Language Review

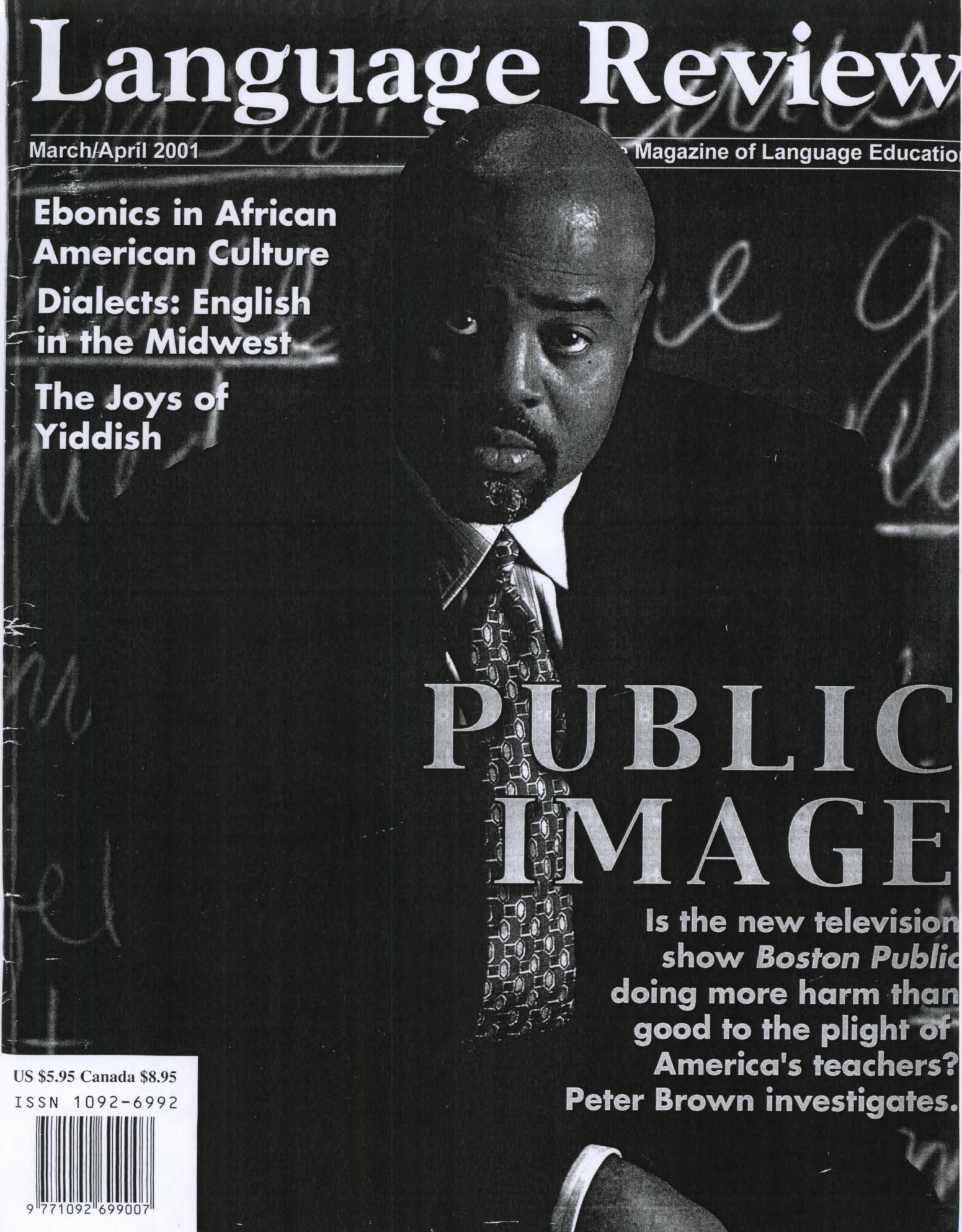The Magazine of Language Education

Ebonics in African
American Culture

Dialects: English
in the Midwest

The Joys of
Yiddish

PUBLIC
IMAGE

Is the new television
show *Boston Public*
doing more harm than
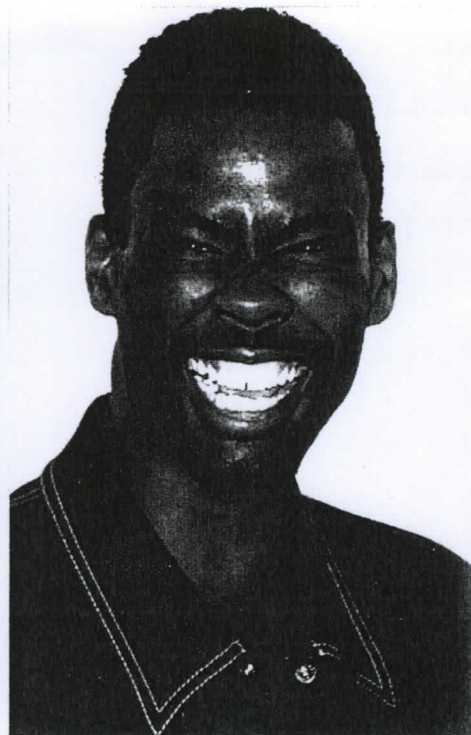good to the plight of
America's teachers?
Peter Brown investigates.

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The Ubiquity of Ebonics

John R. Rickford and **Russell J. Rickford** discuss the role of Ebonics in African American culture.

The recently released *Kings of Comedy* movie demonstrates among other things that Ebonics is alive, accepted and appreciated within the African American community, especially in informal interaction among blacks. The routines of the film's four stars (Cedric The Entertainer, Steve Harvey, D.L. Hughley, and Bernie Mac) certainly rely extensively on black vernacular language. And the overwhelmingly black on-screen North Carolina audience seems to relish the Kings' Ebonics, as similar audiences did during the group's live performances elsewhere over the past two years.

Given the widespread denial and deprecation of Ebonics during the Oakland controversy of 1996, both the vitality of the vernacular and its positive reception might come as a surprise. But as we'll argue below, summarizing evidence from our recent book, *Spoken Soul*, Ebonics in one form or another has been actively used by Black comedians, writers, preachers, actors, singers, and everyday folk for ages. And recent public disparagement of black talk is only one side of a complex love-hate relationship that

African Americans and others have had with it for ages too.

Before we go any further, however, we need to clarify what we mean by Ebonics, or what Claude Brown, author of ·*Manchild in the Promised Land*, called "Spoken Soul." Contrary to popular misconception, Ebonics is not synonymous with slang, the informal and usually short-lived word-usage most characteristic of teenagers and young adults (e.g. dope "very good" or ill "very bad"). The Kings in fact use relatively little slang, consistent with their self-proclaimed "old school" status. And while they do use four-letter words and their derivatives, this is definitely not a necessary nor a defining characteristic of Ebonics.

