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## The Crucible of Identity

John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford (2000): Spoken Soul. Wiley.

*One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro: Two souls, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body . . . The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing . . . to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.*

—W. E. B. Du Bois (1903)

*I who am poisoned with the blood of both  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?  
I who have cursed the drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?*

—Derek Walcott, 1969

Here is a conversation as ordinary in its context as breathing. It took place recently in the office of a California elementary school, between three black people: a second-grade student, or eight-year-old; Miss P., the school secretary, in her forties; and a parent in his thirties who happened to be in the office at the time.

STUDENT: Miss P., my teacher sen' me to the office.

MISS P.: What she sen' you here fuh?

STUDENT: She say I got a rash.

MISS P.: A rash? Where the rash at?

STUDENT: Right here on my chin . . .

- MISS P.: Come over here an' lemme see. [The child walks over to her, and she examines his chin.] So what you want me to do? [No answer.] I'ma call yo' dad, boy. [She phones his father, learns that he can't come for his son right then, and hangs up.] You know yo' dad got to go to school, boy, he can't come an' get you. . . .
- STUDENT: Where Miss G. at? [Miss G. is a staff member the student likes.]
- MISS P.: Miss G. in the room nex' to the library. [The child leaves to look for Miss G.]
- PARENT: [To Miss P.] That boy sound jus' like me. He remind me of me. He remind me of me. Don' seem like that long ago. Seem like jus' yesterday . . .

These speakers, youth and adults alike, used Spoken Soul because it is the language in which comfortable informal conversation takes place daily for them—as is true within vast segments of the African American community. They drew on it for reasons similar to those that the novelists, playwrights, poets, preachers, pray-ers, comedians, actors, screenwriters, singers, toasters, rappers, and ordinary folk whose extensive and creative use of the vernacular we've documented in this book drew on it: because it came naturally; because it was authentic; because it resonated for them, touching some timbre within and capturing a vital core of experience that had to be expressed *just so*; because it reached the heart and mind and soul of the addressee or audience in a way no other variety quite did; because to have used Standard English might have marked the relationships between the participants as more formal or distant than the speaker wanted. For these individuals, not to have used Spoken Soul might have meant they were not who or what or where they were and wanted to be.

The question remains about why Spoken Soul persists despite the negative attitudes toward it, and its speakers, that have been expressed for centuries. The primary answer is its role as a symbol of identity. This is the driving force behind the maintenance of low-prestige languages and dialects around the world, including "Schwyzerdeutsch in Switzerland, Canadian French in Canada, Appalachian English . . . in the United States, and Catalan Spanish in Spain," all of which, as psychologist Ellen Bouchard Ryan has noted, have survived despite "strong pressures to succumb" to the standard languages that dominate them. Pidgin and creole languages worldwide provide additional examples. Often derided as illegitimate, even degenerate, they are

also exalted and embraced as markers of solidarity; local, national, or ethnic identity; and truth.

For many African Americans, the identity function of Spoken Soul is paramount, and very old. The repressive slave codes enacted in America between the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century (including whipping, maiming, branding, ear-nailing and -severing, and castration for various "offenses") may have helped forge an oppositional identity among blacks vis-à-vis whites, expressed in part through a distinctive vernacular. Continued hardships of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (including lynchings, the denial of equal access to education and employment, segregation, poverty, police persecution, and criminal injustice) not only would have facilitated the development and/or maintenance of distinctive black ways of talking, dressing, dancing, making music, and behaving, but also would have made black Americans reluctant to mimic white ways of talking and behaving.

