AFRICAN-AMERICAN LANGUAGE USE:
IDEOLOGY AND SO-CALLED OBSCENITY

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4/8/1997

BACKGROUND

This paper is about what has been called obscene language. As I indicate below, I prefer to use the term uncensored speech in order not to prejudge the actions of the users of such speech. My wish not to prejudge is not the result of unreflexive liberal humanism; rather, it reflects one of the major conclusions presented below, to wit: in many cases, rigorous analysis of form, meaning, and communicative behavior is required before one can pass judgment on the speech of members of communities other than one's own, where the term community membership is determined by age, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, gender, and other variables.

Those who are invariably offended even by mentions, let alone uses, of "obscenity" should not read further. At the outset, I should make some clarifications and disclaimers since it seems many people wish, and indeed insist upon, forcing the discussions below into the judgmental framework of their own personal norms of propriety.

As most social science writers, I have tried to be objective, but it goes without saying that it is possible that some biases based on my own position and personal history in society have inadvertently influenced my discussions. I should also point out that well over a hundred people, students and others, the great majority of whom are African Americans[1] who are culturally African American, have read and discussed with me various versions of this paper, and that it currently incorporates information they have given me. My goal has been to analyze a type of speech behavior that is certainly controversial but which has important implications for understanding some sectors of the African-American community—and even of the White community and other American communities. The type of speech behavior discussed below is indeed present throughout the United States and no doubt present to some extent in all societies.

The examples that I use sometimes represent to varying extents misogynist and other oppressive views, but at the same time they represent behavior that is important to understand. Such behavior cannot be understood without examination, which in turn requires exemplification. I should also point out that the use of specific terms in specific utterances does not necessarily imply anything con-

cerning misogyny or other oppressive orientations. For example, the use of *bitch* and *ho'* (which, by the way, can be used for males as well as females, but usually for the latter) does not necessarily imply that an utterance is misogynist. For example, some females use *bitch* generically to refer to other females—as do some males. Geneva Smitherman (p.c. 1997) provides the example of a well-known male (African-American) gangsta rap artist who said to a prominent (African-American) female economist, as they shared a limousine on the way to a program they were going to do together, something along the lines of, "Wow, I don't think I've ever met a bitch economist before." The rapper was positively impressed and had no intention of insulting the economist. He was not aware of her rules of speech use and evaluation. She was not aware of his and rebuked him with uncommon severity all the way to their destination.

Likewise, the use of *nigga*[2] in an utterance does not necessarily mean that it is racist or reflective of self-hate. Terms such as these are used sometimes simply to refer individuals without any evaluative implications. Sometimes they are even used in positive evaluative contexts. This is a major point of the discussion below. It is also important to remember that racism, sexism, and other oppressive views can be communicated in utterances with no uncensored expressions. Geneva Smitherman (p.c.) provides the telling example of a male preacher who refers to all the women pastors in the audience as "Sista so-and-so," rather than "Reverend so-and-so." The same preacher refers to male preachers as "reverend."

Like most studies, this one is part of a larger project. I have begun my study of uncensored speech with some of the most controversial items because these seem the best point of entry into the general phenomenon. I am aware that the examples will make some people feel uncomfortable, as I would be for example in reading an article on racist Ku Klux Klan speech behavior sprinkled with words such as *nigger*. However, realizing that the article was oriented toward understanding that speech behavior in an attempt to figure out what should or could be done about it, if anything, I, personally, would put my discomfiture aside. Others might react differently. In any case, I recommend that readers approach the material herein intellectually.

Although the examples below do not represent my speech or attitudes, they are part of my world, so to speak, since I hear this kind of speech daily in the African-American community in which I have lived for over a decade and that in which I grew up. When the weather is not too harsh, I can sit on my front stoop and collect examples. I hear daily similarly "obscene" speech throughout the city I live in—from Whites and virtually every other group of English speakers. African Americans are not the only group that uses uncensored speech.[3]

The kind of speech described below is used by only some African Americans. It is not true that all African Americans use uncensored speech. Some do not. It is not true that all Whites use uncensored speech. Empirical research alone will tell us how many African Americans—and Whites as well as others—do or do not use uncensored speech. Such speech is found in all of the major social groupings, e.g., male and female as well as all classes. There are also people in all of these groupings who do not use it. Most important to remember is

that it is not confined to rappers or working-class or un(der)employed males, the group with whom such behavior is often popularly associated. In all age and class groups, some males and some females regularly use uncensored speech. This statement can be corroborated by anyone living in the African-American communities I live and have lived in, and the same is surely true of those living in many other African-American communities, and undoubtedly also those living in many non-African-American communities.

This is a crucial point because many people, linguists included, believe that people who use uncensored speech can be categorized socially in a neat way. The major social groupings that social scientists usually employ are inadequate for this purpose. I believe that religious values along with family upbringing and mores are among the key determinants of the use or nonuse of uncensored speech; and, I might add, it will be easier to characterize who does not use such speech rather than who does.

This writing is not about Asian Americans, Whites, and others, whether they do or do not use uncensored speech. It is focused on those African Americans who do use it regularly. It is not about African Americans who do not use or do not use regularly uncensored speech. It does not trivialize or marginalize this last group: it is simply not about them.

So, what are we to make of the following phrase?

(1) muthafuckin bitch-ass nigga

Several questions come to mind, and I will attempt to provide answers in the discussions below.

1. Is such language acceptable or should it be classified as obscenity? Should this and similar expressions[4] be forbidden, if indeed that is possible?
2. Is such language abnormal in any sense?
3. Do the frequency and function of this and similar expressions indicate anything about the character of some African-American communities in the United States? More specifically, do this and similar expressions indicate degeneration in social life, in ethics and values?
4. Do such expressions tell us something fundamental about language use in at least some African-American communities?

I will return to the question of what speech tells us about community life and values and enter some comments here on debates concerning acceptability.

A number of recent events have raised fundamental questions concerning what type of speech is acceptable and whether certain types of speech should be prohibited. One set of events relates to the racist language to which students of color (mostly African American) have been subjected on college campuses, calling forth organized protests by the victimized groups along with their allies and the installation of speech codes, whose appropriateness, effectiveness, and legality are still under debate.

3

Another event I will discuss in more detail since it bears closely on the issues of primary concern for discussions below. That event is related to the furor raised by the lyrics of songs on an album of the African-American rap group 2 Live Crew, *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*. Outrage over the obscenity and explicitly sexual and misogynist subject matter came to a boil in 1990. (Here, I speak in the voice of those who condemned these songs. Nevertheless, I do not want to prejudge. What is obscene and what is verbally sexual or misogynist is ultimately a matter of interpretation.) Media coverage of the debate initiated by that outrage included writings in *The New York Times* by Michele M. Moody-Adams, "Don't Confuse 2 Live Crew with Black Culture" (25 Jun 1990, p. A16) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "2 Live Crew, Decoded" (19 Jun 1990, p. A23) among others.

