Plays with words: Fungible(ly) fugitive Black sound in ethnographies of communication

JUSTIN LANCE PANNELL

University of Pennsylvania, USA

ABSTRACT

Anti-Black language ideologies manifest in exclusionary language policies (e.g. Sung & Allen-Handy 2019), educational tracking (e.g. Sung 2018), and scholarly claims of Black 'deficiency' (Smitherman 2000). A liberal educational research tradition has countered with ethnographic accounts of cultural 'mismatch' (Michaels 2006) vis-à-vis Black educational 'failure'. Conducting a textual analysis of an archive of ethnography of communication texts, I locate multiple genealogical linkages holding between 'mismatch' and deprivation discourses, principally ones centered on representations of 'pathological' Black 'matriarchy'. Paralleling Black feminist theorizations of 'fungible Black flesh' (e.g. Hartman 1997), I account for these representations by conceptualizing 'fungible Black sound'. I further argue that 'fungible fugitivity' (e.g. Snorton 2017), that is, how Blackness fluidly responds to white incursion is linguistically realized in acts of 'signifyin(g)' (e.g. Mitchell-Kernan 1999), yielding the analytic category 'fungible(ly) fugitive Black sound'. Lastly, I reread an ethnographic text with this analytic to illustrate its affordance for (re)imagining Black futurity. (Black sound, fungibility, fugitivity, raciolinguistic ideologies, ethnography of communication, Black studies)*

Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.

(Baldwin 1998:780)

INTRODUCTION

Presently, many who have not recognized the dark contours of their own silhouette might be gaining sight of the virulent saliencies of racializing classificatory schemes, while those living in the shades cast by modernity/coloniality might likely wonder at the surprise of one's own shadow. That is, as racial hierarchies gain currencies of understanding, the relationality and constructedness of racial categories is more widely recognized. However, while more people may SEE racialization as a sociohistorical contingency and injustice, fewer people avowedly HEAR

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racialization at all. Unfortunately, until RACE-LANGUAGE is denaturalized, linguistic processes of racialization will provide their own dark cover for race. This genealogy of ethnography of communication texts focused on Black speakers not only seeks to denaturalize race-language but also to productively theorize what Rosa & Díaz (2019:121) have called 'raciontologies', particularly race-language ontologies 'beyond the human'. While prior scholarly work (Prendergast 2000) has incisively critiqued color-evasive depictions of Black speakers in Heath's (1983) *Ways with words*, the most influential text of the present archive, I mean to help produce new imaginaries of Black futurity in fields of language study. Specifically, building from its analytical claims, this study engages in a 'reconfiguration' of the archive—a strategy most robustly undertaken by Black feminist thinkers—which 'entails reframing the very conditions, contexts, and circumstances for theorization, which ultimately means making theory anew' (Hanchard 2010:515).

I proceed as follows. First, I review the notions of Black flesh, fungibility, and fugitivity as ontological formations of Blackness which are grounded in histories of Middle Passage, slavery, and their afterlives and which emerge as affordances for (re)imagining Black futurity. Second, after arguing for a modification in the theorization of raciolinguistic ideologies of anti-Blackness, I develop the notion of FUNGIBLE BLACK SOUND. Third, I engage in a textual analysis of an archive of ethnography of communication texts to link the representations of fungible Black sound that appear throughout the archive to broader 'cultural deprivation' discourses. Fourth, I discuss how language practices of signifyin(g) provide for the fugitivity of fungible Black sound, and I then draw further on Black feminist scholars (King 2016) to arrive at the analytic category: FUNGIBLE(LY) FUGITIVE BLACK SOUND. Finally, I reread a core passage from Heath's (1983) *Ways with words* through the lens of the proposed analytic category to demonstrate how it may help us to read, understand, and imagine transgressively.

RACIOLINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES OF ANTI-BLACKNESS AND FUNGIBLE(LY) FUGITIVE BLACK FLESH

Raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa 2015; Rosa & Flores 2017) underwrite the co-naturalization of race and language as perceptually and positionally co-implicational phenomena. Conceptions of languages as discrete, separable phenomena tied to nation-state/colonial populations emerged within colonial discourses (Makoni & Pennycook 2005), while modes of 'race-thinking' (Arendt 1973), or race discourses, were/are foundational to modernity/coloniality (Wynter 1995, 2003, 2015; Foucault 2003; Veronelli 2015). The resulting co-naturalization of race and language has produced a phenomenological shift, inducing the joint apprehension of race-language (Rosa 2019). Analytically, interlocking modes of race-language perception are accounted for by the 'white listening subject' (Flores &

Rosa 2015), which further explicates the overdetermination of race-language (Rosa 2019).

