the repetition of syllable-initial consonant sounds between nearby words, or of syllable-initial vowels, if the syllables in question do not start with a consonant. For example, addressing visitors to a Baptist church in Palo Alto, California, in 1992, the Reverend Emil Thomas said:

> We want you to know that you are ***w***elcome and you are ***w***anted at Jerusalem Baptist Church. If you're looking for a church home, you might find some churches that are ***b***igger, but you won't find any that is ***b***etter. And you can make it straight to heaven from Jerusalem, if you ***b***een ***b***orn again! (All right! Amen!) So, as you worship with us today, we hope that you will ***p***rayerfully ***p***onder the ***p***ossibility of joining with us on this ***p***ilgrimage from time to eternity. (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.46)

In addition, contributing to the songlike effect of the Black sermon is the "hunh" many preachers use at the end of chanted breath groups as an energizing punctuation, as in this extract that the Rickfords draw attention to: "You got to persevere . . . hunh? You got to give yo' all . . . hunh? You got to be long-suffering . . . hunh? You got to *do* right!" (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.47)

Additionally, the two scholars are in general agreement with the tonal semantics features identified by Smitherman. Actually, they maintain that the calling cards of the traditional Black preaching style include deliberate stuttering or the manipulation of voice texture and inflection to produce a grating, gravelly, or mellifluous tone. They point out the presence of often abrupt starts and stops, bursts of acceleration that disrupt an otherwise plodding pace, and wild fluctuations in volume that come without warning. In addition, there is the exploitation of rhyme ("God don't bless mess") and the elongation of syllables, "as in Dr. King's last great speech, in which, his pitch soaring as if to reach the providential summit he was envisioning, chanted, 'I've *been* to the moun-tain-top'" (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.48).

The Rickfords widen their discourse on tone and preaching style taking into account an essay by Grace Sims Holt dedicated to the Black preacher's gift for "stylin' outta the pulpit". By "stylin" she meant the process of strutting back and forth behind the pulpit with hand on hip or on the small of the back, or firing up a congregation by "stomping out the devil" with a polished wingtip heel, or "tearing down the gates of hell" with a violent kick. Even when a sermon is presented largely or entirely in Standard English, as the two scholars note, the signature of Black preaching remains, as in James Weldon Johnson's poem "The Creation", based on the sermon of an old-time Black preacher who originally spoke in dialect. Particularly, they observe:

> The rich metaphors linked to the local environment ("Blacker than a hundred midnights / Down in a cypress swamp"), the direct speech quotations, the repetitions within a simple sentence structure ("And the light broke / And the darkness rolled up") conjure the sense of being in the presence of the traditional Black preacher, and one hears the words with the stretched-out vowels the preacher would give them ("And faaaaaar as the eye of God could see . . . ") (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.48).

Two other verbal strategies that are mostly related to the language used by Black preachers as well as by churchgoers are image-making and the use of proverbial-statements. Proverbial statements are used when the speaker wants to quickly and surely achieve his goal and therefore needs to sprinkle his/her talk with familiar black proverbs, so as to drive home the points with short, succinct statements which have the sound of wisdom and power. However, while proverbs have been around for ages, Smitherman in reference to their everyday use in the Black tradition, underlines the Black tendency to encapsulate and in a sense "freeze" experience through aphoristic phrasing (Smitherman, 2000, pp. 217-218).

Furthermore, Smitherman identifies proverbs as speech acts shaped by specific sociocultural factors within a given speech community. Proverb users must know when, why, with who and for what purpose a proverb should be used. The sociocultural context governing proverb use encompasses the structural patterns of the speech community with its traditions, historical development and norms of interaction. Taken as a whole the community's corpus of proverbs provides a mechanism for storing and disseminating the speech community's attitudes, beliefs, values, philosophical assumptions, virtues and vices, and in general much of the worldview. Essentially, Smitherman refers to proverbs as figurative, epigrammatic statements that express widely accepted strategies for addressing recurring situations. What is more, she expresses her position as a scholar concerned with communication and development in the global African world, that is, in her view proverbs constitute an essential dimension of communication in Africa and the African Diaspora that reinforces cultural authenticity while simultaneously facilitating literacy, critical thinking and technological development (Smitherman, 2000, pp. 231-232).

Smitherman illustrates five points to explain the importance of proverbs.

1. Proverbs are an index of cultural continuity and interaction, they provide a mirror to the world of African and Diasporic people, they continue to exist in Black popular culture and bear directly on the issue of African survivals in the New World.
2. Proverbs are significant in the socialization process, for example, Black parents utilize proverbs to guide the thought and action of their children in an hostile environment.
3. Proverbs are central to mental development and abstract thinking and reasoning, training in proverbs can supplement formal education, particularly in the area of critical thinking.
4. Proverbs are significant rhetorical devices in arguments, debates, verbal duelling, and other interaction contexts where persuasion and manipulation of the rhetorical situation are paramount.
5. Proverbs are indices of cultural assimilation (Smitherman, 2000, pp. 232-233).

Similarly to the use of proverbs, Smitherman maintains that one important part of AVT is the use of images, metaphors and other kinds of imaginative language. From her point of view, the metaphorical constructs are what give Black raps a poetic and creative quality. To make a point loud and clear, to make it arrive to the audience, for Smitherman Black preachers must be (and usually are) good at image-making. For example, Reverend Jesse Jackson has referred to the plight of Black people as analogous to being on the expressway with all the entrances and exits closed off. Another Baptist preacher compared Christ's work to a "mission: impossible" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 219).

2.2.3 Spontaneity, personalization, concreteness and authenticity

Recalling the collective and experiential memory of the past or the current familiarity with the present is very frequent in AVT and proves very effective because it makes the speaker gain trust of his/her listener/s, which also happens with spontaneity, personalization, concreteness and authenticity. Spontaneity is characterized by an ever-present quality of immediacy where the speaker's performance is improvisational, with rich interaction between speaker and audience dictating and/or directing the course and outcome of the speech event. The delivery is not pre-planned, but casual and it assumes a conversational tone. All emphasis is on process, movement and creativity of the moment (Smitherman, 2000, p. 65). Actually, Smitherman underlines that spontaneity can be part of pre-planned discourses as well, explaining that in the Black rhetorical style a discourse can only be pre-planned to a certain level, implying the possibility of changing one's speech based on things like audience reaction, context, and even how one feels in that moment. Therefore, Black speech events seem always fresh and can be immediately personalized for any given situation. The scholar provides the example of Malcom X mentioning to an audience the fact that he had been in prison: he read the vibration of the audience sensing their surprise, and quickly reacted, noting that all Black people in America were once imprisoned under slavery, he capped: "That's what America means: prison"(Smitherman, 2000, p. 219).

Spontaneity can also be addressed as personalization which demands concreteness and specificity, not abstraction and generalization. In fact, there is distrust and suspicion of someone who is too clinical and distances himself or herself from phenomena and events that are under consideration (Smitherman, 2000, p. 257). Some Afrocentric psychologists call this demand for personal involvement a "field-dependent" cognitive style (e.g., Wilson 1971; Pasteur and Toldson 1982). The style draws the audience into the area of conflict and in so doing, the speaker seeks to establish a psychic bond. Consequently, the speaker gains the trust of his/her audience and becomes immediately more persuasive sharing a concrete experience. As Smitherman maintains, with concreteness, the speaker's imagery and ideas center around the empirical world, the world of reality, and the contemporary here and now. Rarely does s/he (the speaker) drift off into esoteric abstractions; his metaphors and illustrations are commonplace and grounded in every experience. Perhaps because of this concreteness, there is a sense of identification with the event being described or narrated: for example, the preacher may assume the voice of God or the personality of a Biblical character. Even the experience of being saved takes on a presentness and rootedness in everyday life, like in the expression: "I first met God in 1925…" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 65)

In a similar way that sums up the concepts of spontaneity, personalization and concreteness, the Rickfords addressed the feature of authenticity in their investigation on Black writers' use of the vernacular. In particular, this feature can be closely related to concreteness because for this community of people, who have been imitated and crossed over and sold out so relentlessly, authenticity is the highly valued sense of what is genuine, true and concrete since coming out of their common experience of the past. For the two scholars:

> It is a question of privilege and access, the password uttered at the door to all that is soulful. Relics from the 'oral world' of the African or African American child—phrases, axioms, toasts, boasts, tall tales, prayers—become ore in the imagination of the grown-up author. When the author bores into this source, what often issues forth is the most organic language, the language the author's mother used when scolding or cooing (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, pp. 23-24).

In addition, authenticity in African American art and life is paramount. Within hip-hop circle for examples, the mantra is "keep it real", but the same notion exists wherever Black people meet, whether in writing, songs or in person.

2.2.4 Verbal games, signifying and playing the Dozen

One more structural feature of AVT is signifying. It is the technique of talking about the entire audience or some member of the audience either to initiate verbal "war" or to make a point hit home. What is peculiar about this rhetorical device is that the audience is not offended because it already expects the speaker to launch this offensive to achieve his desired effect. For example, reverend Jesse Jackson that once stated "Pimp, Punk, prostitute, Ph.D. – all the P's – you still in slavery!" Or Malcom X that put down the non-violent movement with: "In a revolution you swinging, not singing" (quoted in

Smitherman, 2000, p. 65) Basically, signification or signifyin, is the verbal art of ceremonial combativeness in which one person puts down, talks about, “signifies on” someone or on something someone has said. Also referred to as “joanin”, “cappin”, “soundin” and currently “dissin”, this rhetorical modality is characterized by indirection, humor, exploitation of the unexpected, and quick verbal repartee. Smitherman maintains that, although it can be done for just plain fun, signifyin is also a sociolinguistic corrective employed to drive home a serious message without preaching or lecturing. As various scholars have noted (e.g., Hurtson 1935; Mitchell-Kernan 1972; Gates 1988b), signification has a long, honourable history in the Black Experience and is strongly rooted in the African American Verbal Tradition (Smitherman, 2000, p. 255). Thus, attention should be drawn to Black preachers, Black political figures, and Black rappers, who are all, and must be, adept signifiers. In addition, signifying possesses an extremely high linguistic power, it can generate verbal fights, and can be used to advocate for the Black cause in very effective ways; in their own and creative way, with their lyrics, Black rappers are especially able to do so (this is further discussed in Chapter 4).

To give a useful example of how signifying is performed, Smitherman proposes the case of Clarence Thomas, a Black nominee to the Supreme Court in 1991 who faced sexual harassment allegations against him by Anita Hill and whose speaking style throughout the second phase of his hearings was rife with verbal aggressiveness, indirection, and repartee of signification. In particular, Smitherman remarks that from “Giddayup, he came on with an attitude, big-time, signifyin about the chain of events that have led to the reopening of the confirmation hearings” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 256). Following is an extract that highlights one of the best signifyins that occurred in the exchange between Thomas and Senator Howell Helfin, after Thomas boldly announced that he had not listened to Hill’s testimony.

> Helfin: We’re trying to get to the bottom of this, and if she is lying, then I think you can help us prove that she was lying.
>
> Thomas: Senator, I am incapable of proving the negative. It did not occur.
>
> Helfin: well if it did not occur, I think you are in a position, certainly, your ability to testify to in effect to try to eliminate it from people’s minds.
>
> Thomas: Senator, I didn’t create it in people’s minds (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p. 257).

What Thomas implied here is that Hill, the Senate Committee, the media and the person who leaked the FBI files, are responsible for planting the charges against him in the public mind. Therefore, why would he be the one called to eliminate it? (Smitherman, 2000, p. 257) It could be argued that whether the allegations on Thomas were true or false, he was able to represent himself (as well as to rise the occasion to point out injustices) and stand up to the Senate Judiciary Committee largely thanks to his language skills, of which signifying was protagonist together with audacity, eloquence and all those attitudes typical of AVT. On this matter, the concept of planting an idea into people's mind based on "possible facts" is certainly not knew for a member of the Black community, and Thomas demonstrated a certain confidence that only those who had experienced that kind of prejudice before could have. It was common practice in the past to identify Black men (sometimes even boys, youngsters) as violent, abusive and rapists; or, more in general to presume that a Black man is always guilty of something, which explains as well the high imprisonment rate of members of the African American community that is still concerning America today.

Furthermore, signifying works through indirection, the rapper makes his or her points by the power of suggestion and innuendo so that it is left to the listener to decipher and explicate the totality of meaning (Smitherman, 2000, p. 220). For example, Malcom X once stated: "Mr. Moderator, Brother Lomax, brothers and sisters, friends and enemies: I just can't believe everyone in here is a friend and I don't want to leave anybody out" (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p. 220). Here, not only Malcom neatly "put down" his enemies in the audience without a direct frontal attack, he also sent a hidden message, which since it was an all Black audience, " [he] was slyly alluding to the all-too-familiar historical and contemporary pattern of Blacks being betrayed by other Blacks" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 220). Signifying and indirection could be at this point considered very much one and the same, both used to convey a meaning, to make a point, to succeed in a verbal fight by "hiding" such meaning and they are very much used in the vernacular tradition. For example, indirection gives longer raps their convoluted style, that is, the rapper will start with a point and then proceed to meander all around it, in the end, he may return to the point, but he typically will proceed in a "circular fashion", not in a straight, linear, point-by-point progression. Smitherman underlines that when dealing with, or maybe trying to win, a verbal fight against a skillful rapper, it is best to remember that they depend on psychological and experiential logic rather than some abstract system of logic (Smitherman, 2000, p. 220). In this way, Smitherman remarks those core rhetorical qualities of concreteness, authenticity and creativity that characterize AVT. What is more, such indirection and circumlocutory rhetoric were already part of the African discourse strategy and African Americans have, once again as they have done with many aspects of their life, transformed it to accommodate the English language.

Smitherman also explains that being signifying a verbal game, it can also be played with ritualized insults. What is interesting is that this "ritualization" makes insults purely ceremonial, which creates a safety zone (in other words, it makes them non-offensive for the players). The scholar distinguishes two kinds of these insults. One type is levelled at a person's mother (and sometimes at other relatives). Traditionally, this was referred to as "the dozen" (or "playin the dozen"). The other kind is aimed at a person or a thing, either just for fun, or to criticize that person or thing and is indeed referred to as "signifyin". Today, the two types are being conflated under a more general form of play, which may be referred to as "snaps", an emerging term for the game (Smitherman, 2000, pp. 223-224). On this matter, H. Rap Brown proposes a useful distinction between signifying and playing the dozen when stating: "The dozens is a mean game because what you try to do is totally destroy somebody else with words… Signifying is more humane. Instead of coming down on somebody's mother, you come down on them" (Brown, 1972, pp. 205-206).

What is more, Smitherman identifies different ways of playing the Dozen, a good example is by *punning*. While many verbal wits employ punning, in the AVT it largely depends on the threads of the Black experience common to all and on knowledge of Black speech. For example, Smitherman explains that it is commonly believed that Black people are adept with knives and razors as weapons, thus James Brown's phrasing of "I don't know karate but I know karazor". Another such example depends on one's knowledge of how Black English is pronounced and it goes as follows: "Knock knock. Who's there? Joe. Joe who? Joe Momma", this is punning on the similarity in sound between *yo* (not *your*) and *Joe* (Smitherman, 2000, p. 218).

In addition, in her book *African American English a Linguistic Introduction,* Lisa Green includes both snaps and the Dozens in her classification of verbal strategies which consist of words, phrases and sentences and, in some cases, gestures that are used to impress, persuade, manipulate or even control (Green, 2002, p. 137). Green traces the origins of the term *Dozens* from different accounts. One from Harris (1974), who traces it to when it was used to refer to the ill or old slaves who were sold in groups of twelve. Another account traces the origin of the expression to the snide remarks that were made by the field slaves as a display of hostility toward house slaves, who had some advantages (and disadvantages) that they did not have. The mother of the house slave was said to be available to her master, as were dozens of other women. In addition, Green proposes the view of Simmons, who maintained the dozen might be linked to West African sources such as: Efik tone riddles, curses, stereotyped sarcasm and retorts to curses. Simmons's tone riddle examples mention mother and father and have sexual references or refer to body parts while the examples of curses take the form of wishes of bad will such as bodily defects, and make reference to illegitimate birth. Simmons summarizes by saying that "West African folkloristic retentions are definitely known to have occurred and it may well be that from the folkloristic background brought with them from Africa, the American Negroes have fashioned new forms to satisfy new needs" (Simmons, 1963, p.340). Finally, Smitherman also identifies the origins of both the term and the game as debatable but accrediting for the most the view that relocates the game to several cultures of Africa from which Black Americans came (Smitherman, 2000, p. 225).

In addition, Green's explanation of playing the Dozen goes as follows.

> Different rules must be followed by those participating in this sport of verbal repartee. During the game, which is in the call and response format, two opponents dual verbally, making derogatory remarks about each other and/or each other's family members. Participants play the game with persons they know or who are in their circle of acquaintances. To stay within the boundaries, they use exaggerated statements that do not, in reality, characterize the opponent's family members and family life (Green, 2002, pp. 137-138).

On this matter, Green shares the same view of Smitherman, who suggests as well that the Dozen should be played by participants who really know each other, better if family members, and should at least share membership in and knowledge of Black cultural context (Smitherman, 2000, p. 227). Smitherman adds that to be good in the game the snaps must be exaggerated, the wilder the better, like: "your mother's mouth is so big, when she inhales, her sneakers get united". Also, they must employ creative figures of speech, like: “I spoke to your mother today and she said the dentist refuses to give her braces because yellow and silver don’t match” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 227). In addition, the timing of the snaps is critical, it must be delivered immediately and spontaneously. This art form is about what rap call “freestyling” but it is not the only thing rappers have inherited from this game. In the past, those who aimed for the highest level of mastery of the game insisted on rhyming. If someone could construct insults that were creatively exaggerated and were expressed in metaphorical language, on time, and with a rhyme, they were considered in “the top ten” (Smitherman, 2000, pp. 227-228). Actually, this is what distinguishes a good rapper from the others today as well. Finally, it should be underlined once again that, despite the emotionally charged subject matter (often the mother, usually a family member), the Dozen works as a game because it is located within the realm of play. Thus, the rule that is most crucial to the game is that whatever the insult at play is, it must not be literally true.

In light of the above, exaggerated language is not only a necessary element of verbal games; more in general it is a structural feature of AVT. Additionally, sometimes the whole syntax of a sentence may be expressed in an elevated or formal manner even for everyday simple occasions, for example, an invitation to dinner from a working-class Black male could sound something like this and be totally normal: “My dear, would you care to dine with me tonight on some delectable red beans and rice?” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 217) Although this example may seem “extreme” to non-Black English speakers, it is crucial to understand that exaggerated expressions are of everyday use for Black Language speakers.

Furthermore, what Green identifies as loud-talking may as well be an exaggerated language feature. However, in this case, it is not the words that are exaggerated, rather it is the actual volume of the speaker’s voice, that is loud enough for an outsider (of the conversation) to hear. Anyway, similar to any other of the rhetorical features taken here into account, loud talking is used to achieve a precise and desired outcome (Green, 2002, p. 141). For example, Mitchell Kernan explains that “the loud-talker breaches norms of discretion; his strategy is to use the factor of the audience to achieve some desired effect on the addressee” (Mitchell Kernan, 1972, p. 329). Green in turn specifies that the person does not have to yell, but has to make sure the pitch is loud enough to be heard by bystanders, because loud-talking’s intent is to make the addressee lose face. Nonetheless, it is not necessarily intended for malice or evil (Green, 2002, p. 141). Maybe one just cares to make a point so clear that it needs validation from others, or simply wants to have a good laugh.