These writers and others who entered the debate were dealing with lyrics talking about placing a "bitch" on a bed, lying on her back with her legs in the air making her "pussy splats." Moreover, the lyrics go on to speak of trying "to abuse it," a "big stinkin' pussy" ("Put Her in the Buck" by 2 Live Crew). This example is provided to give readers a clear idea of what the furor was about.

As several social commentators have noted, the content represented in 2 Live Crew's music has been present in urban, African-American communities for a long time—and in non-African-American communities as well. For most of that time, however, it did not go outside of those communities, although popular comics such as Moms Mabley, Redd Foxx, and Richard Pryor, in particular, opened the door to the outside so that groups such as 2 Live Crew could come through.

The content and style of 2 Live Crew's rap, however, most certainly do not represent the only strain in verbal forms of African-American popular culture. Indeed, even among rappers, the style of 2 Live Crew represents a minority. Many rappers infuse their music with social critique, strategies for community self-help, and sociohistorical remembrances seeking to instill group pride and initiative. It is disgraceful yet expectable that so much media attention in the United States has focused on one corner of the rap industry to the almost wholesale exclusion of mainstream media coverage of what is on the whole--in terms of uplift, business acumen, grassroots orientation, and critical depth--among the most progressive institutions in the African-American community (Dyson 1993; Rose 1994).

2 Live Crew's lyrics incorporate ideas, discourse strategies, and verbal styles which have long been present in toasts, playing the dozens, and signifying (as Gates noted in his editorial). The lyrics, then, are certainly within the African-American cultural tradition. However, there are several African-American cultures, just as there are several AAEs,[5] related yet different, separated by socio-economic class in addition to other social factors. We must keep in mind that prose versions of 2 Live Crew's lyrics are heard daily in urban African-American communities and not thought worthy of special attention. I hear them regularly in my neighborhood. Moreover, the girls and women to whom this kind of explicit language might in some circumstances actually be directed are perfectly capable of providing just the response it deserves.

4

With regard to rap specifically, it must be mentioned that most types of rap have a caustic turn, one that touches all the topics it considers. Rap comments and discourses on women, people of same-sex orientation, government social policy, the police, capitalism, rival rap groups, and alienation tend all to be equally caustic. Noteworthy exceptions to this caustic turn are gospel, educational, and what some call "bubble-gum" rap, exemplified by Will Smith, who later became the star of the television situation-comedy "The Fresh Prince of Bel Air."

To return to our original question of what is acceptable, it should be emphasized that only a proper linguistic (in the broad sense including the social and the grammatical) understanding of expressions such as that in ex. 1 can provide the foundation for an answer.

THE FRAMEWORK

Language norms and interpretation are the subject matter of the broad sociocultural study of language referred to as the ethnography of communication. As originally developed by Hymes and Gumperz, and subsequently students who joined them, it has been concerned with a deeper understanding of language in its social context than what had been provided by studies preceding it. The focus was not only on (1) linguistic repertoires (the language varieties one uses in speaking), but also (2) nonverbal communication, (3) the speech community (which shares at least one speech variety—dialect, language, jargon, etc.—and rules for language use, interpretation, and evaluation), (4) speech genres (preaching, joking, etc.), and (5) the rules themselves for speech interpretation and evaluation. For examples of the early classic studies in the ethnography of communication, see Gumperz and Hymes (1964, 1972).

Interpretation is related to important notions such as key (other terms are also used), which refers to manner of speech or trope, whether an utterance should be taken literally, figuratively, or ironically, for example. Speech evaluation is along several conceptual lines: positive/negative, profane/sacred, obscene/decent, high/low (with regard to formality of context and socioeconomic stratum) and so forth.

Outside *Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression* and a few studies such as Zwicky *et al.* (1971), Halliday (1976), Davis (1989), Andersson and Trudgill (1990), Hughes (1992), Jay (1992–primarily psychological), and Bolton and Hutton (1995), relatively little theoretical attention has been given to "bad" language. By "bad" language, I refer to language that is evaluated as negative by important, power-wielding segments of a community, if not the entire community, but that is, of course, sometimes used nevertheless.

Although much attention has been devoted to variation in speech according to social context (church, school, pool hall, etc., with peers, parents, or strangers), next to nothing has dealt with major shifts in language evaluation across social contexts and historically. To facilitate discussion, I introduce the term *mode*, meaning a context- or participant-based style of speech characterized by high

distinctiveness in the rules of speech evaluation on a positive/negative scale. Of central concern for this writing is *uncensored mode*. In this mode, expressions that in censored contexts are considered obscene or evaluatively negative are used in an almost or completely evaluatively neutral way. Among *censored contexts*, I include church services and other contexts in which persons of high, mainstream-supported respect[6] are present, e.g. ministers, elderly relatives, etc. Thus, we could say that in locker rooms, almost invariably uncensored mode (hereafter UM) speech is used, whereas in church we would expect censored speech.

In sum, some types of language can go anywhere. Some cannot. The study of modes would be concerned with what speech can go where and when, with what exceptions, and more generally how we can characterize the speech of particular contexts in mode terms.

Uncensored speech is found in virtually every community; it is by no means limited to the African-American community. It is also found in a wide range of segments of the community. Thus, it is certainly not limited to younger age groups, even though we might hypothesize that, other things being equal, it will be found more among younger groups. Nor is it limited to males or lower-income groups.

The increase in the sheer amount of uncensored speech and its use in a wider range of contexts than previously, not only among Anglo-African Americans and Latino-African Americans but Whites and others as well, has been noted by many. It is clear that there has been a shift over this century in the use of uncensored speech in the United States and in all similar modern, highly industrialized societies. Practically anyone over forty (perhaps even younger) in such a society can confirm this by consideration of the changes that have occurred in the classroom, television, and movies.

What is new and what occasions this writing is the presence of uncensored speech in the mass media in much greater quantities than before and its *normalization*, the use of uncensored expressions by some types of people in most social settings in an evaluatively neutral way, i.e., the expressions are not inherently negative or positive. That is, they are neutralized: they are negative, positive, or neutral in force depending on the token in which they occur. Many people who function exclusively or primarily in mainstream settings are not aware of this. In brief, neutralization across a wide range of social contexts, if not almost all, results in normalization.