Illuminating aspects of Blackness as a race-language formation, Sung's (2018:670) sketch of raciolinguistic ideologies of anti-Blackness aligns with certain Afro-pessimist views holding, that due to Blackness' ontological position owed to slavery, 'even if there is some supposed mutability in the racial formation of blackness it is overwhelmingly constrained by the continued institutionalization of slavery and its afterlife'. Although Sung's notion of raciolinguistic ideologies of anti-Blackness is a good starting point, I aim to add focus to how representations of Black speakerhood can promote goals of abolition and decoloniality. Specifically, I argue that an ontology rooted in the 'Middle Passage', slavery, colonization, and their afterlives was/is a radically generative site of conceptual, representational, and discursive potential that anticipates novel affordances situated outside of modernist Euro-American cultural matrices. I return to this intervention momentarily, but first I examine how Blackness has been conceived within strands of Black feminist scholarship.

Hortense Spillers (1987:67) conceives of the ontological implications of Middle Passage and slavery through the notion of 'flesh', which she describes in the following: 'before the body there is "flesh", that zero degree of social conceptualization … If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hold, fallen, or "escaped", overboard'. This definition highlights both the (non)representational aspects of flesh vis-à-vis its (non)subject position and its carceral, violent materiality. As cargo, enslaved Black flesh experienced unimaginable horrors within inhumane ship's holds, whose construction and apportionment were reflected in ledgers that articulated enslaved persons as interchangeable, quantified masses. Spillers (1987:72) describes how enslaved African persons, stripped of any 'semantic' value, were subjected to processes of de-culturing and de-gendering, the latter determining a state wherein 'one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into "account" as QUANTITIES'. In short, enslaved persons were submitted to regimes of quantification, the sole sets of rules by which they were found intelligible, creating conditions inconsistent with any 'semantic' value, that is, the totalization that belongs to commodification. However, while this process of 'thingification' (Césaire 2000:42) severed the relevance of cultural and gender categories to enslaved African persons, Black flesh additionally served as a 'cultural vestibularity' (Spillers 1987:67), whose radical symbolic potentiality generated core aspects of modernity/coloniality.

Saidiya Hartman (1997:25–26) extends the theme of Black FUNGIBILITY, or commodified interchangeability, into slavery economies of affect, power, and pleasure, noting that 'the figurative capacities of blackness and the fungibility of the commodity are directly linked. The fungibility of the commodity, specifically its abstractness and immateriality, enabled the black body… to serve as the vehicle of white self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment'. Therefore, while Black flesh constitutes a bare negation, its fungibility has evidenced a radical symbolic

potentiality, generating, for example, white subjectivities. Similarly, Snorton (2017:64) details how fungible Black flesh generated modernist/colonial sex and gender categories, constituting a racialized interrelation that has 'animat[ed] the semiotics of gender, wherein sex and gender became inexhaustibly revisable according to the racial logic of consumption'. Along these lines, Wynter (1995) explicates the irruption of modernity/coloniality's hierarchical, racializing classificatory schemes through the dialogical relation of Man, or modernity/coloniality's genres of humanness (white-male-bourgeoise-etc.), and Blackness positioned as the liminal, sub/non-human category. Making a general claim, King (2019:23) contends that 'as a Black fleshy analytic … Black fungibility can denote and connote pure flux, process, and potential'. As King observes, because Black fungibility refers to flux and potentiality, it suggests an unpredictability that, when scrutinized by the white gaze, inspires racial anxieties regarding loss of control which continue to motivate attempts to capture Black life in material and representational forms.

These considerations are characteristic of anti-Black racial logics of modernity/coloniality. On one hand, historical and contemporary conditions consistently attest to the cultural (re)production of Blackness as a negated alterity. On the other hand, beyond laying the economic foundations for modernity/coloniality, fungible Black flesh has provided for the construction of white subjectivities (Hartman 1997), the meanings of sex and gender categories (Snorton 2017), racializing classificatory schemes (Wynter 1995), and a host of other core symbolic and discursive moments of modernity/coloniality. In other words, while Black life faces multiple, insatiable forms of exploitation, it is also levied with an arrestingly hypocritical, pathologizing rubric which, as Baldwin states in the epigraph, is 'meant to define the other'. However, antimonies surrounding Blackness also enable Black fugitivity.

Faced with these conditions, Black life is often realized and survived in resistance, flight, and disruption. Snorton (2017:74) elaborates an ontology of fungible fugitivity, wherein 'blackness is that vestibularizing paradigm that is both within and outside the nation-as-home', providing Black people with 'loopholes of retreat' as impermanent homes. While *fugitivity* literally denotes urgent escape from captivity, it also refers to rich domains of discourse and practice by which the carceral apprehension of the white gaze and apparatuses of white supremacy are eluded. Motivated by persistent racial anxieties, the specter of white incursion has entailed how 'fungibility and fugitivity figured two sides of a Janus-faced coin' (Snorton 2017:84), one which manifests as an affordance for (re)imagining Black futurity.