2.2.5 Mimicry and *braggadocio*

One more rhetorical quality of AVT is "mimicry" for Smitherman and "marking" for Green. They both refer to a deliberate imitation of a speech and mannerisms of someone else that may be used for authenticity, ridicule, or rhetorical effect. For example, whenever rappers quote somebody, they attempt to imitate the tone of voice, gestures and particular idiom and language characteristic of that person (Smitherman, 2000, p. 217). Green, on her part, imagines the case of a Black female that complains to a friend about something her man said. When she tells her friend what he said, she mimics him, her voice tone goes deeper and she acquires his gestures too. Indeed, Green maintains that verbal statements in marking are accompanied by facial expressions and other body movements that help to characterize the attitudes or tendencies of a targeted person. Oftentimes people are "marked" when they are thought to speak and act "proper". "Speaking proper" can, but does not necessarily, involve using what is considered by the mainstream to be Standard English. Being the vernacular such a cultural identity aspect of the Black community, in some instances, people who are characterized as 'speaking proper' are understood as repudiating and setting themselves apart from the vernacular culture. Thus, in marking these speakers, the marker exaggerates words, mannerisms, body stances and gestures that are not usually associated with the vernacular culture. The commentary that the marker makes by his actions is that the speakers share characteristics and views of a different class or group (Green, 2002, p. 142). On the other hand, Green points out that who is entrenched in the vernacular culture may also be marked. A simple example could be the many comic sketches where, usually without malice and wanting to generate laughter, Black comedians imitate their mothers or grandmothers, wanting to "slap em in da face" or "preparing to do some ass smakken", marking tones and cadences of the vernacular language of their relatives. Of course these are inside (of the Black community) jokes and are received as such. At the same time, the game changes if a white man for example "laughs on" how a Black man speaks or behaves. Similar to the previously addressed concept of the snaps, as long as it is a member of the community that knows how, when, why and with whom to play, then it is ok. Nonetheless, if an outsider does it, it can quickly escalate into disrespect. This is probably a consequence of the history of ridicule that the Black community has been put through by white society, that is, not only traceable to the years of humiliations under slavery, when for example slaves used to be paraded naked and sold to the highest bidder (slave master), which certainly was a diminishing practice. But also, can be found in minstrel shows. Indeed, the Rickfords point out that not every work that employs the vernacular obviously conveys positive attitudes. The minstrel tradition, that was popular in the United States between about 1840 and 1900, for example, did nothing but hurt Black people. As Sylvia Wallace Holton, a professor of English, has noted:

> The minstrel show may have originated on the plantation, first as a means of entertainment by the slaves for themselves and later as a more stylized performance for their masters and their guests. . . . Whatever its origin, it developed rapidly into a ritualized three-part form performed by white men in black face [using grease or burnt cork] to burlesque the black. The image of the black man that grew out of the minstrel show, which became confused with reality in the minds of many Americans, was of a carefree entertainer who could sing about jumping Jim Crow. . . . (Holton, 1984, p. 102)

The minstrel tradition reinforced demeaning stereotypes of African Americans that were portrayed as comical, childlike, gullible, lazy, and in the words of Nathan Huggins, “insatiable in . . . bodily appetite” (quoted in Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p. 30). These stereotypes were conveyed in part by a highly conventionalized “Negro dialect” used by the minstrel performers, as in this example in which *am* is used instead of “is”—a peculiarity one did not hear in Black speech of the time, and does not hear today:

> END: Mr. Cleveland, a fellow was trying to stuff me dat when it am day here it am night in China.
>
> MID: Well, James, that is true.
>
> END: What makes it true?
>
> MID: It is caused by the earth rotating on its axis, but—
>
> END: What am an axis? (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p. 30)

Moreover, not only were nineteenth-century minstrel shows and books containing Black dialect intended mainly for white audiences, they were performed and by white individuals too. Indeed, as the Rickfords point out, “the grand daddies of vernacular literature—Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page—were White” (Rickford and Russell, 2000, p. 31).

After all the above, it is understandable how and why African Americans have become so strict on the “right” use of their language, because it is their prior form of cultural expression. Indeed, this is an important point to take into consideration when discussing how much the vernacular language matters for Black representation. They want to tell their story and they want to tell it right, today the Black community is still fighting the stereotypes that white representation of them and shows like the minstrel have created. African American Vernacular speakers are still ridiculed from time to time, for how they speak or behave, and actually, their language is still considered “the wrong way of talking” by the white middle and upper class. Interestingly enough, upper- and middle-class Blacks often do not encourage speaking the vernacular; others go as far as having an attraction-repulsion sentiment for it. Explaining such sentiment, the Rickfords, in particular referring to Black writers using the vernacular, argue that there was and is an array of practical and artistic motives behind the use of the vernacular; however, the most accomplished writers in the vernacular have understood two rudimentary principles. One is that message cannot be separated from language, and the other is that Spoken Soul often thrives when and where Standard English is left mute (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p.38). Therefore, those writers for example, who felt limited and offended by the vernacular, at the same time, found they could not fully divorce themselves from it either, and made spirited use of it especially in their (familiar) social interactions. This is probably because language is so strictly related to identity and familiarity that in a social context more familiar it becomes more difficult to separate oneself from it. Interestingly, this “torn feeling” on the use of the vernacular, is still at debate today. Black community members are still torn between using the language that represents their identity or separate from it in order to rich a higher social status (access to mainstream society). This issue is further discussed in paragraph 2.3.2.

As a consequence of what has been discussed so far, confidence in language and speaking style comes to be a key component of AVT, and one of the main ways to show confidence, as Smitherman puts it, is through *braggadocio,* which, in simple terms, is the art of bragging, very frequent among rappers. Green identifies the same quality as *woofing*, describing it as a strategy in which boasting is used to intimidate an opponent, thus avoiding violent confrontation. The linguist proposes the case of Muhammad Ali who was considered to be a skilled woofer who bragged about his athletic prowess to his opponents (Green, 2002, p. 136). In addition, bragging can be of various kinds and dimensions, for example instead of saying something like "if you so bad, gon and start something", one potential opponent (in a verbal exchange/fight) could boldly rap: "if you feel froggy, leap!" Whether referring to physical badness, fighting ability, lovemanship or coolness, the aim is to convey the idea of an omnipotent fearless being, capable of doing the undoable (Smitherman, 2000, p. 219). Braggadocio is a good example of that exaggerated and bold language typical of AVT that possesses a persuasive quality, the one that within a verbal fight makes one of the fighters (or as Smitherman puts it, rappers) win. For example, rapper Smokey Robison once confidently rapped: "I'll take the stars and count them, and move the mountains, and if that won't do, I'll try something new". The rapper was picturing himself as a hero doing impossible things, another aspect of braggadocio is in fact making the impossible appear possible, a feature that characterizes the vernacular tradition in general, and which together with creativity and image-making, aims to the same effect, persuasion and victory in a verbal confrontation.

Finally, from the practice of all the strategies hereinabove described, one thing becomes clear, the community of speakers of AVT uses it to distinguish itself, to preserve and protect its cultural identity and heritage from the "other" society, that is, mainstream white. From this point of view, AVT is used to resist white discriminations and cultural appropriation. Therefore, it could be argued that Black language is closely related to African Americans' cultural identity not only because of the past, from which derive many language strategies and attitudes, but also because of their present socio-cultural conditions. On one hand, white America is starting to welcome and accept Black people within a new and "common" society, largely thanks to Black pride movements and widespreading phenomena such as the Hip-Hop Nation and the idea of "Black is cool". On the other hand, America is still refusing to complete the transition to a colorblind society, as problems such as degrading ghetto conditions, high imprisonment rate, unequal job opportunities, low education and poor healthcare demonstrate. Resulting from what just stated, the relevance of Black Language use can be addressed as well from a double perspective. For one, it is largely appreciated for what concerns the music industry, the movie industry and the literary industry, where people enjoy Black characters speaking Black Language and representing their culture or even their struggle (case in point the success generated by productions like *The Help* in 2011, even though its narrative, as many others, presents, acknowledges and idealizes the idea of a "white hero"). At the same time, Black Language is still largely discredited as non-standard English and therefore still considered "bad talk" or the language of uneducated, poor or even dangerous, ghetto people. Basically, the double conscious Black identity, the diasporic being, the double-self, reflects into African Americans socio-cultural conditions and on how they are perceived from the white society.

In conclusion, such double status may be the reason why African Americans are masters of speech and oral skills. Their language is their power; their goal is to seek validation within a contradictory society through verbal skills. For these many reasons, within the following paragraph is provided a better look into African American status and language use in the U.S. of today.

2.3 Language prejudice, social controversies and the need for code-switching

The many aspects briefly introduced above correlate Blacks' social conditions in the U.S. and African American Language use. In addressing such matter, the primary focus should be on the existence of a "standard language ideology in the USA", which creates "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, non-varying *spoken* language and the various institutions (the school, the media, the courts) that promote it" (Finegan, Rickford, 2004, p. 289). Writer and linguist Rosina Lippi-Green addresses language prejudice pointing out how language prejudice can actually translate into racial prejudice. In trying to prove her point she collected diverse experiences from ethnically different people around America. An example she provides is a phone call from a woman to Oprah Winfrey, during one of her show episodes on "Black English", who wanted to make her opinion known.

> I guess what I'd like to say is that what makes me feel that blacks tend to be ignorant is that they fail to see that the word is spelled A-S-K, not A-X. And when they say *asked,* it gives the sentence an entirely different meaning. And this is what I feel holds blacks back (quoted in Lippi-Green, 2004, p. 290).

What stands out from the woman's statements is that "holds blacks back", implying that if they spoke differently (Standard English) they would receive better treatment or gain better conditions in the American society. In Lippi-Green's view, this is the promise that society gives to ethnically different people to justify what in reality is racial prejudice. As she argues, people rely on language traits to judge others and use variation in language to construct themselves as social beings, to signal who they are and are not - and cannot be. Moreover, independently of issues of language effectiveness or communicative success, most people believe that there is such thing as *good* or *bad* language. Many assume that it is perfectly reasonable to judge others on the basis of language variety rather than on the content of what they have to say. Lippi-Green provides a clear example of this when saying that most people would be surprised at an employer or a teacher who turned away an individual on the basis of skin color. However, most would find nothing unusual or wrong with a teacher of Puerto Rican students (and this could totally be applied to Black students who are speakers of Black English) who sees her students as a problem to be solved. What the linguist is demonstrating with this example, is how most people use false assumptions about language to justify judgments that have more to do with race, national origin, regional affiliation, ethnicity and religion than with human language and communication (Lippi-Green, 2004, pp. 291-292). Furthermore, in public situations, it has become unacceptable to reject individuals because of the color of their skin, but some do reject individuals because of the variety of English they speak or the accent they speak it with. Lippi-Green argues that somehow many have come to believe that some types of English are "more English" than others; that there is one perfect and appropriate kind of English that everyone should speak; that failure to speak it is an indication of stupidity, willfulness, or misguided social allegiance. This, she explains, has to do with the field of ideology and critical language studies where much of the work on language subordination and limiting of discourse take place. For example, to understand arguments for standardization or for English-only laws, one should begin with the cultural conceptions that underlie such arguments (case in point, the idea that "English has always been dominant; it must remain dominant"). Also, to first understand how such arguments are linked to particular power structures and interests (as is the aim of this paragraph) is to understand how and why they work. More specifically, when looking at the issue of language standardization, linguists often refer to a "standard language ideology" that is, a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, non-varying *spoken* language that is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions. However, Lippi-Green warns, *everyone* speaks a dialect and a uniform language is an impossibility (Lippi-Green, 2004, pp. 292-293).

The question then remains the following. How is it possible that institutions still pressure for such standardization of language? For Lippi-Green, a standard language ideology becomes the means by which discourse is seized, and provides a rationalization for limiting access to discourse (therefore limiting access into society: this notion will come useful when addressing code-switching). Moreover, authority that is associated with education is the most often cited and best established type of rationalization in this process. Of course, access to education is controlled and disciplined by the mainstream so it ends up as being the heart of the standardization process. Therefore, as the linguist states, asking children who speak non-mainstream languages to come to schools in order to find validation for themselves, in order to be able to tell their own stories in their own voices, is an unlikely scenario (Lippi-Green, 2004, p. 294). From this point of view, one could imagine that while being not fully accepted in a still primarily white, upper-middle class and Standard English speaking, ruled America, the school might not always be a pleasant and positive place where a Black Language speaker can feel welcome. Indeed, the process of standardization that such mainstream society promotes has two sides: first, devaluation of all that is not (or does not seek to be) politically, culturally or socially mainstream; and second, validation of the social (and linguistic) values of the dominant institutions. Moreover, in the USA at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the "dominant group or class" is a matter both of race and economics: the social and political power is predominantly white and upper-middle class. Within this type of society, an *institution* is an organization that has social and structural importance and a specific set of goals important for continuing the established social structures of the community. Such institutions include the educational system, the new media, the entertainment industry, the business sector, the government and the legal system, the military and religious organizations (Lippi-Green, 2004, p. 294).

In a nutshell, the institutional approach that Lippi-Green describes relies on a simplistic model: language is communication; communication must be clear to be effective; to be clear, language must be unvarying, static, standardized (Lippi-Green, 2004, p. 295). The problem here is that *spoken* language, contrary to the *written* one, is everything but static.

As highlighted before, it undergoes constant changing processes, especially a language that aims to preserve cultural identity as much as Black English does, that keeps on changing as soon as a part of the language is assimilated by the mainstream.

All of the above, to prove two main points. The first is that linguistic assimilation is not demanded of everybody but only of certain groups, and therefore proves that racial prejudice is still present in America. For example, a white Standard English-speaking person will never be demanded to know or to speak Black English. In the same way, some people that speak a distinctive regional or social variety of English that is not overly stigmatized (as Black English is), like a strong upper Midwest English or Boston English, are not asked to assimilate. In addition, other individuals that do speak a less favored or stigmatized variety of English but that possess other kinds of currency like social power, political power or economic power, are not asked to change too. For example, it would be hard to imagine powerful political figures like John F. Kennedy or a "V.I.P" like Arnold Schwarzenegger, attending classes for accent reduction or "better" English (Lippi-Green, 2004, p. 295). The second is that at the same time, somehow, Black English is acquiring more and more "coolness" in the mainstream, and tends to enter it quite often. The problem here would be double. For one, being Black English a cultural means of identification, distinction and pride, such assimilation by white society can be seen as cultural appropriation. The other problem would be that if institutions (like the school) are able to persuade a Black English speaker that his/her language is "no good", the speaker might be persuaded of it. In other words, Lippi-Green's assumption is that the institutions' problem in the end is not about language, but about race. And leaves her readers with a problem, that is "when an individual cannot find any social acceptance for his/her language outside his/her own speech community, the risk is that they may come to denigrate their language even while continuing to use it" (Lippi-Green, 2004, p. 296). For example, one member of the African American community could totally "fall into the mainstream trap" and refuse or restrict Black English language use (for example, only to household situations), ending up confirming and generating even more prejudice around it. This can especially happen with higher class Blacks or Blacks that "made it" into the white society, acquiring a "white status". Unfortunately, if such African American community members do not recognize their origins, through language as well as actions, or refuse to stand for the Black cause, they might end up empowering prejudice and racism, and worst, they would waste the advantage that their position as insiders of both the white and Black community gives them. An advantage that could result in a more equal and right society.

To conclude her argument, Lippi-Green maintains that the day-to-day, persistent devaluation of the social self has repercussions. While some may accept this devalued notion of themselves and their language communities, others react with anger and personal resistance and if there is a group of people going through the same experience, consistent negative feedback might bring organized resistance. This kind of resistance and counter-resistance (of the institutions) that puts the empowered language mainstream against small groups or individuals who struggle for recognition is an ongoing process (Lippi-Green, 2004, p. 297).

2.3.1 The Ebonics controversy

In light of hereinabove, seeking for recognition of the African American Vernacular Language within the institutions that are in control of language and language use is certainly not new. Also not new are the conditions of African American students that continue to attend underfunded and overcrowded schools, where they are more likely than their affluent peers to be taught by uncertified teachers who lack the skill or professional credentials to ensure that students are receiving an adequate education (J. Baugh, 2004, p. 316). A particular case unified these two points, the Ebonics controversy of the 1996 Oakland resolution. It started with the best of intentions but ended up generating a national storm that brought out the problem of language in schools and in the society. The Oakland school board had noted dismal educational statistics for Black students and embarked on a mission to improve the educational performance and graduation rates of African American students enrolled in its public schools. To do so, a strategic African American educational task force was formed. The task force embraced African American English and its educational potential for teaching Standard English and so wrote what is now known as the controversial Ebonics resolution. In the resolution, they proposed the recognition of AAL as a distinct linguistic variety, which they called Ebonics the adoption of such language to better teach Standard English to African American students. For once, a school board wanted to take care of the Black students, and better their conditions and education. The problem was that the aim was only the acquisition of a “better” Standard English. Therefore the controversy. From one point of view, Ebonics recognized as a language was a good thing, children would be able to speak (and to learn) at school in the same language they spoke at home, and this would favor, as linguists pointed out, in particular Labov (1997), motivation and achievement by getting a head start in learning how to read and write in this way. On the other hand, the resolution end-goal was to better the acquisition of mainstream English from Black students, diminishing the importance of Black Language and restricting its only aim to the pursuit of a “perfect” Standard English. For these reasons, the resolution ended up being problematic both for the Black community that felt once again disrespected and neglected, and for the mainstream white institutions that kept on favoring exclusive Standard English teaching.

Nonetheless, linguist John Baugh pointed out that Oakland’s efforts to increase Standard English proficiency among students who are American slave descendants did not truly receive a fair hearing. For him, close inspection of the Ebonics controversy reveals well-intentioned educators who attempted to portray the linguistic legacy of slavery in ways that comply with federal educational regulations for other language minority students (Baugh, 2004, p.316). For example, the initial Oakland resolution set the stage for the prospect of bilingual education funding for African American students. Unfortunately, but quite predictably, African American students did not obtain such funds because Black English never fully came into recognition as a language autonomous from Standard English. In other words, mainstream education institutions avoided the possibility of giving Black students the same education funds that other minorities speaking different languages have (Baugh, 2004, p. 314). However, stung by hostile reactions to their efforts by Blacks and whites alike, Oakland educators eventually dropped all references to Ebonics in their educational plans. Indeed, their website now makes no reference to Ebonics whatsoever. In addition, Baugh calls attention to the fact that in Oakland, as in many public schools districts throughout the USA, every effort has been made to avoid calling special attention to the linguistic legacy of African slavery and its relation to the education of Black children (Baugh, 2004, p. 315), which remains nowadays statistically worse than the one offered to white children.

2.3.2 Code-switching, an ability formed out of necessity

In a similar way to Lippi-Green and Baugh, Smitherman too argues that the sociolinguistic construction of reality in the class system of the US is made more complex by the contradiction that Black and White English (WE) represent, which she describes as being "the same and not the same" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 99). For Smitherman, White English (Standard English) is that language spoken by power elites and those who aspire to upward social mobility; non-standard English (NSE) is that language spoken by working-class whites; Black English (BE) is that language spoken by African Americans. Additionally, the scholar matches Lippi-Green's position when arguing that, significant and profound social and economic distinctions accompany each of these three linguistic phenomena. While WE and NSE are *class* dialects in US society, BE, by contrast, is a *racial* dialect within the class system. That is, BE is spoken across the class spectrum among African Americans. What is more, middle-class Blacks develop code-switching skills (from Black to White English) which the Black working and *unworking* classes generally do not possess (Smitherman, 2000, p. 101). In Smitherman's own words:

> It is necessary to account for the linguistic contradiction of black-white English in order to grasp the sociolinguistic construction of reality in the US. This contradiction is a function of and helps reproduce patterns of labor exploitation. During slavery, white workers had to relinquish wage demands in the face of competition from free (slave) labor. When slavery became non-profitable, culminating in the Emancipation Proclamation, US society was faced with the potential time-bomb of its newly emancipated African workers joining forces with white workers. Racism was the ruling class's tool to prevent this alliance (Smitherman, 2000, p. 101).