Some of the types of semantic change that have accompanied neutralization and normalization are noteworthy also, particularly generalization of meaning, evident in the case of *nigga*. In the case of this lexical item, one of its principal semantic features (to look at the issue in this way) has been deleted: [+ of African descent]. Neither ethnicity nor lineage determines its use anymore (see below). Instead of being a consequence of neutralization and normalization, generalization appears strongly to be a consequence of the higher level of adoption by the general American community of aspects of African-American culture today than in the past.

The term *uncensored mode* has been coined in recognition that individuals

operate effectively within different evaluative language norm contexts—which is true of language users worldwide. My focus, however, is on certain African-American groups, among whom there is normalization or there is significant use of uncensored speech, i.e., in a broad range of social situations. (Normalization has also increased among other African-descent, Asian-American, and White youth, indicating that growing normalization is a by-product of American culture, or, perhaps, the postmodern, postindustrial, capitalist state.)

AN ANALYSIS OF TWO EXPRESSIONS

Introduction

In this section, I will present analyses and discussions of two features in example (1): *-ass*, exemplified in *bitch-ass*, and *nigga*. These items are among those seen as the main offenders by many who would prohibit or limit uncensored language. I will concentrate mainly on these two items but will also provide some comments on a few related words and a basic semantic interpretation of the phrase itself.

Often it is assumed that writings on the structure and use of AAE are contrastive with White language varieties since indeed many of them have been concerned with where differences lie. My concern in this writing is not contrastive. I am interested in presenting aspects of AAE grammar and use, and in some cases one finds the same phenomenon with White varieties. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that with respect to all of the features discussed below, there are significant quantitative or qualitative differences between AAE and White vernaculars.

This analysis is based on (1) papers, personal communications, and speech tape recordings of students who have lived in African-American communities (principally in New York City) and who have direct and regular contact with African-American groups using UM speech as their main mode or certainly one of their important modes of speech, (2) my own knowledge based on living in several African-American communities, and (3) interviews with various individuals who have lived in African-American communities across the nation. (The main source is 1.) I also refer to a few brief writings in the popular press on the subject.

The grammar of *-ass* words

My concern in this section will be with the grammar (specifically, morphology, syntax, and semantics) and use (basically pragmatics) of what I refer to as *-ass* words (hereafter AWs), so termed because of the special type of compounding involved in words such as, e.g., bitch-ass. A number of the following examples with negative import refer to females (although an expression such as *bitch-ass* can be said of males too). This occurs because of the dynamics of the kind of dis-

course being examined, a discourse, one might add, which reflects the sexism in American society in general and in the African-American community specifically. (See, among the many works in a African-American feminist tradition, hooks 1990.) In a number of cases, examples with negative import referring to males and that are pragmatically authentic are not available, or the author, being male and middle-class, has less access to the full range of uncensored discourse than others, who might be able to provide additional, appropriate, male-oriented examples to expand the data set already collected.

The grammar and use of these compounds is more complex than what is presented below, which is intended to serve solely as an introductory treatment. AWs are closely related in semantics and pragmatics (function) to *-time* words, such as *jive-time* 'acting or talking in a unserious or deceptive way', *hippy-time* 'acting or talking like a hippy (i.e., flower child of the 1960s and 1970s) or pseudo-hip person', *country-time* 'unsophisticated, naive', *punk-time* 'behaving like a male homosexual or in an unmanly way', and *Jew-time* 'behaving in a way, often stereotypically, associated with Jews' (as distinct from *Jew-town*,[7] which may be used as a verb, adverb, adjective or noun).

The first element of AWs need not be a single noun; one also finds adjectives, e.g., *jive-ass*, 'insincere, insignificant', *stank-ass* 'smelly, nasty'; participles, e.g., *cocksuckin'-ass, muthafuckin'-ass*; and various other types of complex formatives, e.g., *pussy-whipped-ass* 'female-dominated', *no-dancin'-ass, cock-diesel-ass* 'impressively muscular' (allomorphs: cock-diese, cock-dee); and occasionally full VPs, e.g., *ain't-got-no-rap-ass* 'unable to speak persuasively, especially to desirable females'. I have singled out AWs for attention because they reflect a productive morphological process that is central to UM and because they illustrate and elaborate on the point made concerning neutralization: neutralization is not only contextual, it also has grammatical dimensions that require linguistic analysis for full understanding.

Before making the first point about AWs, I point out that hyphens will be used to link *ass* to the preceding lexical material in AWs, as opposed to other kinds of expressions with *ass*. *Ass* in AWs does not serve its widely known function as noun denoting 'buttocks'. Of course, *ass* is used in the sense 'buttocks', so there arises a question as to whether the grammar of African-American English distinguishes two asses. I will refer to the ass that occurs in AWs as discourse - *ass*. I will refer to the noun ass denoting 'buttocks' as anatomical *ass*. There is also a third *ass*, occurring in expressions in which it is preceded by a possessive pronoun, usually used as the equivalent of the reflexive *self*, as in ex. (2) but also used as a substitute for other pronouns, e.g., *him*, as in ex. (3a) and *he* in (3b):

(2)   Get your triflin' *ass* out of here. (= Get your triflin' *self* out of here.)
(3)   a. I saw his *ass* yesterday. (= I saw *him* yesterday.)
        b.His *ass* is gonna get fried. (=*He* is gonna get fried [reprimanded, punished].)

I refer to this third type of expression in which ass occurs as a metonymic pseudo-pronoun (MPP), metonymic because ass in its anatomical sense has been metonymically extended to stand for the whole person. I note in passing that speakers of probably all varieties of American English use some types of MPPs e.g., *Get your butt out of bed!* In other varieties, though, there are not as many of them nor do they have anything approaching the broad range of use found in AAE varieties.

In some cases, the type of ass (anatomical, discourse [i.e., AWs], or metonymic) being used is not clear, e.g., in

(4) Look at his fat ass.

The use of *ass* in this example might literally refer to buttocks (anatomical *ass*) or, metonymically, to the entire person, in which case the sentence would be the equivalent of *Look at his fat self*. In some cases, however, the specific modifier of *ass* allows for only one interpretation. For example, the phrase *satchel ass* (used mainly by older African Americans) can be interpreted only as anatomical since *satchel* (in my vernacular at least) can refer only to buttocks, not the whole person, unlike an adjective such as fat. Thus, if someone said *Look at that satchel ass muthafucka*, s/he would necessarily be referring to the buttocks of the "muthafucka."