The more organic Ebonics features that these popular funnymen deploy are the distinctive vernacular pronunciations, grammatical features and rhetorical patterns found among virtually all age groups and most classes within the African American community.

Consider grammar. In the movie, the Kings mark tense and aspect when and how events occur with the tools of black talk.

(Top left) Steve Harvey and Cedric The Entertainer. (Top) Chris Rock and (above) Richard Pryor.

They place invariant *be* before verbs for frequent or habitual actions ("they songs *be* havin a cause"), and use *done* for completed actions ("you *done* missed it"), and *be done* for future perfect or hypothetical events ("Lightning *be done* struck my house"). And they frequently delete *is* and *are* in sentences where standard English requires it ("Tiger __my cousin" . . . "We __ confrontational"). As Bernie Mac noted (although not in relation to these forms): "You talk this way ain' nothin to be ashamed of."

Some of these features are also found in

the vernacular of whites and other ethnic groups, particularly in the South, where 90% of the Black population was concentrated until the early 20th century. But as extensive linguistic research has demonstrated, they are more common in the vernacular of blacks, particularly among the working and lower class.

Some features, like the deletion of *is* and *are*, are rarely if ever found in white vernacular usage, particularly outside the South. As D.L. Hughley commented in the movie, "We do things different." Where these features came from is still a matter of academic debate, but African, Caribbean and English sources have all contributed.

And contrary to public perception, Ebonics is governed by systematic rules and restrictions, unconsciously acquired and obeyed, as all natural languages are.