In sum, while the current theorization of raciolinguistic ideologies of anti-Blackness (Sung 2018; Sung & Allen-Handy 2019) incorporates several trenchant aspects of an Afro-pessimist critique, it lends exclusive focus to constraints on Black life. Drawing on Spillers, Hartman, Snorton, Wynter, and King, I have attempted to limn an alternative vision of Blackness. Specifically, the pure flux

and potentiality of fungible Black flesh and fugitivity provide for structures of thought and feeling outside of the stultifying devaluations of modernist Euro-American cultural matrices.

FUNGIBLE BLACK SOUND

Like Black bodies, African languages, too, were rendered a fungible negativity and submitted to the purposes of modernity/coloniality. Specifically, the 'epistemological-ideological apparatus of modernity enable[d] the colonial imagination to presuppose the colonized linguistically and expressively as less than human' (Veronelli 2015:119). Put another way, colonizers did not hear colonized people speak languages AS SUCH; instead, they heard mere 'sound', and thus language, stripped of its symbolic properties, was perceptually rendered a materiality. African speakers in particular were positioned as non-speakers and cast(e) as the negated *relatum* in the construction of white-'standard'-speaker-human constructs, or modernist/colonial genres of speakerhood (cf. Wynter, 2003).

To mirror Black flesh as an analytic category, I refer to the radical negativity unfolding from the violence inflicted on Black language practices, which were conceived within the colonial imagination as non-language practices, and the concomitant non-subject position of Black speakerhood as *Black sound*. To be clear, *Black sound* does not refer merely to language forms separated from content, which can be analytically parsed for any expression; instead, *Black sound* denotes the ONTOLOGICAL CONSTITUTION of Black speakerhood, or its 'raciontology' (Rosa & Díaz 2019), that is owed to peculiar HISTORICAL PROCESSES that have inscribed and naturalized an inexorable distance and difference between Blackness and language. I also want to stress that the proposed analytic—fungible Black sound—applies to Blackness in the global context of modernity/coloniality. For example, traces of Black sound ideologically manifest in terms like *amakwerekwere* and *amagongongo*, which are onomatopoetic terms for bird chirping and tuneless drums respectively that are applied to the language practices of Black African immigrants in South Africa (Makoni 2020). This is of a piece with ideologies produced by travel writers and 'experts' of 'natural history' who fixated on the 'Hottentot' population of Africa and their putative inferiority. Scholars have pointed out that *Hottentot* is a compound word derived from the Dutch terms meaning *stammer* and *stutter*, and it is thus that Strother (1999:4) remarks that 'it is first and foremost because they were presumed to lack true human language that the Hottentot was assigned the role of a creature bridging human and animal realms'. These examples bear out the linguistic realization of Mbembe's (2017) claim that in the dialogical construction of modernity and Blackness, the image of the slave and the colonized person are both inexorably linked to Blackness, while the colonial experience of Africa and the experience of Black enslavement align within a broader necropolitical regime of modernity/coloniality (Mbembe

2003). In short, processes of 'thingification' (Césaire 2000:42) that perceptually render Black language practices as Black sound are consistent across the slave society, the colony, and their afterlives.

More broadly, the proposed framework is situated within a body of scholarly work which aims to decenter Eurocentric accounts of modernity (e.g. Dussel 1993, 2000) insofar as the present work highlights the RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION of modernist/colonial genres of speakerhood vis-à-vis fungible Black sound within the context of a series of world-(un)making phenomena: 'epistemicide' (Santos 1998), 'epistemic racism' (Grosfoguel 2013; Menezes de Souza & Nascimento 2023), and 'linguistic racism' (Dovchin 2020), each of which is tethered to a universalized, European (white male) subject and attendant knowledge formation. Importantly, the Black communities entextualized within the present archive belong to the Global South, as the divisions of the Global North and Global South rely on power relations rather than geographical distinctions (Antia & Makoni 2023); hence, the Black epistemologies drawn on in the analysis and reconfiguration to follow should be understood as counter-hegemonic interventions within the complex 'entanglements' (Kerfoot & Hyltenstam 2017) of the Global South–North.

Returning to particulars of the 'raciontology' (Rosa & Díaz 2019) of Black speakerhood, to theorize fungible Black sound, I draw on Laclau & Mouffe's (2001) and Laclau's (1990, 1996, 2014) view of antagonism. On this view, all objects belong to the realm of discourse. Moreover, since all forms of discursivity are subject to modes of distortion and misrecognition (Laclau 2014), all discourse is characteristically ideological. In short, the distinctions between the discursive-ideological and social realms are collapsed. In turn, the ontological realm emerges AS A HISTORICALLY CONDITIONED SET OF SEDIMENTED DISCURSIVE-IDEOLOGICAL/SOCIAL FORMATIONS. The key point here is that antagonism is a dialogical and ontologically constitutive relation, and the central antagonism that is of principal concern in the present case is that holding between (i) the signifying/social system of hegemonic modernist/colonial genres of speakerhood, and (ii) modernist/colonial constructs of Black speakerhood, that is, Black sound. In the case of Black sound, language is negated of Black speakerhood, and Black speakerhood is thus consigned to a 'zone of nonbeing' (Fanon 2008:2; Menezes de Souza & Nascimento 2023) which (i) is characterized by a radical and equivalential negativity, which is to say a fungible negativity, and (ii) relationally and dialogically generates modernity/coloniality's signifying/social system in which hegemonic genres of speakerhood, or normative constructs of language and speakerhood, are situated. Put another way, Blackness generally (Wilderson 2010), and Black sound specifically, is that sedimented and thus ontological formation relative to which identifications of speakerhood within discursive-ideological/social systems of modernity/coloniality are capacitated. In short, it is an ANALYTIC or DEFINITIONAL entailment as well as ontological presupposition of the hegemonic discursive/social system of modernity/coloniality that if one is a language speaker, then one is not a Black (non)speaker, and, correlatively,

