

Articulate While Black

BARACK OBAMA, LANGUAGE,
AND RACE IN THE U.S.

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and

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“Nah, We Straight”

Black Language and America’s First Black President

[Barack Obama] speaks with no Negro dialect, unless he
wants to have one.¹
—Harry Reid

You go to the cafeteria...and the black kids are sitting here, white kids are sitting there, and you’ve got to make some choices. For me, basically I could run with anybody. Luckily for me, largely because of growing up in Hawai’i, there wasn’t that sense of sharp divisions. Now, by the time I was negotiating environments where there were those kinds of sharp divisions, I was already confident enough to make my own decisions. It became a matter of being able to speak different dialects. That’s not unique to me. Any black person in America who’s successful has to be able to speak several different forms of the same language...It’s not unlike a person shifting between Spanish and English.²
—Barack Obama

I still get goose bumps thinking about it. It was that moving of an experience. I remember being in Miami on Memorial Day weekend in 2008, six months before America elected its first Black president. It was hot, and for anyone who’s ever been to Miami, yeah, it was humid. The kind of humidity that made you feel like you was swimmin instead of walkin. Some folks had taken like three different buses just to get there. When the last bus finally pulled up to the stadium, madd people rushed out. We waited for hours, but it didn’t matter. The air had that electrified feelin to it. Then, outta nowhere, the afternoon thunder rolled in and dropped buckets of water on thousands of people who had already been waitin outside for hours. Instead of complainin, folks huddled under umbrellas with strangers, engaged in political conversation, and broke out into chants of “Yes we can! Yes we

can!” Couldn’t nu’in break our stride that day. Not even the rain. We were here to see Barack Obama for ourselves. We’d seen him on TV, heard him in interviews, and now it was our turn. As the doors to the stadium swung open, thousands of people packed the house, runnin for they seats like it was a Rick Ross concert or something!

Anyone who’s ever been to an Obama rally remembers that excitement well. The energy of the 20,000 racially diverse folks gathered that day, screaming in a frenzy as Barack Obama was introduced, was unforgettable. He stood there at the podium for a good five minutes, unable to speak over the roar of the booming crowd. He just looked out and smiled—and folks went wild! He slowly moved to pick up the mic but couldn’t find it. He searched the podium, as if deliberately building up the suspense, and the crowd went even wilder. Then Barack leaned back like he was Hip Hop artist Fat Joe (“lean back, lean back”) and tilted his head all calm and cool-like into the podium to take a look. Finally, he picked up the mic, looked back out into the crowd, laughing, “But I ain’t even say anything yet!” As the crowd went bananas, Barack worked the predominantly Black section in front. “Oh, the hardcore is over here in the front, huh?” [Crowd roars! Barack moves to the side] “Oh, no wait, the *real* hardcore is over here!” [Crowd is outta control by now, and it lasted for several minutes!] Caught up in the frenzy of the jam-packed arena, I thought to myself, “This guy is a legend in his own time...and *will* be our next president.”

As a linguist, of course, I couldn’t help but think about how Barack was using Black Language to connect with this racially diverse crowd. It struck me that, for the first time, despite all the hootin and hollerin about Bill Clinton being our first “Black” president, America may have its first Black Language-speaking president. As the campaign marched on, folks from across the political spectrum began commenting on Barack’s language, from linguist John McWhorter’s playful use of “Blaccent” to Hip Hop icon Snoop Dogg’s observation that Obama had “the right conversation.” And as it was later revealed, Harry Reid’s racialized comments about Barack Obama’s language—that he “speaks no Negro dialect, unless he wants to have one”—gave us all pause. What *exactly* did that mean? As we (me and Geneva) talked about the many language-related moments of the campaign, the idea for this book was conceived. It occurred to us that, despite this being some Americans’ most poignant “postracial” moment, there was much work to be done.

Languaging Race: Viewing Race through the Lens of Language

While numerous books on President Obama have focused on the racial politics of his presidency, none has examined these issues from a critical

linguistic perspective. Notable works, such as William Jelani Cobb's *The Substance of Hope: Barack Obama and the Paradox of Progress* (2010) and Randall Kennedy's *The Persistence of the Color Line: The Racial Politics of the Obama Presidency* (2011), provide insightful historical and political analyses yet make only passing mention of language. In *Articulate While Black*, we complement these insights by viewing language as central to racial politics in the United States. This is especially important to us since, despite the constant monitoring and mocking of Black Language, we maintain that Barack Obama's mastery of Black cultural modes of discourse was crucial to his being elected America's forty-fourth president. For some obvious and not so obvious reasons, we argue that the "brotha with the funny name" (as some Black folks called him) wouldn't have gotten elected if he couldn't kick it in a way that was "familiarily Black."

In this book, we provide a much-needed contribution to discussions on race and Barack Obama by *linguaging race*, that is, by examining the politics of race through the lens of language. Though language remains relatively unexamined by scholars of race and ethnicity, it plays a crucial role in the construction of racial and ethnic identities. As University of California, Santa Barbara professor of linguistics Mary Bucholtz notes in her *White Kids: Language, Race and Styles of Youth Identity*, "Language is often overlooked as an analytic concern in research on race, yet it is nonetheless central to how race is culturally understood."³

The same holds true for the nonacademic world. We have a far more developed conversation on race than on language. For example, whether we agreed or disagreed with Attorney General Eric Holder when he famously said that we are "a nation of cowards when it comes to race,"⁴ we were able to engage the dialogue. But when was the last time you heard anyone say that we are a nation of cowards when it comes to language? Unlike race, we have no national public dialogue on language that recognizes it as a site of cultural struggle. In American public discourse, language is often overlooked as one of *the* most important cultural tools that we have for distinguishing ourselves from others. Language, no doubt, is a significant form of "symbolic power."⁵ Yet its central role in positioning each of us and the groups that we belong to along the social hierarchy lies largely beneath the average American's consciousness.

Viewing race through the lens of language, *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S.* provides new insights about the relationships between language and racial politics in the Obama era. Throughout this book, we analyze several racially loaded cultural-linguistic controversies involving Barack Obama. In the process, we reveal and challenge American ideas about language, race, education, and power in order to help take the national dialogue on race to the next level. In much the same sense that Black philosopher and Union Theological Seminary professor Cornel West

wrote that (and about) “race matters” nearly two decades ago, this book does the same for language.⁶ By theorizing language and race together, we show how “language matters” to the national conversation on race.

Since language is one of the most salient yet least understood means we have for creating our identities, we open up with an exploration of the way Barack Obama uses language in his speeches, interviews, and everyday interactions. More than just providing a sociolinguistic perspective on Barack Obama’s language use, though, we provide a sociolinguistic perspective on Black Language more generally. The linguistic perspective on Black Language varies drastically from the general public’s perspective—just about everything you thought you knew (or “thought you thought,” as the brothas out East useta say) about Black Language couldn’t be further from the linguistic facts.⁷

“The Most Powerful Speaker of Our Age”: The Obama Generation on Obama

Throughout our conversations with and surveys of Americans of the Obama generation (mostly 18–24, with a few in their early thirties), it became clear that he was extremely highly regarded as a speaker and communicator. As one respondent put it, Barack Obama is “the most powerful speaker of our age.” The word used most frequently to describe Barack Obama’s language and language use was *eloquent*. Folks also often remarked that he spoke “with conviction” and regularly used words like *confident* to describe his language. Beyond his eloquence and confidence, Barack came off as “poised,” “composed,” and “always in control of the situation.” He struck listeners as being “highly educated” but “not in a way that patronizes his audience.” To many, despite the Republican framing of him as “elite” and “too professorial,” he was “able to communicate complicated ideas in a straightforward manner.” He was often described as “clear,” “direct,” “down to earth” and also as “careful,” “measured,” and “deliberate.” More than that, he was “inspiring,” “empowering,” and “motivating,” and while using language to “build up a sense of community,” he also managed to “speak as if speaking to individuals (as if he was speaking to me).”

Barack Obama struck a chord with this generation like no other presidential candidate. As one White respondent commented:

Dignified yet humble, assertive yet calm/collected, stern yet compassionate, and formal while authentic, President Obama’s language transcends the typical blandness of modern politicians (at least the old, white, male variety) and I believe that he is truly able to inspire hope and confidence through his speeches.