An important question is how one can tell when there is an AW (i.e., with discourse -*ass*). In some cases, access to the mind of the speaker or social context is necessary, e.g., with *fat(-)ass idiot*. In other instances, the linguistic context suffices, e.g., *satchel ass idiot* or *shelf-butt-ass Joe*. In the former, *ass* is necessarily anatomical, while in the latter it is necessarily discourse -*ass*, i.e., an AW. Anatomical and discourse *ass* cannot occur next to one another, thus the unacceptability of **Look at that fat ass-ass idiot*, where, were this string permissible, the first -*ass* would be the anatomical one, the second the discourse -*ass*. Interestingly, discourse -*ass* can occur, however, with *butt*, another word for ass, as in the just cited example *shelf butt-ass Joe*.

The meaning of -*ass* in AWs is to be found on the level of discourse and expressive meaning. That is to say that what -*ass* in AWs communicates invariably is something about the communicative situation. The basic meaning, then, is social and abstract. AWs mark a discourse as being in UM. It may in specific utterances have the force of an intensifier, as Smitherman (1994: 94) observes; but this is not always the case.

AWs are a type of compound. They are written hyphenated to indicate that they receive stress as compounds do, e.g., *blackbird*, which has primary-secondary stress (1-2 stress). With AWs, secondary stress falls on -*ass*, and primary stress falls on one of the syllables of the first element. As other com-

9

pounds, and NPs in general, AWs can serve a modifying function, viz. to modify following nouns, e.g., *crazy-ass muthafucka* 'a crazy [with several meanings: 'funny', 'mentally ill', 'bold'] male' (as opposed to the other interpretation, *fat ass muthafucka* 'a male with fat buttocks.)

AWs are unlike the typical compound, and like the typical grammatical morpheme, in that the meaning of -ass, as noted, has been semantically bleached: it no longer serves to convey referential meaning; rather, its meaning resides on the discourse-expressive level, marking UM. More specifically, then, its meaning has been generalized (one aspect of semantic bleaching); it has gone from referring to a body part to referring to the discourse situation. (As an MPP, ass has been generalized to refer to the entire person.)

There are several morphological and syntactic constraints on AWs. A morphological constraint is that -ass is not inflected. Note that normally expressions referring to certain kinds of body parts possessed by an individual have the -*ed* suffix, e.g*., pidgeon-toed, slew-footed, left-handed, cross-eyed,* etc. (In my vernacular, anatomical *ass* is variably inflected; thus *fat ass**ed** idiot* and *fat ass idiot,* but not **triflin'-ass**ed** idiot,* though *triflin'-ass idiot* is fine. (Again, the hyphen indicates an AW.) Notice that *smart-ass*, uninflected, appears frequently in *The Village Voice,* apparently from the pens of White writers.) Uninflectability is an expected result of grammaticalization. That anatomical *ass* is only variably uninflected is possibly the result of its association through homophony and dia-chrony with discourse -*ass*. It is clear that, historically, discourse -*ass* arose from a semantic split involving anatomical *ass*. (The reverse is highly implausible.)

One syntactic constraint on AWs is that they must be followed by a noun.

(5)   a *He's jive-ass ('insincere').   d. *He's a jive-ass.
        b *He's triflin'-ass.   e. *He's a triflin'-ass.
        c *He's bitch-ass.   f. *He's a bitch-ass.

(Some people accept 5a and 5b with AWs containing adjectives, but not 5c containing an AW with a noun.) Other types of sentences with an AW followed by a noun are also unacceptable, e.g., *I saw that jive-ass, *I saw that bitch-ass.* The sentences in 6 are acceptable.

(6)   a. She's a triflin'-ass woman.
        b. He's a jive-ass fool.

It is not obvious how this restriction might be explained.

To return to questions of meaning, it should be observed that AWs do not consistently signal "hard" semantic content; indeed, in most cases, they do not. So, frequently one AW may be easily substituted for another.[8] AWs most often occur with slang expressions that come in sets of semantically interchangeable items, e.g., the set of generalized positive evaluation *fly, phat, fresh, dope*.

AWs are more about poetics, ways of positioning oneself in the world and emotive reactions and attitudes toward other entities. However, AWs *do* carry

some lexical, as opposed to discourse, meaning, but that meaning is always carried by the formative to which -ass is attached. This is in accord with the claim that the -ass in AWs is semantically bleached and evaluatively neutral. The fact that whatever hard information is carried by the first element accounts for the selecting of particular items to combine, e.g., *bitch* as opposed to tired or *funky*.

AWs are often used by the speaker simply because of their rhythmic utility. As with *playing the dozens, snapping,*[9] *reciting toasts,* denotative meaning and economy of expression are not the issue. Rather, expressive ingenuity and social effect are. In sum, AWs may express significant lexical content (with the word[s] accompanying *-ass*), but more often than not, their primary function is to be found at the poetic-expressive-discourse level.

This last point is true for a number of items typical of UM, e.g., *muthafuckin*, which has little or no referential meaning, as opposed to discourse-expressive meaning. Observe that, while *muthafucka* generally refers to any male, like the work *guy*, *muthafuckin* is more general in reference and can be applied to any referent, including inanimate ones, e.g., *Get all that muthafuckin-ass, funky shit out of here*, and female ones, e.g. *Bitch, I'll kick your muthafuckin ass*.

AWs reflect a highly productive morphological (i.e., compounding) process. There are, however, some very clear exceptions, some variably so, e.g., **butter-ass* (accepted by a few people), **dope-ass, *phat-ass,* and **nigga-ass.* (The first element in the first three is a general term of positive evaluation like *cool* and *fly*.) There appear to be no grammatical or sociocultural explanations for these exceptions as a group; however, certain ones may have plausible explanations within the scope of our current knowledge of uncensored mode speech, but I will not pursue the matter.

That AWs are not inherently negative or positive can be easily shown by the fact that, in addition to occurring with negative expressions such as *triflin'* and *fucked-up*, they also occur with positive ones such as *fly, fine* 'good-looking', and cock-diesel,[10] e.g., fine-ass muthafucka 'good-looking male', fine-ass bitch 'good-looking female'. Many people are simply unwilling to believe that AWs have uses with positive evaluation, but these and equivalent sentences can actually be heard. (An example, with context, of such a "difficult-to-believe" utterance would be "Hey, muthafucka" as a perfectly friendly greeting. I was greeted that way on a number of occasions during my junior high school through college years—by middle- and working-class peers, males in these cases.)[11]

Nigga

Most Americans know that *nigga* (hereafter N except in examples) is used among African Americans (and other blacks in the United States), but African Americans (and blacks in general) take grave offense at whites' calling them N. In what follows, I will concentrate on African Americans, since non-African-Americans blacks in the United States are a varied group and I do not know much about their attitudes specifically. What is not widely known is that usage of the word, as lin-

guists would expect, is much more subtle. It is currently used by younger African Americans (roughly under 30) and some non-African Americans to mean 'male'; it applies to males of any ethnicity in much the same way as does *guy*. (It may also refer to females included in a group with males.) The meaning of *nigga* does not change in any consistent way when applied to persons of different ethnicities.