In this way, Smitherman gives an explanation of how language differences have come to disguise what in reality is racism. Within this society, that prioritizes who speaks Standard English, it becomes clear that African Americans have had (once again) to adapt in order to gain social favor, acceptance and access to mainstream society. The ability that developed out of such needs, as Smitherman points out, is code-switching.

Code-switching, similarly to the previously described verbal strategies of the African American Vernacular Tradition, is not only a linguistic practice but a strategy as well. It has represented and still represents the Blacks' way to enter white society. In particular, journalist and Blackness cultural critic Ida Harris, in a 2019 article on such practice, went as far as titling it: "Code-Switching Is Not Trying to Fit in to white Culture, It's Surviving It". The article explains, in understandable, easy words, what code-switching consists of and the effects it has on Black people's thoughts and behavior. Harris starts by recounting her own experience and feelings on the matter. She recalls one time she had to stand in front of a class of all-white students:

> The voice that sprung from my throat was unfamiliar as I introduced myself to a classroom of White students. Its tone was high-pitched and enthusiastic—a far cry from my naturally soft raspiness. It wasn't the first time I was unsettled by being the sole Black person in a room, but these moments had a profound effect on me. Without thought, I'd shifted my demeanor and speech. My thoughts were calculated, quickened, and in search of the "right" things to say. The words poured from my mouth pointed and stiff. I enunciated each consonant and vowel, and stressed each syllable. The production of it all, though a departure from my normal self, was seamless. It was the first time I noticed I had code-switched. Admittedly, I was later ashamed for abandoning my native tongue—African American Vernacular English—and sense of self in an effort to assimilate into a space of teaching and learning, particularly because, as the instructor, I was an authority figure (Harris, 2019).

From her own experience, Harris shows how unsettling, unconscious (but also conscious, as in the other examples she proposes) and automated, like a mind modality that activates when in alert for survival, code-switching can be. The journalist remarks that for many African Americans code-switching is a skillset that is integral to their survival, although, at times, such *performance* is superficially understood as a lingual phenomenon. To prove her point, she refers to the text *Language and Interracial Communication in the United States: Speaking in Black and White* (2009) in which George B. Ray describes African-American code-switching as "a skill that holds benefits in relation to the way success is often measured in institutional and professional settings". Therefore, more than the linguistic adaptation aspect, what needs to be brought out about code-switching are its effects on the individual performing it. A first approach to such effects on and conditions of the individual, as Harris highlights, was that of W.E.B Du Bois who, in her view, alluded to the concept of code-switching when he wrote about African Americans reckoning with dual identities—Blackness and Americanness—in *The Souls of Black Folk*. The passage Harries refers to is:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 1903).

For Harris, Du Bois speaks to how this sense of being is a testament of resilience and actually pictures the struggle that every Black individual faces. However, the journalist explains, code-switching goes beyond "feeling", as in her experience for African Americans "it is a performative expression that has not only helped some thrive in mainstream culture—it has helped many simply survive" (Harris, 2019). For example, the journalists analyses the "talk" many African American parents have with their children to warn them of, and prepare them for potential encounters with law enforcement, an element of code-switching. The conversation involves clear directives on how to switch up behavior when approached by police. It goes something like this: "Turn down loud music", "Adjust your posture", "Keep your hands visible" "Exercise good manners", "Speak properly". Such conversations are a response to the dominant culture's attitude toward Blackness, Black people and Black culture. Unfortunately, for Black citizens, such a perverse attitude remains present during quite a few brushes with the law. A study conducted by Stanford researchers revealed that Black motorists experience traffic stops at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts, and were 20% more likely to be ticketed by authorities. What Harris points out, is that in the case of Black people mere traffic run-ins can escalate and sometimes even result in death. As cases in point, the journalist presents those of Sandra Bland (2015) and Philando Castile (2016). Sandra was a 28-year-old African American woman who was found hanged in a jail cell in Waller County, Texas, three days after being arrested during a traffic stop. Officials found her death to be a suicide. There were protests against her arrest, disputing the cause of death, and alleging racial violence against her. Bland was pulled over for a traffic violation when the exchange escalated, resulting in Bland's arrest and a charge of assaulting a police officer. Philando Castile was a 32-year-old African American man who was fatally shot (7 close-range shots) during a traffic stop by police officer Jeronimo Yanez of the St. Anthony police department in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul metropolitan area. Both cases were recorded and publicly consumed. On them, Harris observed:

> I often wonder how code-switching may have preserved their lives. If for one moment, like myself standing in the center of that classroom, they had ordered their words, tweaked their voice, or code-switched in the more ironic way I've only read about, when the enslaved and the oppressed dumbed down their literacy and downplayed their dignity when faced with the crack of the slaver's whip or the scrag of Jim Crow's noose (Harris, 2019).

On another note, Harris argues that the ability to code-switch back into the Black selves is another way to "feel whole and in some regard redeemed". To better explain such subsisting (or as discussed before, resisting white societal oppression) the journalist presents the case of Derrick Harriell, a poet and associate professor of English and African American Studies at the University of Mississippi, who maintains that he experienced personal disappointment when he "switched up being himself" stating what follows.

> I know certain forms of code-switching have been responsible for saving our lives as Black people and key to our survival, so in that way I'm not judgmental… I understand that my ability to not code-switch is a privilege, but it's also a privilege my people died for, therefore for me, I have to [be myself] or else I feel as if I'm doing my ancestors a disservice (quoted in Harris, 2019).

Harriell forwards the idea that for a number of Black Americans, to not code-switch is a form of pointed privilege and power. The privilege, Harris observes, speaks to the once-denied prerogative to be audibly and visibly one's authentic self, or masked and acculturated for one's own advantage. However, how one wields that power varies from person to person. Some may use the gained visibility and recognition into mainstream society to stay themselves, they maybe have gained such access because of that, like for example famous Black rappers who parade Black pride to such society and use Black English as a system of communication and protest. At the same time, others may gain success thanks to code-switching, in all of its forms, linguistically as well as behaviorally, and may perceive of it only good effects, and so keep on practicing it. One could argue that such practice for some can be survival, as Harris maintains, or for some can correspond to social success, then again it can mean denial of roots and identity for others (if not all of the three options in one person). This generates quite a confusion, as Du Bois would probably put it, a double feeling in one's self. Anyway, to give an example of someone whose code-switching has been mostly advantageous, Harris presents the case of Dr. Dione Mahaffey, an Atlanta-based business psychologist and coach, who sees the very notion of code-switching as draining, but asserts that the practice has been most beneficial as she progressed in her career:

> It's exhausting, but I wouldn't go as far to call it inauthentic, because it's an authentic part of the Black American experience," Mahaffey says. "Code-switching does not employ an inauthentic version of self, rather, it calls upon certain aspects of our identity in place of others, depending on the space or circumstance. It's exhausting because we can actually feel the difference (quoted in Harris, 2019).

For Mahaffey, code-switching is about exchange, a give and take of sorts. Much of her participation is predicated on how much of herself she is willing to negotiate. She says she doesn't share the things that make her a dynamic woman, or the remarkable professional she is. "I save that for my village" she says. In the professional sphere, Harries observes, Mahaffey flips those feelings on their head. She has mastered the performative niceties of code-switching and uses it to her own advantage, particularly when working in white spaces. The business coach says she "consider[s] double consciousness to be a part of the laws of power: Play the perfect courtier, and grace your way to the top". Harris finally concludes:

> My code-switching in the classroom occurred because I doubted that my authentic self was enough to be in the room, and that further complicated how I felt about myself. Because I'm now more consciously aware of the impact code-switching had on me, I'm almost certain I won't do it again. However, I realize that code-switching, for some, is not about assimilating but surviving, and well, I'm not sure how to feel about that (Harris, 2019).

By way of conclusion, linking the psychological ambivalence that causes and validates code-switching to language, Smitherman too in *Talking That Talk* analyses what she calls the "linguistic push-pull" of African Americans and describes it as "the historical development of Black English in the push toward Americanization…[that is]

counterbalanced by the pull of retaining its Africanization" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 295). The scholar argues that in an effort to establish and maintain themselves as first-class citizens, African Americans, on the one hand, subscribe to the linguistic ethnocentricism of the dominant society. On the other hand, she maintains, "their history of struggle has depended for its success on cultural and linguistic solidarity situated within a Black Experiential, that is, Afrocentric, framework. Black leaders, for instance, have had to be linguistically competent in Africanized English Vernacular styles. This 'linguistic push-pull' is a reflection of DuBoisian 'double-consciousness'" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 295). Smitherman's suggests that the linguistic push-pull comes into evidence because of the interaction between the African American community and the white society, which produces cultural and linguistic assimilation. Under this perspective, the scholar describes phenomenon such as the birth and growth of the Hip-Hop Nation and the idealization and assimilation of Black Culture into mainstream society. Hip Hop is a core identity feature of Black Culture and plays an important role in the representation of the Black community. While this will be the starting point of Chapter 4, in Chapter 3 an extensive discussion on Blackness and identity is provided taking into consideration the figure of former U.S. President Barack Obama. Obama is a particularly fitting example because as an African American he has experienced double-consciousness and has engaged in an identity-finding journey during his adult life.

Chapter 3: Obama dealing with race and identity

From this chapter on, the work of scholars H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman, *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the US* (2012) will be the most important bibliographic source for my discussion. The book gives an analysis on what American society thought and perceived of Obama as a Black presidential candidate and President. What comes out of this analysis is an America that although being in the 21st century is still full of controversies and contradictions. America in 2008 was torn between acceptance of the idea of a Black president and refusal of him. Many questions were in Americans' minds, like: what consequences would a Black president have for mainstream whites? To what length would he really benefit the Black community? What changes would he bring to society? As a matter of fact, both the white and the Black communities were struggling with identifying Obama's figure that was peculiar because of his mixed heritage and life experiences. Indeed, he was considered either not Black/white enough, or too Black/white. Although Obama had tried not to be put into one box or the other, society kept searching and asking for signs of racial identification, and this was particularly evident during his presidential campaign, since he was a completely new figure in the political field. He was a Black man that was not so Black after all. His skin was slightly lighter, his biography was much different from that of a (stereo)typical American Black from the ghetto and actually closer to that of a white middle-class person. His education was higher level, his family was partly white and partly Black and he had travelled and experienced a life that many Blacks did not even dream of. Therefore, it was hard for the Black community that was still oppressed in white America to identify with him, nonetheless many of them supported him because no matter his background story, he was Black and having a Black president would (hopefully) be a huge step ahead for the Black struggle. At the same time, as Obama's campaign strategist David Axelrod pointed out, there was a lot of discussion about the historic nature of Obama's candidacy, but the number one thing they (campaign strategists and Obama) wanted to resist was: to not be pigeonholed as a (Black) niche candidacy. Axelrod also stated that Obama himself always used to say, "I am from the Black community but I am not limited to it" (Axelrod, 2016). While this position was taken especially to not scare away white voters, what was an interesting discovery during a 2007 poll was that most African Americans, who did appreciate Obama and recognized him as an African

American, were at the same time really skeptical that America would accept a Black president, thus this was holding back their vote. What Axelrod concluded from that, was that they had to win even in states that were mostly white –in other words, they had to win white consent and acceptance – in order to prove to minority voters, in particular Black voters in the country that it was possible for Barack Obama to be elected president (Axelrod, 2016). Besides this problem and although Obama made the conscious choice not to emphasize the issue of race (which was obvious to everyone) as Axelrod explains, he was still highly supported by Black voters, due to the initial hope that, with his election, the Black community would ultimately get a fair representation, abolishment of prejudice and bettering of social, economic, health and education conditions. On the other hand, this was precisely what the white mainstream feared: a Black president that although being well educated and wealthy, with good family and good history in academics and politics, would still be too Black, thus, so concerned with the needs of the Black community that he would not take care of white society's problems. In a nutshell, Obama was such a contradiction himself that neither the Black nor the white communities could figure him out. This idea of being one thing but also the other has first been expressed by W.E.B. Du Bois when discussing the feeling of *doublness/double consciousness*, which is intended as an ambivalent psychological and cultural condition affecting Black people. Barack Obama having to deal with both his complex-to-find identity and America/ns racial problems certainly experienced this feeling

3.1 Obama's *double consciousness*

Acceptance or not acceptance, Black or white, an American or an African? These questions, before Obama, first troubled pioneer sociologist Du Bois. Interestingly enough the biography of Du Bois is actually similar to that of Obama. They both grew up in contexts were racism was relatively mitigated, Du Bois in the Northern US and Obama in Hawaii with his white grandparents. Coming to experience racism mostly in their adult years they both embarked on a quest for Blackness. A journey so troubled and complicated that, for example, Obama even recurred to drugs to try to put away from his mind the dilemma of what *race* he belonged to (Luconi, 2021 [2020], p. 368). In addition, Du Bois' and Obama's quests are not only similar, but they are both also a representation of that need to find identity and home that is embedded into the African Diaspora.

More specifically, Du Bois was born in 1868 in Massachusetts into a family that had long been free. Living and growing in a middle-class family of the north he had opportunities that many Blacks could not have, for example, he pursued education with intellectual fervor relying on money donated by neighbors and so he began college at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. His travel to and residency in the South was Du Bois's first experience with Southern racism, which at the time encompassed Jim Crow laws, bigotry, suppression of black voting, and lynchings. This experience, generated in Du Bois the need to search for his African roots in an attempt to find his Black identity. After completing a Ph.D. in history from Harvard, he returned to the South to teach and advocate for the Black cause while identifying more and more with his fellow southern companions' struggle. During that time, the quest for his own identity gave life to his *double consciousness* theory that he articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), written in an effort to portray the genius and humanity of the Black race. The book is a vital text, especially for the "vocabulary" of identity and selfhood that Du Bois created for his times. Within the book, apart from *double consciousness*, he expresses two fundamental concepts that are reflect as well in Obama's ideas. For example, each chapter of the book begins with two epigraphs, one from a white poet, and one from a Black spiritual, in order to demonstrate intellectual and cultural parity between Black and white cultures, a concept often recalled in Obama's politics (see paragraph 3.3). In addition, the introduction of the book famously proclaimed that the problem of the 20th century was the problem of the color line and Obama expressed that the same problem was still affecting America of the 21st century. His solution for it resided in starting to consider American society as one big and diverse society, not divided by color but unified by it. Indeed, his campaign and then presidency had this as principal goal (unfortunately, not successfully accomplished). In Obama's own words at the 2004 Democratic Convention, "there is not a liberal America and a conservative America, there is the United States of America… there is not a Black America, a White America, a Latino America, an Asian America, there's the United States of America" (Obama, 2004). In this way, Obama identified and collocated himself as a post-racial leader in what he believed to be a post-racial society. As a matter of fact, even when taking a position in favor of one or the other society (Black or white) would have been the easier choice for him, he kept avoiding taking a particular stance, with the idea that it would have been beneficial for him (and the society) in the long run. As it becomes clearer later in this chapter, Obama's political views were characterized by a sort of balance that could not be found by taking extreme positions. On the other hand, acquiring this balance was not an easy path for him. Before trying to resolve America's race issues, he had to find his own identity. More specifically biographer David Maraniss stated what follows:

> Almost everything of president Barack Obama finds some explanation in his early life, his story in particular is one of search for identity, trying to figure out who he was and what his place in the world was… Trying to figure out his identity was really the story of his young life and I think that search helps explain everything about him as president. (Maraniss, 2016)

Obama's life did not reflect the life of most American Blacks. He grew up in a partly white middle-class family, he went to an excellent private school in Honolulu, then graduated from Columbia University and later again from Harvard Law School. At the same time, it was in college years that he felt the need to reconcile with his Black heritage and African American identity. As Maraniss points out, he already struggled with his roots because he came from a dysfunctional family and grew up in different places. First he was born and lived a few years in Hawaii, then at age five he moved to Indonesia after his mother married his stepfather. There, he had to adapt and learn the language. Then, he moved back to Hawaii and lived with his (white) grandparents. In addition, his father was absent. He left his family right after Obama was born, his step-father was an alcoholic, his mother was not always there for him, particularly she was ambitious to help women all around the world. Therefore, the one additional factor to his quest for identity, was his quest for home. However, when adult Obama went to Chicago, he was able to find there both his home and his identity especially thanks to the African American community of the South Side of Chicago that is also where and when he really started to feel a sense of purpose. Then, similarly to what made Du Bois become such a distinguished activist, and it probably was in the frustration of experiencing Black community's difficulties in person, acting as a community organizer there, that Obama understood the real source of power of America and that there was only so much that he could do as a community helper. To change things he needed more power and that would require going into politics and studying law. The years spent in Chicago are essentially the years that gave him the purpose of becoming president. Additionally, coming out from his life long journey culminating with the experience in Chicago, Obama came into being as what Maraniss defines an "integrated personality" (Maraniss, 2016). Integrated personality means that a person has done the work to bring all the parts of his/her personality into proper alignment so that it forms a balanced and whole person psychologically. This concept is very important because it shaped Obama first as a person but also as a politician and, as it is explained later, this is a unique and "winning" feature of him. In other words, his "integrated personality" is a product of both his mixed heritage and his many homes. What is more, these two factors, while at first shaping in him that sense of *double consciousness*, are the very same factors that ultimately helped him resolve or anyway give response to that feeling. Indeed, experiencing *double consciousness*, means being simultaneously included and excluded from citizenship, feeling the weight of the asymmetries of power and inevitably seeing oneself (also) through the dominant gaze of the whites. Obama not only felt that "citizenship" was nowhere to be found in his youth, but also as an adult he came to experience that "white eye" on him first when in University then as a politician. Maraniss explains how deeply this condition can affect even someone in a high-level position as Obama. He maintains that in spite of Obama's important socio-political status he "never got completely over his self-consciousness" and "observing of himself [while] being a politician" (Maraniss 2016), Maraniss also explains how carefully Obama was always looking at and observing himself, trying to find the right way of behaving and the "right conversation" to adopt and this eventually helped him a lot in his political career. *Double consciousness*, in fact, also expresses the idea that Black people must have two fields of vision at all times, they must be conscious of how they view themselves, as well as being conscious of how the world views them, and this was too something Obama could never forget. Maraniss, for example, observes what follows.

> Because he is a Black man in American, there are parts of his personality that he can't show in public in his political life and the key one is anger. [It is because of] a legacy of racisms in America that a Black man is not gonna get that far, politically, and so he has always kept that under control. Not to say that he is an angry person, but he certainly has frustrations that he managed to keep under control. [I] attribute part of that to how his early life shaped him. Hawaii, "cool head main thing"… it is part of the Polynesian tradition of not showing too much,

> keeping your cool. And, Obama even aside from the mainland racist connotations as a Black man, even before he had this coolness. (Maraniss, 2016)

What comes out of Maraniss's observation is one of the three main causes of *double consciousness*, that is, the daily consequences of white stereotypes towards Blacks. The other two are, the ordinary racism that excludes Blacks from mainstream social life; and the (unsolvable) cultural dilemma linked to feeling forced to choose between being American and being African. These three factors represent what Obama as a Black person had to put up with all his young, adult, personal and political life.

What is more, Obama's *doubleness* directly reflects in his language, which is what ultimately helped with his identification inside, acceptance in and success with, both white and Black American societies, or has he would have it, "the" American society. In the following paragraphs, an extended analysis on Obama's language use in relation with his identity and American racial issues is provided.