As compared with previous presidents, his language was described as "dynamic," "captivating," "intoxicating," and "rhythmic almost to the point of hypnosis." His speeches were seen as "vibrant, charismatic" and "replete with imagery," as "prose that flirts with the boundary of poetry." In short, Barack Obama was viewed as one helluva gifted orator, quite possibly the most effective and powerful that this generation has witnessed.

"Nah, We Straight": Styleshifting from Ben's Chili Bowl to Ray's Hell Burger

Our conversations and surveys further revealed that, in Barack Obama, America heard a speaker who was "strategic" and "hyperaware" of his audience. While being cognizant of your audience may come with the territory as far as politics go, what distinguished Obama was his successful stylistic performance. It's one thing to know that you gotta say "the right things" in terms of *content* but quite another to be able to say "the right things" in the right way in terms of *style*. Barack was seen as someone who could speak directly and comfortably with folks across regions, generations, socioeconomic divisions, racial and ethnic groups, and political and religious views.

Barack Obama's global family history, diverse life experiences, and socialization within multiple cultures within and beyond the United States, along with his biracial background, surely helped him hone his styleshifting skills.⁸ At the beginning of this chapter, we quoted Obama's description of his experience as a young man of Color growing up in American schools as one where you had "to make some choices." In an American context, in which sharp racial divisions in friendship groups are still the order of the day, Barack had to learn to speak "several different forms of the same language." In much the same way that many bilingual/bicultural Americans *codeswitch* between two languages (English and Spanish, for example), many bilingual/bicultural Americans *styleshift*—move in and out of linguistic styles—between varieties of the same language (Puerto Rican English and White Mainstream English, for example).⁹

While Barack Obama's ability to styleshift is one of his most compelling and remarkable linguistic abilities, it is also par for the course for many Black Americans who travel in and out of Black and White social worlds and work environments. In fact, Black Americans in our conversations and surveys were more likely than Whites and others to note Obama's styleshifting abilities. Further, although many Americans clearly noted his linguistic flexibility, only non-Black Americans described Barack's language as static, or as "simply White English." One White respondent, speaking for all Americans, went so far as to say, "His language is seen as white across

racial lines.” Along the same lines, a self-described “Latina with Mexican immigrant parents” offered these observations:

When Obama addresses other groups, specifically communities of color such as African-Americans, we would expect...the use of more casual language and a different pronunciation of words to be shown. Instead, he uses the same language style for this group as well. This is due to the fact that...he cannot code-switch between the dominant white-american language variety and the African-American one.

Another respondent, a self-identified “Hispanic & Caucasian Chicana,” commented, “I’ve never heard him deviate from normative English.”

Compare these observations to this Black woman’s response from Philly, “President Obama’s language is ever changing as a reflection of his environment and the racial or political composition of his audience.” Black Americans, more than any other group, were most sensitive to Barack’s styleshifting and offered more complex and layered descriptions of his linguistic steez (style). Black Americans not only noted the range and ability of Obama’s styleshifting, many also distinguished between his language (grammatical structure) and his style (language use).¹⁰ Or as one Chi-Town brotha put it: “Barack Obama may not sound ‘black’ in a transcription of his speeches, but he definitely sounds black over audio recordings.” Let him explain:

I think that I would describe President Obama’s language and speech as Standard American English. Based off of my observations, there is nothing particular about the language that he uses that would separate him from the Standard American English model. However, I do feel that the *way* that he speaks is particularly African American. This refers more to his rhetoric, intonation, and style. However, his speech or the extent to which he plays up his Black manner of speaking varies depending on his setting. I feel that he possesses a good balance and mix between the two manners of speaking, and pulls it off successfully, where it doesn’t seem unnatural for him. [emphasis in original]

A Black woman echoes these observations:

If I had to describe Barack Obama’s language in one word, I’d describe it as interesting...He’s able to tiptoe the line between Standard English and a semi-African American type of dialect. It’s

not really African American in terms of the way he uses grammar (he doesn't use "be"...), but his mannerisms and his style of speech—the way he draws certain vowels out and some of the slang terms he uses—is somewhat characteristic of Black speech.

While these two respondents differed in terms of their view of the degree to which Barack Obama sounded "Black," both made critical distinctions between his language and his style. Both also noted that his grammar, for the most part, was pretty much "standard." By contrast, a sista from Cali makes observations about instances of Barack Obama using Black Language style as well as syntax. Noting both the range of Barack's styleshifting and distinguishing between his language and style, she notes that he reserves "the nonstandard grammatical structure" of Black Language for "settings that are primarily Black." She then offered an example of Barack's language from his visit to Ben's Chili Bowl, which she described as "a racially mixed, very informal location in the heart of D.C."

This now famous example was captured on YouTube.¹¹ In the clip, Barack Obama is seen interacting with a Black cashier. When offered his change, he declined with the statement, "Nah, we straight." While this may seem like a simple phrase, in these three words we have three different linguistic features that are aspects of Black Language.

(1) Barack Obama says "nah" rather than "no." This is a big deal for linguists for a number of reasons. Whereas the vowel in "no" is a diphthong, the vowel in "nah" is a low monophthong. In other words, the vowel sound in "no" is like the one in "note," whereas the vowel sound in "nah" is like the one in "not" (which is not to be confused with the way some White speakers may pronounce "nah" like the vowel sound in "gnat," or the way some southern speakers pronounce "naw" like the vowel sound in "gnaw"). All of this work on vowel sounds has actually led most linguists to consider "nah" a lexical variant of "no," meaning that it is a different way of saying the same thing but which might mark social difference. In this case, although "nah" is used to some extent by speakers throughout the United States, it is more often than not associated with the speech of Black folks.

Varying between lexical variants and different pronunciations are linguistic hallmarks of Barack Obama's styleshifting. For instance, in a South Carolina speech with a racially mixed audience, which we analyze later in this chapter, Barack says "wit mah Bahble" for "with my Bible." In this case, the diphthong in *my* and *Bible* was rendered as *ah*. (This phonological process is known as the monophthongization of diphthongs—say that shit five times fast).

(2) Despite some hilarious misinterpretations of the word *straight* (nah, he wasn't talkin bout his sexual orientation!), Barack Obama used the word in its Black, now-crossover youthful sense to mean he was "OK," "fine," "alright" with not getting his change back. Many observers have noted Barack Obama's use of Black slang in relation to Hip Hop Culture, using such words as *flow* or *tight*.¹² Other than its ever-evolving slang, the lexicon of Black Language is not as widely known outside the Black community. Barack Obama also uses words and phrases from this less widely known dimension of the Black Lexicon, which have survived for generations in the Black community, such as "trifling," "high-yella," "Tom/Uncle Tom," and "house nigger."¹³

(3) In addition to words, phrases, and pronunciation, the third Black linguistic feature in Barack's "Nah, we straight" is known as copula absence. The copula refers to *is* and *are* and other forms of the verb *to be*. Now, while this might be TMLI (too much linguistic information), this feature is actually one of the most important and frequently studied features of Black Language. Leading sociolinguist and Stanford University professor John R. Rickford once described the *copula* as Black Language's "showcase variable," because it is a feature that gives Black Language its distinctiveness, setting it apart from other varieties of American English.¹⁴ In the twenty-first century, the Black Language copula has blown up all over the Black Twitterverse in TTs (trending topics) and hashtags such as #uknowuugly. While this has actually confused many non-Black tweeps, it can be rendered simply as: "You know you are ugly."¹⁵ Non-Black tweeps sometimes call out this use of copula absence as a sign of "Black people's ignorant ways" or "their lazy, ungrammatical speech." Black tweeps, on the other hand, respond by noting that Twitter is all about being concise. Rather than "deficient," one could argue that copula absence is "efficient." (You only get 140 characters to say what you need to say!) Yet when Barack and other Black speakers use this form, it's actually rarely about efficiency and most definitely not about Black people's "lazy, ungrammatical speech." Contrary to popular opinion, Black Language actually has a more complex verbal system than any other White American variety of English. This is due mostly to its origins as a Creolized form of African and European language varieties.¹⁶ Now, before explaining further, we warn you it's about to get real linguistic up in here. But, yo, these next five points are necessary, though, if we're gonna understand why breakin down Barack's linguistic steez is so important. Aight, here we go...