Are the Kings of Comedy unique in their use of Ebonics? Absolutely not. Comedians like Richard Pryor and Adele Givens and Chris Rock all draw on the vernacular, often to differentiate between blacks and whites, a recurrent theme in black comedy. Twentieth century icons like Sammy Davis, Moms Mabley and Dick Gregory all did too, as did old-timers like Bert Williams and George Walker (who began performing in the 1890s). Noting its ubiquity, in fact, Redd Foxx and Norma Miller included a chapter on "black street language" in their *Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor* (1977).

The musical and verbal traditions of the Black experience are also replete with the sounds and structures of Spoken Soul. This may be most obvious in the newer genres, like hiphop, as in Grammy winner Lauryn Hill's 1998 *Lost Ones*: ". . did you really gain from/What you done done, it—so silly, how come?" But in 1924, Ma Rainey 's blues wailed in similar grammatical grooves ("See, See, Rider, see what you done done"). So too did the old spiritual that the Howard University choir intoned at their 1997 commencement ceremony ("Lord, I done done/I done done whatcha told me ta do") moments after keynote speaker Carole Simpson had bashed Ebonics.

Although African American ministers include some of the most accomplished manipulators of standard English, they invariably draw on Black rhetorical patterns in their sermons, as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., often did, and as the Rev. Jesse Jackson still does. Moreover, as several studies have shown, Afro-Baptist and other preachers often use Black English to add realism and drama, especially at the peaks of their sermons. Celebrated Black writers too, have drawn extensively and creatively on the Black vernacular, from Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) through Langston Hughes (1902-1967) and Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) to contemporaries Sonia Sanchez (b. 1934) and August Wilson (b. 1945). Some novelists, among them Alice Walker and John Widemann, have used Ebonics not just in dialogue, but in narrative text.

Black writers have also been among the staunchest defenders and aficionados of Black English. James Baldwin called it "this passion, this skill, this incredible music," Toni Morrison insisted that there were certain things she could not say "without recourse to my language," and June Jordan praised its "life, voice and clarity."

As these last comments show, it is definitely not the case that African Americans always deny and disdain what is for most of them their mother tongue. So why did the nation greet Ebonics with such vitriol and hilarity during the controversy of 1996/1997?

Perhaps because of the general misconception that the Oakland School Board intended to teach and accept Ebonics in the classroom. Most of the fuming and fulminating about Ebonics stemmed from the mistaken belief that it was to replace Standard English as a medium of instruction and a target for success. Actually, the Board agreed with virtually everyone else in America that their students should master mainstream English, Standard English or whatever you want to call the variety of

WARNING: *Readers may find the images accompanying this article offensive. In no way does American Language Review support or endorse any points of view that may be construed from these images. They are an integral part of this article and have been included in the interests of scholarly research.*

Leroy, Big D, And Big Daddy Speakin Ebonics On The Internet

Ebonics Test: Leroy is a 19 year old sophomore at Oakland High School where they teach Ebonics as a second language. Last week he was given an easy homework assignment. All he had to do was use each of the following words in a sentence. This is what Leroy said:
Rectum...I had two Cadillacs, but my ol' lady rectum both.
Seldom...My cousin gave me two tickets to the Knicks game, so I seldom....
Tripoli...I was gonna buy my old lady a bra but I couldn't fine no tripoli.
http://www.user.whitleynet.org/ianbert/email/ebonics.htm

Pseudo-Intellectualism for the masses

Figure 7: "Ebonics: Pseudo-Intellectualism for the Masses"
(http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3070/ebonics.html)

This example comes from one of at least 1,021 websites that have appeared on the Internet since December 18, 1996 when the Oakland California School Board released what has come to be called the Ebonics Resolution[1], the result of a 30-member African American Task Force attempt to grapple with the underachievement of Oakland's African American students. These students were only 53% of Oakland's

David Kirkland, Austin Jackson and **Geneva Smitherman** present the findings of their project that monitored various "Ebonics" sites on the World Wide Web.

English needed for school, formal occasions, and success in the world of work.

The real disagreement was about the means. The School Board's plan was to improve the teaching of the standard variety through systematic comparison and contrast with the vernacular. There is good research evidence for this approach, though the Board cited none of it. The conventional approach, favored by most Americans despite overwhelming evidence of its limitations, is to elevate and teach the standard by disparaging and trying to stamp out the vernacular.