3.2 Obama's identity perception changes as his language *styleshifts*

Obama's flexible linguistic abilities were critically important to his being elected. His mastery of white mainstream English ways of speaking, or "standard" English, particularly in terms of syntax, combined with his mastery of Black Culture's modes of discourse, in terms of style, was an absolutely necessary combination for him to be elected America's first Black president. For example, an African American woman articulated this sentiment perfectly when asked about Barack Obama's language and language use, stating what follows:

> I feel like Obama has been able to balance his multi-racial identity and his Black experiences. His speeches are a great example of that balance. Obama has the ability to use Standard English in a "Black" context by using the "preacher" format to develop his speeches and then delivering them in Standard English. By combining these two experiences, Obama was able to appeal to a larger audience of people. Whites did not feel alienated by his language, and Blacks felt a sense of familiarity with his speech pattern. (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, pp.20-21)

From this statement, it is clear that while mastery of Standard English is mandated in American politics, Obama's ability to combine this variety with Black ways of speaking was ultimately crucial. Indeed, as Alim and Smitherman point out, his linguistic style mattered in three main ways. The first one is that his mastery of white mainstream ways of speaking allowed white Americans to feel more comfortable with him. As pointed out by the reported excerpt, he used a language variety that was familiarly white, which did not "alienate" whites in the way that Black Language sometimes does. In addition, Black Americans highly regarded Obama's proficiency in this style as well. As for the second, not only did whites feel that he spoke familiarly white, many Blacks felt that he spoke familiarly Black. Often Blacks described Obama's speech style in terms of "a Baptist preacher" or in the "tradition of the Black Church". More precisely, Alim and Smitherman maintain, what made Black people accept Obama was that he could "kick it in a style that was recognizable to the community as 'something we do'. Rightly or wrongly, to many Black folks anything less than that mighta made the brotha suspect" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 21). This is probably because the way one uses the language often hints at one's politics, indexing his/her (dis)alignment with particular groups or causes. For example, it is common to read into people's words for clues, signs, anything that might help figure out where they stand and, in the case of Obama, many Black community members read his use of Black modes of discourse as indexing a political alignment with their community. Thirdly, Obama's ability to bring together white syntax with Black style and to speak familiarly Black, was not only important for the Black community, it was also critically important for the white community for two reasons. One, the white community has always enjoyed the Black preacher's style (so long as it did not come at them in a too hard and harsh way, as it was supposed to be anyway). The second and most critical reason is that it made Obama both "American" and "Christian". Indeed, not only are white Americans more familiar with a Black Christian identity, but due to the contentious history of the Nation of Islam and tensions with immigrant Muslims in post-9/11 America, many whites also fear (Black) Muslims. Therefore, speaking familiarly Black made Obama familiarly American and familiarly Christian (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, pp. 21-22). Essentially, it made him less frightening.

Furthermore, during Obama's first presidential campaign, the question of his identity was raised quite often and his use of a language that would help recognize and accept him, was key. For example, the first of many trying to take advantage of Obama's mixed origins was Donald Trump who many times pictured Obama as "not an American" and even demanded to see his birth certificate. Nevertheless, why were Obama's origins (and he himself as a person) so controversial? As previously discussed, him growing up in Hawaii and Indonesia with a Kenyan father and Muslim family roots made it difficult for white Americans to understand his personality. At the same time having a white mother and growing up not in a more common Black American environment (that would have made it much easier to collocate him in Blackness) but actually in a higher-class environment, caused African Americans to question his identity too. Therefore, sounding familiarly Black and also familiarly American and familiarly Christian, not only helped him being accepted and considered by the white electors, but also won over those in the Black community who questioned his heritage. Actually, questions of this type were something that Obama had to put up with all throughout the elections. Constant polemics about "his not being Black enough" and "his not being white enough" caused him having to prove being worth to both sides of society. Anyway, as it will become clearer later in this chapter, he was able to do so. Indeed, as Smitherman and Alim sum up:

> Barack's style of speaking clinched his victory because he put most Americans at ease. Here was a Black candidate for president whom Black folks could trust because "he sounds White, but not *too* White" and White folks could trust because "he sounds Black, but not *too* Black"… His familiarly Black style Americanized and Christianized him, helping them [Whites] get over their irrational fears of a "foreign Muslim" or a "socialist African". Blacks, too, were likely happy of a Black man who "sounds Black but not too Black". Quiet as it's kept, because Black Language's marginalized status in broader American society, some Black folks suffer a linguistic shame that hypercriticizes any speech that sounds "too Black" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 22).

Summing all of the above up, caught between discriminatory discourses of language, citizenship, religion and race, Obama's language use hit what the two scholars identified as the "sweet spot" that appealed to the majority of Americans. The key point here, is that it was not what the now-former President said, but how he said it. What is more, more than any other cultural symbol, Barack Obama's multifaceted language use also allowed society members to create linguistic links between him and famous African American male historical figures (that were already known and therefore not scary) and these links served to simultaneously “Whiten”, “Blacken”, “Americanize”, and “Christianize” him in the eyes and ears of both Black and white Americans (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 23). Moreover, Obama’s practice of linguistic adaptation is a consequence of that careful observation of himself and of the circumstances that was mentioned in the introduction of this chapter. While this process is actually quite common among African Americans and as previously discussed is called code-switching and is usually used to get access into mainstream society, Alim and Smitherman define what Obama does as *styleshifting.* It is important to notice that while it may often appear simple or lighthearted, whether speaking of code-switching or *styleshifting,* it is also a practice loaded with complex issues of identity and power. For example, in the same way as the previously discussed Black Language use *vs* Standard English use and the need and demand for linguistic adaptation (see Chapter 2), no one would ever expect white candidates for presidency to sound “Black” or “Latino” or “Native American” in order to be taken seriously, but Barack Obama *needed* to “sound white” in order to acquire position and power (a position of power). Anyway, saying that Obama’s language is all about “sounding white” would be wrong. As Maraniss recalls, “it was during an accidental speech at an anti-apartheid protest… it was the moment that he [Obama] realized that words can move people [and] even though he was observing himself sort of sarcastically when he was talking, he saw the power of that” (Maraniss, 2016). Indeed, Obama’s language is actually about “moving people” and adopting the right rhetorical strategies (sarcasm being one of them) to do so. This firmly remarks that language is loaded with power, more precisely, the power of intention. For example, former Senate majority leader Harry Reid, distancing Obama from previous Black candidates like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, claimed that (white) Americans might actually vote for Obama, in part because he spoke “with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one” (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 24). Reid’s assessment of Obama’s *styleshifting* was accurate. What needs to be underlined is the phrase “unless he wanted to have one”, because it brings out the intentionality of Obama’s language style, which is first, not to be taken for granted, and second, a fundamental component of the Black Vernacular Tradition, that is –talking with intention in order to pursue a certain goal. However, it is worth mentioning that rather than a peculiar exception to the rule (the rule being: African American politicians are not able to become presidents or to acquire a high political status), Obama’s linguistic practices mirror those of many Black Americans who negotiate Black and white social worlds on the regular. In particular, Obama adapted his language not only to gain access to white society, but also to the Black society. He was recognized as a member of the Black community because he was able to speak Black English. Anyway, Reid's comment sadly implied that if a Black man wanted to be elected "he'd better keep his language in check, less any 'hints' or 'traces' of his 'Negro-ness' leak out into the public eye/ear" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 24). Furthermore, given such intense amount of social scrutiny, it must be pointed out that Obama's linguistic flexibility is not merely a function of his diverse life experiences. It is also a creative response to the awareness (*double consciousness*), one shared with many Black Americans, that white America continues to have a love-hate relationship with Black America and its language. For example, despite the fact that Black Language stays on white people's minds and in their mouths, white America continues to interpret Black linguistic forms as signs of Black intellectual inferiority and moral failings (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 24). Instead of what they really are, that is expressions of cultural identity. Ultimately, what Reid's comment does is reminding many African Americans across the country that if their speech patterns or appearance are "too Black" or too different from what the mainstream considers acceptable, they are going to be deemed inferior and, looking, sounding and behaving like a white man is therefore seen as the only way a Black man might be considered as good as a white man. This perfectly conveys the idea of white cultural hegemony concerning America.

3.2.1 Obama as the "exception to the rule"

In light of the above, it has been very common from the part of white commentators, politicians (sometimes even current President Joe Biden), and media people, to describe Obama as being "articulate" or "very articulate". This is especially interesting again, because no one would ever refer to a white politician and describe him saying, "I like him, he seems very articulate" yet this was one of the "compliments" that Obama usually received during his first campaign for presidency. As Alim and Smitherman argue, the word "articulate" was offensive not only to Obama but also to all Black people, as it concealed much discriminatory meaning. It did not only mean, "He knows how to speak well" but also it meant, "He knows how to speak well even though he is a Black man". On this matter, the two scholars take into account the considerations of journalist Lynette Clemetson who found the core of the *articulate* issue being, “when whites use the word in reference to blacks, it often carries a subtext of amazement, even bewilderment… Such a subtext is inherently offensive because it suggests that the recipient of the ‘compliment’ is notably different from other black people” (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 35). In other words, the implication of using the word articulate as a compliment is that most Black people do not have the capacity to engage in articulate speech, while white people are automatically assumed to be articulate. Furthermore, when white people give Black people the “compliment” of being “articulate”, they often juxtapose it with other adjectives like “good”, “clean”, “bright”, “nice-looking”, “calm” and “crisp”, implying the exceptionality of all of that (clearly derived from white stereotyping of Blacks). Therefore, it suggests to Blacks that whites’ private opinions about them are exactly the opposite of those “compliments” that they constantly repeat. What derives from such perspectives is an “exception to the rule” narrative, similar to the one that Reid pointed out in his comment. From one adjective (articulate), a much larger discussion can generate and actually did generate (because of its being used to describe Obama) with questions like, if he is articulate, are all the other African Americans unarticulated then? What do you mean he speaks well? Why are white Americans so stunned by a Black man who speaks “well”? These questions put words to a feeling that African Americans have long felt but not necessarily expressed. The term *articulate* then, assumes racially coded meanings that function to reproduce racist ideologies and, most importantly, racial inequalities, especially because used in special reference to a niche of Black individuals who managed to enter (at different levels) the white society. On this matter, Alim and Smitherman speak of articulateness as a function of “enlightened exceptionalism” (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 32), that is, the idea that Obama is a singularity, an exception, one out of many, out of the un-achieving, inadequate, not *articulate* Black community.

Consequently, another question comes into play, what made Obama different from other stereotyped African Americans to the eyes of the whites enough to be accepted as their President? (Something that before him was maybe not unthinkable, but that never really worked and nobody truly believed in such possibility, Blacks above all). For one thing, in the run-up to the 2008 presidential campaign most Americans were immediately taken by surprise by the young, charismatic (but also) Black candidate. As a relatively unknown politicians, Obama seemed to have gripped the nation's imagination in a way that few presidential candidates had before him. Many whites, in particular, given their extreme isolation from communities of color, did not know how to respond to his candidacy and searched for some kind of interpretive frame with which to understand this incredibly successful Black politician-professor who also became the Senate's only African American. This, along with his multiracial background, his global family biography, and his rise to the top of American politics, threw many Americans off while simultaneously stunning them (again because they were not used to seeing an African American conquer such high social and political status). In this way, trying to "know the unknown" the question about Obama's race became "America's great obsession" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 33). Being stunned by the figure of Obama and seeing him as an anomaly because of the persuasive stereotypes about Black men in American society, like Black criminality, Black inferior intelligence, and even Black poor work ethic, worked to induce many whites to make sense of Obama through a theory of exceptionalism. The theory maintained that because he was not like "other Blacks" he then was the exception to the rule that frames all Black people as lazy, dumb, and/or criminals (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 33). Essentially, the idea of Obama's exceptionalism functions to make sense of him to the white mainstream. On the other hand, it validates a new form of racism that allows for and even celebrates the achievements of individual persons of color, but only because those individuals are generally seen as different from a less appealing, even pathological black or brown "condition".

Taking the "exceptional" perception of Obama into account, a particular fascination with his language and communicative behavior has indeed been the subject of extreme scrutiny (language is in fact inextricably linked to race in America) (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 34). More specifically, as stated before, his ability to "talk white" "whitened" him to white ears. However, this is problematic especially in relation to the African American conception that the more a member becomes accepted into the mainstream the further he/she gets from his/her Black identity origins. As a matter of fact, being African American people and language so strictly related to and a representation of their heritage and culture, a member that does not speak that language risks to be considered a "sell-out" (to the whites), and this is another reason why Obama had to be particularly skilled with his (*styleshifting*) language.

Interestingly enough, Joe Walsh (Republican representative from Illinois) offered one more view on America's fascination for Obama and of him winning the elections. His view put together once again race and language. What was relatively new was his suggestion that Obama's election was actually linked to "white guilt" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 36), which is the feeling that white Americans experience about slavery and Blacks' conditions. Although the "white guilt" concept may generate a new point for reflection, Walsh's view too assumes an "exceptional narrative" that also favors the framing of Obama as the "Magic/exceptional Negro", a concept beyond offensive for the African Americans.

Finally, however, it could be argued that the "exceptionality" of Obama can be conveyed in yet another, non-offensive, way. In particular, it should be taken into account his skillful ability in jogging between two languages, two cultures, and two societies. Indeed, he is the embodiment of this duality of America and a representation of it at the same time. Being his figure so peculiar, it came to a point when the "question" of his race and the "issue" of race in America became one and unavoidable. He knew that he needed to address it openly. He needed to make clear that duality did not make him or anyone else less American; actually, it makes him (and others) American indeed. To do so, he wrote a speech that ended up conquering the souls and the hearts of his audience and it is from that speech on that Obama's presidency became effectively possible. Demonstrating his linguistic abilities, "A More Perfect Union" speech is one of Obama's masterpieces.

3.3 "A More Perfect Union": Obama addresses race in America while putting his own imprint on the African American Vernacular Tradition

At a crucial historical moment in the 2008 presidential campaign, then-senator Barack Obama was forced to directly confront America's most treacherous social, cultural, and political minefield, race. While Obama had been relatively silent on the issue of race, there came a point in the campaign when he had no other choice but to address the nation. During the months of heated primary debates with his then-opponent Hilary Clinton, a series of controversial sermon sound bites from Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright emerged and were looped 24-7 across all media outlets. Reverend Wright had been Obama's pastor for some 20 years, performed Obama's marriage ceremony to Michelle, baptized Obama's two children, and was currently serving as a member of the Obama campaign's African American Religious Leadership Committee. His pastor's controversial sermonizing became a national case. Indeed, the media coverage of such matter turned into a public relations nightmare for Obama, who by March 2008 was considered "done" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 65). As a matter of fact, Obama's candidacy lead to the most racialized campaign in American history, consequently, as explained before, Obama had to spend his campaign trying to avoid being pigeonholed as "the Black candidate". Actually, he spent most of the campaign trying to avoid the question of race in general, partly because he knew how controversial this topic was in America, and partly because (as he explained in his speech discussed below) he wanted the focus of his campaign and then presidency to be on America, Americans and his politics. Doing so he was also implying that for him the question of race should not be raised at all, because he considered America a society that had supposedly overcome and should have by then overcome racism and that had "bigger problems" such as wars, education, health and wealth. Of course, that would have been a picture-perfect campaign if everyone would have let him have it in his way. In reality, it was quite difficult to do so. Firstly, the press, the media and his opponents, went hard on him, detecting, collecting and displaying every little thing that could conduct him to having to deal with the topic of race. Secondly, the remarks on his identity that was "difficult to identify" were constant, the elector wanted him to fit into one community, the white or the Black, and kept on asking him to address their question. Thirdly, even his politics programs were scrutinized in an attempt to detect even the lightest favoritism for one community or the other.

In such perspective, clearly for Obama to navigate America's minefield of race was more than complex, it probably seemed impossible. The challenge became even more difficult when he had not only to navigate in between the two American societies (Black and white), but also when Reverend Wright's, a man so close to him personally and publically, came out of his sermons as a violent, supposedly "Black supremacist" and this obviously alarmed Obama's white electors. However, after doing a string of talk shows and media appearances attempting to extinguish Reverend Wright's racial firestorm, Obama told his senior advisor, David Axelrod, "I want to do this speech on race. I want to put this thing in its proper perspective… I think this is an important moment, and people may accept what I have to say or not, but it's an important moment in terms of dealing with the elephant in the room" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 66). What came out of Obama's statement is the famous "A More Perfect Union", which is also known as the "Race Speech", delivered at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on March 18, 2008. This speech, Alim and Smitherman maintain, not only changed Obama's situation in the public eye and was what granted him to win the elections only eight months later, but it did much more. In particular, they state what follows.

> When the motion of history presented Obama, and America, with this gut-wrenching political moment, Obama did not retreat from the difficult, problematic, ultrasensitive topic of race. Rather, he faced the matter of race and US racism head on, making a strategic decision to talk openly, boldly, honestly and personally about race. In doing so, he offered us a new twenty-first-century model for political discussions about race in the United States (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, pp. 66-67).

Authenticity is one of the main features of the African American Vernacular Tradition and is the first one that comes to mind when thinking of Obama's speeches as well as of him as a person. Anyway, to provide a better analysis of the "A More Perfect Union" speech, since Reverend Wright's sermons were essentially the tip of the iceberg that caused Obama's address to the nation, it should be noted that the sermons' excerpts were decontextualized and offered to the American public without explanatory cultural background about Traditional Black Church preaching. Indeed, the media attacked Wright as a racist, hatemonger, and leader of a church that denounces white people (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, pp. 67-68). Such picture of Wright was partly due to what he said and how he said it in his sermons and partly due to his belonging to the Trinity United Church of Christ. The Trinity, although being a predominantly white Christian denomination that historically branched from early American Puritanism, has symbols and literature that are African-centered and its motto is "unashamedly Black". Wright's belonging to the Trinity was perceived as a "scary problem" because, in the words of Alim and Smitherman, "it is difficult for non-Blacks to wrap their minds around the fact that pro-Black is not anti-White" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 68). Additionally, the two scholars quote University of Chicago (white) Professor Emeritus Martin Marty who explained, "for Trinity, being 'unashamedly black' does not mean being 'anti-White', but rather is a discursive tactic to address the abiding sense of shame in many African Americans that is a legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 68).

In addition, attacking Wright's sermons without attempting to understand them was the easier path (especially for Obama's opponents) in order to fortify scary Black stereotypes, that were caricatured and demonized in the past in the same way that the Reverend was being labeled as aggressive and dangerous. What this leads to understand is that more than the message contained in those sermons, it was the rhetorical style and linguistic discourse in which the message was conveyed that became disturbing for the white audiences. Indeed, Wright adopted the typical Black jeremiad style of delivery and a little more about it should be understood before judging and condemning him. This is even more important not only because Obama does make reference to the jeremiadic tradition in his "Race Speech", but also because he makes it his own (as discussed before, adaptation and *styleshifth* are two core qualities of Obama's rhetoric).