The first point is that while speakers of White American varieties of English only have two ways of representing the copula, speakers of Black Language have three. In Black Language, you can say all three of these, depending on the situation: (1) "We are straight," (2) "We're straight," or

(3) "We Ø straight." In White varieties of English, you are restricted to the first two forms. Black folks can shift between these three variants, all of which have the same literal meaning but differ in social meaning.

Speakers of Black Language don't just be leavin the copula out whenever they feel like it, though. The second point is that copula absence follows a very well-documented set of linguistic constraints. That means that you can't just decide to always use the zero copula form (as in "We Ø straight"). Take this example from a Black minister in San Francisco: "The Black Man Ø on the rise, and the White man, he Ø runnin scared now, because we Ø wide awake today and he know we Ø not just gon lay down and accept things as they are." While the copula can be absent before prepositional phrases and locatives ("The Black Man Ø on the rise"), progressive verbs ("he Ø runnin scared"), adjectives ("we Ø wide awake"), negatives, and the future marker *gon* ("we Ø not just gon lay down"), it cannot be absent when it is in sentence-final position ("as they are"). The copula can't be absent in the first-person singular form either. Like, if Barack had said something like, "Nah, I straight," that'd be a bad look cuz it's ungrammatical in the Black Language system.

Now if that wasn't complicated enough, the third point is that these linguistic constraints on copula use are also ordered such that the copula is more likely to be absent in decreasing order before *gon* ("She Ø gon do it"), a verb + *ing* ("She Ø doin it"), locatives ("She Ø at the bus stop"), adjectives ("She Ø happy"), and noun phrases ("She Ø the boss"). Fourth, copula absence also depends on phonological (pronunciation) constraints, such as if there's a vowel or a consonant before or after its use. Lastly, as shown in great detail in Alim's *You Know My Steez: An Ethnographic and Sociolinguistic Study of Styleshifting in a Black American Speech Community*, Black folks also shift their use of the copula in regularly patterned ways depending on the race, gender, and cultural knowledge of the person they're speaking to. For example, on the one hand, Black youth display high levels of copula absence in their peer groups and when talking with Black male Hip Hop heads. On the other, they are much more likely to use the copula (*is* or *are*) when speaking to White women who know nothing about Hip Hop. All of this is what linguistic experts mean when they say that Black Language is "rule-governed" and "systematic" like any other language variety (told y'all it wasn't nu'in simple about Barack's use of "Nah, we straight").

Now, if we compare Barack's language use in Ben's Chili Bowl with his language use in Ray's Hell Burger, we can get a really good sense of how Obama shifts styles. One of Obama's favorite spots, Ray's Hell Burger is located in Arlington, Virginia, and has a predominantly White clientele. In the nearly eight-minute clip of his appearance there, Obama's language is informal ("How're you doin, man?" "We'll check that out"), but he does not

use features of Black Language.¹⁷ Obama is seen, however, interacting briefly with a Latina employee, whom he winks at and says, “Hola,” in a form better than *el español típico de la mayoría de los gringos*. His Spanish greeting was taken up by the employee who responded right away, “Hola!”

Revisiting Barack’s Ben’s Chili Bowl experience, we have generally the same speech situation (lunchtime at an informal restaurant), speech event (a service encounter between customer and employee), and speech act (ordering food).¹⁸ We see Barack Obama in a crowded restaurant with a multiracial crowd in Washington, D.C. The interaction went down like this:

BARACK: [Handing over his money to the cashier] You just keep that. Where’s my ticket. You got my ticket?

CASHIER: [Offers Barack his change]

BARACK: Nah, we straight. [Reaching over to take his soda]

CUSTOMER: You got cheese fries, too?

BARACK: Nah, nah, that’s you, man...

[Video cuts away and returns after Barack receives his chili dog]

BARACK: Now, do y’all have some Pepto Bismol in this place?

ALL PRESENT: [Laughter]

BARACK: [Walking back up to the counter, addressing cashier again] Hey, how come he’s got some cheddar cheese on his and I don’t have any on mine?

ALL PRESENT: [Laughter] Woahhh!

CASHIER: Whatever you like, sir.

BARACK: We got some cheese, you can sprinkle on it? [Gesturing the sprinkling of cheese, then *signifyin*] Not, not, not, not the Velveeta but the...

CUSTOMERS: [Laughter]

CUSTOMER: The cheddar cheese!

BARACK: The *cheddar* cheese.

In addition to the three main features we discussed in “Nah, we straight,” we can see here that Barack’s language is generally informal with phrases like “You got my ticket?” and “Nah, nah, that’s you, man.” We also see his use of other features of Black Language (and southern varieties of English), which folks often use in more casual environments. Barack’s use of *y’all* (“Do y’all have some Pepto Bismol in this place?”), for example, is the preferred way to mark the second-person plural on such occasions.

In addition to Barack’s language (grammatical structure), we can also look at his style (language use). The Pepto Bismol joke shows Barack’s use of humor, which flows into a type of banter that many African Americans

know well. In this case, Obama expresses his discontent about not getting cheese on his chili dog in a lighthearted and humorous example of signifyin.¹⁹ “Not, not, not, not the Velveeta” is characteristic of a sometimes subtle mode of discourse in Black communication that includes acts such as snappin, bustin, crackin, playin the dozens or dissin someone through wit and humor. Here, the president of the United States wanted some real cheese, not that fake Velveeta stuff!

“As for Your Greasy-Mouthed Self”: The Art of Signifyin and Talkin Trash

Other examples of Barack’s signifyin abilities include his “roast” of Donald Trump at the White House correspondent’s dinner in 2011. The roast included some classic signifyin that, although lighthearted and entertaining, was incredibly witty and cutting. In the weeks before the dinner, Donald Trump was all over the media championing the Birther Movement, insinuating that he’d make a run for president, and directing some pretty pointed questions at the president. Well, the president had some answers:

Donald Trump is here tonight. Now I know that he’s taken some flack lately, but no one is happier, no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than Donald. And that’s because he can [letting out a laugh under his breath] finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter, like, did we fake the moon-landing? [Crowd laughter] What really happened in Roswell? [Crowd Laughter] And where are Biggie and Tupac? [Big laughter and applause] All kidding aside, obviously we all know about [gesturing out towards Trump] your credentials and breadth of experience [Crowd laughter]...um, for example, um...[Donald Trump is shown uncomfortably scratching the side of his neck with his index finger]...No, seriously, just recently in an episode of *Celebrity Apprentice* [Crowd laughter], at the Steakhouse, the men’s cooking team did not impress the judges from Omaha Steaks, and there was a lotta blame to go around, but you, Mr. Trump, recognized that the real problem was a lack of leadership. And so ultimately you didn’t blame Lil Jon or Meatloaf [Crowd laughter], you fired Gary Busey! [Crowd laughter] [Then matter-of-factly, Barack adds] And these are the kinds of decisions that would keep me up at night. [Uproarious crowd laughter and applause]

First, Barack Obama made out the conspiracy theory that somehow the president of the United States is not a citizen of his own country to be completely foolish. Second, he framed Trump as inane and inept for being preoccupied with making calls for the president to “prove” his citizenship instead of focusing on more serious issues. Third, the president cut deeper into Trump’s rump by highlighting his lack of legitimate political experience. He framed him as nothing more than a reality show star, busy makin “serious” decisions like who was to blame for “the failure of the men’s cooking team.” Then in a one-two punch, he “praised” Trump for firing the right chef on his show and quickly followed with, “And these are the kinds of decisions that would keep me up at night.” With this one-liner, he underscored the enormous difference between him and Trump in terms of their political experience and capacity to govern. Stay in your lane, son.