But we are not convinced that African Americans want to abandon "down-home" speech and become one-dimensional mainstream speakers. Even Maya Angelou, who said in 1996 that she was "incensed" by the Ebonics resolution, has used Ebonics creatively in her poems (e.g., "The Thirteens" and "The Pusher"). And Bill Cosby, who contemptuously referred to "Igno-Ebonics" has crafted his comedic routines with soul talk (e.g. in "The Lower Tract"). Their strong negative reactions, we believe, were largely the result of their fear that students would be restricted to the vernacular.

Over a hundred years ago, James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the black national anthem ("Lift Every Voice and Sing") argued with his friend Paul Laurence Dunbar about the limitations of black dialect as an expressive instrument. But he had written masterful dialect poems himself e.g. "Sence You Went Away," 1900). Johnson's love-hate relationship with the vernacular is just one manifestation of the dual consciousness ("Two souls... two warring ideals in one dark body") that W.E.B. DuBois identified in 1903 as a characteristic of being black in America.

Judging from America's wholesale consumption and enjoyment of black comedy, music and literature that is born and bred of Spoken Soul, we are not convinced that whites and other ethnic groups want to see Ebonics abandoned either, quiet as that viewpoint is kept. Certainly it is not necessary to abandon Spoken Soul to master Standard English, any more than it is necessary to abandon English to learn French, or to deprecate jazz to appreciate classical music.
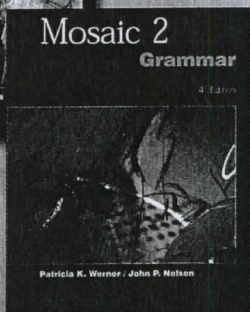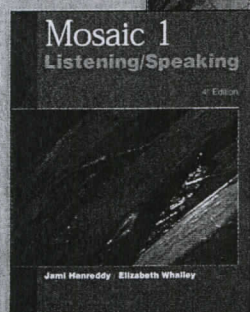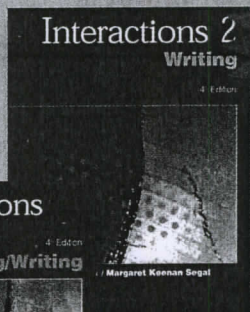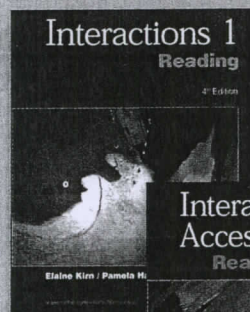
Moreover, suggesting, as some do, that we abandon Spoken Soul and cleave only to Standard English is like proposing that we play only the white keys of a piano. The fact is that for many of our most beautiful melodies, we need both the white keys and the black. What really strikes us about the Kings of Comedy, and the other comedians, writers, singers and preachers whom we've cited in this column, is their ability to command and switch seamlessly between Spoken Soul and Standard English.

Developing that dynamic bi-dialecticism in young African Americans is what Oakland was essentially proposing (albeit unclearly) in 1996. It remains an achievable and laudable goal.

school population, but they represented 80% of the suspensions and 71% of the "special needs" students. And their average grade point was 1.8 compared to 2.7 for white and 2.4 for Asian students. Public response to this educational crisis, both on the Internet and in the broader public space, generated much heat but little light and reflected little sympathy for the plight of Oakland students.

The Ebonics controversy is a continuation of more than a century of focus on what James A. Harrison referred to back in 1884 in the journal *Anglia* as "Negro English." Included in this litany of debates is the internationally-publicized 1977-79 *King* Federal court case (also known as the "Black English Case") in which Smitherman (co-author of this article) served as chief advocate and expert witness for parents and their children who brought suit against the Ann Arbor, Michigan School Board for its failure to take the children's language into account in the educational process. Instead of recognizing the children's speech as legitimate and rule-governed, the Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School had used their "Black English" as the basis to place the children in learning disabilities classes. Federal Judge Charles Joiner's ruling in the parents' and children's favor, in concert with the tremendous body of research by linguists over two decades demonstrating the legitimacy and power of Ebonics, should have sounded the death knell over issues regarding the systematicity of African American Language. However, tension and conflicts over the language have never disappeared. Now, the cycle of debate includes the new dimension of cyberspace.