if one is a Black (non)speaker, then one does not speak language. And, it is just this analytic entailment and ontological presupposition that serves as the relational condition of possibility for identifications of speakerhood within modernist/colonial discursive-ideological/social systems.

It may help to consider the affordances of this view. First, it provides a theorization of Black sound that not only accounts for the radical negativity of Black non-speakerhood but also its radical generativity, which, like Black flesh, serves as a 'cultural vestibularity' (Spillers 1987:67) for modernist/colonial identifications of speakerhood. Second, the proposed view parses the discursive/ideological and ontological levels, which allows us to situate Black sound within the body of scholarly work concerning raciolinguistic ideologies. Devaluations characteristic of raciolinguistic ideologies of anti-Blackness (Sung 2018) are articulated on surfaces at the discursive/social (ideological) level, which itself is ultimately owed to the ontological constitution of Blackness generally (Wilderson 2010) and Black sound specifically as negated *relata* within relations of antagonism holding with the modernist signifying/social systems in which identifications of normative speakerhood are enacted. It is of paramount importance to stress that the discursive/social field is organized by relations of CONTINGENCY rather than necessity. Hence, new articulations of Black speakerhood remain possible, consequential, and urgent, since such articulations can *inter alia* play a subversive role in drastically reorganizing modernity/coloniality's discursive/social practices, forms, and institutions.

Finally, the capacitating role that Black sound plays for modernity/coloniality's identifications of speakerhood does not imply, of course, that Black people themselves do not speak language(s); however, it does mean that the ontologically constituting antagonism to which Black sound belongs and its structuring role for modernity/coloniality's genres of speakerhood regularly impel sets of persistent and virulent presumptions and ascriptions of Black languagelessness (Rosa 2016, 2019), projecting a teleologically structured ensemble of expectations which dovetail with interlocking race-language perception and positioning associated with the 'white listening subject' (Flores & Rosa 2015).

In total, the ontological implications of Middle Passage, slavery, colonialism, and their afterlives interject in the articulation of Blackness as a race-language formation. These violent intervening conditions are referenced by Spillers' (1987) analytic category 'Black flesh'. Conceiving of Black flesh relative to race-language, the first intervention of this article is the analytic category 'Black sound', that is, the radically negative ontological formation of Black non-speakerhood resulting from the sedimentation owed to the violent historical processes to which Blackness has been subjected. As we see below, the analytic category 'fungibility' serves to underscore the dual movement of Black Sound, which, beyond instantiating a radical negativity, also serves as a condition of possibility for modernity/coloniality's genres of speakerhood. The additional focus on fungibility primes the analysis toward highlighting the generative aspects of negated Black speakerhood, which

can then be placed in the service of goals exterior to the Euro-American cultural matrix.

FUNGIBLE BLACK SOUND IN ETHNOGRAPHIES OF COMMUNICATION

Ethnography *simpliciter* has deep historical ties to anti-Black colonial projects (e.g. Willis 1969; Baker 1998; Trouillot 2003; Pannell 2022), and ethnographies of communication that entextualize Black speakers bear traces of fungible Black sound. Ethnographies of communication seek to uncover the norms for language use within speech communities. Specifically, for types of speech events, speech acts, and communicative behaviors, ethnographers of communication seek to discover the norms which govern speakers' productions of utterances that are not only well-formed but also 'appropriate' (Hymes 1964). Although the notion of linguistic appropriateness has recently been the target of a trenchant critique by Flores & Rosa (e.g. 2015, 2019), appropriateness still has widespread currency within the fields of language education to which these ethnographies of communication belong. Particularly since Hymes' (1981) study calling for 'ethnographic monitoring' of 'bilinguals' and 'bi-dialectals' in schools, ethnographies of communication in Black communities have lent particular focus to student populations.