3.3.1 Obama's new jeremiad

The "American jeremiad" is a speech, a sermon or other form of public discourse in which the speaker critiques the society for its misdeeds and wrongdoings while holding out hope that a consequent fall from Grace can happen if the country corrects its behavior and lives up to its divine mandate (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 76). Alim and Smitherman also point out that cultural historians track the continuing belief in and discourse of American exceptionalism to its beginnings in the American (white) jeremiad of the Puritan era and contend that the "prophetic history" and "mission" of America as a special, unique country is writ large in jeremiadic sermons and speeches. What is more, this type of sermons and speeches have a set tripartite formula that is been used by Obama to structure his discourse on race. First, the speaker intones America's promise as a beacon of liberty, equality, and social justice; second, he (or she, but it was almost always a he) details and castigates America's misdeeds, its grave departure or "retrogression" from the promise; third, the speaker reaffirms the prophesy that America will complete its mission and redeem the promise. This rhetorical structure helps the speaker to simultaneously chastise and uplift his audience (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 77). What should be noted here is that the white Puritan American jeremiad never doubted its destiny as God's elected for the fulfillment of those claims of freedom fundamental to the birth of what came into being as America "land of freedom and possibilities". However, at the same time a Black jeremiad raised from the contradiction of slavery in that very same land. Its beginning is in the Antislavery Movement, that is when Black leaders adapted the White jeremiad for the purpose of protest against enslavement and later discrimination and racism. In the Black version, the rhetoric envisioned US descendants of enslaved Africans as also being God's chosen people. God's mandate became a charge to the White nation to live up to its divinely inspired calling and provide equality and social justice for the Black nation. To bring attention to the enormous contradiction that the White jeremiad was perpetrating (with slavery), was exactly the point that the Black jeremiad made through his preaching. Indeed, following the tripartite structure of American jeremiad, the Black speaker lauds America for its founding principles and promise (life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, all men are created equal), details and denounces the society for its failure to live up to the promise (enslavement, denial of equal opportunities, Jim Crow) and calls on the country to recommit to its historical mandate and divine promise by alleviating Black oppression. Moreover, while Obama's Race Speech relied on Aristotle's fundamental rhetorical principals of *ethos* (persuasion based on a speaker's personal character) and *logos* (persuasive appeal based on reason), more importantly he selected a familiar rhetorical paradigm, indeed, the jeremiad. In addition, he skillfully adapted this centuries-old framework to accommodate a postmodern, post-Civil Rights, twenty-first-century Black and white audience (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, pp. 79-80). The real question however remains: how was he able to do so? More specifically, how does one speak the truth about race in America, and in a single speech, when having an honest discussion is like navigating a minefield? And how does a man who is racialized as Black, the bottom rung of America's racial hierarchy, address these real and difficult tensions when both Black and white racial resentment is heightened by the divisive discourse incited by the very act of his presidential bid? The answer to these questions is in the formidable challenge charged to Obama, with commentators on both sides looking for any sign of either too much sympathizing with Black people or too much association with the white power structure. The rhetorical situation called for someone who could be, as commentator Keli Goff hoped for, yet not believed possible, "somber yet transcendent, painfully honest yet awesomely inspiring… but most of all he would have to find some way to unify and uplift and connect, not alienate" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 71). Indeed, Obama stepped up to the challenge and made the impossible possible. To put it in Smitherman and Alim's terms in reference to that particular quality of African Americans, Obama was able to "make a way outta no way" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 71).

Basically, Obama created his own jeremiad, a new and improved one that worked because, taking from the past, it was also built and adapted for a new context, a context that was in search of approval not only from one of the two societies (Black or white) but from both. Actually, Obama was confronted with a rhetorical situation in which Black and white perceptions and past and present experiences of race are conflictual, because of the long, brutal history of enslavement, followed by an additional century of neo-enslavement and today fundamentally continuing racial separation. At the same time, what was new then was that this *race speech* was delivered in our time, which many Americans believe has given rise to a post-racial (or "colorblind") society, one in which problems of race and racism are widely believed no longer to exist. This is probably due to the large impact and "success" of the Civil Right Movement, with which African Americans have made major advancements on all fronts and since which the discourse on race, has been more and more avoided. Therefore, Obama's speech presented the very rare occasion to hear a Black man talk about race on the national stage. In other words, this was not a 1968 but a 2008 Black and white audience waiting for a speech about race. This situation called for a new kind of Black oratory, a reinvention of the tradition, and Obama was able to do exactly that. On this matter, Alim and Smitherman observe what follows:

> Given the demands of these two different –and on some levels, diametrically opposed audiences– the historical moment called for a race speech that could be explicatory, but it could not be condemnatory as was the case with much of the racial rhetoric of the previous century. While the rhetorical task required a speech crafted by an African American, it had to be an "American", not just an "African American" speech. Or in the words of Obama, it had to be "black and more than black". Given his background and upbringing, his "improbable" journey in America, Obama seemed especially suited –dare we say called?– for this task. He was after all an American who is neither "White" nor "Black" (in the narrow

> stereotypical American sense). At the same time, paradoxically, he was an American who is and has lived both “Black” and “White”, who thus is uniquely positioned to see and feel both dimensions of the Black-White binary (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 72).

In this way, Obama created a “new Black rhetoric” performing a speech that was definitely not a typical political speech either. The responses to his performance were great. More precisely, he generated a sense of “awe” in millions of audiences from all over the country and from many heritages. Obama’s speech satisfied the complex psychological demands of whites, Blacks and many others while at the same time it candidly spoke the truth to them. It could be argued that this is indeed one of the reasons why he was so successful because he was truthful and people appreciated it even if that truth was hard to ear. In addition, his strategic rhetorical choices generated verbal persuasion thanks to the accurate audience assessment on which he built his discourse. What is more, Obama made large use of AVT strategies (discussed in Chapter 2), that were not only vital, but actually the bases, the fundaments on which his (new) rhetoric modality formed. After all, in every successful AVT speech, the success of the orator has never been based solely on the content of the speech rather it has always been judged by the rhetorical style of the speaker.

Moreover, it should be highlighted that given that commentators had prematurely deemed the speech’s success an impossibility or suggested that a miracle was needed, Obama’s “Race Speech” was the proof of his own ability “to make a way outta no way” (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 73). Obama himself during the speech, while addressing Wright’s character, actually quoted:

> This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but rather how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way for those like me who would come after them (Obama, 2008).

This is a long-standing idiom in African American Language and is grounded within the Tradition. It reflects the Black struggle to survive “against all odds”. It represents the paradox of the indomitable drive to find a solution when there is no way out. Employing this familiar culturally rooted Black Vernacular idiom, Obama symbolically indexes his Black identity, represents his Black cultural affinity, and advances a political stance that frames the Black condition in terms of success, not failure. Ultimately, it leads to his being validated by the Black community. More precisely, for Black listeners Obama's use of their idiom signaled a cultural-linguistic connection and a political worldview that validates the perspective of Black survival under extraordinary adverse circumstances. At the same time, demonstrating Obama's ability to adapt what he says to whom he says it to; Alim and Smitherman noted what follows.

> Obama articulated this vernacular idiom in the formal voice of the LWC (Language of Wider Communication)… Linguistically speaking, while most Black speakers using this idiom pronounce it with a particular Black prosody and rhythm and render "out of" as "outta", for example, Obama utters this phrase in highly formal register, enunciating every syllable. Drawing on a culturally salient and politically important proverbial Black idiom in The Tradition but formally pronouncing it, Obama articulates Blackness anew. He found a way to articulate Blackness on a national stage – quietly communicating an important ideological message to the Black electorate – but doing so in a form that was digestible to non-Black America (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 76).

In light of this, Obama did not use code-switching but kind of a "code-combining" strategy, that is, his habit to merge the tradition and the new, the Black and the white styles of communication, into one. Indeed, this happened with him creating a new and adapted jeremiad in the speech in question. As a matter of fact, he took language and rhetorical qualities from AVT, mixed those with his "white" pronunciation and adapted something intrinsic of both Black and White Tradition, that is, the Jeremiad, and made one of his own by changing the structure of it. Simply put, he remixed the classic traditions to create a hybrid form to suit the needs of a new era. Anyway, the structure of Obama's speech follows the tripartite formula of classical jeremiads; this helps him make his argument. He opens with an allusion to the promise of America as articulated in its founding documents: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union…Our Constitution…at its very core had the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time". Then, he notes that even at the outset, there was a retreat from the promise, making his point about slavery with the use of familiar, shared Biblical language: "original sin". He expands on the retreat from the promise, detailing a litany of past racial injustices, the impact of which continues to be felt in Black communities today. He uses deductive reasoning, anchoring his major claim in the long history of institutionalized racism and deeply entrenched structures of racial oppression in the United States. He skillfully paints a portrait of that history and establishes his minor claim by laying out the destructive effects of this past on the African American community today. Finally, Obama concludes by deducing the impact of this history on the pulpit oratory and public rhetoric of Reverend Wright – and on the consciousness and discourse of Blacks of Wright's generation. As Alim and Smitherman observe, the strength of his discourse is the logical, systematic accounting of historical fact (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, pp. 80-81). Indeed, Obama makes large use of AVT features such as concreteness and authenticity; he draws on factual reality coming from shared experience and counts on it to work for his aims. One of the aims being bringing to the attention of the broader American community problems usually concealed inside the Black community. By doing so, he first gives a sense of acknowledgment to the Black community and their problems, second, he gives the instruments to understand them and their conditions to outsiders. After all, I think knowing and understanding something is the only way to stop being scared of it, more importantly in this case, it is the way to demolish stereotypes that ignorance (in the sense of not knowing well enough something) creates. Following are a few excerpts of Obama's main points.

> On education: Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.
>
> On economic discrimination: where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments – meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black

> and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities.
>
> On the abandonment of Black neighborhoods: the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods - parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement - all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.
>
> On the American dream deferred: for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it - those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations - those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future.
>
> On the impact on the Black psyche: Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger… find[s] voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table… And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews (Obama, 2008).

After exposing these realities, one more way by which Obama takes from the jeremiad tradition is with his calling on both Blacks and whites –all Americans– to rededicate themselves to the realization of America’s destiny and the perfection of the union. He does so by reaffirming his audience’s belief in the promise of America and in keeping with the religious beliefs of both Black and White jeremiad, he links his call to action to global religious ideology: “what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand - that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us” (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p.82). Again, he draws on shared experience, this time both of Blacks and whites, in order to make his point effective.

On the other hand, Obama also departs in several ways from the jeremiad tradition. To begin with, Obama’s rhetoric does not convey a sense of impending doom and destruction. For example, Obama pointing out that the failure to “come together” to talk about the common problems of education, employment and healthcare that plague all citizens will impede the social change that most Americans are desperately clamoring for, conveys a very different emotional feeling than the fear engendered by predictions of imminent destruction and danger. This actually was the hallmark of the jeremiad in the Antislavery Movement as well as the racialized oratory of the twentieth century in which the jeremiad was often delivered to Black audiences, such as Malcom X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech or Martin Luther King's hinting at gloom and doom in his "I Have a Dream" speech, warning that there will be "neither rest nor tranquility" and "whirlwinds of revolt" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p.82). Basically, Obama's speech departs from the more caustic, fiery and highly expressional (at times, aggressive) language characteristic of the Black jeremiadic tradition (that of Wright's sermons for example). He chooses to abandon the rhetorical pathos and rather proceeds with calm, deliberate reasoning, seeking to elicit rational, thoughtful understanding and action that will ultimately benefit the entire nation; in another excerpt from his speech, he articulates exactly this.

> In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination - and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past - are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds - by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations (Obama, 2008).

With this Obama underlines that is not only whites but also Blacks who have some work to do if America is to realize the promise and perfect the union. This is part of the geniality of his discourse because he is putting two very different societies on the same level. He is equally sharp yet fair with both communities. In this way, he is proving his impartiality. In addition, by doing so, he made another departure from the traditional Black jeremiad, where the message is usually solely directed to whites and there is no critique or exhortation for Black people to take a certain amount of responsibility for their condition. More specifically, Alim and Smitherman point out that in Obama's case, airing the race's dingy laundry in public was a decided rhetorical risk that an earlier generation of Black orators, speaking to a white or racially mixed audience, would not have taken. However, he had anticipated a particular receptive 2008 Black audience; after all, many were living daily “in communities rife with Black-on-Black crime” (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p.83). On this topic, his “critique” was subtle and exhortative, not filled with anger or high pitch tones, Obama was calm but confident while stating what follows.

> For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances - for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs - to the larger aspirations of all Americans -- the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who has been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives - by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny (Obama, 2008).

What is remarkable from this excerpt is that Obama takes the discussion not only one step further, but on a completely new level, calling for Blacks to link their struggle against current economic and social injustices with that of whites (and immigrants, presenting so another bridge that needs to be crossed) experiencing the same.

While with these parts of his speech Obama distances himself from the rhetorical style of the traditional Black jeremiad (in tones and accusations) creating his own; by drawing on his personal character and credibility he successfully connects America’s prophetic promise to his life’s journey and his family history, establishing even more his identity and authenticity. In this way, he not only collocates himself back into the Black Rhetoric Tradition, but he is also able to reintroduce himself to the American public that had questioned his identity. Even more importantly, with his very origins he was able to explain the diverse and complex unfolding of the American promise. In particular, he stated:

> I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest

> nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible (Obama, 2008).

Finally, he concludes with his personal disclosure, characterizing his relationship with Reverend Wright. In order to do so, as Smitherman and Alim highlight, Obama uses inductive reasoning, citing several specific instances to establish his general argument about the logic of his close association with the Reverend (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 85) and trying to, more than redeem, make Wright understandable to the white community. Again taking from AVT he draws on concreteness, authenticity and experience to work for his rhetorical aim, which, in this case, is for the audience to conclude that Wright is doing "God's work here on Earth" (Obama, 2008). At the same time, here again the brilliance of Obama's rhetoric is in his message of equality and fairness of judgment all throughout the speech. For example, he acknowledges Wright's "contradictions –the good and the bad", and his "profoundly distorted view of this country", and the "divisiveness" of his comments in the televised sermon excerpts.

What proves even more Obama's ability to juxtapose different realities and make them work together for his aims, is the portrayal of his white grandmother right after having discussed Wright. In particular he says she was: "a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world" (Obama, 2008). Yet she displayed the same racial prejudices and contradictions assigned to Wright: "a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe" (Obama, 2008). This disclosure enhances and fortifies once again Obama's credibility as the audience is made to understand both Wright and Obama's grandmother. Both figures provide a human face to what ideologically is preventing society from moving forward, past beliefs. In fact, they vividly and sadly exemplify the thought patterns of Black and whites from another moment in time, a time that Obama, though fully understanding it, makes every effort to distance from (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 86).

Returning to the jeremiadic structure of the speech, the third and final part, symbolizing the unity that is needed in the country, rhetorically returns to its beginning, reiterating the call to perfect the Union:

> This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected… As so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two-hundred and twenty-one years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins (Obama, 2008).

By way of conclusion, while the overall arc of the "Race Speech" is that of the Black jeremiad, Obama made significant departures from this tradition. Speaking from both a Black and white (as well as a globally diverse) perspective on race, which was something that no one had ever really done before, this was new, and bold, and brave, and clever all at the same time; he displayed a depth of understanding of multiple racial perspectives and the past in which those perspectives are still mired. For example, how he presented Wright and his grandmother, with a profound understanding of them and their different experiences (one white, one Black), was emblematic for the point that he was trying to make, that was, both Blacks and whites can struggle. Also, they can equally be understood for who they are. At the same time, this does not mean they cannot be better, and this applies to all Americans.

Finally and most importantly, the real peculiarity of this speech was that it was not anywhere near the typical polarizing positions of the past, or present. It was an honest, reflective, thoughtful searching for a new discourse on race that provided society of the 21th century with a road map to begin "the process of racial healing" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 87). In other words, one of Obama's best abilities is that to find a balance in everything, probably because he had to find a balance for himself he therefore developed the awareness of the importance of having it. Finding a balance instead taking extreme positions was the most innovative thing not only an African American could do, but also that a politician could do. In this way, he gave life to a completely new way of political rhetoric, and generated a new approach for discourse on race. Anyway, although Obama brought innovation to political rhetoric through the reinvention of AVT, his rhetoric is highly characterized by an intrinsic part of Black Culture, that is, Hip Hop rhetoric and language. So much so, that he acquired the status of being the "first Hip Hop President". His use of Hip Hop Language (in this are obviously comprehended gestures, attitudes, expressions and so on) made him so much more understandable, relatable and appreciated, from both communities. Because, the white community had and has a growing loving relationship for Hip Hop Language and Culture, and because Hip Hop is a strictly distinguishing identity part of African Americans, in this way he was officially recognized as part of the community. What is more, because of his “coolness” and his “Hip language” he was able to appeal and to conquer the hearts of many. The following chapter provides an extensive explanation of this distinctive Black Culture component, that is Hip Hop, and of how Obama uses its linguistic power.

Chapter 4: From rappers to Obama, a Black identity story of representation

In the previous chapter the purpose was that of showing how former-US President Barack Obama’s success was largely due to his use of the African American Vernacular Tradition, which he was both able to smartly re-adapt for a 21th century society. While he was finding a balance between the two American societies, his Black Cultural identity played a major role for getting him to be accepted. This chapter wants to highlight yet another way with which he was able to pursue his political aims, become the first Black President of the US, and give political representation to the Black community. A strong tool of Black identity representation is Hip Hop Culture and Language and indeed this is what Obama drew hard on. So much so that, it can be argued, he not only has been the First Black President, but also, the First Hip Hop President. As it is discussed in this chapter, this idea of him being a “Hip Hop President” is also responsible for his popularity. It is that one additional part of him, which made him gain large consent both in Black and White America. That consent was the result of what is really a two-party relation between Obama and the Hip Hop community, a relation in which one works to validate the other and vice-versa. For example, Obama’s use of Black/Hip Hop Language validates it for the mainstream (being he part of the higher-class and being Black Language categorized as exclusively lower-class language); also, Obama performing Hip Hop gestures and appreciating Hip Hop makes it even “cooler”. At the same time, being Hip Hop Culture idealized as “cool”, Hip Hop community members supporting Obama make of him “a cool President”. In this way, he gains acceptance into the Black community (because he is recognized as a member) and into the white community too (due to the large assimilation of Hip Hop Culture in the mainstream). This two-party relation is here highlighted through an analysis of Obama’s language, behavior, and politics in relation with Hip Hop Culture and its community members and exponents. Particular attention is given to the political representation that Obama was able to give to the Black community. Actually, what he did was giving the optics of equality, which indeed do not do the same work as actual measures of equality. But they do mean something, particularly to people who have been denied access or visibility, or people who have been made to feel like the work they created was not worthy of equal consideration in the eyes of the country it was created in. For example, rap music is now a worldwide phenomenon that spread out of Black neighborhoods, yet for many, it is not "good" music, in the very same way in which Black and Hip Hop gestures and language are at all times acquired by the mainstream, yet not acknowledged by it. In order to understand this, a better look to Hip Hop Culture and Language origins, history and aims, is necessary.

4.1 The perception, evolution and language of Hip Hop Culture

Hip Hop Culture symbolizes the younger generation of urban African Americans born since 1965. More than just rap music, Hip Hop Culture encompasses dance, graffiti artistry, sampling, clothing, and the claim of authentic blackness, indeed Hip Hop in all its forms is a strictly Black identity related art. The term Hip Hop primarily refers to urban, originally exclusively Black, youth culture in America, which carries a strong sense of Black community. Originally, Hip Hop was outdoor party music and it was a way for young people lacking other outlets for recreation to have a good time. Actually, it was Jamaican popular music that inspired the basketball court parties where Hip Hop originated (Painter, 2007, p. 364). As a matter of fact, basketball also is a Hip Hop Culture element.