Websites provide a forum for reactions to issues such as the Ebonics controversy where members of the public can freely display their inner selves while their true identities are masked. Analyzing "Ebonics" sites produced by lay persons (sites maintained by linguists were excluded) between December, 1996 and June, 1999, generated from 13 search engines[2], our research team uncovered 1,021 sites, with 181 of them being duplicates where an author had borrowed wholesale from another website. Although the sites represented diverse samples—some constructed in what the authors conceived of as "Ebonics"—it was possible to classify them into one of the following categories: Jokes, riddles, nursery rhymes, poems, songs, religious or Biblical texts, rules for speaking Ebonics, political speeches and documents, "standardized" tests, dictionaries/glossaries, cartoons or other visual representations (some with no accompanying text).

About a third of the sample (N=348) was in Ebonics, or at least what the authors construed of as Ebonics. Only 21% of these representations used Ebonics accurately. For example, "Twas da night befo' Christmas and all in the hood," an Ebonics version of the first line of this well-known Christmas poem, was accurate in its use of "da" (Ebonics "d" for "th" substitution) and in its representation of Ebonics' postvocalic "r" deletion in "befo." (http:www.//joel.net/EBONICS/christmas.asp). However, the overwhelming majority of the sites that attempted to represent the syntax or phonology of Ebonics were grossly inaccurate, as in this line from an attempted translation of "Three Blind Mice": "She done whacked dare tail wid a fuckin knift" where

"dare tail" would be "they tail" in correct Ebonics, and "knift" does not exist in Ebonics or any other variety of English (http://www.joel.net/EBONICS/blind-mice.asp).

Some of the most interesting web pages employed racist character stereotypes: Rufus, Buckwheat, Aunt Jemima, Big Daddy (used in reference to "God"), and Leroy. This last stereotype appeared on at least one out of every ten sites. He is represented as ranging in age anywhere from 18 to 30—yet he still attends high school! As further indication of such absurdity, the site entitled "Big D's Ebonics Page" is reproduced under three different URLs and contains anywhere from 12 to 16 Black stereotypical web productions, such as the "Gangsta Aptitude Test," which pokes fun at African American intellect, Ebonics nursery rhymes which dismiss Ebonics as a crude and even infantile tongue, and the "Ebonics Prayer" which denigrates African American spirituality, the sustaining core of Black Culture. This is significant because Big D's Ebonics sites exemplify a growing trend of web propaganda that disses the language and the people who speak it.

The research team was able to achieve a high degree of inter-rater reliability (90%) in classifying attitudes toward Ebonics itself and toward African Americans.

Almost a quarter of the 1,021 sites characterized African Americans as dumb, lazy, criminal-minded, sex-crazed, and as a group of people not to be taken seriously. Ebonics, as the language of African Americans, was represented as "nothing but" slang, profanity, bad English, and a form of speech to be put down and ridiculed. In total, a full 90% of the sites reflected such negative attitudes toward the language. For example, the author of "Ebonics: An Insult to Black Intelligence," foolishly claims that "no intelligent person uses ebonics. I have heard all the excuses, especially the most popular one: 'I be usin' ebonics around my frains but I use regular English in public." HOGWASH! If you use ebonics in private, then you use ebonics in public." (http://www.blackpower.net/ebonics/ebonics.htm). Such an absurd allegation—that code and style switching does not exist—is contrary to all linguistic evidence and research.