The problem has historically been with whites calling African-Americans N. It is not fully clear, but apparently sometime during the immediate post-Vietnam War era, or perhaps during the war itself, N began to be applied to non-African Americans, by African Americans and whites. So, perhaps the first issue to be dealt with is specifically when whites can call African Americans N.

The important features of situations in which this is possible without offense, which in turn assume a certain type of relationship among the interlocutors, are African-American cultural dominance (and perhaps numerical dominance) and interpersonal relationships involving whites (typically European Americans) who are able to function in a culturally African-American way and who have established solid, trusting relationships with African Americans. One context where one definitely finds at least some whites permitted N-use would be urban basketball courts (Curbelo 1994). It would appear that only among younger African-Americans, say those under thirty, does one find appreciable numbers who accept, under stipulation, N-use by whites.

Certainly, the great majority of African Americans, male and female, use N, even if very infrequently, when among other African Americans, and do so regardless of their attitudes about N use. In other words, some may be against N-use, but use it nevertheless. N-use attitudes are mostly of two types: positive and negative. The negative view is presented well by a twenty-eight year old college student (who uses an AW):

There is a real danger when we ourselves have accepted the use of a word that was imposed on us by our oppressors to degrade and humiliate our ancestors. By us allowing this word to permeate our communities, our minds and our vocabulary, is like we're saying to the white man-slaveholder, 'Yeah, you're right we ain't nothing but a stinky-ass nigger anyway.' So we need to raise our consciousness and stop this annihilation (quoted in Curbelo 1994).

The positive view has quite eloquently been expressed thus:

Look, we have the power to determine how and what we say. We can't let no white man determine that for us. It's like, if we ain't gonna use it because white people have misused it, that's bullshit. We need to take the power back and have control over our own lives and that includes how we talk and the words we use.... I mean great black poems have been written about 'nigger' by great 'niggas' for 'niggas'.... It can be an empowering word, and it can show black pride. In the '70s, you saw a lot of that, people in Afros calling each other nigger', making music about it, writing poems, making films.... I just saw a documentary recently on Malcolm X, made in the '70s, and the opening is this whole thing showing black people in Afros on the street, and there was some kind of tune through this whole thing saying, 'Nigger, nigger, nigger'.... It was deep, real powerful stuff...(quoted in Curbelo1994).

My data and understanding of N-use indicate that the use of the word itself is a marker of UM since most speakers would censor it in what I have termed censored contexts (see above).

N has definitely been neutralized, and I sense that it is used positively as much as negatively. We might also distinguish neutral uses, whereby N simply means 'guy', 'dude', 'homeboy', 'homie', 'brotha' (brother), or 'partna' (partner). These uses appear to be quantitatively predominant.

The following are examples.

(7) a. Da's a funny nigga, he be tellin' jokes all-la time and be havin' us rollin'. (*neutral*) (Birdsong 1994)
   b. (Ready to fight) Wussup (what's up), nigga! (*negative*) (Gibbs 1994)
   c. (Greeting a friend, followed by a hug) Wussup (what's up), nigga! (*positive*) (Gibbs 1994)
   d. my nigga (Said of boyfriend or husband)

Apposite to issues revolving around N-use is a short writing by Gloria Naylor, the well-known African-American author of the *novels The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day*.[12] She makes the crucial point that the meaning of words does not inhere in the sequence of sounds they are made of.

As linguists must repeatedly emphasize, the meanings of words is for the most part conventional, assigned by society in the process of use. Words are what people make of them. The meanings of those sound sequences we call words change over time, through linguistic drift below the level of consciousness and sometimes by means of conscious, political activism. Witness what happened with the apotheosis of the word *black* during the Black is Beautiful Movement of the 1960s and '70s. (Of course, in some segments of the African-American community there has been a marked recidivism, as *black* regains ground as a term of abuse.[13])

Naylor describes how she had actually heard N used in her home and neighborhood environment many times before N was hurled at her by a White person. She reacted that time, knowing something was wrong but not sure of what it was. She learned from that incident that N was a word that can be used to humiliate. Of course, what she heard was what some African Americans consider a different word, one with a distinctive pronunciation and intent (which I spell *n-i-g-g-e-r*). In her view, the African Americans she knew had taken a term of degradation in the mouths of Whites and defanged it. N was used by African Americans to reference the "varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be." Naylor adds to the list the following types of examples (not verbatim):

13

(8)   a.   triflin niggas (Said of neglectful parent, public drunks, the
               contentedly unemployed, poor housekeepers, etc.) (*negative*)
       b.   I'm telling you, that *nigga* kicked ass! (admiration) (*positive*)

N has long had a neutralized use among African Americans, probably since the earliest days of Anglophone North America. This is nothing new. What is new, however, is generalized reference, i.e., using N to refer to anyone of any race or ethnicity. Thus, White public school teachers hear themselves referred to as "that White nigga" or simply "nigga," and Asian Americans in San Francisco can be heard, as they navigate high school hallways, to call one another niggas; and the same is true of White students (Grant Venerable, p.c.). This is also the usage across the San Francisco Bay in Oakland, where, too, N is not racially or ethnically specific (Richard Wright V, p.c.). N still, however, prototypically refers to blacks since it is not normally qualified by African American, Black, or any other term that denotes African Americans, though qualifiers referring to other ethnicities are not unusual. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that N can be used for non-blacks without modification.[14]

N used with generalized reference among African Americans and others is most probably a result of the near hegemony of African-American popular culture among youth. Generalized reference is limited to youth and continues to stun older (roughly, over 35) African Americans and non-African Americans when they hear it so used.

As noted already, N most often means 'guy', or 'dude', to use an older term. It has been ethnically and racially generalized and is almost never used to refer to females unless they are referred to as part of a collective including males.

It is interesting that the same thing has happened with N cognates in other languages, e.g., Haitian Creole *nèg* and Brazilian Portuguese *nego*. Consequently, this development should not be taken as exceptional. Why does this happen? There is no definite answer. It probably happens in contexts where blacks, or people of color, are in certain respects culturally dominant, and generalized usage among them spreads to the wider population. Ethnically generalized reference in the United States can almost certainly be attributed to African-American popular culture hegemony and notably rap music. The Haitian historical facts surely fit. The Brazilian case, however, is more complex; and, while this is a reasonable explanation, it requires further research for firmer support.