Another example of Barack’s siggin was when he and Hip Hop mogul P. Diddy got into it. Four years before Barack’s election as President, Diddy described an exchange he had with him in these terms: “I had the privilege to meet Barack Obama, interview him...and also joke around with him, have some, you know, we had some funny banter back and forth. We was really like snappin on each other.”²⁰ In the clip, Obama, after wiping the sweat off of his forehead repeatedly throughout the interview, is urging young people to vote (for John Kerry, at the time, instead of George W. Bush):

BARACK: Well, some people just gotta remember what happened in Florida, you know, when George Bush won the Presidency, he thinks, based on just a tiny [pronounced “tahny,” there goes the monophthongization of diphthongs again] margin of votes....And like I said, don’t let people overpromise what you can do through politics. It’s not gonna solve the problems of the entire world, but it makes a little bit of difference....You get registered, you vote—that takes about 15 minutes. And if you can’t spend 15 minutes on deciding what your community’s gonna look like and what your country’s gonna look like, then you don’t have any cause to complain.

DIDDY: He makin sense [No copula needed]. That’s what we need. We need people to make sense. We applaud you. [Then the *sig-nifyin* begins]...And I wanna apologize for not sweatin, but I do this so much...

BARACK: [Begins to protest and takes off his suit jacket] [Unseen staff start laughing]

DIDDY: ... I'm so *cool*. I just want y'all to see. Everybody I'm interviewing is sweatin. I'm not even touchin my brow. [Laughter from staff continues]. I'm so cool. [Barack still wiping sweat off his face] And I wanna apologize. [Then he really begins *clownin*] I ain't tryna make you look bad or nu'in like that but I'm just so cool. Um, we, we...

BARACK: [Talking to the camera, pointing at Diddy] He, he wearin a T-shirt... [No copula needed]

DIDDY: [Bent over laughing]

BARACK: ... I tell ya, if he was wearin one of those fancy designer clothes he's designin, he'd be sweatin just like me.

DIDDY: The guy's good. The guy's good y'all. Let's give it up for him.

BARACK: [Slapping Diddy on the back, smiling] I appreciate you guys, thank you.

DIDDY: Peace, peace, thank you.

Barack has proved himself to be a pretty skilled signifier but Diddy was a fool wit that one! Layin it on Barack. And hammin it up for the camera too.

Now, there are two things of interest here in terms of styleshifting. One, of course, is how Barack was able to engage the Black cultural mode of discourse known as signifyin. The other is how he accommodated his linguistic style closer to the style of P. Diddy throughout the interview. What began as extremely formal and reserved, with mostly "standard" English responses, ended with several examples of Black phonological and grammatical features. Diddy, generously using copula absence throughout the interview, finally gets one back from Barack ("He \emptyset wearin a T-shirt"), as Barack shifts his linguistic steez structurally to match the Black discourse genre. That right there—shifting between discourse modes and linguistic forms in the same interaction—is a prime example of styleshifting.

These few examples (and there are many others) show that Barack Obama can hold his own when it comes to the art of signifyin and talkin trash. Obama talks about learning these skills in high school while playing on the university basketball courts "where a handful of black men... would teach [him] an attitude that didn't just have to do with the sport. That respect came from what you did and not who your daddy was. That you could talk stuff to rattle an opponent, but that you should shut the hell up if you couldn't back it up."²¹ Further, in his high school years, Barack writes about an illustrative exchange between him and his homie Ray, who introduced him to "the black parties that were happening on the army bases."²² Ray and other Black friends "eased [Barack's] passage through unfamiliar

terrain” in the process of his *becoming Black* or becoming well versed with Black American cultural signs, symbols, tropes, practices, and worldviews.²³ Language use was central to the cultural socialization process.

The following signifyin exchange between him and Ray provides a glimpse into the ways that Barack became socialized into Black linguistic ways of speaking:

[Ray talking] “I mean it this time,” he was saying to me now.

“These girls are A-1, USDA-certified racists. All of ‘em. White girls. Asian girls—shoot, these Asians worse than the whites. [You should recognize that as copula absence now, “these Asians Ø worse”] Think we got a disease or something.”

“Maybe they’re lookin at that big butt of yours. Man, I thought you were in training.”

“Get your hands out of my fries. You ain’t my bitch, nigger... buy your own damn fries. Now what was I talking about?”

[The exchange continues with Ray claiming racism across dating and sports practices and Barack denying that it’s always racism]

... [Ray talking] “Tell me we wouldn’t be treated different if we was white. Or Japanese. Or Hawaiian. Or fucking Eskimo.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“So what are you saying?”

... [Barack signifies on Ray, claiming that his poor diet and training, rather than racism, are more likely the reasons why he wasn’t starting on the football team] “As for your greasy-mouthed self,” I added, reaching for the last of his fries, “I’m saying the coaches may not like you ‘cause you’re a smart-assed black man, but it might help if you stopped eating all them fries you eat, making you look six months pregnant. That’s what I’m saying.”²⁴

“Y’all Know about Okey-Doke, Right?” Black Sermonizing—Barack Obama’s Communicative M.O.

Despite his ability to flex Black Language across many contexts and signify with the best of em, Americans in our survey most often described Barack Obama’s speech as “mirroring” that of a Baptist preacher. In fact, one could say that “the Black preacher style” was seen as Barack’s communicative M.O. Black Americans, in particular, were not only more likely to frame Barack as a Black preacher, but they also usually provided more nuanced and

descriptive readings of his "preacher style." Collectively, Black folks touched on Barack's cadence, timing, effective use of pauses, metaphors, rhythm and repetition, as well as Black discourse modes of signifyin and storytelling. They described Barack's "preacher-like" speech as

- having a slow and pointed cadence...words intermittently separated with pauses pregnant with meaning
- he uses the passion and rousing speech tools of preachers in Black churches...such as signifyin', using words that have double meaning that blacks pick up
- he uses repetition...altering pitch and stress
- he adopts a more Pastorial African-American vernacular and references more Biblical verses
- bringing...citizens along with storytelling and narration...his storytelling ability usually wraps around to connect to a larger theme
- often he uses metaphors and stories...His ability to tell stories is one of his greatest strengths...through persuasive storytelling, he taps into the unconscious mind where we make decisions, making it that much easier for him to influence the audience through his language
- he consciously uses sophisticated code-switching and rhythmic patterns

Generally, White Americans didn't go into as much detail, but almost all of those who noted his preacher style linked him to iconic Black preachers and ministers, such as Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X. Having presumably less experience worshipping in Black churches, some White folks went way out and described Obama as "singing" in his speeches. While Black folks often refer to a "sing-song" quality in Black speech, the Black survey respondents did not describe Barack this way, probably due to the relative flatness of his speech when compared to the best Black preachers. One White male respondent compared Barack Obama's style to that of a "preacher" and then immediately made the direct link to "MLK's...singing" or "chanting": "At his best, he has the deliberate and enthusiastic pace of a talented preacher. It's almost as if he's singing or chanting as opposed to talking. This, of course, is not unlike how other talented orators, like MLK, sound." The next example is the most detailed description of Barack Obama's preacher style provided by the survey's White respondents:

Obama's composure always remains cool and collected with a strong sense of inner peace—he never lets emotional intensity

take over his speeches. At the same time, he is also the 21st century echo of African-American preacher style characterized by such strong orators as MLK... Additionally, his speech is effective because his delivery is not boring or monotonous, but rather like a song. The way Obama alters his pace, tone, and rhythm is similar to the way a preacher speaks, which is essentially close to singing. The intonation, emphasis, and pauses and silences that characterize his speaking style are churchy and religious.

Obama is indeed particularly well versed in a mode that draws on Black preacher style. No doubt his time at Trinity was a firsthand language immersion experience in the Black Church's ways with words. In his "A More Perfect Union" speech (a.k.a. "The Race Speech"), for example, Obama painted a vivid picture of Reverend Wright's Trinity services and connected with many Black churchgoers and others who recognize the Black Church as an important cultural institution: "Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing and clapping and screaming and shouting."²⁵

Obama learned a mode of Black sermonizing. While not attempting to duplicate it to the letter in the political sphere, he readily engaged in a "stylistic sampling" of the Black Church's Oral Tradition, as one respondent put it. In his "More Perfect Union," for example, Obama began his speech-sermon by framing slavery as America's "original sin." Opening with this religious frame primed the audience for the most important moment of the speech, which to us, sounded like the climax of a sermon. From approximately the last eight minutes of his speech, Obama uses a number of Black preacher-style rhetorical devices. He cites Scripture; offers the flock ("Americans") a choice between good and evil, right and wrong; and then, through the effective use of timing, repetition, and narrativizing, offers us a way to perfect our character (ourselves and the Union). The only way to truly witness the man's skillz is to examine the lengthy excerpt below, which is notated to highlight his multilayered use of repetition²⁶ and which includes a truncated sample of his storytelling:

In the end, then, 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. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper....