Only 10% of the sites represented the language as creative and as a legitimate form of speech. An example is the work of the Reverend Herbert Daughtry, pastor of the House of the Lord Church, and Mr. Charles Barron, President of Dynamics of Leadership, Inc. Together they launched the "New York Ebonics Movement." The Movement has four purposes, one of which is "to respect the speech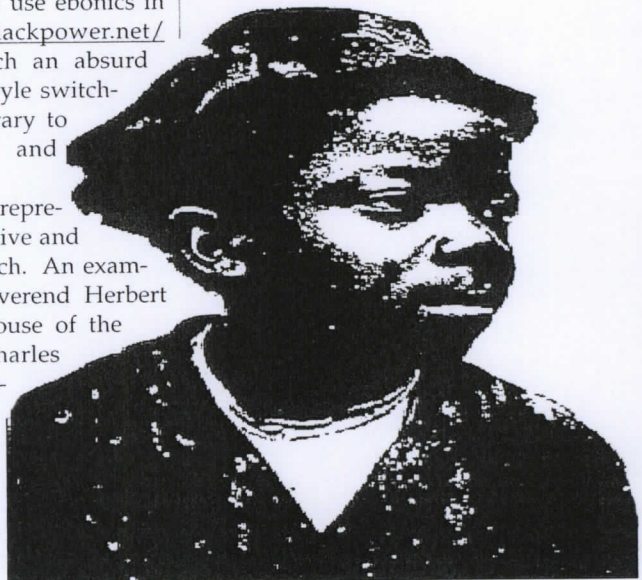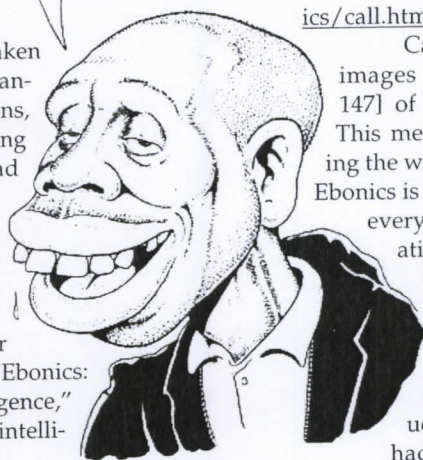 that African American children bring with them to the educational experience in New York schools, therefore meeting children where they are linguistically and taking them where they need to go." (http://www.dynateck.com/ebonics/call.htm).

Cartoons and other visual images comprised 14.4% [N= 147] of the websites surveyed. This means that anyone searching the web for information about Ebonics is likely to encounter, after every seventh website, a negative image. Some of these images reflect a late Twentieth Century reincarnation of older, historical caricatures that many people (including this research team) had thought long since dead. As mentioned, Leroy sometimes dubbed "Leon" or other names, but always the same character type—was the most popular image (represented both visually and in stand-alone text). The depiction of Leroy, as shown (left), parallels a racial archetype that commonly appeared after Emancipation, namely the racial caricature, "Jim" (above). This and other stereotypical images commonly appeared in anti-abolition tracts and in the form of postcards and souvenir booklets from 1863 to 1925[3]. Looking at these images, one can see both in the late Twentieth Century "Leroy" and in the Nineteenth Century "Jim," the wide, flat nose covering most of the face, thick, massive bloated lips, a protruding jaw, and carnivorous-like teeth which combine with saliva that drops from Leroy's lips creating a bestial effect.

The image of the Black man as an over-sexualized speaker of Ebonics is represented in a pornographic video advertisement linked to the gay website at http://www.gaywired.com, which portrays a sex-obsessed Black male to promote a gay pornographic movie. Playing on the popular reading program, "Hooked on Phonics," the advertisement presents its title in a preschooler's script, with the "k" in "Hooked" and the "s" in "Phonics" backward. The positioning of these letters reflects a com-

Figure 2: "Jim" Types of Sunny South. Indelible Photographs. Published by A. Wittemann. Souvenir Books and Post Cards, ca. 1900? From Anti-Black Thougt 1863-1925: Anti-Abolition Tracks and Anti-Black Stereotypes (Smith 1993)

"Websites provide a forum for reactions to issues such as the Ebonics controversy where members of the public can freely display their inner selves while their true identities are masked."

Oncst I wuz thot of az stoopid an inabil too cummoonikate... but Thankz too dis noo "Ebonics" I is now bi-ling-u-al!

> "What are we to conclude from this analysis of over a thousand websites dealing with Ebonics? Given a national school system and an American public more and more dependent on cyber-airways for information, we must assume that misinformation and misleading viewpoints about Ebonics have tainted the perceptions of the majority of web users."

mon attitude toward Ebonics that was displayed in website after website, namely that Ebonics is "baby talk" or underdeveloped speech. More significantly, anyone, including small children, searching the Net for information on Ebonics could easily be exposed to this picture of a naked Black man clutching his penis.