What is usually associated with Hip Hop Culture, like gangsta rap, the idea of thug life, and violence (although these are elements that are actually part of it and are discussed later in here), is only a marginal part of Hip Hop Culture. For example, it possesses a creative quality that allowed Hip Hop to spread and gain major success all over the world during the years, as for example through fashion with baggy pants, sneakers, Malcom X caps (appropriately worn backward), style, and so forth (Smitherman, 2000, p. 268). However, it also allowed the Black community, especially youngsters, to find a non-violent way out of the thug life of their suburbs. For example, rappers used to divide the Bronx into personal territories and battle against each other in non-violent verbal competitions that involved the creation of improvised lyrics, the rapper who came up with the best lyrics won. In this way, their raps offered playful alternatives to physical violence. Other examples are break dancing, which also includes simulated battles between dancers, and graffiti artists that have history for competing on whose the biggest, extravagant, cooler piece of art painted in the streets is. Remarkably, these are all things that gained such a massive assimilation and popularity into the mainstream that not everyone knows they come from Black Culture. While each of these are popular, rap music remains the most widely circulated aspect of Hip Hop Culture, due in large part to the fact that music can easily be mechanically reproduced in studios and sold for profit. It is simply more profitable than the other Hip Hop art forms.

Due to its widespread popularity all over the world rap music acquired a certain power and influence, especially thanks to its language that, as an inherited product of slaves' culture, preserves their will to resist oppression and strive for change. Indeed, from the period that it started, the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, rappers created music out of personal experience in their disadvantaged neighborhoods (Painter, 2007, p.365). Their lyrics were based on that experience (that is an essential element of AVT as discussed in Chapter 2) and therefore reflected the problems of the Black community, functioning as a means of representation and rebellion. In other words, rap's lyrics gave voice to the Black struggle in the very same way the enslaved once did, through music and orality. Rap music has brought out yet another way to use orality in the fight for the Black cause, a way to, as Smitherman observes, "fulfill the mission of the artist to 'disturb the peace'". However, as she adds, "of course, the United States Ghetto (USG) is a hotbed of unrest, dispossession, and powerlessness; so, for African Americans living on the margins, for this 'underclass', there is no 'peace'" (Smitherman, 2000, pp. 268-269). In addition, Smitherman frames rap music and Black rappers, such as Queen Latifah, Snoop Dog, 2 Pac and many others, as the fundamental representatives of Hip Hop's quest for this peace, a peace that is more and more difficult to be found. This is probably due to the fact that rappers (especially in the past) lacked political representation, they were actually looking for it, rapping about it in their lyrics, in an effort to be heard. Interestingly, as argued by African American author and cultural critic Hanif Abdurraqib, although art is admired for its ability to open the human spirit up to empathy, years of Black rappers rapping about what is happening in their communities have not exactly softened much America's response to those communities (Abdurraqib, 2017). This is mostly due to the stereotypical ideas around the Black subject, for example as being violent, aggressive, criminal and so on; ideas that not only reinforce racism, but also play a significant role in the persistence of underprivileged and degraded conditions of Black communities in. Indeed, the misinterpretation and misconception of rappers' lyrics and the realities represented by those lyrics are a constant into the mainstream white society. This is most disappointing because rap music was born out of the need for representation in order to denounce Black conditions and biased perception. Actually, as a way of rebellion some stereotypes have been embraced by Black rappers who have shifted their meaning and even turned them into distinctive features. This is probably also an inheritance from that necessity to create alternative or completely new meanings to things as a way of resistance to the oppressor on the part of the enslaved (that is, still, white society). It was a way of encoding the language that is now reflected by the linguistic inversion that characterizes rappers' rhetoric (as discussed later in this chapter). Anyway, while it may have been discouraged by mainstream's hostilities, the genre, through its decades of growth, has not turned away from "the core idea of archiving life as a political action" (Abdurraqib, 2017). Indeed, Rap has been a genre of speaking directly to politicians, though rarely to their faces, usually through lyrics that contained sharp signifying practices. While the signifying may not be always understood, the American government actually felt threatened by their message. In light of this, one of the most effective practices that made the rapper and so what he/she was rapping about visible, not necessarily in a positive way, but at least heard, was that to provoke someone in power so much that they would call for that music to be banned. More precisely Abdurraqib maintained what follows.

> [to be banned] was rap's greatest trick, especially in the late 80s and early to mid-90s, when the government was easiest to provoke into such responses. It didn't take rappers long to realize that their particular brand of storytelling was not the type that could gain sympathy or understanding from White people in power, so why not play into the inevitable fear? When people in power who enforce and back violent policies pretend that the "rawness" of rap makes its creators less human, there is no use in imaging much of a bridge (Abdurraqib, 2017).

"The bridge" Abdurraqib is referring to is that between the Hip Hop/Black community and (fair political representation by) the government. As addressed later in here, the Black community ultimately found in Obama a powerful ally that finally gave them political voice, but before him, "the bridge" had been under construction for years, with Hip Hop artists working at it from all fronts. Thanks to them over the course of a quarter century, rap music grew from a purely local performance style in the Bronx of New York City in the 1970s, to become the top selling musical format in the United States in 1998 (Painter, 2007, p.363). Actually, the term "Hip Hop" was first given broad popular exposure by "Rapper's Delight", the first commercially successful rap song, which was released by the Sugar Hill Gang in 1979. The song featured the infamous lyrics: "With a hip hop, the hipt, the hipidipit, hip hip, hopit, you don't stop" (Fernando, 1994, p.13). From that moment on, despite rap music's preoccupation with police brutality and its use of graphic sex that made it highly controversial, the genre continued to make headway in American popular culture; actually, it can be argued that it became even more popular because of that. Furthermore, from the need for representation, political rap also arose and climbed the top of the charts during the rap music's "golden age" that went from 1988 to the mid-1990s (meanwhile police brutality remained a staple topic) (Painter, 2007, p.365). During this "golden age", numerous recognitions came for rappers and their community; they were everywhere, music, television, awards and movies. The problem was that the more rappers accessed privilege (money, attractiveness, popularity, white status entrance) the more they were likely to lose their primary feature, indeed, their Black identity, and they became more reluctant to represent their community, simply because they were starting not to be part of it anymore. The same happened with middle-class, healthy and educated Blacks acquiring notoriety, who became numerous in those years and either disappeared from the African American community scene or posed a threat to lower-class African Americans. This is because authentic Blackness in Hip Hop culture is considered that of individuals who do not interact much (if not at all) with the white society. A good example of this idea of authenticity and of what makes a rapper be and stay authentic, is famous rapper Tupac Shakur, who remains the representative figure of the "true and real" Hip Hop generation (Painter, 2007, p.366). He was born into a family of Black Panther activists that experienced poverty and drug addiction. He was a heavily tattooed artist whose demons included weakness for drug, sex, and violence of the thug life. As gangsta rap's most influential star, he symbolized the many contradictions of Hip Hop Culture and embodied its fetish for young Black male authenticity (Painter, 2007, p. 366). This was the image that Black rappers came from and this idea of "thug life" is the one that many of them believed they should have kept representing, an image that during the years became more and more controversial because rap music can be and is many diverse things and can convey many contrasting messages. Rap music can be politically critical, social realist, degrading to women, feminist, homophobic, homoerotic, moralizing, materialistic, violent, black nationalist, entertaining, pornographic, and just playing fun, sometimes all at once (Painter, 2007, p. 367). Despite or because of all of this, rap music is able to be the voice of the poor, the oppressed, and the youth in revolt against official harassment all over the world. In light of this, Smitherman argues that rap music is a contemporary response to conditions of joblessness, poverty, and disempowerment, which continue to be the norm for the Black (or not Black) masses. For example, a cultural critic, describing himself as being from the "front lines of the White Struggle" provides this description of rap music: "[It is a rebellion against] white America's economic and psychological terrorism against Black people" (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p. 269). Another account describes it in this way: "Petulant, raw, and screaming with vibrant and violent images … [Rap music] represents people who are angry that the power apparatus tried to bury it [them] alive" (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p. 269).

In this way, rap music has become a – or, perhaps *the* – principal medium for Black youth to "express their views of the world" and to seek to "create a sense of order" out of the turbulence and chaos of their lives. Despite the 1990's emergence of guns, violence, misogyny, and overused taboo language in rap music, the founding mission of Rap remains that clearly reflected in Rapper Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 1982 hit song, "The Message". Here they decry, for all the world to hear, the deplorable conditions of the hood:

> Broken glass everywhere,
> People pissin on the stair,
> You know they just don't care.
> I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise...
> Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge,
> I'm trying not to lose my head.
> It's like a jungle sometimes
> It makes me wonder
> How I keep from going under (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p. 270)

For contemporary Blacks, then, the chain are the same as in enslavement. Naughty by Nature for example raps as follows.

> [Introduction]: I think it's about time you explained to everybody the real reason you wear this chain around your neck…
> [Treach]: Too many of my people got time
> It shows as crime unfolds

… their goals locked in a facility where time is froze
God knows the heart hurts
To see no sky, just dirt
They give a man a cell quick before they give a man work…
Bars and cement instead of help for our people
Jails ain nothin but slave-day sequel
Tryin to flee the trap of this nation
Seein penitentiary's the plan to plant the new plantation …
Who's locked up, who's shot up, who's strung out, who's bleedin- keep readin
I need to explain: the chain remain the same (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p. 270)

As proved by these lyrics, other than its violence, its raw language, and its misogynistic views, rap is art form that accurately reports, "the nuances, pathology and most importantly, resilience of America's best kept secret… the black ghetto" (quoted in Smitherman, 2000, p. 271). Indeed, Hip Hop culture is resistance culture. Thus, Rap music is not only a Black expressive cultural phenomenon; it is, at the same time, a resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against white America's racism and its Euro-centric cultural dominance.

4.1.1 Hip Hop resistance rhetoric and *flippin the script*

As pointed out in Chapter 2, rap music is rooted in the African American Vernacular Tradition. Indeed, Smitherman also identifies the rapper as a post-modern African griot, a verbally gifted storyteller and cultural historian in traditional African society. In addition, she specifies that the rapper must be lyrically/linguistically fluent since he or she is expected to testify, to speak the truth and to come at it with no uncertain terms. The rap must be characterized by quickness (Smitherman, 2000, p. 269). In particular, "the rate of speech in rap music must be constant in order to correlate it with the beat of the music… the rapper utters a minimum of two hundred and fifty-eight syllables per minute" (Yasim, 1995, p. 38). What should be noted is the expressiveness that the rate gives to the rapped words, giving that sense of restlessness, of fighting for breath, resembling the constant agitation of African Americans lives, from their past as slaves to their continual quest for home and recognition nowadays.

The features of AVT that characterize rap language and rhetoric are principally tonal semantics, narrativizing, signifying, *braggadocio*, sampling, *playin the Dozen*, Africanized syntax, and other communicative practices in which ultimately is found what rappers call *flippin the script* (Smitherman, 2000, p. 279). These are all important strategies that fundamentally work to persuade holders of opposing views (white society) to rappers' points of view. They work thanks to the creation of word-pictures about concrete problems inside the Black community, generally about life, love, and survival. Most importantly, rappers' rhetorical practices reflect the way in which their music capitalizes on Black cultural expression as a scaffold for resistance rhetoric (Smitherman, 2000, p. 278).

The least understood of these rhetorical practices is that of *flippin the script* (Smitherman, 2000, p. 279), that is also one of the least understood communicative practices of African American Language in general. It consists of the manipulation of European American Language's semantic structure. It is often inappropriately dismissed as "Black slang" but this rhetorical manoeuvring is actually what linguist Grace Holt (1972) called "semantic inversion". It is a process whereby AAL speakers take words and concepts from the EAL lexicon and either reverse their meanings or impose an entirely different one due to a critical perspective on "things". For example, in the Hip Hop world, New York and Los Angeles, gigantic cities of Black oppression, become "Zoo York" and "Los Scandalous". Semantic inversion/*flippin the script* was an act of linguistic empowerment as Africans in America took an alien tongue and made it theirs; simultaneously, they created a communication system that became linguistically unintelligible to the oppressor, even though it was his own language (Smitherman, 2000, p. 279). In simpler terms, *flippin the script* means taking a word or a phrase and giving it new (usually by way of criticism) meaning. Smitherman further discusses that the "*flippin*" process of the new Hip Hop generation in particular reaches back to the 1960s and 1970s for a taste of Blackness, because those are the years of the generation who came of age during the Civil Rights-Black Power movements. Words and phrases from those years are recycled and sometimes modified among Hip Hoppers, a few examples are: jam, joint, funky, forty acres and a mule (the name of filmmaker Spike Lee's production company), and so on (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 35).

More than that, Smitherman sees rappers as engaged in a conscious return to the Source and making their way toward an African identity for the twenty-first century. She sees them as still "in search of HOME" (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 35). In this way, she relates modern rappers' necessity and practice of *flippin the script* to that of slaves. Indeed, rappers are not the first generation to look for home. Forcibly removed from their native land, homeless Africans in America have been on a continual quest for home since 1619 and, this quest is still going on today. This is because after Emancipation, with the failure of Reconstruction and with the Great Migration after the world war years, in their quest for home in the Promised Land of the North all the Black community found was urban blight, poor housing, inadequate schools, police brutality, and other social problems of the "inner city" (Smitherman, [1994] 2000, p. 35). Therefore, African Americans had and have to flip the American (white) script in order to resist such diminishing conditions, to find representation and a way of rebellion. The language (as well as the music and other art forms) of Hip Hop is very much rooted in this search for home. In light of this, again, the Africanness and Blackness of the rapper are key elements for his/her authenticity.

Furthermore, Smitherman highlights one specific word that gives a clear idea of what *script flippin* consists of "*nigger*". This is a peculiar term as used by rappers, because it is often misunderstood by European Americans and castigated by some African Americans. When used by AAL speakers, "nigger" has a different pronunciation, because of AAL's postvocalic –r rule, and in today's Hip Hop world, a different spelling: *nigga*, and for the plural, *niggaz.* In AAL the term as a variety of positive meanings. Your bestfriend, your homey, is your nigga; for example, 2 Pack dedicated a rap song to his "homiez", titled "Strictly for My Niggaz". Black women use *nigga* to refer to their boyfriends. For example, female rapper Yo Yo celebrates the fact that she has a *nigga* on her team in "the Bonnie and Clyde Theme" duet she recorded with Ice Cube. In addition, even the negative meaning of "nigger" has a different nuance from the racial epithet of white. For AAL speakers "nigger" refers to negative social behaviour, and thus, anybody (including white people) who is "acting out" might be called "nigger". For Smitherman, *niggas* are those Blacks who are "down for Blackness and identify with trials as well as the triumphs of the Black experience in the USG –United States Ghetto" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 281).

The communicative practices of the Hip Hop community have the aim of showing the culture of the USG and representing the case of America's still dispossessed slave descendants. Chuck D., of Public Enemy, explained the role of rappers in the resistance rhetoric of the African American community in this way: "Rap music is Black Folk's CNN" (quoted in Chambers and Morgan, 1992, p. 83). In other words, it is the African American principal means of representation; it is the voice of the Black community. The Hip Hop community employs African American communicative traditions and discursive practices to convey the Black struggle in the face of America's abandonment of the descendants of enslaved Africans. Therefore, rap music simultaneously reflects the cultural evolution of the Black Oral Tradition and the construction of a contemporary resistance rhetoric. Smitherman invites to critical reflection and "keep on the good work" for rappers by stating what follows:

> Of course, one might be moved to reflect on Maya Angelou's words: "My people had used music to soothe slavery's torment or to propitiate God, or to describe…love and the distress of lovelessness, but I knew no race could sing and dance its way to freedom" (1981, p. 22). Nonetheless, the rap artists of Hip Hop appear to have heeded poet Margaret Walker's admonition to "speak the truth to the people", and they are doing it in a language that the people know and understand. As a Womanist activist from back in the day, I applaud Hip Hop Nation for seeking to disturb the peace lest the chain remain the same (Smitherman, 2000, p. 283).

4.1.2 Aims, misinterpreted messages and the need for political representation

In light of the hereinabove, rap developed out of and is based on a consistent and fundamental resistance rhetoric that aims to disturb the "political peace" of America. Although the search for political representation is ongoing, rappers of the importance of Tupac and other figures in Hip Hop not only are able to provide sociopolitical critiques and Hip Hop social theory through their art, they also actively seek to restore the humanity of Black people. Alim and Smitherman even identify a Tupac's "political agenda" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 150) that was not limited to political concerns, but it was a human agenda that aimed to disrupt the overwhelming power of whiteness in cultural and psychological terms. The following are Tupac's own words.

> I am a revolutionary in every sense of the word. I take care of everything that's mine and I'm handling my business every day. The fact that I can still sit here and look in people's faces and still be smiling, shows you that I am a human being. This is my agenda. I tackle some of these problems head on. My whole thing is to show young black men that you do not have to give up the essence of you to be successful in this country. You don't have to do that…You can curse how you want to, live how you want to, throw your finger in the air how you please and still make money… So I represent that thug life –all of the underdogs coming together and just uniting. Taking over. Instead of asking for any of they shit, just taking what we got and building on it (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 151).

As Tupac's words underline, rap music is a Black cultural expression that prioritizes Black voices from the margins of urban America and continues to articulate the shifting terms of marginality in contemporary American culture. However, there is one big problem still affecting the political agenda of rappers like Tupac. Although rap music has gone mainstream and global in the last decade, dominating record charts and the Internet, this does not mean that the mainstream receives the message that this music wants to convey. Due to race related prejudice, in fact, rap music often tends to be considered "second class music" just in the same way that Black people are considered "second class citizens". Therefore, the messages contained in that music, can be misread, misinterpreted, or at worst, not arrive at all.

Under this perspective, many questions come to mind. Why does their message not get through? Why are the people that created such a phenomenon (Hip Hop) still undermined and stereotyped today? Are their voices not important? It could be argued that this condition causes the Black community to seek more and more for political representation (that form of representation that could get their message right). Therefore, this is what rappers aim to do with their lyrics that thrive on reality, truth and experience. They create a space for expressing their struggle, and a way of Black identity representation. In other terms, they create a *political* location of their own. As a matter of fact, Hip Hop continues to broadcast a particular *physical* location into America's public consciousness and conscience, the ghetto (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 159), and the very act of speaking up and out from this marginalized social location is to express a form of agency in and on the world that is indeed political. In this way, in Hip Hop the lyrical becomes political for the very reason that its authors and narrators speak for their people (that is, the same that politicians supposedly do).

What is more, members of the Hip Hop community have always actively tried to "speak the truth", that is one of the main principles which rap music is based on. Here, "the real" is central to the credibility of the speaker and is used in order to "make things change". Due the highly creative practice of rappers who write, circulate, reinterpret and put to various uses their truths, the risk is that while the politics of Hip Hop often lead to misinterpretation, its art and aesthetics are often wholly misunderstood and, in a cultural space where the aesthetic is political, these misreading take on even greater importance. Thus, a listener must be in a conversation with multiple discourses within and beyond the African American community in order to interpret these complex multilayered texts (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 143). One political figure that was particularly fit to do and to be exactly that is former-President Barack Obama. Being an African American but also a politician with "white status", as discussed in the previous chapter, Obama made an effort in his political journey to reinterpret and re-frame for the mainstream both the message and the personas behind rappers' lyrics and the Hip Hop community. He engaged in a sort of re-humanizing process of the Black being. Essentially, he was that political representation that the community was long looking for. More precisely, he was able to give voice to the Hip Hop community both with his politics and initiatives, and with his being the representation of it. Although the Hip Hop community fashioned a powerful resistance rhetoric it still lacked the political experience to make it more effective, Obama was the combination of the two. He had the Blackness, he had the rhetorical skills, he had access, and he had the political experience too. Ultimately, he too flipped his own script. He was able to do so because he decided not to hide every hint of his Blackness in search for mainstream acceptance. On the contrary, he showed proudly in many occasions to be part of the Hip Hop community. Indeed, as Abdurraqib has observed, what Black people always understood about Obama that often got lost in non-black analysis of him was the immense difficulty in being the most visible man in the world *and* being unafraid to nod to Blackness (Abdurraqib, 2017). This was what made him the First Hip Hop President.