For we have a choice in this country. **We can** accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. **We can** tackle

race only as a spectacle... **We can** play Reverend Wright's sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election... **We can** pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she's playing the race card, or **we can** speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies.

We can do that. [He repeats "We can" and articulates the entire phrase in a lower, breathy voice to give it the sound of genuine feeling. Pausing to add rhetorical effect]

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change.

That is one option. Or, at this moment, in this election, **we can** come together and say, "Not this time." *This time we want to talk about* the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. *This time we want to reject* the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn.... They are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time.

This time we want to talk about how the lines in the Emergency Room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care....

This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. *This time we want to talk about* the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit.

This time we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together, and fight together, and bleed together under the same proud flag. *We want to talk about* how to bring them home from a war that never should've been authorized and never should've been waged, and *we want to talk about* how we'll show our patriotism by caring for them, and their families, and giving them the benefits they have earned....

There is one story in particular that I'd like to leave you with today—a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking

on Dr. King's birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta.

There is a young, twenty-three year old woman, a white woman, named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African American community since the beginning of the campaign... Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign... And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue... He simply says to everyone in the room, "**I am here because of Ashley.**"

"**I'm here because of Ashley.**" By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough... But it is where we start...

In the eight-minute excerpt, Barack repeats "we can" seven times in succession (and emphasizes it once for rhetorical effect) before moving listeners to "we want," shifting the focus from our failures to our collective goals for action. He then effectively uses a combination of the phrases "Not this time," "this time," and "this time we want to talk about" to begin 10 different successive ideas.²⁷ All the while, he presents us with the choice between "division...conflict, and cynicism" and coming together to say, "Not this time." Finally, he humanizes that choice with the story of young White Ashley and an older Black man and suggests that together we can work to perfect the union.

In this "A More Perfect Union" speech, Barack was addressing a national audience made up of folks across the racial and linguistic spectrum. In majority Black contexts, however, where Black linguistic norms prevail, Barack Obama's been known to take his Black church stizzy to the next level. Specifically, he can shift into a deep Black style of *call and response*, a communicative strategy that breaks down conventional divisions between "audience" and "speaker."²⁸ Shot through with action and interaction, call and response is concentric in quality, with the audience becoming both observers and participants in the speech event. The audience's verbal and nonverbal responses co-sign the power of the speaker's call. Barack

Obama's speech in front of a predominantly Black crowd in South Carolina provides a quintessential example. He fired folks up to the point where they was damn near testifyin. Walkin across the stage, he looked out into the crowd:

BARACK'S CALL: They're tryna bamboozle you. [Pause]

CROWD'S RESPONSE: [Black woman seen waving her sign like a fan, Black men shaking their heads in recognition; crowd laughter] Yes!

BARACK'S CALL: It's the same old okey-doke. [Pause]

CROWD'S RESPONSE: [Laughter, agreement] That's right!

BARACK'S CALL: [Looking out to audience with a half smile] Y'all know about okey-doke, right? [Pause]

CROWD'S RESPONSE: Yeahhh! Yes! [Laughter]

BARACK'S CALL: It's the same old stuff!

CROWD'S RESPONSE: Yeahhh!

BARACK'S CALL: Just like if anybody starts gettin one of these emails sayin, "Obama is a *Muzlim*." [Pause]

CROWD'S RESPONSE: Yes! They do it!

BARACK'S CALL: I've, I've been a member of the same church for almost twenty years. [Pause]

CROWD'S RESPONSE: C'mon now! Alright!

BARACK'S CALL: Prayin to Jesus!

CROWD'S RESPONSE: [Hits a climax with uproarious shouts and applause]

BARACK'S CALL: Wit mah—wit mah Bible [pronounced *Bahble*]. [Pause]

CROWD'S RESPONSE: Amen! [Continued applause]

BARACK'S CALL: Don't *LET* people turn you around [continued applause] because they're just makin stuff up!

CROWD'S RESPONSE: Yes, they are!

BARACK'S CALL: That's what they do!

CROWD'S RESPONSE: Yes, they do!

BARACK'S CALL: They try to bamboozle you!

CROWDS RESPONSE: [Laughter] Hoodwink you!

BARACK'S CALL [now a response to "Hoodwink you!"]: Hoodwink you! [Laughter]

Barack Obama's masterful use of the call-and-response mode of Black Communication transformed this venue in South Carolina into a Baptist church lit with the spirit. Well, at least for the Black folks that were present. *Weelllll*...While Black folks were shoutin, hollerin "Amen!" and goin

back and forth with Barack in a culturally familiar verbal dance—until the lines between caller and responder were blurred—most White folks on the scene were either looking on blankly or smiling quietly. It’s quite possible that White folks knew that something else was going on but couldn’t quite figure out what it was. Of course, Blacks in the audience and most reading this now recognized that Barack was also recalling famous lines associated with Malcolm X (ironically, a Muslim) about White people trying to “bamboozle” and “hoodwink” Black folks. Like a coded verbal game of catch, Barack threw it out, the Black audience caught it, and then threw it back for him to catch. It wasn’t that White audience members didn’t approve of what was being said; it was that they were simply unable to play the game.²⁹

Familiarly White, Familiarly Black, Familiarly American, Familiarly Christian: The Syntax and Style of Barack’s Language

All of Barack’s flexible linguistic abilities that we have described thus far were critically important to his being elected. This was perhaps the single most consistent finding in our survey: Barack Obama’s 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. One respondent in particular articulated this sentiment perfectly. When asked about Barack Obama’s language and language use, she explained:

When Obama was on the campaign trail, his speeches mirrored that of a Baptist preacher. The way certain words were stressed and the rise and fall in his speech were very reminiscent of the church. Sprinkled with imagery, metaphors and historical references, coupled with an underlying theme and you had speeches that captivated not only Americans, but the world... 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.

Of course, mastery of so-called "standard English" is mandated in American politics, but it was Barack's ability to combine this variety with Black ways of speaking that was ultimately crucial. His linguistic style mattered in at least three ways. First, Barack Obama's mastery of White mainstream ways of speaking allowed White Americans to feel more comfortable with him. He used a language variety that was familiarly White, which rightly or wrongly, did not "alienate" Whites in the way that Black Language sometimes does. Relatedly, his style of speaking was seen as "transcending" Blackness, with many describing him as "exceptionally articulate," making (unintentional) racist links between "articulateness," "Whiteness," and "intelligence."³⁰ Though some Americans noted that White, male mainstream ways of speaking English are problematically mapped onto "the language of politics" and "the language of success," Black Americans highly regarded Barack's proficiency in this style as well. Using positive terms, many respondents across racial lines described Barack's ability to use "standard English," "typical American English," "normative English," "standard American English," "polished standard English"—and our personal favorite, "a language literally born of the American educational system's upper echelon."

Second, not only did Whites feel that Barack spoke familiarly White, many Black folks felt that he spoke familiarly Black. While some Black women respondents noted that his "sounding Black" had to do with his "manly (deep) voice" or his "baritone," more often Blacks described Obama's speech style in terms of "a Baptist preacher" or in the "tradition of the Black Church." So, while responding positively to Barack's command of "standard" English syntax, the real clincher for Black folks was that Barack 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. This is because, sociolinguistically speaking, the way we use language often hints at our politics, indexing our (dis)alignment with particular groups or causes. We read into people's words for clues, signs, anything that might help us figure out where they stand. In the case of Barack Obama, accurately or not, many Black folks read his use of Black modes of discourse as indexing a political alignment with the Black community.

Thirdly, Barack'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 at least two reasons. One, Whites have always dug Black preacher style, so long as it didn't come at them too hard in that caustic, biting, damn-you-to-hell kinda way. (There is a reason why many Black folks refer to Martin

Luther King Jr. as “White America’s favorite ‘Negro’” and why, after hearing Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s sermons, for instance, White Americans don’t know whether to shit or go blind!)