To return to example (1), we are now in a better position to provide a translation. N would normally refer to a male, and of course not necessarily a black one. *Bitch-ass*, which would typically refer to a female, can also refer to males, but in the sense of 'male who has qualities stereotypically linked to females', i.e., someone not manly, lacking in courage or daring, weak. This particular phrase refers to males, of course, since N normally refers to males. *Muthafuckin* here functions principally as a marker of UM, i.e., it's function is primarily expressive-discursive. Thus, possible translations of *muthafuckin bitch-ass nigga,* with no censored words, are 'wimp', 'unmanly guy', 'chicken' (in the sense of coward), 'sissy', and so forth.

DISCUSSION

We are now in a better position to return to the questions raised at the beginning of this article:

Question 1. It is impossible to forbid the use of any expression, at least not in any broad range of contexts, so the question of prohibition is a nonstarter. This is not theoretically but practically so since the resources for the level of social engineering required would never be allocated in a society such as ours. Obscenity, in the final analysis, is in the ears of the hearer. The labeling of expressions as obscene varies socially, regionally, and temporally. Thinking on words as well as actions and images to be censored varies with respect to social context, region, and time.[15]

If obscenity is considered with regard to its essence, we are really talking about what is considered, by some people on some occasions, as unacceptable speech, which covers not only expressions, but also topics, tropes, and aspects of grammar (in the broad, socially adequate sense, including pronunciation, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics). Unacceptable speech, then, is the appropriate unit of analysis, especially if we aim for a socioculturally viable theory of "bad" language, which accords due attention to relations of power and dominance. Speech is deemed unacceptable for a variety of reasons, ranging from prohibitions against "using the Lord's name in vain" to those against using language considered abusive or supportive of inequalities (related to sexism, heterosexism, classism, and white supremacism). Nonstandard language is seen as unacceptable for reasons ranging from a perceived need for standardization in the service of capitalist-based technology and enterprise to the creation and maintenance of cultural capital. Some expressions, for example, are eschewed simply because they bring us, species chauvinists that we tend to be, too closely face to face with our animal biology, e.g., *shit*, *fuck*, and others denoting basic biological functions.

Thus seen, one can assume that unacceptable or "bad" speech is an ever-present feature of human social life. We have reason to hypothesize that the complexity and volume of speech labeled unacceptable has increased historically as sociocultural complexity itself has increased, especially in respect to sociocultural stratification, which ranks groups and the cultural particulars associated with them in terms of their unequal access to resources. The existence of unacceptable speech assumes the desire to censor speech, but in class-stratified societies it also reflects the power to do so. Hence, with regard to the normalized expressions of concern, one could suppose that they might well have been decensored by now were it not for the normative pressures of the hegemonic institutions with which normalizing speakers must negotiate, if only infrequently.

Question 2. Obscenity and other unacceptable language is certainly normal, in the sense that it has always been with us. Normal/abnormal distinctions are the product of social convention and consequently hinge fundamentally on culture- and class-based value judgments. If certain social groups have normal-

ized language called unacceptable by others, then that language is normal for the former.

There are at least three real issues, the first two related to the social distribution of power and influence: Who has the power to judge? Who has the power to censor? Both powers exist all along the social scale, but toward the bottom censorship fades into mere censure, buttressed by ridicule, loss of status, and ostracism. The issue that sociolinguists should do more to broadcast concerns the communicative competence underlying what are actually value judgments. This issue, adumbrated above, is particularly relevant for middle- and upper-middle-class African Americans and Whites who have the economic and cultural capital to pass judgments in this society. The problem is that critics and social commentators in these two categories *typically* lack the communicative competence necessary, but assume they possess it. With African Americans, this is because they may indeed be competent in some African-American groups in some African-American communities and take for granted that they are competent in all African-American cultural spheres

In some ways, such African Americans are victims of not realizing how fast cultural change has occurred in Black America since the 1960s, whose events and movements unleashed the significant cultural divergence within the African-American world that we see today. Under segregation, upper-status African Americans did have a clearer picture of the range of behaviors throughout the social continuum. Those who have reached the age and position to see their writing published in major outlets of hegemonic discourse such as the largest-circulation newsweeklies and *The New York Times* are too old and too removed by class and cultural change to retain any authority they may once have had.

There has been an increasing sociocultural and geographical separation between lower-income and higher-income African Americans, due primarily to the creation of African-American middle- and upper-middle-class suburbs and the increasing entry of upper-status African Americans into higher-paying occupations, both results of the Civil Rights Movement.

Whites apparently assume competence on the basis that they are Anglophone Americans, but the assumption itself rests on a cultural presumptuousness. So it is, for example, that Janet Maslin, the head film critic at *The New York Times* confused the issue in her review of the 1994 Boaz Yakin film "Fresh," wherein the main character, a twelve-year-old African-American boy called Fresh, is supposedly "so numb to racial epithets that he often uses 'nigger' when addressing his white friend" ("Black, 12 and Complex: More than Role Models," *The New York Times*, 1 Apr 1994, C6). Most African Americans would not consider the friend white, but that is another issue. As already pointed out, *nigga* has been neutralized, normalized, and generalized in reference. The fact that the Fresh character used it as he did cannot, consequently, be employed in this way as a launching pad to social commentary. It is to Yakin's credit that he was tuned in enough, even though non-African American, to Fresh's poverty-stricken, drug-infested milieu to present a level of linguistic realism going beyond general knowledge. (Ms. Maslin, I should note, figures among the most thoughtful of film

critics. The example merely illustrates a feature of our social ecology, and she is willy-nilly a product of her times and milieu.)

Question 3. As to whether the kind of speech discussed above indicates a degeneration in social life, much can be said. However, I will limit myself to a discussion that leads to the principal point I wish to present in this writing, namely, that the meaning and function of all speech is a matter of interpretation, in the sense that what speech means is not always apparent in any direct way. This is so, for one thing, because language is used both literally and figuratively. Much speech is full of tropes, and even layers of tropes, which to varying degrees re-move tokens from the sphere of literal, direct interpretation. By token, I mean specific instances of speech said in specific social situations by and to specific interlocutors with specific social identities, histories, motivations, and goals. In other words, tokens are necessarily linked to a social environment and the per-formance of social work, e.g., joking, oath-taking, informing, engaging in small talk, and so forth. Consequently, speech does not always reflect beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in a direct way. Etiquette, humor, and norms for the interpretation of speech vary from community to community. The ability to interpret and thereby have the basis for evaluating the speech of one's peers and others is necessary for functioning successfully in one's community. Indeed, some arrogance is implied when a person outside of the community in which a cultural form originates steps forward, prior to rigorous analysis, to interpret and evaluate it.