The portrayal of Ebonics speakers as sex-obsessed is also found on websites that draw on popular, contemporary images and icons. For example, the picture (below) replaces the words on the Intel Pentium II processor logo with "Yo! Ebonics Inside" and "pimpin' II." Other websites such as the one seen in Figure 7 (see p. 22) succinctly communicate multiple negative messages concerning Ebonics. Here, the name of the popular butter substitute "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter" is replaced with "I Can't Believe It's Not English" on what appears to be an exact duplicate of the product. Reflecting the confusion and misconceptions about the Oakland School Board's statement that Ebonics is a language different from English, this altered title is placed on an inverted bottle of butter, suggesting that the subject of Ebonics itself is odd, backward, or simply not worthy of intelligent discussion. The words that accompany this image, "EBONICS: Pseudo-Intellectualism for the masses," more than reinforce this point.

Figure 6: (http://joel.net/EBONICS)

What are we to conclude from this analysis of over a thousand websites dealing with Ebonics? Given a national school system and an American public more and more dependent on cyber-airways for information, we must assume that misinformation and misleading viewpoints about Ebonics have tainted the perceptions of the majority of web users.

According to research, 84% of Internet users in the United States are European American[4], and 45% of Net users are of school-age[5]. This means that an overwhelming number of European Americans and students will come in contact with negative information that distorts Ebonics and the reality of its speakers.

Close to 70% of all teachers have access to the Internet[6]. And nearly all teachers will have access by 2005[7]. Accordingly, language arts (and other) teachers will undoubtedly be swayed by the anti-Ebonics propaganda in circulation on the Internet. This may even cause them to be reluctant to teach about language diversity in the classroom, pro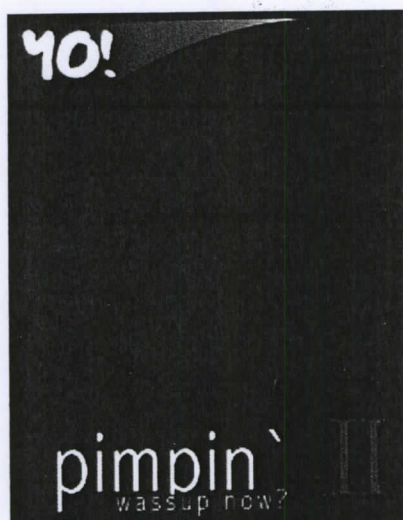moting the misconception of a monolingual standard, which excludes Latinos, Asians and Blacks. It is thus ironic that as our nation becomes ever more connected with the world through the Internet, we as a nation may be disconnected from the reality of language diversity as a result of negative messages on the Internet. We need to question "why" wh-en one types in the word "Ebonics," does 'pornography arise? Why do racist images and character stereotypes unveil themselves? And why do-es the conservative, anti-Black child perspective speak out so loudly?

Internet productions on Ebonics represent unsolicited views, voluntarily of-fered to communicate with others, in a medium that provides a cover for the writer's identity. Of course we were unable to ascertain the racial identity of the 1,021 producers of the Ebonics websites our research uncovered. Nor is there any way to corroborate the self-professed racial identities that were sometimes given within those websites.

However, given the digital divide that still exists, it is safe to assume that the folks who hang out in cyberspace are not your typical boyz in the hood. And while we do not claim that these websites are representative of the more than 250 million Americans who comprise this nation, still these Ebonics websites do provide a snapshot of turn-of-the-century attitudes toward the language of African Americans as well as attitudes toward African Americans themselves. What this portrait reveals is that we language arts teachers and scholars of the new millennium have our work cut out for us.

Notes:

1. The formal title of the "Ebonics Resolution" was "Resolution of the Board of Education Adopting the Report and Recommendations of the African American Task Force."

2. The Internet search engines and directories were: Excite, Infoseek, Yahoo, Altavista, Netscape, Microsoft Network, Lycos, Snap.com, Go Network, Planet. Com, Hot Bot, Web Crawler, and Go To.com.

3. John David Smith, ed., *Anti-Abolition Tracts and Anti-Black Stereotypes: General Statements of "the Negro Problem."* New York: Garland, 1993.

4. "African-Americans and the Internet." Pew Internet Project. Http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=25. (October 22, 2000).

5. "Current Population Survey(CPS) Report." U.S. Census Bureau. http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/computer.html (October 1997).

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

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