The second and most critical reason why speaking familiarly Black was important for Whites is this: It made Barack both “American” and “Christian.” Not only are White Americans more familiar with a Black Christian identity, but due to the contentious history of the Nation of Islam and contemporary tensions with immigrant Muslims in post-9/11 America, many Whites also fear “(Black) Muslims.” Speaking familiarly Black made Barack familiarly American and familiarly Christian. To borrow from one Asian American respondent who wrote about forever feeling like a “foreigner” in the United States, “Barack needed to not only be American; he needed to be 110 percent American.” After all, who can forget the lunacy of some White folks at the McCain-Palin rallies (“I, I, I don’t trust him—he’s A-A-Arab!”)? And the never-ending and overwhelmingly White Birther Movement, which even includes the likes of your boy Donald Trump? Growing up in Hawai’i and Indonesia with a Kenyan father and Muslim family roots was apparently too much for White folks to handle. Now, let’s not kid ourselves here—it ain’t like White folks got a lock on xenophobia and anti-Muslim bias. Sounding familiarly Black, and thus familiarly American and familiarly Christian, also won over those in the Black community who questioned Obama’s heritage (“He ain’t Black—he from Kenya!” or “Ain’t he a Mooozlim?”) or weren’t down with what they saw as his appropriation of the Black American struggle (“He’s probably one of those Africans who doesn’t like us, but will use the label ‘African American’ to take advantage of affirmative action programs”).³¹

In sum, Barack’s styles 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.” Of course, it would be too simple to leave it there. The reality is that Whites, too, were happy with a Black man who “sounded White, but not *too* White.” His familiarly Black style Americanized and Christianized him, helping them get over their irrational fears of a “foreign Muslim” or a “socialist African.” Blacks, too, were likely happy with a Black man who “sounds Black, but not *too* Black.” Quiet as it’s kept, because of Black Language’s marginalized status in broader American society, some Black folks suffer a linguistic shame that hypercriticizes any speech that sounds “too Black.” The stories of people “cringing” every time they hear Magic Johnson speak, for example, are all too common. In a similar way that Barack Obama’s familiarly Black style helped some White folks get over irrational fears of a “foreign/Black Muslim” or a “socialist African,” his familiarly White style

helped some Black folks get beyond irrational insecurities that "the whole race" would be deemed "ignorant" because of one Black person's speech.

Caught between discriminatory discourses of language, citizenship, religion, and race, Barack Obama's language use hit that ever-so-small "sweet spot" that appealed to the majority of Americans. It didn't matter how many times he repeated that he wasn't a Muslim or how many times he presented his birth certificate; what mattered more to most Americans, even if subconsciously, was not what he said but how he said it. More than any other cultural symbol, Barack Obama's multifaceted language use allowed Americans to create linguistic links between him and famous African American male historical figures. These links served to simultaneously "Whiten," "Blacken," "Americanize," and "Christianize" Barack in the eyes and ears of both Black and White Americans.

With No *White* Dialect, Unless He Wants to Have One: Language, Race, Power

To be sure, hittin that small sweet spot ain't easy. While styleshifting may often appear simple, humorous, or lighthearted, it is also loaded with complex issues of identity and power. From a critical linguistic perspective, styleshifting, and language in general, is anything but a neutral practice. Returning to our survey, some Americans recognized that not everyone can shift like Barack Obama, in part, because not everyone has access to both White and Black ways of speaking. What troubled a few Americans, in particular, was the fact that while no one would ever expect White candidates to have to sound "Black," "Latino", or "Native American," for example, to be taken seriously, Barack Obama *needed* to "sound White." As one White American bluntly put it: "In order for Obama to sound 'knowledgeable' to the majority he must speak like a white man, enunciate clearly, say r's, etc." Another noted that "Obama *has* to speak that way," further explaining: "For an African American to become president of a country that is governed dominantly by white men, he had to publicly lose all traces of 'blackness.'" The White woman who noted that Obama's language "is seen as white across racial lines" also had this to say:

In many ways, he *has* to speak the way he does. We have never had a 'black' president before. It's an idea that many voters had to get comfortable with, and one that others may never be comfortable with. He has to comfort all those that are skeptical by modeling himself closer to the presidents [the 43 White men] that have come before.

These responses demonstrate that language is loaded with power. Which languages are preferred in which contexts? By whom? Which groups are included—or excluded—by these decisions? Who benefits? Can we imagine a context, for example, in which Harry Reid based a White man's electability on the fact that he speaks with no White dialect unless he wants to have one? Simply put, why must Black Americans shift toward styles considered White in order to be "successful"? These questions show that the way we talk can either grant or deny us access to social, political, and economic opportunities (think jobs, schools, etc.). Barack certainly knew this when he said that Black people who want to be "successful" have to be able to "speak several different forms of the same language."

All of these issues rushed to the front of Black minds when Senate majority leader Harry Reid (Democrat from Nevada) famously distinguished Obama from previous Black candidates for president like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. He claimed that (White) Americans might actually vote for Obama, in part, because he was "light-skinned" and spoke "with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one." The messed up color-coded comment and outdated terminology aside, Reid's assessment of Barack Obama's style-shifting was pretty much on point. It's worth restating, though, that rather than a peculiar exception to the rule, Barack Obama's linguistic practices mirror those of many Black Americans who negotiate Black and White social worlds on the regular. As Barack Obama said, "That's not unique to me."

What is unique to Obama, though, is that he was not your average run-of-the-mill-type brotha—he was a senator running for president of the United States of America. Reid's comments sadly implied what our White respondents made explicit, that if a Black man wanted to be elected president he'd better keep his language in check, less any "hints" or "traces" of his "Negro-ness" leak out into the public eye/ear. Given that intense amount of social scrutiny, we can assume that Barack's linguistic flexibility is not merely a function of his diverse life experiences. It is also a creative response to the awareness—one shared by many Black Americans—that White America continues to have a love-hate relationship with Black America and its language. 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.

Reid's comments make it clear that White America rewards Black Americans who don't sound "too Black," particularly in contexts that matter—from classrooms to courtrooms to corporate boardrooms. Syracuse University professor of finance and political analyst Boyce Watkins got right to the heart of the matter when he reflected on the broader social implications of Reid's linguistic description of President Obama:

What is saddest about [Harry] Reid's commentary, however, is that it reminds many African-Americans across the country that if our speech patterns or appearance are "too black" (whatever that means) or too different from what some consider acceptable, we are going to be deemed inferior. It seems that looking, sounding and behaving like a white man is the only way I might be considered to be as good as a white man. That is White Supremacy 101.³²

It is precisely this White cultural hegemony—captured concisely by the Black folk idiom, "if it ain't White, it ain't right"—that we hope to disrupt in this book in terms of language. Because, as Americans, whether we like it or not, we not only see race but we hear it too.

NOTES

1. See: <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2010/01/09/reid-apology-for-negro-dialect-comment/>. Last accessed: 09-01-2011.
2. One of Barack Obama's most insightful interviewers was none other than "Sir Charles"—NBA legend Charles Barkley, that is. His book, *Who's Afraid of a Large Black Man?* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006) features interviews on race in America with Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Jesse Jackson, Tiger Woods, Morgan Freeman, George Lopez, and Ice Cube, among others. Obama's quote is from page 25.
3. In Mary Bucholtz's *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 5). Not only is language often overlooked in popular discussions of race, but White people are often missing too. Bucholtz's book is the first to use the tools of linguistics to examine the construction of diverse White identities in the United States.
4. US Attorney General Eric Holder made these comments at the Department of Justice African American History Month Program on February 18, 2009. According to Holder, "One cannot truly understand America without understanding the historical experience of black people in this nation. Simply put, to get to the heart of this country one must examine its racial soul. Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards." The full transcript can be found at: <http://www.justice.gov/ag/speeches/2009/ag-speech-090218.html>. Last accessed: 09-01-2011.
5. See Pierre Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
6. See Cornel West's *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), a groundbreaking classic on race in America. According to West, "The fundamental litmus test for American democracy—its economy, government, criminal justice system, education, mass media, and culture—remains: how broad and intense are the arbitrary powers used and deployed against black people" (vii). From this perspective, West continues to be the most vocal Black critic of Barack Obama.
7. The sociolinguistic research on Black Language—also known as African American English, African American Vernacular English, African American Language, Black English, Ebonics and still, by Harry Reid anyway, "Negro dialect"—can be found in numerous