In the 1980s, anthropologists Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu found black inner-city teenagers in Washington, D.C., hostile to the adoption of a cluster of behaviors defined as "acting white"—at the top of which was "speaking standard English." The opposition is not just to speaking Standard English, which can be done in an identifiably black way, with a black accent and rhetorical style, but also and especially to talking proper or talking white (whether standard or vernacular), with white pronunciation patterns or accents. This attitude remains deeply ingrained today. Working-class teenagers from East Palo Alto and Redwood City, California, recently articulated for us their opposition to talking white and their defiant defense of talking black. For them, Spoken Soul is a litmus test for anyone who claims to be black (although one has to be cautious about the shrinking of Du Bois's consciousness to a one-soul paradigm):

Then i's these . . . black girls jus' like—ack lak white girls. Ah say,  
"You wanna be white, go change yo' sk[in] color. Shut up! [Tinky]

Over at my school . . . first time they catch you talkin white, they'll never let it go. Even if you just quit talkin like that, they'll never let it go! [Reggie]

It pisses me when the Oreos [black on the outside, white on the inside]—they be trying to correct your language, and I be like,  
"Get away from me! Did I ask you to—correct me?! No! No! No, I didn't! Nuh-uh!" [Fabiola]

As hip-hop culture and the language, body movements, dress, and music that embody it spread among young Americans of virtually every ethnicity and are adopted by teenagers in countries as distant as Russia and Japan, the status of black language and culture at the popular level is rising, and young African Americans of every class proudly claim it as originally and most authentically theirs.

We shouldn't let this mention of teenagers delude us into thinking, as many do, that Spoken Soul figures in the identities of young people only. Black adults of all ages talk the vernacular, and it functions to express their black identity, too. While it is true that African Americans with less education and earning power use the grammatical features of Spoken Soul more extensively than do those with more education and earning power, the vernacular is often wrongly associated with ignorance. The use, enjoyment, and endorsement of the vernacular by blacks who are well educated and hold good jobs reveal that much more is going on. This category includes not only such writers as June Jordan and such comedians as Steve Harvey, for whom the vernacular is part of their occupational art. It also includes business administrators such as Arch Whitehead (featured on *60 Minutes* and referred to earlier in the book), who eschew Spoken Soul in the world of work and extol it as the language they prefer at home or with friends.

A series of studies conducted since the 1970s reveals that attitudes toward Spoken Soul and Standard English, particularly among blacks, are more complex than what is commonly reported in the press—namely that the former is disdained and the latter extolled. Acknowledging this complexity is one key to understanding the persistence and significance of Spoken Soul.

In the 1970s, education specialist Mary Hoover polled forty-eight parents of elementary students in East Palo Alto and Oakland, California, about their attitudes toward vernacular and standard Black English. (Standard Black English or Black Standard English is a variety in which the speaker uses standard grammar but still sounds black, primarily because of black rhetorical strategies and selected black pronunciations, among them intonation and emphasis.) Hoover also asked about Superstandard, or "talking proper," in which the speaker sheds all traces of black pronunciation and affects a stilted syntax. She found little support for "talking proper," long the butt of humor and deprecation within the black community, but plenty of support for Standard Black English and a distinct preference for it over the ver-

naricular in the classroom and at work, and for reading and writing. However, there was strong support for the vernacular in informal spoken interaction at home and in the community, especially with black family members and friends.

One of the most frequent explanations that the parents gave for wanting to retain the vernacular was its role in the preservation of their distinctive history, worldview, and culture—their soul. The sentiment is not unique to African Americans. As T. S. Eliot observed some fifty years ago: "For the transmission of a culture—a peculiar way of thinking, feeling and behaving—and for its maintenance, there is no safeguard more reliable than a language." Literary critic Cleanth Brooks, noting the maintenance of Welsh in the face of English domination, and other examples, observed that:

The soul of a people is embodied in the language peculiar to them. . . . It is significant that peoples throughout history have often stubbornly held on to their native language or dialect because they regarded it as a badge of their identity and because they felt that only through it could they express their inner beings, their attitudes and emotions, and even their own concepts of reality.