When ethnographers of communication find widespread student 'failure', they virtually invariably rely on 'mismatch' (Michaels 2006) theories that (dis)connect students' home culture and that of the school (e.g. Horner & Gussow 1972; Kochman 1972a,b; Heath 1982, 1983). Unfortunately, 'mismatch' theories overlook patterns of racialized domination, subjugation, and violence. This 'oversight' is part and parcel of the 'cultural deprivation' discourses which liberal 'mismatch' discourses were meant to SUPPLANT (e.g. Hymes 1981). Because cultural deprivation discourses themselves relocated the referent of a racist essentialism from biogenetic explanations to cultural ones (Smitherman 1977, 2000), biogenetic, cultural deprivation, and mismatch discourses are genealogically linked. In the global context, pedagogical articulations of cultural deprivation serve as a synecdoche for broader mutations surrounding 'new' (cultural) racism, which 'has been legitimized by academic approaches that portray the high poverty rates among people of color both in the core and in the periphery in terms of their traditional, inadequate, underdeveloped, and inferior cultural values' (Grosfoguel 2002:213). The genealogical mutations of the principal premises of these arguments to racial superiority/inferiority hinge on multi-scale articulations of the 'developmental fallacy' (Dussel 1993:67), which holds that the 'progress' and 'development' of a disembodied, though covertly racialized, universalized, and unilinear, sociocultural trajectory is monopolized by whiteness, while similar progress by Black speakers is both *a priori* necessitated and foreclosed.

Embedding traces of Black sound, ethnographies of communication that inflict discursive/social forms of racial violence synchronously disavow this (then

doubled) violence. For example, in *Ways with words*, Heath (1983:19) first cautions readers against reading her work through the lens of 'different racial memberships', only to then, in the same paragraph, stress that the Black speech community of 'Trackton' and the white speech community of 'Roadville' are 'PRODUCTS OF THEIR HISTORY and current situation' (emphasis added). Similarly, to disentangle his cultural notion of race from one centering on 'social' or 'class' issues, Kochman (1981) describes an annual assignment which he gave his students to go to expensive department stores and note the speech patterns of the workers. Unsurprisingly, while students generally remarked that they received more staff attention than usual, the Black and Latinx students alone identified this added attention with suspicion of theft. While Kochman admits that such perceptions may be accurate, he uses this example to carve out his notion of race by denying that such differences are racialized, subsuming them instead under social or class differences. Such putative disentangling effectually disavows the dimensions of oppression and violence that compose racialization. Heath's and Kochman's disavowals also portend how articulations of Black speakerhood bearing traces of Black sound in ethnographies of communication are similarly disavowed.

Spillers' (1987) work was composed in dialogue with the United States Department of Labor study *The Negro family: The case for national action*, better known as the 'Moynihan Report'. Notoriously, Moynihan (1965:30) targets the 'Negro family' as a 'tangle of pathology' which causes 'aberrant, inadequate, or anti-social behavior' and leads to unemployment, poverty, deprivation, and so on. The putatively matriarchal structure of the Black family and its supposed linkages with deviant gendered behaviors and norms are identified as the kernel of the 'problem'. The Moynihan report can thus be considered the text of cultural deprivation par excellence, and it merits reexamination in light of its consequentiality within a genealogy linking cultural deprivation and 'mismatch' discourses. For both sets of discourses, the cultural deprivation thread in the causal order in which 'family pathology' supposedly produces social 'failure' is abundantly apparent. More broadly, while the contours of 'family pathology' and 'matriarchy' maintain a representational particularity relative to Blackness, such particularity falls within the scope of imbrications of race, sex, and gender within hegemonic modernity/coloniality (Dussel 1993; Santos, Nunes, & Meneses 2007), wherein, paradigmatically, 'racism and sexism function together' (Balibar 1991:49).

The idea that Black speech and discourse styles are fundamentally deprived due to hostility is reflected in Kochman's (1972a,b, 1981) ethnographies of communication, which entextualize Black (non)speaking practices while proposing a taxonomy of speech events including, for example, 'rapping', 'running it down', 'signifying', and so on. However, while each element of the taxonomy maintains minor differences, each element is uniformly associated with the goal of exploiting interlocutors, that is, getting interlocutors 'to give up or do something that will be of some benefit to the speaker' (Kochman 1972a:228). As a rule, the communicative events, purposes, and strategies Kochman elaborates are grounded in adaptations to

the unpredictability and chaos of Black (language) environments, which are appended by the constant imperative to defend one's 'rep' by being 'continually ready to take advantage of a person or situation' (Kochman 1972b:263). Adaptation to essentially survival-of-the-fittest conditions by children, while leading to norms valuing oral and aural modalities, is counterposed to white bourgeoisie norms that value reading and writing literacies.