- volumes in research institutions across the country. It's the most oft-studied variety in the United States. See the work of linguists Guy Bailey, John Baugh, Lisa Green, William Labov, Sonja Lanehart, Marcyliena Morgan, John R. Rickford, Arthur Spears, Donald Winford, and others.
8. While shifting between Black and White varieties may be par for the course for many Black Americans in contact with Whites, Barack's a global, multilingual brotha. He's been known to flex his Spanish skills from time to time. In his most recent visit to Puerto Rico (2011), for example, he got quite a response for using the word *Boricua* to describe Puerto Rican culture. In *Dreams from My Father*, Barack explains that he learned enough Spanish in Harlem to "exchange pleasantries" with his Puerto Rican neighbors. Barack's linguistic flexibility is most likely due to the fact that as a young child he had a remarkable range of linguistic experiences. He not only noted his father's British accent, he also learned some Hawai'i Creole from his grandfather and others in Hawai'i (25), and it took him "less than six months to learn Indonesia's language, its customs, and its legends" (36). Though he has probably lost some of his knowledge of Indonesian, YouTube videos show him greeting Indonesians in their language. Later in life, Barack wrote about greeting some of his Kenyan relatives in Luo, demonstrating that he's the kind of person to make every effort to communicate with others (374). More recently on March 21, 2012, Fahima Haque wrote in *The Washington Post* about Barack Obama's interaction with a deaf community college student, demonstrating his impressive sign language skills (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/president-obama-impresses-with-his-sign-language/2012/03/21/gIQAXG37RS_blog.html). Last accessed: 04-19-12). So, in addition to his socialization into Black Language and White mainstream ways of speaking, Barack's communicative flexibility spans a broad range of experiences and is a testament to the idea that language socialization occurs across the life span. In other words, we don't speak only the language of our family or hometown. If we are sufficiently motivated and have a broad range of experiences, we pick up ways of speaking throughout our lifetime. Peep the new volume by Alessandro Duranti, Elinor Ochs, and Bambi Schieffelin, eds., *The Handbook of Language Socialization* (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) for more on the language socialization process from top linguistic anthropologists in the game.
 9. *Styleshifting* is a technical linguistic term used to describe the way speakers shift in and out of particular linguistic styles. It might be helpful to think of your voice box as a gearbox. A steep incline calls for a low gear. However, when the road flattens out again, you may wanna kick it into a higher gear, and so on. Most of us adapt to the changing contexts of our communicative encounters in much the same way drivers adapt to the changing conditions of the road. The difference is that most speakers shift styles quite unconsciously as they move throughout their day-to-day lives. As an incredibly successful politician, Barack Obama must be conscious of his speech in ways that the average American's probably not required to be. Just as driving skills increase with varied experiences, so does one's ability to styleshift. Barack Obama, then, if we carry our analogy a bit further, is more like a NASCAR driver than your average run-of-the-mill motorist. Of course, this analogy also points to issues of social inequality. We ain't all pushin Maybach's on nicely paved streets, nahmean? For recent scholarly work on Black American styleshifting, check out H. Samy Alim's *You Know My Steez: An Ethnographic and Sociolinguistic Study of Styleshifting in a Black American Speech Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). For White styleshifting, check out Mary Bucholtz's *White Kids: Language, Race, and Styles of Youth Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011). And for Puerto Rican styleshifting and codeswitching, check Ana Celia Zentella's now classic, *Growing Up Bilingual* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997). For an excellent edited volume with chapters by leading experts, check out Penny Eckert and John Rickford's (eds.) *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

10. Geneva Smitherman made this distinction in her pioneering book on Black Language, *Talkin & Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977; republished, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986).
11. Fastest way to find it is to search for "Barack Obama Real Cool": (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30-IYueJivk>). Last accessed: 09-01-2011.
12. One Black respondent went beyond Barack's ability to speak across different racial groups (Blacks and Whites) and described his ability to speak across different segments within the same racial group ("very high intellectuals" and "street kids that love hip-hop"): "One time, Obama was able to fit a rap song into his speech perfectly, based on the way he spoke his previous statements. He mentioned how he had been receiving criticism, and instructed himself, and anyone else who has 'haters' to brush that dirt off of their shoulders (reference to Jay-Z song). This shows how Obama can reach everyone in the audience when he speaks, from the very high intellectuals to the street kids that love hip-hop."
13. Barack Obama uses all of these lexical items in *Dreams from My Father*. In Geneva Smitherman's *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994, 2000), *trifling* "describes a person who fails to do something that he/she is capable of doing; irresponsible; inadequate" (285). Barack uses *trifling* in exactly this sense on page 226 in *Dreams*: "We're trifling. That's what we are. Trifling. Here we are, with a chance to show the mayor that we're real players in the city, a group he needs to take seriously. So what do we do? We act like a bunch of starstruck children, that's what." Smitherman defines *yella/high yella* as a term used to describe "a very light-complexioned African American; praised in some quarters, damned in others. Community ambivalence stems from *high yellas'* close physical approximation to European Americans." (303). In *Dreams*, Barack writes about becoming "familiar with the lexicon on color consciousness" (193) in the Black community and uses the term *high-yella* on page 273 in *Dreams*: "the high-yella congregations that sat stiff as cadets as they sang from their stern hymnals." *Tom/Uncle Tom* is described by Smitherman as "a negative label for a Black person, suggesting that he/she is a sell-out, not down with the Black cause. *Tom* comes from the character Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's nineteenth century novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who put his master's wishes and life before his own." (284). Barack uses these terms to describe his puerile attempt to belittle another Black classmate in college: "Tim was not a conscious brother. Tim wore argyle sweaters and pressed jeans and talked like Beaver Cleaver....His white girlfriend was probably waiting for him up in his room, listening to country music.... 'Tim's a trip, ain't he,' I said, shaking my head. 'Should change his name from Tim to Tom.'" (101-102). *House nigger*, Smitherman explains, historically referred to "an enslaved African who worked in Ole Massa's house," rather than in the field (*field nigger*), and "was viewed as loyal to Massa." (130). Malcolm X updated this term in the 1960s to refer to the working-class Blacks as *field niggas* and middle-class Blacks as *house niggas*. *House niggas* were "more likely to deny the existence of racism or make excuses for it, to identify with whites and the system, and thus unlikely to engage in protest or rebellion." This is precisely how Barack Obama used the term when he realized that his Muslim grandfather, whom he always imagined to be "an independent man, a man of his people, opposed to white rule" in Kenya, turned out to be anything but that. "What Granny had told us scrambled that image completely, causing ugly words to flash across my mind. Uncle Tom. Collaborator. House nigger." (406).
14. Rickford, J. R., Ball, A., & Blake, R. (1991). "Rappin on the Copula Coffin: Theoretical and Methodological Issues in the Analysis of Copula Variation in African American Vernacular English." *Language Variation and Change*, 3, 103-132. For Rickford's most extensive paper on the copula, check out "The Creole Origins of African American Vernacular English: Evidence from Copula Absence," available at www.johnrickford.com.
15. Yo, just had to share a few. The first one is a retweet from @djttaylor12: "#uknowuugly when you look in the mirror with the lights off." This next one is from @Doyinakalyrical:

- “#uknowuugly when your twitpic is still the twitter default egg.” LOL! It ain’t all jokes, though. Some folks provide more critical commentary, like this one: “#uknowuugly when u preach about GOD all the time, yet u have the most stank, ugly, negative, un-GODLY attitude there is! YEAH I SAID IT.” Chuuuuch! Catch Alim on @hsamyalim.
16. The copula is just one example of BL’s complex verbal system and the Africanization of American English. According to John R. Rickford, copula absence “provides one of the strongest arguments for possible Creole and African influences on the grammar” of Black Language. Many Caribbean Creoles and West African languages do not have the copula in some grammatical environments, and patterns of its absence in Black Language mirror that of its absence in Creoles (See Alim’s *You Know My Steez*, 141–160, for strong evidence of this from Black youth in the San Francisco Bay Area in Cali). Rickford also notes that “the very presence of certain aspect categories in [Black Language]—particularly the completive (marked by *done*) and the present durative, or habitual (marked by *be*)—may be attributed to their prevalence in West African languages, which is well documented in the work of William Welmer and others. Even the existence of a category of remote past (marked by *BEEN*) may go back to distinctions in languages like LuGanda and KiKongo. Moreover, the tendency of [Black Language] to encode its most important tense-aspect distinctions through a series of preverbal markers (*be*, *bin*, *done*, *BIN*, *fitna*, *had*, and so on) rather than through verbal affixes strikingly parallels the pattern in Caribbean Creoles.” (from John R. Rickford and Russell Rickford’s *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000, 154).
 17. Check it: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDy9I9C1xUM&feature=related>. Last accessed: 09-01-2011.
 18. Linguistic anthropologists will recognize these terms. They refer to an approach to the scientific study of a culture and their communication patterns known as “the ethnography of communication.” A *speech situation*, the largest level of the three levels of analysis, describes the social occasion in which speech may occur (in our example, lunchtime at an informal restaurant). You will hear many *speech events* inside of a *speech situation* (in our example, a service encounter between customer and employee). A *speech act* refers to each action of speech inside of a *speech event* (in our example, ordering food). Check John Gumperz and Dell Hymes’s edited volume for an early classic, *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972).
 19. *Signifyin* has been described as a means to encode messages or meanings in conversation, usually involving an element of indirection. According to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan: “The black concept of *signifying* incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not in another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. Superficially, self-abasing remarks are frequently self-praise.” Check out her classic article, “Signifying and Marking: Two Afro-American Speech Acts” in John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, eds., *Directions in Sociolinguistics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972, 82).
 20. This interview was taped for www.diddy.com. You can catch it at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ne_87Kw35pE. Last accessed: 09-01-2011.
 21. From Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995, 79).
 22. *Ibid.* 72.
 23. In many ways, *Dreams from My Father* details Barack Obama’s search for “a Black identity.” He writes, “Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant.” (76). Barack Obama, to use Awad Ibrahim’s terms, was in the pro-

- cess of *becoming Black*. Many Black Americans, particularly those on the margins of what most Americans see as a normative Black identity (sons and daughters of African immigrants, for example), know this process well. Awad Ibrahim, Sudanese professor of education at the University of Ottawa, describes the process like this: "To become Black is to become an ethnographer who translates and searches around in an effort to understand what it means to be black in North America, for example." It is a process of "entering already pronounced regimes of Blackness." (from "Whassup, Homeboy? Joining the African Diaspora: Black English as a Symbolic Site of Identification and Language Learning" in *Black Linguistics: Language, Society, and Politics in Africa and the Americas*, eds., Sinfree Makoni, Geneva Smitherman, Arnetha Ball, and Arthur Spears (New York: Routledge, 2003, 181–183). Black feminist cultural critic Joan Morgan, who is Jamaican, described the process of becoming Black in America in these terms: "As a matter of both acclimation and survival, we learn [African American] history. We absorb the culture. Some of us even acquire the accent." (See her essay, "Black Like Barack" in T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, ed., *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union,"* New York: Bloomsbury, 2009, 63). For both of these scholars two things are central to the cultural socialization process of becoming Black in the United States: (1) being positioned as "Black" by others in society and experiencing anti-Black racism, and (2) positioning yourself as "Black" by acquiring "Black" ways of speaking. That dialectic of positionality is what Obama navigates throughout *Dreams from My Father*.
24. From Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (73–74). Years later, Obama would take these skills with him on the campaign trail as an adult. As William Jelani Cobb writes in *Barack Obama and the Paradox of Progress* (New York: Walker, 2010): "[Obama] showed up in a Marion, South Carolina barbershop and immediately commenced trash-talking a patron's alligator shoes. It was a risky move, but his underlying point was to illustrate that he understood [Black] barbershop protocol. The campaign printed up posters of him sitting in that barbershop and distributed the DVD of his visit." (72).
 25. For a full transcript of the speech, see T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, ed., *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union,"* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009, 237–251). It was delivered on March 18, 2008, in Philadelphia and is known as "The Race Speech" or just "The Speech." You can also catch it on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrp-v2tHaDo>. Last accessed: 09-01-2011.
 26. This excerpt is notated to demonstrate the multilayered use of repetition. For example, the phrase "we can" is marked in bold. Each instance of "this time" is underlined. Each use of "we want to talk about" or "we want" is in italics. Overlapping repeated phrases like "*This time we want to talk about,*" are marked with "This time" underlined and in italics. Whole phrases such as "**I am here because of Ashley**" are marked in bold and underlined.
 27. Georgetown University professor Michael Eric Dyson also notes Obama's use of "anaphora," which is repetition of the "same word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences." What's interesting here is that Obama layers his repetition of multiple words and phrases, creating an advanced use of this strategy, one that is common in the Black preacher tradition. See Dyson's full comments and other examples of Obama's use of this rhetorical device at: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/a-presidentpreacher-from-anaphora-to-epistrophe/2009/01/18/1232213445525.html>. Last accessed: 09-02-11.
 28. For great examples of Obama's rendering of *call and response* in text, check *Dreams from My Father*, pages 293–295. You can also hear this portion of Barack's South Carolina speech here: http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0309/19538_Page2.html. Last accessed: 09-01-11.
 29. Writing about Black music, Imani Perry discusses another level of call and response. "To make something good...means in part to effectively employ the call-response trope on several levels, and, just as important, to know what is good requires a sophis-

- ticated...understanding of the symbolic references and cultural history from which the music derives.” (*Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 36). Relating this to Barack’s speech in South Carolina, Barack put out the encoded Malcolm X call, and his Black audience responded. While there is some scholarly debate about whether or not Malcolm X used those exact words, the important point is that Barack Obama tapped into the symbolism and cultural history of Malcolm. He was also employing another level of signifyin, one that is central to the Black literary tradition. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifyin(g) Monkey; A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York/London: Oxford University Press, 1989), signification relies on one’s knowledge of previous texts and the author’s (speaker’s) ability to reinterpret them in new ways. Certainly, signifyin on a Muslim minister’s words to ensure that he was seen as anything but a Muslim qualifies. Barack done did it again.
30. The phrase “exceptionally articulate” was actually used by one White American and “articulate” was used overwhelmingly by White respondents more than any other group. This led us to develop the idea of “articulate as an exceptionalizing discourse.” But, yo, check the next chapter for more on this problematic “articulate” business.
 31. Or as one 58-year-old African American barber put it: “When you think of a president, you think of an American.... We’ve been taught that a president should come from right here, born, raised, bred, fed in America. To go outside and bring somebody in from another nationality, now that doesn’t feel right to some people.” Quoted in William Jelani Cobb’s *Barack Obama and the Paradox of Progress* (Walker, 2010, 69). White folks in particular continue to struggle with Obama’s nationality and religion. Just recently, during the Republican primaries leading up to the 2012 presidential race, a poll showed that about half of Republican voters in Alabama and Mississippi still believe that Barack Obama is a Muslim. And even scarier is the fact that about a quarter believe that his parents’ interracial marriage should have been illegal (<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/12/news/la-pn-poll-obamas-a-muslim-to-many-gop-voters-in-alabama-mississippi-20120312>. Last accessed: 04-19-12). If that’s not wild enough, how about recent comments in April 2012 from rock star and Romney-endorser Ted Nugent? In addition to calling the president a “criminal” and his administration “vile,” “evil,” and “America-hating”—not to mention using extremely dangerous and violent language—he also claimed that the United States would turn into a “suburb of Indonesia” under Obama’s second term ([http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/secret-service-ted-nugent-violent-anti-obama-message/story?id=16159549#T5IFxRzwHn0](http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/secret-service-ted-nugent-violent-anti-obama-message/story?id=16159549#.T5IFxRzwHn0). Last accessed: 04-19-12).
 32. Check the full article at: <http://www.thegrio.com/opinion/reids-negro-dialect-remark-politically-incorrect-but-totally-right.php>. Last accessed: 09-01-2011.