4.2 Obama bridging the gap between Hip Hop and politics

Obama embodied the first political figure that really could give to the Hip Hop community the political representation they so long searched for and rappers of the importance of Snoop Dog, Ice Cube, Ludacris, Jay Z and many others knew that. Quoting from Snoop Dog, Obama was different from any other Black political figure of the past because he was the first that actually had “the right conversation” (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 131), which is something very different from the “articulate” deal discussed in Chapter 3. Alim and Smitherman write that Snoop’s description of Obama was right because with these three words, he concisely captured Obama’s ability to styleshift as well as his ability to navigate treacherous racially and politically charged terrain by reaching multiple constituencies at one, especially through his rhetoric. As the two scholars argue, this “multiple-versions” strategy (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 132), that is the ability of combining more “personas” into one being (for example, Obama the Black man but also the politician, the cool guy but also the husband and father, the Hip Hop lover but also a respectable Harvard Law graduated), is necessarily adopted by members of a maligned social group like that Hip Hop(pers). Consequently, Obama’s adoption of it frames him (even more) as part of that very same social group. In this way, Obama comes to be in close relation with Black rappers because highly visible members of the same maligned community. A community aware that dominant culture consistently frames them as “dangerous to America”. In addition, Abdurraqib describes Obama’s connection to rap music and rap artists with the following statement.

> [The connection] always felt logical, never false. Not necessarily because of his race, but because he always seemed to carry himself with the charisma and understanding of the stage that an MC has. His cadence, tone, and crowd control always felt rooted in rap music, which is rooted in a black oral tradition — people telling stories around porches, and then to instruments, and then to beats. It’s why his biggest moments onstage often carried gestures or language with a similar swagger. You could feel it in ’08, when he brushed dirt off his shoulders while a crowd erupted around him. Or when, during the first presidential visit to Jamaica in 32 years, he smiled while waiting for the audience to settle before shouting “Wha gwan, Jamaica!” into the microphone, causing the audience to burst into

> laughter. Or when he dropped the mic on the floor of the White House during his final correspondents' dinner, two fingers pressed to his lips (Abdurraqib, 2017).

This statement shows Obama as a high profile Black public voice that having "the right conversation" was able to successfully represent the Black/Hip Hop community. To better indicate Obama's success, Alim and Smitherman use the expression "he went platinum" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 132) both in reference to Obama's politics, through his ability to use language to pass America's most complex and binary test, that is "would white Americans accept a Black man in the White House?"; and also in reference to the Hip Hop world, through his ability to linguistically navigate Hip Hop's unrelenting critique of government.

Moreover, the idea of Obama as being the First Hip Hop President is due not only to his use of Hip Hop Language and style, that were critically important symbols during his 2008 presidential campaign, but also because they were and are one of the primary means one can talk about (the problem of) race in the US. Indeed, since seeking political representation for their struggle, but lacking political experience, Hip Hop artists from around the world were vocal in their support for Obama's presidency. What is more, while Hip Hop, as Smitherman and Alim put it in, "had Obama's back" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 134), he was supportive of Hip Hop too, especially during his campaign.

4.2.1 Obama's "Hip Hop coolness" prized by Black rappers

In a series of interviews, Obama repeatedly declared that Hip Hop was one of his favorite musical genres and to listen and enjoy very popular Black rappers like Jay-Z, little Nas and Lil Wayne. What is more, Will.I.Am's video "Yes We Can" even became the leading pop culture ad in Obama's campaign. Now, while one could argue this as being a strategic move to acquire the consent primarily of the Black community another perspective comes into play when considering a particular interview in which he stated, "You know, I gotta admit, lately I've been listening to a lotta Jay-Z, you know, this new American Gangster album is tight" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 134). What is remarkable here is that not only he lists Jay-Z album as something he likes (creating a sense of communality with other Black community members that enjoy it too), but says it is "tight" and also uses "gotta" and "lotta", making the conversation informal and proving that his familiarity with Black Language and Hip Hop's lexicon is not merely symbolic, it is real and he can use it whenever he wants to. Since he often made statements like this, artists, while often commenting on his politics, also picked up Obama's style. They liked that he was real and relatable because he was a Black man who enjoyed Hip Hop music and that also spoke like them, with no fancy talk (except for the occasions that needed to). He knew how and when to behave and "play cool" and people loved it of him. For example, he once improvised a dance on a stage on the notes of Snoop Dog's "Drop It like It's Hot" and the crowd went crazy after witnessing a US (then) senator, as Alim and Smitherman phrase it, "getting down to Snoop!" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 131). One more time that he showed his "coolness" and familiarity with Hip Hop culture gestures, was during a speech in South Carolina where he responded to the negativity that was being hurled at him from the Clinton campaign. Obama calmly and "coolly", and to resounding applause, looked over his shoulder and brushed it two or three times. While many in the crowd appreciated the gesture, those familiar with Hip Hop knew that he, by getting the dirt off his shoulder, was sampling Jay-Z's hit from *The Black Album.* The fact that a presidential candidate sampled a popular Hip Hop gesture in order to rebuff classic, textbook Washington politics was definitely not missed (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 135). What is more, sampling is a typical practice of rappers. For example, they sample old Black music work to produce new music with lyrics that work for their time, and this is what Obama does too. In this case, in particular he sampled a Hip Hop gesture and used it in his own way and for his own aim. In this way, he simultaneously made fun of his opponents, undermined them, and conquered his audience with a funny, unexpected and especially relatable Black Culture gesture. Gestures like this that bring out Obama's Black identity in a very evident way, are many and can convey important messages. The most important one is that they validate the Black being to the eyes of the mainstream; this is further discussed later in this work. In addition, these gestures are part of what prompted people to refer to Obama as the First Hip Hop President, because he not only used Hip Hop culture at his advantage but he was part of it too and later even became a symbol for it. This is also why many political observers credit Hip Hop for bringing out the largest youth vote in presidential election history (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 135). Indeed, Hip Hop is the language (and style) that attracts and that is practiced and acquired by the youth (both Black and white youth).

Furthermore, many Hip Hop artists, like KRS-One, B.G., Mike Jones, Plies and others, explained in interviews that this was the first time that they were inspired to vote. The Game even said he would "vote twice" if he could and Ice Cube while advocating for Obama once stated, "people want a real change" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 133), implying that voting for him would finally cause that change. At this point, it was clear that Hip Hop heads wanted to "change the game of Washington" as Obama wrote in a letter to *Vibe* magazine, again capitalizing on Hip Hop's language (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 136).

4.2.2 Obama's search of balance in the political representation of Hip Hop

Obama has also had to walk a fine line in terms of how he represented his relationship with Hip Hop. He had to find a way of communication that would work for Hip Hop heads and haters alike. Therefore, Obama needed to show that he was willing to "come down *on* Hip Hop", but at the same time, "remain down *for* Hip Hop" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 137). Indeed, while many used to define Obama as "Hip Hop President" with positive affection, as a way to celebrate his relative youth, hipness, comfort and familiarity with Hip Hop Culture, others used the label as a means of fear mongering. Conservative critics, such as Craig Smith, for example, attempted to use Hip Hop to scare white voters away from Obama, whom he described as "merely" a "Hip Hop senator from Illinois" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 138). In his racist and reductive rant against the First Hip Hop President, Smith suggested that the Obamas would use "ghetto slang" and have "no sense of decorum" in the White House. In this way, by counting on race prejudice to discredit his opponent, Smith wanted to frame Barack Obama and Hip Hop as "dangerous for America" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 138). On this matter, it should be noted that while the Hip Hop community appreciated Obama's linguistic styleshift, others read it has a threat to Standard English and used it in racist, race-baiting rhetoric against him. However, language has also been a major part of President Obama's criticism of Hip Hop. As a matter of fact, in order to find that balance between haters and supporters of Hip Hop, he has often been as critical of Hip Hop as celebratory. Obama articulated exactly this in a BET interview that Alim and Smitherman take into account. Following are Obama's words.

> And, you know, honestly, I love the art of Hip Hop, I don't always love the message of Hip Hop. There are times where even on the artists that I named, the artists that I love, you know, there's a message that is not only sometimes degrading to women, not only uses the *N*-word a little too frequently, but also – something I'm really concerned about–is always talkin about material things and always talkin about how I can get something, you know, how I've got more money, more, you know, cars, more (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 138).

Here Obama makes two very important points for two very different constituencies. First, for many members of the Hip Hop community, it was the first time that they had ever heard a presidential candidate refer to "the *art* of Hip Hop" and by doing so he had the potential to reframe the conversation about Hip Hop music as really a conversation about art, poetry and lyrical production. By using the word *art,* he demonstrated his respect for a culture that, despite its enormous commercial and global success, continues to be misunderstood and misinterpreted by the mainstream (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 138, 139). In reality, the public discourse on Hip Hop Culture still remains woefully unsophisticated and needs someone to elevate it, take its part, explain its value and make it understandable to the more reluctant mainstream, which is what Obama is particularly skilled to do. The second important point that he made with that interview is that he was critical of "the message of Hip Hop" and this was interpreted by some in the Hip Hop community as legitimate criticism and by others as Obama's need to support Hip Hop while not losing his broader base. In this way, Obama was able to both defend and criticize Hip Hop in a very cautious way. For example when it came to the issue of gender and race he "gave a little to both sides" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 139). He critiqued Hip Hop for messages that are "degrading for women" but prefaced that with "sometimes"; he also critiqued the use of the *N*-word but followed that with "a little too frequently". In other words, Alim and Smitherman argue that his use of adverbs in these cases indicated that he was not just following the popular, reductionist point of view. His qualifiers here were instead a subtle yet important signal. At the same time, when it came to something less controversial, he chose an adverb that gave the impression that he was really condemning Hip Hop for "*always* talkin about material things". Anyway, this is a critique not at all new for hip hoppers because it is something that they have heard many times before, so there was no need for him to be more subtle. Essentially, with the BET interview Obama, once again, walked that tightrope and achieved balance by giving both communities, the Black/Hip Hop one that searched for representation and the white/mainstream one concerned about the negative messages of Hip Hop spreading, what they wanted and needed to hear. And this ended up benefitting him in the long run, as he once again established the same message that he was aiming for in his "Race Speech", that is, he is not only Black nor only white, but a combination and a balance of the two. In particular reference to the mainstream concerns, for example, he stated that Hip Hop can "absolutely" be used in positive ways in his administration. In this way, he demonstrated his respect for Hip Hop by showing that he engaged directly with the culture and that he appreciated it for its complexity and political potential, which is also something very new. In Obama's own words in reference to Black rappers like Jay-Z and Kanye West having potential to bridge the gap of misconception and prejudice about Hip Hop and especially race, he stated: "I think the potential for them [is] to deliver a message of extraordinary power, that gets people thinking –you know, the thing about Hip Hop today is it's smart. I mean, it's insightful. And, you know, the way that they can communicate a complex message in a very short space is remarkable" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 140). In this way, Obama once again acknowledged Hip Hop as a smart, insightful, and complex art with the potential to produce thought-provoking music. He acknowledged the power of the art as well as that of its people, he represented them, gave them voice and opened up a possibility for them to be heard in a positive way (and this is what Black people wanted from the start). Additionally, Hip Hop has enormous influence on especially the youth, therefore Obama pointing out that it can be used for the better, is a very smart position to take against mainstream "haters" of Hip Hop that engage into diminishing it and its use of Black Language whenever possible. This further demonstrates not only the language gap between the two American societies, but also the cultural gap, where ignorance plays as a "safe space" and continues to promote racial discriminations based on language and culture prejudice. As a matter of fact, one thing that Hip Hoppers and Obama have in common is that they both are very aware that before they even talk, they could be already framed as unintelligent, lazy and dangerous. And, it is perhaps because of this that Hip Hop remains one of the few, if not the only, musical genre in America that consistently talks openly, boldly and honestly about race (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 159). Interestingly enough it is also what Obama did with his rhetoric (as seen in the previous chapter).

All of the above –the support Obama gave to Hip Hop, rappers' supporting him back and their sharing the same Black Culture and experiencing the same prejudices– played a role in his being recognized as a Hip Hop President. Alim and Smitherman perfectly describe this.

> Obama's ability to break barriers, defy odds, explode stereotypes, and exceed all expectations –his outright, Public Enemy-style "refuse to lose" mindset– is what, to many, makes him Hip Hop. As Hip Hop head and journalist Davey D. wrote: "What makes Obama Hip Hop is that he's intelligent… He defies all the nasty stereotypes that have been put out by corporate media that have left everyone around the world with a false impression of Black men". Then, as if comparing Barack Obama to the Trickster figure of Hip Hop and the African American Oral Tradition, he continues: "The fact that he was able to come seemingly out of nowhere and outsmart and outmaneuver the mighty Clinton machine when they appeared to have everything all sewn up… The fact he was able to defy the odds by outlasting and overcoming all the racism heaped on him by his republican opponents and full onslaught by Fox News and all their lies was incredible… That's what makes him Hip Hop" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 161).

4.2.3 Obama giving political voice to Hip Hop during his second term

While the positioning of Obama as the First Hip Hop President started during his presidential campaign, it was secured during his presidency. Indeed, he installed real relationships with rappers of the Black American community. He invited them to the White House and even asked for their help with his politics. Obama used Hip Hop Culture to reach out to youth and to talk about issues like health care and criminality rate.

(Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images)

In the picture, rapper Ludacris shakes hands with Obama after his delivering remarks to criminal justice activists in Washington, in 2015. Indeed, the President and his team have focused on the issue of criminal justice throughout his second term, an issue particularly important for the Black community (still facing police brutality and unjust sentences that are directly connected to the high imprisonment rate of Black people in American prisons). Obama had also made a point of championing programs that addressed disadvantages faced by young men and boys of color, chiefly through his My Brother's Keeper Initiative (Rhodan, 2016). Being Black rappers like Nicki Minaj, Chance the Rapper, Alicia Keys, Wale, J. Cole, and Ludacris the representative of the Black American community struggle, they were called to sit down with Obama and some of his top advisers to talk about his political initiatives. What is more, being Obama a politician meant that a part of this was expected to be "performance", yet he did not merely entertain rappers. He actually listened to them: Macklemore on addiction, Kendrick and J. Cole on Black youth and criminal justice. The seat he offered them at the table was more than just an idle one. It was one that put artists in a room where they could be heard (Abdurraqib, 2017). Ludacris for example, appreciating the efforts of Obama to contact Black rappers, and to involve them into his politics, stated, "It was a gathering of the minds" and "that was extremely important for Hip Hop, because he's giving us a voice. He's done a great job of supporting Hip Hop and certain artists, continuing to say we should put out positive messages. I think he's done enough. We've made strides" (quoted in Landrum, 2017). Ludacris was not the only one paying homage to Obama. Lamar said Hip Hop owes Obama some gratitude for giving rap artists an opportunity to visit the White House. DJ Khaled also said he was honored to visit the White House for the My Brother's Keeper Initiative along with his rap cohorts, stating, "Obama always represents Hip Hop in so many ways… his playlist is Hip Hop. I've been to the White House. I'm Hip Hop. It was a major key for me. He represents all cultures. That's what a president is supposed to do" (quoted in Landrum, 2017). In this way, Obama gave political voice to the artistic representatives of the Black community. Furthermore, Abdurraqib also observed that what surprised him most looking at pictures of those encounters were the looks sported by everyone.

> A couple of the rappers chose suits, sure. But some, like Ludacris, were dressed down in sweatshirts and sneakers. Even the ones who came out in nicer clothing had their own signature touches: Rick Ross letting his dress pants spill into a pair of black Adidas, Chance in his baseball hat. The conversation happening in the photo was one of comfort. These artists came as they were — not in defiance or

> spectacle… There is certainly a power in that, but the door that Barack Obama pushed open for rappers to be seen and comfortable in his White House presented a new type of power dynamic (Abdurraqib, 2017).

What Abdurraqib observed highlights Obama's capability of being unafraid to nod to Blackness. He made rappers feel comfortable and free to be themselves (sending this way a message to Black citizens all over America) in the most political locations of all (the White House), a House that historically they never felt theirs, but now being there even felt "cool". Actually, while saying goodbye to President Obama a few days before Trump entered the White House, Abdurraqib pointed out that this was one of the many ways that Obama bridged that gap between the Hip Hop community and politics and that he feared the end of his presidency because that gap was about to be reopened. In his own words: "I'll remember it as rap shifts back into its contentious relationship with politics, and as the idea of having dinner with the president becomes, once again, something for which you'd receive shame and ridicule" (Abdurraqib, 2017).

However, many were the occasions that saw Obama by the side of Black rappers or in association with Hip Hop Culture exponents. In a CBS's article, journalist Jonathan Landrum argued that Obama embraced Hip Hop more than any of his predecessors. He used Jay Z's lyrics and Kanye West in speeches, released playlists on Spotify that included Nas, Chance the Rapper, Mos Def and Method Man. He was caught dancing to Drake's *Hot Line Bling* with Usher and Janelle Monae at a White House event. Thought-provoking rapper Kendrick Lamar was seen at his left together with singer-actress Janelle Monae at the White House in July 2016. In a televised concert celebrating the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Obama was shown rapping along when Public Enemy's Chuck D performed *Fight the Power* (Landrum, 2017). Most importantly, throughout his presidency, Obama paved a way for several rap stars to enter the White House for political discussion and musical performances. For example, socially conscious rapper Common, seen at a White House state dinner in May 2016, became a regular at White House events. Concerts have taken place at the White House since the 1800s when President John Adams was the first occupant. A few rappers, such as Run-DMC, visited the mansion to meet previous presidents over the years, but the Obama administration gave them a prominent role. Indeed, Big Sean's 2014 performance is considered by some to be the first true rap performance at the White

House, when he joined Ariana Grande for *Right There* (Landrum, 2017). Since then, a barrage of rappers have taken the stage there, including Wale and Lamar. In light of this, rapper Nas once stated on Obama, “He's a Hip Hop fan—that makes him relatable. It makes him real…Hip Hop doesn't hurt anybody, it helps people. Some of the nicest people in the world are Hip Hop artists. [Obama] respects it. He loves it. It's a part of his world” (quoted in Landrum, 2017). Additionally, in November 2016, BET saluted the Obamas with a star-studded concert celebrating a mixture of gospel, R&B and rap music; the president and first lady Michelle Obama joyously danced as De La Soul rapped their classic *Me Myself and I.* One other remarkable moment was when Obama held up flash cards as *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda performed a freestyle rap in Rose Garden area of the White House. Mrs. Obama even got into the rap act, performing a comedic one with former *Saturday Night Live* star Jay Pharoah to promote her college initiatives. On his part, the President never tried to rap publicly himself, admitting once: “That's one thing I can't do is rap. I like rap but I cannot rap” (quoted in Landrum, 2017).

By taking these many initiatives especially by including the Hip Hop representatives inside the White House (a symbol of the nation) Obama challenged that mainstream belief that located and limited rap music (and so Black people), as argued before, to the Ghetto. In this way, Obama not only proved this belief wrong, but also gave new position to Hip Hop as part of the American society and framed it as capable of playing a major role in American politics. Also, he restored the proudness of the Hip Hop and the Black being and this is remarkable. On this, Abdurraqib observed what follows.

> Above my desk now, there's a picture of Barack Obama, surrounded by rappers. Rappers on every side of him, dressed however they chose to dress. Rappers with their honest songs about the people who live and die in places that are often used as political talking points. Rappers standing proud with their proud president. All of those smiling black people in the Oval Office, miles away from a past where none of them, I imagine, ever thought they’d get to make it this far (Abdurraqib, 2017).