In addition to offering an image of linguistic chaos and acrimony, ethnographers of communication in Black communities implicitly capitalize on representations of Black speakerhood which, by evidencing a fungible, radical negativity, serve to relationally produce normative constructions of language and speakerhood. For instance, Kochman's (1972a,b) insistent focus on the expressive, directive, and stylistic aspects of Black language works to carve out, by negation, normative constructs of language and speakerhood, particularly those implicated in our 'language myth' (Harris 2002) centering referentiality, realism, and a transference-model of language, that is, the language myth produced within a meta-discursive regime that supervenes on colonial ideologies of enumeration (Makoni & Pennycook 2005). This meta-discursive regime is further implicated in a rationalist 'universal liberal subject that [has] legitimated the projection of European ideologies on a global basis' (Bauman & Briggs 2003:68) by which '[race-]language became a means for creating new forms of exclusion' (Bauman & Briggs 2003:44). In short, a fixation on expressive and directive aspects of Black language in exclusion of referentiality and information-transference WITHIN A DISCOURSE OF DEPRIVATION makes the normative view of speakers as information-givers/receivers who principally make use of the referential function of language conspicuous in its absence, while Black speakers are instead primarily associated with language practices which are interchangeable in their centrally ludic, libidinal, and ultimately subrational dimensions. In turn, the putative universality of the normative (white) construction of language and speakerhood comprises one more permutation of hegemonic, Eurocentric modernity's insistence that its knowledge is 'unpositioned, unlocated, neutral, and universalistic' (Grosfoguel 2002:208), which in the case of language consigns Black speakerhood to a linguistic 'zone of nonbeing' (Fanon 2008:2; Menezes de Souza & Nascimento 2023), that is, an ontological field characterized by a radical negativity. However, through the relational production of normative speakerhood vis-à-vis fungible Black (non)language practices, the generative qualities of fungible Black sound become evident.

When conditions of social and linguistic deprivation are paired with representations of non-normatively aggressive Black women, the gendered dimensions common to these ethnographies and the Moynihan Report emerge. For instance, non-normatively aggressive Black woman speakers are inscribed in Kochman's descriptions of 'rapping', where a Black man 'hits on' a Black woman. Kochman (1981:77) notes that 'Black women's role and pattern of response to the rapping of black men is active and forceful, for in black culture traits like independence, aggressiveness, and sexual assertiveness are seen to be common to both males AND

females'. The 'independence' and 'aggressiveness' of Black women are then compared with demure, 'good' white women, that is, the normative standard, who conceal their sexual interests. In outline, the race-language logics underpinning these representations are the following: conditions of deprivation determine predacious language practices which are primarily expressive and directive, rendering referential, rational, and transference-based genres of normative speakerhood an absent-presence. In short, representations of Black speakerhood within these texts' gendered deprivation discourses bear the trace of a fungible Black sound that is both radically negative and generative in producing a normative speaker construct and, relatedly, serving as a 'mismatch' with school language practices that putatively explains school 'failure'.

Along similar lines, Horner & Gassow (1972), in their ethnographic descriptions of Black children's speech, compare their over-reliance on 'mands' with white children's ubiquitous use of 'tacts'. Mands are verbal events that rely on some type of reinforcement, such as commands, requests, warnings, and so on, while tacts are verbal events that are descriptive in nature and do not require strong reinforcement to master. Horner & Gassow (1972:191) reason that because Black children must pay special attention to the emotional reactions of interlocutors providing reinforcement to manding, Black children are left with an acute 'interpersonal sensitivity' and putatively correlative INSENSITIVITY to common objects, properties, and aspects of the physical environment, leading to a dearth of descriptive capacities, that is, a lack of proficiency in producing language that requires referentiality, realism, and a grasp of universals. Thus, the representation of a libidinal, subrational Black speakerhood again renders the referentialist, realist, and transference-based model of language an absent-presence, embedding the trace of a radically negative, fungible, and ultimately generative Black sound.

In turn, Black social and linguistic deprivation is attributed in the text to family structure, and Black mothers are a conspicuous target of blame. These authors contend that the vast majority of mands issued by Black children are 'for movement, attention, or information' (Horner & Gussow 1972:183), yet despite the putative 'centrality' of the mother as the 'single most frequent interlocutor' (Horner & Gussow 1972:173), she is represented as seldom available, while fathers are either absent or wholly unengaged. Horner & Gassow thus subtly suggest that since the needs of Black children are rarely met in full, they are frequently forced to issue mands to manipulate others, never truly transcending mands to issue tacts, that is, referential and transference-based language practices. Thus, the material and attentional absence of the father and the mother's abdication of responsibility for language socialization is situated within a deprivation discourse regarding Black (non)language that (i) is linked to earlier gendered deprivation discourses, (ii) 'accounts' for school 'failure' through 'mismatch', and (iii) embeds representations of Black speakerhood that bear the trace of fungible Black sound in generatively rendering referential, realist, rationalist, and so on, normative speakerhood an absent-presence.

The most influential of these ethnographies, Heath's *Ways with words*, similarly reproduces representations of pathological Black matriarchy and embeds traces of fungible Black sound. The supposedly matriarchal structure of Trackton—a Black community—is present in the following ethnographic description.