The major point to consider is that just because we "speak the same language," it does not mean that we use that language the same way in communi-cating. Different social groups have their own rules for language use and the evaluation of speech. This applies to different groups within the same ethnic group or "race" also. Keep in mind also that different social groups also speak different dialects, so in some cases we are confronted with words which sound and seem to be the same or similar but are not.[16]

Obviously, the language of low-income, urban African-American youth is not completely divorced from that of middle-class White or African-American parents. However, it would be unwise in the extreme for these people to assume that they know what, to take one example, rap songs mean—linguistically and socially. The literature devoted to language study reveals many examples of peo-ple assuming they have completely understood each other, when in reality serious miscommunication has occurred. Speaking a language variety closely related to the other's often falsely lulls us into assuming that we are competent to judge what the other says.

This said, there is still room in some cases for criticism. What the foregoing comments imply is not that we should not judge, but that we should do so with the appropriate knowledge and caution. In other words, cultural critique is always in order, e.g., the cultural critique that occurred during the Black is Beautiful Movement within the Civil Rights Movement. We should also be aware that what is is not always what should be. We might expect that, even when properly interpreted by those fully competent to do so, 2 Live Crew's lyrics, to take one example, do show signs of sexism among other things. But, then again, 2

Live Crew are males in a sexist society. We should not forget that sexism and other social ills are the problem. The lyrics of this group as well as the verbal output of any individuals are useful diagnostics of social ills only to the extent that they are interpreted in their proper sociocultural context.

Question 4. To the extent that we are required to provide a theory of uncensored speech in order to account for its grammar and use, we will learn something fundamental not only about language in the African-American community, but also in all communities, given that uncensored speech can be assumed to be present in all sociocultural settings. An adequate understanding of uncensored speech will certainly assist in analyzing and perhaps dissolving problems arising from intergroup communication. These problems can go significantly beyond misunderstandings, which we often find in film and book reviews.

Some examples will help to illustrate this point. It is interesting that the expressions *Hymie* and *Hymietown* are not normally used by African Americans in the Chicago area, although they are current among Whites. It is ironic, then, that Jesse Jackson, the African-American politician and long-time Chicago resident who used the latter and was severely criticized for doing so, used an expression atypical in the African-American speech of that area, regardless of wherever he may have actually picked the expression up. These expressions are, however, normalized in the speech of some sectors of the White Chicago community. A very interesting sociolinguistic, psychological, and political question, is whether, Jackson, trying to fit into the mainstream, White, culture of informal settings, innocently used a term that he was not communicatively competent to use. The notions of uncensored mode, neutralization, and normalization provide us with a framework to pose more sophisticated questions regarding instances of verbal offense.

Another example: Where I grew up, *bastard* was normalized (and therefore neutralized), particularly among young African-American, male peer groups. I once used the French equivalent, *bâtard*, in addressing (in Paris at a student residence) a young, male French friend, who became extremely upset. Fortunately, I was able to metacommunicate (in language available to me at the time) the relevant cultural differences in terms of neutralization and normalization and thereby to diffuse the situation.

CONCLUSION

My main concern in writing this has been the African-American middle and upper classes, within whose ranks are found those with the most network resources, education, skills, assets, and entrepreneurial know-how. This is the segment of the African-American community that most needs to have an overall understanding of African-American culture. Often, in these two groups, understanding of African-American culture is limited to those aspects that pertain narrowly to these classes. While it is also positive for people of other ethnic groups to understand African-American culture and the African-American community—as well as those of non-

African-Americans—it is the African-American middle and upper classes who will have the most concern and motivation for using knowledge gained of the whole of African-American culture in a constructive way.

More affluent African Americans' scorn for aspects of mass African-American culture (those traits of African-American culture[17] that are concentrated in lower-income groups and that most distinguish it from those of Whites) has a long history. This is certainly not the only response to mass African-American culture, but it is a prominent one. It is neither surprising nor inevitable and is a reflex of misinformation and/or the internalized oppression typical of all groups that have been long oppressed (Fanon 1968 [1961]; Spears 1991, 1992). It is not surprising because such negative attitudes are inculcated and supported by powerful, White-elite-controlled institutions. That such scorn continues is testimony to the relative weakness of African-American mass media and the poor (and hindered) distribution of African-American intellectual output. Very few nonscholarly African-American publications present sophisticated cultural and specifically political/economic debate with any regularity. *Crisis*, founded by the venerable W.E.B. DuBois; *Emerge*, the newsmonthly; and New York City's *Amsterdam News* are notable among the exceptions. The more successful African-American popular periodicals slavishly promote American-style electoral politics and capitalism, as they are lavishly supported by advertisers benefiting from those institutions. Sharp critique, even with tacit acceptance of the American political and economic system, is typically punished by no advertising from major White corporations. Witness the demise of *The National Leader* during the 1980s, unable to continue with only the advertising of a few relatively progressive African-American corporations (and, of course, some liquor and cigarette advertising).

African-American popular culture is one of the primary engines of American popular culture, and it springs, as is typical of the main currents of popular culture, from lower-income sectors of the community. The cultural prejudices of many entrepreneurial middle-class African Americans have prevented them from recognizing prime business opportunities in popular African-American culture. Observe how two of the most important musical movements in the post-Civil Rights era, reggae and rap, were long shunned by the most important African-American media enterprises, allowing White companies to move in to commercialize these musical forms without competition from African Americans, who were better positioned to do so.

Uncensored speech cannot be profitably discussed without emphasizing the twoness of African-American consciousness in the United States, first exposed by DuBois (1961 [1903]). Twoness is basically the dual personality caused by the cohabitation of two consciousnesses or cultural systems within one mind, the White and the African-American, the hegemonic and the subaltern. African-American middle- and upper-class negative attitudes towards mass African-American culture are all the more ironic because many, perhaps most, of these African Americans on occasion use the same type of uncensored speech that is probably more widespread among lower-income African Americans. Their White counterparts behave similarly in regard to the speech of their lower-income

counterparts.[18] It is almost as though, while operating within the hegemonic framework, African Americans (like members of other ethnic groups throughout the world who have their own versions of dual consciousness) sometimes criticize what they themselves do when operating out of their alternate consciousness. Observe the following example (Geneva Smitherman, personal communication), uttered by an African-American woman church member in a discussion during which she expressed her firm opposition to to the use of *nigga*: "Well ... just tell me one thing: why *niggas* always got to be using the word *nigga* so much?"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

[1] I will use African American and Black interchangeably, capitalizing the latter when used in the sense of the former. Similarly, when used in the sense of European American, white is capitalized. This article focuses on the historically English-speaking segment of African Americans whose descent is primarily from United States-dwelling citizens.