4.3 Obama pays homage to his Black identity, from The Pound to the Mic Drop

One more way through which Obama bridged the gap between Black and White America, and managed to give voice to the Black cause through Hip Hop, was through language, that comprehends, as clear by now, expressions, behaviors and gestures just as well as words. Two main gestures of Black identity representation involved two key moments into Obama's presidential journey, one at the beginning of it, one at the end.

4.3.1 The Pound

(Erik Miller/Reuters)

This occasion involves Obama's wife Michelle and took place on June 3, 2008, at campaign rally in St. Paul, Minnesota, where Senator Barack Obama sealed the Democratic nomination for president of the United States. In celebration of his historic victory, he and his wife Michelle hugged. Then Michelle in a very spontaneous way extended her fist to give him a pound and like any Black Language speaker Obama responded with a pound too. Although, used for decades all over African America, the Obamas' pound "sent shockwaves throughout mainstream White America" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 94). Nevertheless, what is the pound? In Black communication, the Pound is a gesture of solidarity and comradeship. It is also used in a celebratory sense and sometimes as a nuanced greeting among intimates and/or those with a shared history (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 96). Thus, it was and is quite commonly used by Black speakers, yet it generated much turmoil on the part of the mainstream and as everything that the Obamas' did, it quickly became a national case. Most importantly, one fundamental thing came out of that, it made evident the cultural and linguistic gap between Black and white Americans. First of all, there was the misinterpretation of the gesture, that was attributed many negative meaning, from being a ritual of Muslim terrorists and a sign of violence, to Michelle's way to display her power over her husband, and even her Black nationalism, characterized by a "hate Whitey" sentiment (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 98). These two interpretations among others are particularly important because they demonstrate how much prejudice (all Blacks are violent terrorists) and stereotypes (a Black manly woman coming from the ghetto that hates whites) still were (are) present in white America and how little America knows about Black ways of communication, that in most cases appropriates without even knowing of it (for example, the high five). Second of all, the gesture was wrongly named as "fist-bump", "fist pound" and even "terrorist fist jab", while the accurate term for it is "dap", "giving dap" or "pound" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 96).

What Smitherman and Alim note about The Pound is that mainstream white America's unfamiliarity with it, as well as many other aspects of Black communication, persists in the supposedly "postracial" twenty-first century. Additionally, they point to scholarly work that shows, both in its non-verbal and verbal forms, that Black Language continues to be misunderstood by the white mainstream. In particular, as scholar Annette Powell Williams stated, "Cultural 'understanding' can only come about after a long period of involvement with a group. The subtle ways in which black people communicate with each other, unperceived by the outsider –or, if perceived, likely to be misinterpreted– are nevertheless the cues that make for effective communication" (quoted in Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 96). From this view, whites' confusion about and misinterpretation of the Obamas' pound, underlines the cultural and linguistic gap between Black and white America that is indeed a consequence of that lack of a "long period of involvement" between the two groups that Williams argued about. This exposes the fact that what has been supposed to be (as Obama himself stated), for a long time now, one society, has actually always been split in two. Therefore, that "involvement" never happened.

Anyway, in contrast with the negative reactions of the white community, African Americans overwhelmingly applauded the Obamas' pound because it is a key sign of their Black identity. Indeed, for the Black community the Pound indicated that Obama was finally showing his "Black-hand side" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 98) and more importantly, knowing that previous generations of Blacks suppressed this kind of Black communication for fear of "looking *too* Black" in mainstream settings, in this scenario Obama could represent "Black Folks 2.0"(Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 98). As a matter of fact, by using The Pound, he made it "ok" because his gesture was signaling to a whole new generation of Blacks to not be ashamed of their ways of communications. Until President Obama, Black Language (or gestures indeed) was never used in politics. More precisely, as argued before, Blacks who aspired to get into politics knew that they were more likely to succeed if they spoke Standard English and spoke it "well". Essentially, they had to code-switch. This is a practice so deeply rooted in the African American community that is practiced daily, often without even being conscious of it, as explained by Harris in Chapter 2. Therefore, what Obama did was innovative at its most. He not only spoke Black Language, he used its gestures too, and conveyed in a subtle yet effective way his message, to the Black community, that you can speak Black, you can be who you are, and be proud of that. In particular, who interpreted the gesture right, found it "nice", "intimate", "spontaneous", "a genuine affectionate moment" and "people saw their willingness to display their affection in the way they really do at home" (Alim, Smitherman, 2012, p. 99).

What is more, with time and with the Obamas' choice to never apologize or show they were bothered by criticism and to keep practicing The Pound to greet people unashamedly (particularly Michelle), the "fist bump" acquired a degree of acceptance in the white mainstream, and even became a "cool gesture" because the first lady and the President also did that. What is remarkable on this matter, is the Obamas' ability in turning something considered mostly negative, into their favor, as Obama did with his "Race Speech". They were able to turn what initially was considered their weakness (in particular, Obama's position as non-white/non-Black and Michelle's association with the Ghetto) into something largely appreciated by both Black and white public. Moreover, they did that by taking from the AVT, which consists of language, but also gestures (like The Pound), attitudes and rhetorical qualities, like authenticity, spontaneity and confidence.

Furthermore, while the Obamas certainly helped with the new perception of The Pound as a "cool gesture" in white society, it should be noted that it was first introduced into mainstream Black Culture in the late 1970s/early1980s as Hip Hop Culture spread out from its NY home to Blacks all across the country (like Hip Hop, The Pound was also adopted by many multiracial urban youths). More specifically, Smitherman and Alim underline that in these days when gestures like The Pound and the high-five have gone global, it is well to remember that Black nonverbal (and verbal) communication has always had an ambivalent status in white mainstream culture.

4.3.2 The Mic Drop

(Yuri Gripas/Reuters)

In 2016, President Obama ended his last White House Correspondents' Dinner address by literally *dropping the mic*. More precisely, holding two fingers to his lips, he picked up his microphone, and then let it dramatically drop to the ground. While this is a typical Hip Hop Culture gesture, this time people were not as socked by it as they were by The Pound. This was at the end of his second mandate and America had grown accustomed to his Hip Hop identity. Also, the Correspondents' Dinner is an annual event that has occurred since 1921, thrown by the White House Correspondents' Association (the journalists who cover the White House and the President) and it is not an "official" event held by the US Government and the President is an invited guest. The speakers at the dinner are almost always comedians or media personalities who are heavily associated with politics. They generally attempt to poke light-hearted (and sometimes not-so light-hearted) fun at the President and the President typically delivers a (joke-laden) speech at the end. Therefore, somewhat of a not-so-serious moment was expected, and indeed it generated a good laugh in his audience. Anyway, from another perspective, it was a serious gesture on his part. It could be argued that it was the perfect end to his "Hip Hop presidency" and a key exposure moment of his Black identity. In other words, he went from establishing his Blackness with The Pound at the beginning of his presidency, to concluding in the same way, with a gesture that is once again a key element of Hip Hop Culture. Obama attended the event every year he was in office and his speeches were usually very funny and well received. This time however, he decided to conclude his eighth and final appearance in a way that would be remembered. What is more, he not only dropped his microphone, he did that while stating: "With that, I have just two more words to say: Obama out" (Obama, 2016). Two more words that are part as well of Hip Hop Language, words that evoked a speech by the then retiring NBA basketball player and Hip Hop Culture idol, Kobe Bryant, who had ended his speech with the words "mamba out" at the end of his last game on April 14, 2016 (Smith, 2016). In this way, Obama paid homage to his culture and identity, that as argued in this work, he spent time and effort into representing. Indeed, the *mic drop* is a gesture popularized by rappers and comedians since 1980 (Forrest, 2013). Performers from

different groups can engage in confrontational performance styles, rappers may participate in rap battles; comedians may interact with a heckler in the audience, and dropping the microphone after a particularly effective line indicated complete confidence in the opponent's inability to come back with anything that would be worthy of a response. Indeed, *Guardian*'s journalist Stuart Heritage, in his article "Obama Out: a brief story of mic drops" observed that, as a gesture, the mic drop signals the end of a statement so definitive that it cannot possibly be followed by anything. It is an act of destruction, as described in Eric B and Rakim's 1987 single *I Ain't No Joke*: "I used to let the mic smoke / Now I slam it when I'm done and make sure it's broke" (quoted in Heritage, 2016). Notable mic-droppers over time have included everyone from Eddie Murphy to Chris Rock to the Arctic Monkeys' Alex Turner. What is interesting is that the gesture gained increased popularity from 2012 when Obama first performed something similar to a mic drop on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* by concluding his performance by sort of prissily flinging his microphone to the ground (Heritage, 2016). Even then, his gesture captured mainstream attention and became a very popular meme on the internet. However, as Heritage observed, "no mic drop in history will ever be as thoroughly scrutinized as the one performed during his final White House correspondents' dinner" (Heritage, 2016). What is more, in 2017, RM, the leader of boy band BTS, revealed that the track "Mic Drop" from their extended play *Love Yourself: Her* was inspired by Obama's speech (Dahir, 2017). A figurative exchange of mic drops also features in a promotional video for the Invictus Games featuring Obama and the British Royal Family (Roberts, 2016).
What is interesting is that once again, an already popular gesture became even more "cool" and famous because Obama performed it. This is an additional proof of Obama's success in becoming a symbol (and so a representative of) Hip Hop Culture. Additionally, imitators of Barack Obama had made him perform the mic drop many times. Key & Peele sketches have depicted Obama dropping the mic, as has Saturday Night Live and the YouTubers Gregory Brothers (Heritage, 2016). In other words, Obama was pictured performing the mic drop even before he had ever done it. This shows that the idea of him as the "Hip Hop President" had long been in mainstream's minds.

Conclusion

From his campaign's "fist bump" to his theatrical mic drop at the White House correspondents' dinner, Barack Obama made of his political journey as a President a journey of restoring Blackness and Black Culture's worth to the eyes not only of America, but also of the world. He did that by using Hip Hop Culture as a smart and effective vehicle of Black representation. Remarkably, while The Pound first generated negative attention, and only then, acquired popularity into the mainstream, the mic drop was well received from the get-go. Consequently, it could be argued that Obama's strategy of representation of Hip Hop Culture actually did work to validate it to the eyes and ears of the mainstream. I think, in this way, he engaged in a re-humanizing process of the Black being that was very much needed. What is more, Obama not only gave voice for political expression to Black rappers, he was that voice too. His performances included the use of Black Language and gestures in more than one occasion. It was his way of telling the Black community, you can be who you are, you do not have to be ashamed. At the same time, he was communicating to the mainstream something even more important, that was, Black people are human and Black Culture needs to be acknowledged and cherished because it is actually a large part of the American mainstream. In this way, he managed to "flip the political script" of America and become the First Black President that was also the First Hip Hop President, and he was both, he embodied two societies, two Americas, and validated one for the other and I think this was the reason of his success. Finally, one more interpretation of Obama's mic drop is left to make. What if with that, Obama not only wanted to spectacularly conclude his speech, but really, he was concluding his presidency in the same way he initiated it? With a spontaneous, authentic, Black culturally rooted gesture. I think it was a way for him of paying homage to his culture, to acknowledge it one more time, a way to remind everyone that although (or maybe under this perspective, because) he is Black, he is The First Black President of the U.S. The message that he sent by dropping the microphone could be interpreted as a call to all Blacks to acknowledge their identity, a call to solidarity, and ultimately a call to recognition by all Americans, that Black people are also powerful, capable of great things and deserving of respect. From my point of view, the most relevant action Obama called is the one for the Black identity recognition: the mainstream has to acknowledge Black Culture and its creations, in order to support the actual integration of the African

American being inside the mainstream society, which can only happen by interrupting cultural assimilation without cultural recognition. Finally, to accomplish this scope, more structural changes in society are still needed.

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Summary in Italian

Fin da piccola sono sempre stata affascinata dall'America e dalla sua idea di "terra delle grandi opportunità". Essendo nata nel 1997, sono cresciuta guardando programmi che mostravano l'America come il paese delle occasioni, in cui si svolgevano grandi e ambiziose storie che si concludevano sempre con il successo dei protagonisti, che riuscivano a realizzare i propri sogni. Crescendo, mi immedesimavo in quelle storie con la fantasia, creando scenari sempre diversi ma con lo stesso finale: riuscivo a farcela. È stato questo che, quando ero più piccola, mi ha spinto ad imparare la lingua inglese e che, da più grande, mi ha influenzato nello scegliere il mio percorso universitario - incentrato sulla lingua e cultura inglese e americana. Quando ho iniziato a studiare la storia dell'America ho capito che tutto ciò che vedevo in quei programmi televisivi rappresentava solo una parte della società americana, quella "bianca". Dunque, ho capito che era così facile sentirmi parte di quella cultura perché quei programmi erano pensati proprio per persone come me, bianche.

Grazie alle lezioni di corsi come Storia degli Stati Uniti d'America, Letteratura anglo-americana, Letteratura contemporanea inglese, Sociologia e Diritti umani, ho acquisito una visione ben più critica della realtà e, soprattutto, ho appreso quanto io abbia dato per scontato il mio "privilegio bianco" in questi anni. Frantumando la mia idealizzazione dell'America, sono stata in grado di approfondire le sue sfaccettature e contraddizioni. Una di queste è che il Paese è raccontato come il "Paese della libertà" da alcune persone, ma che purtroppo non lo è stato per altre. Studiando questi argomenti, ho iniziato a scoprire i molti modi in cui gli afroamericani continuano ad affrontare le conseguenze della schiavitù nella nazione che si proclama "libera" per eccellenza. In particolare, il mio interesse è stato catturato dal modo in cui la comunità afroamericana è riuscita a sopravvivere in una società che continua a inquadrarli come cittadini di "seconda classe" e che valorizza quasi esclusivamente la "bianchezza". Durante il mio percorso universitario ho iniziato a riflettere molto su questo argomento, ed è per questo motivo che ho deciso di approfondirlo nella mia tesi. Infatti, durante questo lavoro prendo in considerazione tre punti principali: la Lingua Inglese Nera e la Tradizione Orale Afroamericana, le contraddizioni dell'America e la necessità di rappresentazione Nera. Partendo dalla schiavitù fino ad arrivare ad oggi, in questo elaborato analizzo il linguaggio afroamericano come mezzo principale di resistenza Nera, prendendo in considerazione le condizioni socioculturali della comunità afroamericana e la sua evoluzione. Lo scopo è quello di evidenziare come questo linguaggio culturalmente radicato ha contribuito all'avanzamento della comunità Nera in America e come questo sia riuscito a preservare l'identità culturale di questa comunità. Inoltre, il linguaggio afroamericano è stato negli anni adattato man mano che le esigenze della comunità cambiavano, in modo da essere utilizzato per il perseguimento di obiettivi precisi.

Ciò che voglio evidenziare con questa tesi è come il linguaggio abbia effettivamente funzionato per il raggiungimento di questi obiettivi e raccontare così il grande potere che si cela dietro di esso. In particolare, la lingua afroamericana è caratterizzata dal forte desiderio di rottura degli stereotipi e dei pregiudizi razziali che continuano a relegare i membri della comunità Nera ai margini della società. Partendo da questa condizione di subordinazione alla società mainstream (termine con cui si indica la parte predominante della società americana, quella bianca), esploro dapprima le tecniche di comunicazione in opposizione al sistema bianco, per poi arrivare alla cultura e ad il linguaggio Hip Hop, nati come mezzo di rappresentazione Nera. In ultimo, evidenzio il fatto che il linguaggio e la cultura afroamericana condividono obiettivi, ma anche mancanze, in particolare, di rappresentanza politica. Per rispondere a quest'ultima, prendo in esame la figura di Barack Obama, primo Presidente afroamericano degli USA. In quanto oratore particolarmente abile, Obama è stato in grado di trattare il "problema della razza" in America e di rappresentare la sua identità culturale in molti modi, impegnandosi in un processo di "ri-umanizzazione" della personalità Nera agli occhi del mainstream. Questo processo aveva l'obiettivo di favorire da una parte l'integrazione all'interno della società mainstream (grazie alla rappresentazione politica), dall'altra la validazione del linguaggio e della cultura Neri anche da parte dei suoi stessi membri, che spesso sono spinti a ricercare "bianchezza" per sentirsi più accettati dalla società. Infine, concludo la mia tesi con alcuni spunti di riflessione, in particolare riflettendo su quanto la figura di Obama ha significato in quegli anni e quali sono state possibili conseguenze visibili ancora oggi.

In dettaglio, nel Capitolo 1, tratto principalmente le origini e le caratteristiche dell'Inglese Afroamericano. Esso si è originato nelle piantagioni di schiavi dove, nonostante la varietà di gruppi linguistici dell'Africa occidentale, deliberatamente mescolati nelle piantagioni, al fine di ostacolare la comunicazione tra schiavi e la ribellione, si è evoluto come lingua comune diventando la lingua franca delle comunità schiavizzate. Con il tempo, la lingua da loro creata diventò un vero e proprio codice, inaccessibile ai loro padroni, e che divenne uno dei principali mezzi di resistenza degli schiavi. Grazie al “codice”, all'interno delle piantagioni, credenze culturali, conoscenze, espressioni artistiche e idee venivano preservati e tramandati oralmente da una generazione all'altra. In questo modo, la Tradizione Vernacolare Afroamericana (AVT) si è formata e si è fatta carico di portare avanti l’identità culturale della comunità Nera degli Stati Uniti fino ad oggi. Nel Capitolo 2 analizzo questa tradizione, che preserva l’eredità afroamericana e riflette lo spirito collettivo della razza, evidenziandone gli elementi costitutivi. Le pratiche comunicative, le strategie retoriche e i gesti radicati nella tradizione, non solo sono legati alla passata esperienza della schiavitù che gli Afroamericani hanno in comune, ma si sono anche evoluti e adattati per soddisfare le diverse esigenze degli Africani in America. Infatti, da questo punto in poi, pongo particolare attenzione allo status socioculturale degli afroamericani nell’attuale società americana e al modo in cui la comunità Nera utilizza il suo linguaggio come mezzo di resistenza in opposizione al sistema “bianco-americano”. Questo sistema è responsabile di ciò che Du Bois articola come la “doppia coscienza” dell’essere Nero, cioè una condizione di disagio che spiega il sentimento degli afroamericani di essere “un americano” ma anche “un Negro” (Du Bois, 1903). Partendo da questo concetto, nel Capitolo 3, svolgo un’ampia discussione sulla doppia coscienza, sulla “nerezza”, e sul “problema della razza” in America. La figura principale presa in considerazione in questa discussione è l'ex presidente degli Stati Uniti Barack Obama che è un esempio particolarmente appropriato perché non solo in quanto afroamericano, ha sperimentato la doppia coscienza e si è impegnato in un viaggio alla ricerca della sua identità Nera da adulto, ma è anche l'autore di quello che oggi è conosciuto come il “Discorso sulla Razza”. Questo discorso è un'opera retorica eccezionale e innovativa in cui Obama ha unito due società storicamente opposte e separate, attingendo in gran parte alle strategie retoriche della tradizione afroamericana. Obama diventa in questo modo il focus principale del mio lavoro anche nel Capitolo 4 in cui sostengo che il suo uso della lingua Nera insieme all'orgogliosa esibizione della sua identità culturale (in particolare della sua identità Hip Hop) attraverso gesti ma anche attraverso politiche di rappresentazione, in cui ha coinvolto l’attuale voce della causa Nera, cioè, i rapper, hanno lavorato per il progresso della comunità Nera in modi diversi, che alla fine hanno contribuito a restituire umanità alla personalità afroamericana agli occhi del mainstream.