Another reason for blacks' accepting and preserving the vernacular is its usefulness in "getting down" with other blacks. A black professor at a midwestern university, interviewed in a study in the early 1990s, explained that she not only used Spoken Soul with her black friends as a release from the stresses of her white-dominated professional life, but also employed it at times to create a positive relationship interaction with black students:

I think it [black vernacular] can be a unifier in developing a certain kind of rapport with them. . . . The personal rapport perhaps gives them a greater sense that "I am on your side. . . . There's no barrier between us. I can identify with you"—[it's] kind of a signal with the language.

We should remember that for many, speaking the vernacular is a source of great pleasure, as well as great utility. As Toni Morrison pointed out, there are some things that soul speakers cannot say, or say as well, "without recourse to my language."

The most recent study of attitudes toward black vernacular and Standard English is an ongoing one being conducted by Jacquelyn Rahman, a linguistics graduate student at Stanford University. In spring 1999, she asked black undergraduates and graduate students

there what they thought of the two varieties of English, and found that even among these upwardly bound black academics and pre-professionals, the value of both varieties was endorsed, much as Mary Hoover had found with black parents two decades earlier. On the one hand, Standard English was defended as the variety needed “in a white-dominated world . . . to gain respect and get good jobs,” “in formal settings (work, school reports),” and “when I am around the white majority . . . because that is what my audience understands and it’s socially more appropriate.” On the other hand, Black English was praised for its “spirit, creativity, resilience and soul,” for its “character and history,” for “being more expressive and vibrant,” and because “it keeps me close to my family and friends, as well as serving as a living reminder of my history as a member of a distinctive ethnic group in this country.” Virtually all the students said that they were bidialectal, some becoming so after initial school experiences in which they were derided by black classmates for talking white. They draw on one variety or the other as audience and situation demand.

Because we have celebrated Spoken Soul throughout this book, one might be tempted to group us with those who argue that Standard English is unnecessary, and who insist that vernacular speakers need not extend their repertoires. On the contrary, we feel that shunning Standard English too easily lets the power structure and our own would-be spokespeople off the hook, allowing the former more wantonly to disregard the raw voice of protest, and the latter to have one less weapon hopelessly mute in affairs of business and the state.

That mainstream English is essential to our self-preservation is indisputable. Without it, how could we have wrested judgeships and congressional seats and penthouse offices from those who have long enjoyed such privileges almost unchallenged? We have come this far thanks, in part, to a distinguished lineage of race men and women who used elegant Standard English as a template for their struggle against the very oppressor responsible for imposing the language on them. Malcolm X’s speeches show his command of Standard English, especially a black Standard English that, like Jesse Jackson’s, is non-vernacular in grammar but soulful in its rhetorical style and pronunciation, including intonation and emphasis. (Malcolm himself was quite critical of “ultra-proper-talking Negroes,” including “those with their accents so phonied up that if you just heard them and didn’t see them you wouldn’t even know that they were Negroes.”) But in making the transition from the street to the podium, brother Malcolm also

had to develop his expertise in speaking and writing Standard English, and his initial discouragement is described in his *Autobiography*:

I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad. In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn’t articulate, I wasn’t even functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I would say it, something such as “Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad.”

Before we even fix our mouths to snub the speech of the marketplace, we must remember Malcolm, and remember also Frederick Douglass’s “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July? An Address delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852.” Drawing his imposing form upright before the president of the United States and other assembled statesmen, Douglass declared that:

This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people.