[2] I use nonstandard spelling for some words to reflect their pronunciation and to emphasize their use by African American speakers as opposed to others. In some cases such distinctions are important, e.g., that between *nigga* and *nigger*, which in much African American discourse on language are two different words. The second belongs to White varieties of English and carries its own semantic and pragmatic properties.

[3] When I was in college at Kansas University, White male friends informed me that for most White males at the university--students and some faculty and staff--nigger was the normal term of reference for African Americans when no African Americans were present and outside of censored contexts. Among those so using nigger were student body presidents. During the year that I lived in a college dormitory, I overheard uses of nigger as I went along the hallways.

Given the usage of nigger in the college community, it is not surprising that an African-American college friend who later became a judge in Kansas City reported that White judges not infrequently slipped and used nigger in his presence and sometimes with pejorative accompanying lexical material, e.g., "...big burly black nigger..."

In high school, a female White friend informed me that many in her group of friends normally used nigger--including herself, but they didn't necessarily "mean anything by it," i.e., it was not necessarily used in a negative evaluative context.

[4] I use expression as a cover term for words, phrases, sentences, etc.

[5] I use the term African-American English (AAE) as a cover term for Standard African-American Englishes (SAAE) and African-American Vernacular Englishes (AAVE), both of which are in turn the cover terms for the collection of standard and nonstandard varieties of AAE respectively. In doing this, I am making two claims: (1) that AAE comprises not one but a number of related standard and nonstandard varieties, and (2) that varieties of AAE may have distinctively African-

American traits while having none of the features widely agreed upon as being nonstandard, e.g., the use of ain't and multiple negatives within a sentence. The distinctively African-American features of SAAE have to do primarily, but not solely, with prosody and language use. See Spears 1988 for more discussion.

[6] Obviously, some individuals enjoy high respect in uncensored mode social situations, but not outside, e.g., some people with a high level of charisma and verbal agility and high-income individuals whose revenue comes from illegal activities.

[7] *Jew-town* denotes—variously according to its syntactic category status—traits and behaviors (commercial only, it appears) stereotypically associated with Jews. I have not heard it outside the Chicago area, though it may well be used in other areas. When not a noun, it may be freely used in reference to non-Jews. Thus, in a way somewhat similar to *nigga* (see below), it has taken on a generalized meaning, i.e., in terms of the ethnicity of the individuals to whom it is attributed. Additionally, it, as *Jew-time*, appears to be neutralized, used in positive, negative, and neutral evaluative contexts.

[8] This is especially true in abusive modes of speech such as *playing the dozens* and *reading*, where the goal is to be as verbally "abusive" as possible or to be relentlessly "abusive" in a creative way. The quotation marks are present to indicate that such speech may or may not be truly abusive since in abusive mode what is normally abusive becomes normal and is thus not necessarily abusive. *Playing the dozens* is one well-known speech event that unfolds in abusive mode, where verbal dexterity is of utmost importance. *Reading* is a speech activity in which degradation or reprimand is the most important goal, though creativity is important also. Reading is often associated with male African-American homosexuals (for lack of a better term--some in this group reject gay as White-oriented), but females and males of all sexual orientations engage in reading. I remember my grandmother, born shortly after the Civil War, reading the boyfriends of an aunt of mine as "cotton-pickers" and "ink-spitters" 'very dark-skinned person'. What Whatley (1981) observes for *fussing* (not abusive necessarily) holds true for reading also: higher status and older individuals have more leeway to do so with impunity.

[9] *Playing the dozens* and *snapping* are not quite the same for all participants in African-American culture. For some, snaps may figure in playing the dozens, but for a communicative situation to be characterized as playing the dozens, there must be an exchange between at least two interlocutors and the verbal exchanges may go beyond the grammatical formulas found in snaps, e.g., *Yo' mama's so* (*ugly, fat,* etc.) *X*, where X is a degree specifying string. An example of a snap is *Yo' mama's so ugly she has to sneak up on a glass to get a drink of water.*

[10] Quantitatively, there is a tendency for AWs to occur in negative sentential contexts and there is a reason for this based on highly generalized communicative practices—not word meaning. See above on *abusive mode*.

[11] A female French friend has reported that it was common for close female university-student friends to greet each other, in a totally positive way, with "[name], *putain!*" 'whore'. Consequently, this way of talking is not limited to African-American or American communities.

[12] Unfortunately, an exact reference cannot be provided. The copy of this writing that I have does not identify the publication but does state that the article first appeared in *The New York Times* in 1986. A search of *Times* indexes did not turn up the article, however; nor did searches of a number of indexes and other references. No response has been received from queries sent to the author. It seems that the writing that came into my hands may be an excerpt of a longer piece.

[13] I have always found it curious that not only *black* but also *yella* (cf. yellow) and *high yella* 'almost or as light-skinned as a white person') can be terms of abuse. Thus, one would hear the following negative statements,

Look at that black bitch/muthafucka.
Look at that yella/high yella bitch/muthafucka.

but *Look at that brown(-skinned) bitch/muthafucka* doesn't work if intended as negative.

[14] Of course, *nigger* has been used in figures of speech to refer to groups today considered white, e.g., *nigger turned inside out*, said of the Irish in the 19th century and sometimes used by African Americans (and no doubt Whites) today in reference to light-skinned Hispanics.

[15] Consider for example the Irish text of Biblical and other Christian writings, the *Book of Kells* (approximately 800 A.D.), whose illustrations include among things a masturbating soldier (Scott Jaschik, "Notes from Academe: Ireland - Inside the Irish Imagination: The Medieval Book of Kells Seen through Modern Eyes," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 Feb 1997, p. B2).

[16] Major differences in language use are largely responsible, for example, for the continuing conflicts between certain African Americans and Jewish Americans. The tension is especially exacerbated when African Americans speak to other African Americans in "hearing distance" of others, or when others "listen in on" speech intended for African Americans solely. Upper-caste Anglophones typically refuse to believe they are not competent to interpret a wide range of lower-caste Anglophone, i.e. African-American, speech. As happens commonly, bidirectionality in communicative competence breaks down most ascending the social scale. See Kochman (1981) for excellent examples.

[17] This is not to imply that African-American culture is monolith; indeed, there are many but they can be seen as having a shared core.

[18] I make the distinction between the amount of uncensored speech used by upper- and lower-income groups on the basis of the fact that in the lower-income groups there is greater unemployment and more employment where censored speech is not required. This is not to claim that there is no uncensored speech in upper-income occupational settings—far from it—only that within those settings, there is a higher number of subsettings requiring censored speech.

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