> The line of allegiance in families is not between male and female as spouses or as parents of children, but rather between parent and child. The link between mother and son lasts the longest and is the strongest. Young men often father and support children who remain with their natural mothers; they wait as long as possible to marry and move in with a wife or steady woman. They prefer to stay on with their own mothers and help them, while at the same time contributing to the support of their children living in other households … This bond between a 'mamma and her boy' is the strongest kin tie exhibited in Trackton. (Heath 1983:55)

This passage begins with a paradigmatic reference-by-negation to family ties bound by the common allegiance of spouses. Referring to the structure of Black families in Trackton by what they are not creates an open slot for a normative family arrangement wherein the father and mother collaborate to raise children, a slot filled by descriptions of the concerted dual parenting in the white community of Roadville (e.g. Heath 1983:38–42). The absence of the father implied by the virtually inordinate strength of the mother-son bond in Trackton is compounded by Heath's suggestion that males may live with their mothers even after they father children and that women often raise children largely without the presence of the father. That is, the strength of the bond between a 'mamma and her boy' is so strong that it may override the bond with the child, while single mothers are often left to raise children in the absence of the father, rendering the mother as the ultimate source of family pathology.

Having conjured the 'shadowy evocation' (Spillers 1987:80) of Trackton's 'matriarch', Heath portrays the approach of the mother as that of total abdication.

> Preschoolers, especially boys, are always being presented with situations and being asked "Now what you gonna do?" The children must think before they respond … [and] must feel the motivations and intentions of other individuals. They are powerless to counter physically; they must outwit, outtalk, or outact their aggressors. Across sets of situations and actors, children learn the domains of applications of a particular word, phrase, or set of actions, and the meanings conveyed across these are often neither literal nor predictable. (Heath 1983:64)

Heath's analysis of what she calls 'challenges', that is, sets of language games akin to the dozens in the first sentence ('Now what you gonna do?') reproduces the survival-of-the-fittest portrayal of Black language socialization, wherein language games are instruments in a proxy war for boosting one's rep. According to Heath (1983:64), the cumulative effect of these language games is that, in Trackton, not only are conveyed meanings across contexts 'often neither literal nor predictable', but in terms of language function, 'discrepancy between the referential functions of utterances and their intended social function is the norm rather than a stylistic deviation'. That is, there is so much 'gaming' of language in Trackton that a well-ordered semantic system is undermined by the topsy-turvy figurations and connotations at the heart of challenges and other forms of signifyin(g).

Compare this scene with those of white Roadville and middle-class Townspeople, where children do engage in forms of figuration, such as parable and puns (e.g. Heath, 1982:56, 1983:106–109), yet from an early age become experts at being 'information-givers' (e.g. Heath 1982:56, 72), a role that clearly precludes widespread 'discrepancy between the referential functions of utterances and their intended social function' (Heath 1983:64).[1] The key point is that, in Trackton, the generalized linguistic disarray entailed by the lack of systematicity of referential function casts speech in Trackton as ludic, libidinal, and ultimately subrational, with thought largely identified with intuition and emotion. Thus, Trackton speech bears the trace of fungible Black sound, and such representations of Black speakerhood relationally produce normative constructs of language and speakerhood, which here manifest as a cathexis corresponding to aspects of the white speech communities of Roadville and Townspeople. Once again, these representations are couched in a deprivation discourse in which the mother is to blame, having inured her children linguistically and socially to a ruthless world which requires putatively analogical language practices that lead to school 'failure' due to cultural 'mismatch'.

Also unique to Trackton among Heath's ethnographic descriptions are (mis)naming practices that materialize as palimpsestic erasures of 'the right to name' (Spillers 1987:69). For the analysis that follows, it is helpful to keep in mind that the hospital, school, county seat bureaucracy, and birth certificate are all involved in a biopolitical management of Black children in Trackton that is associated with (mis)naming practices akin to erasures of 'the right to name' (Spillers 1987:69) reflected in property ledgers (e.g. Spillers 1987) and cartographies (e.g. King 2019) of 'slave holders'. Heath describes the (mis)naming procedures in Trackton in the following.

> Family names [ancestral first names] are rarely chosen, and the most frequent names are those which the mother has only heard, perhaps on television or in a movie, and has never seen written. Therefore, hospital authorities often write the name as they hear it, and not as it would be normally spelled … The birth certificate is often not seen by the family until the child is ready to go to school, and the family has to go to the county seat to pick up the birth certificate to prove the child's age. However, when the mother brings the baby home from the hospital, she proudly announces the baby's name. It is then either given a particular rendering by others of the community or dropped, to be introduced only when the child prepares to go to school and needs to know his 'real name'. (1983:61)