By bequeathing to us such eloquence, Douglass commands us not only to master Standard English but also to learn it in its highest form. And we must. For in the academies and courthouses and legislatures and business places where policies are made and implemented, it is as graceful a weapon as can be found against injustice, poverty, and discrimination. Like Douglass and Malcolm X, we must learn to carry Standard English like a lariat, unfurling it with precision. We must learn to use it, too, for enjoyment and mastery of literature, philosophy, science, math, and the wide variety of subjects that are conducted and taught in Standard English, in the United States, and, increasingly, in the world. We must teach our children to do so as well. This, as you know, is no mean feat. It requires time, money and other resources, patience, discipline, and understanding, all of which

tend to be in tragically short supply in schools with large black populations. But treating Spoken Soul like a disease is no way to add Standard English to their repertoire. On the contrary, building on Spoken Soul, through contrast and comparison with Standard English, is likely to meet with less resistance from students who are hostile to “acting white.” It is also likely to generate greater interest and motivation, and as experiments have shown (see chapter 9), to yield greater success, more quickly.

But if we could wave a magic wand and have all of black America wake up tomorrow talking like television anchorman Bryant Gumbel, shouldn't we do so? Actually, no. Sampling Standard English should not lead us to forget the flavor of Spoken Soul, or vice versa. Just ask yourself: Why would our forefathers and foremothers “sing the Lord's song in a strange land” (Psalm 137:4), if their voices hadn't created a note that was decidedly their own? Without that note, how could they have described to their children their intimate relationships with love and freedom and death, relationships that were dissimilar to those of their masters? In the end, all words (and the rules for pronouncing and combining them) are mighty. As the African concept of *nommo* asserts, spirits are conjured by the saying of words. Ancestors are invoked by the speaking of words. If our enemies can make us forget these words, and then make us forget that we have forgotten, they will have robbed us of our ability to honor and summon our ancestors, whom we so desperately need now more than ever.

True, the vernacular has been abused. (How could we ever forget the prattle of the blackface minstrels?) But we must reclaim it. We must stop importing this shame that is manufactured beyond our communities for something as cellular and spiritual as our language. We must refuse to allow Spoken Soul to remain a stepchild in the family of tongues. We must begin to do for language what we have done historically (in some cases only very recently) for our hair, our clothes, our art, our education, and our religion: that is, to determine for ourselves what's good and what's bad, and even what's *baaad*. The crucial thing is that we hold the yardstick, and finally become sovereign guardians and arbitrators and purveyors of our culture. For all who share this vision, we close with four modest suggestions:

- Develop a new awareness about the origins, structure, politics, and larger significance of Spoken Soul. We're not suggesting that you case the 'hood thinking about etymology or phonology. Rather, try to keep in mind that all languages and dialects are systematic, rule-

governed, and righteous, and that none has ever fallen out of a black hole or been spontaneously conceived.

- Be conscious of our love-hate relationship with Spoken Soul. The next time a brother or sister starts speaking in deep vernacular during a city council meeting and you feel yourself stinging with embarrassment, try to remember the social conditioning and the historical circumstances behind that private shame. We don't promise that you'll overcome your shame, only that you may begin to understand it and, one hopes, reverse it. By the same token, the next time you find yourself submerged in and surrounded by Spoken Soul, acknowledge it silently. Adore it. Taste it as if for the first time. Try to imagine the same scene, the same ethos and ambience, without it.

- Strike such phrases as “broken English,” “lazy English,” “bad English,” and “careless English” from your vocabulary, and teach your friends and family to put little stock in such uninformed and absolutist judgments. You can't speak soul simply by being lazy or careless about speaking Standard English. At the same time, urge youngsters to appreciate and become proficient in Standard English, especially the black Standard English that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Maxine Waters, Maya Angelou, and other leaders have commanded so well.

- Don't ever shun or jeer a brother or sister because of the way he or she speaks. It is only when we have claimed both Spoken Soul and Standard English as our own, empowering our youth to appreciate and articulate each in their respective forums, that we will have mastered the art of merging our double selves into a better and truer self. Remember: to become an accomplished pianist (jazz *or* classical), you've got to be able to work both the ebonies and the ivories.

We should remember and do these things, because issues of language, class, culture, education, and power will continue to smolder, and will flare up again. As the African American proverb—cast in Spoken Soul—cautions us, “Every shut eye ain't asleep, every goodbye ain't gone.”