The above passage begins with another reference-by-negation, which opens an empty slot for the normative pattern of choosing 'family names', a slot that is again filled by the parents of Roadville (Heath 1983:84). The lack of connection to progenitors through ancestral names evokes the shattered kinship relations of Black families, whose mothers are, in a remarkable claim, described as choosing names essentially at random by arriving upon a name that was heard on television or in movies. The (mis)naming which occurs in the passage is materially incurred by a biopolitical regime that contains the following elements: (i) 'hospital authorities', who have literacy knowledge and competency enabling them to write names

down as they hear them, (ii) the county seat, which maintains the birth certificate and uses the child's name as a 'tag' or 'mark' for biopolitical management, and (iii) the school, which requires the family and the child not only to show the birth certificate but to conform to the name written on it in order to enter the school. Hence, (mis)naming in Trackton involves a form of biopolitical management of Trackton children which cuts across the sphere of kinship relations. In concrete terms, the names of Trackton children that have individual, cultural, and kinship value, that is, sobriquets are delegitimized and ultimately excised within the formal context of the school. Hence, of relevance here is the state, rather than the 'master', and biopolitical management, rather than property relations, yet the effects contain parallels in that the seizure of 'the right to name' (Spillers 1987:69) by a biopolitical regime with a disinterest in the child 'in any SEMANTIC sense' (Spillers 1987:73) entails an estrangement of the child from the symbolic order of the kinship sphere vis-à-vis names.

Consequently, a striking ambivalence attends Trackton children's names, from the television-derived to the state-imposed, an ambivalence so drained of value in any 'semantic sense' that it inscribes traces of fungible Black sound within the text. At the same time, representations associating misnaming with Black speakerhood make meaningful and legitimate the normative symbolic order of names and the set of naturalized family relations on which it supervenes. Hence, Black sound again evidences a radical generativity in relationally producing a normative speakerhood vis-à-vis a cathexis corresponding to aspects of the white speech communities of Roadville and Townspeople. And, once again, the weight of blame falls on the mother in that the (non)intentional landing upon a name heard on television or in a movie is owed to her. Meanwhile, unlike fathers of Roadville, who help pick out names from baby books (Heath 1983:84), the Trackton father is missing from the naming process.

Importantly, the language socialization environments depicted in these ethnographies of communication ultimately affect Black children in the same way, since such environments are typically responsible for the putatively figurative and analogical modes of speech and thought which are characteristic of, for example, Trackton children, and these representations of Black speech and thought along with their ludic, libidinal, and subrational features CONSTITUTE TRACES OF FUNGIBLE BLACK SOUND. Hence, while Heath (1983) explicitly genders speech events in Trackton such as 'challenges' or 'talking junk', the gendering of Black children's speech in Trackton is equally explicit AND superficial. On the deeper levels connecting the performance of speech acts, language socialization processes, and (sub)rational features and dimensions of (non)language, ALL Trackton children are interchangeably represented and/or represented interchangeably as speakers bearing the trace of fungible Black sound. Further, such traces of Black sound relationally generate normative constructs of language and speakerhood, demonstrating the fungibility—particularly the radical generativity—of Black sound. In turn, embedded in deprivation discourses, representations of Black (non)language practices are offered as the *explanans* for school 'failure' of Black children.

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FUNGIBLE(LY) FUGITIVE BLACK SOUND

Heath (1982, 1983) and Kochman (1972a,b, 1981) lend inordinate attention to 'ritual insults' (e.g. Labov 1972) of Black speech. This is unfortunate, for as scholars have noted, 'signifyin(g)' denotes a far more rich and expansive set of language practices, or as Gates (1988:81) explains, signifyin(g) refers to 'the black trope for all other tropes, the trope of tropes, the figure of figures'. What ties signifyin(g) practices together is metaphor, simile, pastiche, parody, and the whole host of forms of figuration, each of which requires listeners to decode additional, connoted meaning from the range of potential meanings generated by the relation between the signifier and the speech event. Or, as Mitchell-Kernan (1999:311) aptly puts it, 'attend to all potential meaning-carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse'. In the same vein, the introduction of universes of discourse into acts of communication skews 'the relationship between intent and meaning, between the speech act and its comprehension' (Gates 1988:53). Hence, although an interpretation is surely arrived at for an act of signifyin(g), that interpretation is never final or conclusive.

I suggest that this turning toward the full universe of discourse constitutes a fugitive language practice in relation to the archive of ethnographies of communication in Black communities in the sense that it involves a flight to a discursive space not only to where the white listening subject (Flores & Rosa 2015; Rosa & Flores 2017) would perceive innovations as mistakes (e.g. Flores & Rosa 2019) but to where the white listening subject cannot go, to where he does not have access. In other words, the Black universes of discourse invoked by signifyin(g) practices, in the encoding and decoding of its arrays of connotations and figurations, are a discursive territory from which the white listening subject is barred by his lack of sociocultural knowledge. Specifically, if we conceive of ethnography as a form of surveillance (e.g. Martinez 2016; Pannell 2022), signifyin(g) can be understood as a fugitive means of 'dark sousveillance' (Browne 2015; Pannell 2022) DEPLOYED IN RELATION TO THE ETHNOGRAPHER AS AN AFFORDANCE FOR ESCAPING THE STULTIFYING RUBRIC OF (DE)VALUATION IMPOSED ON BLACK LIFE. This is significant because while the representations of Black speakerhood in these ethnographies of communication maintain a sedimented negation and fungibility, thus bearing traces of fungible Black sound, this self-same set of representations can be reinterpreted if fugitivity is employed as an analytic, resulting in what Laclau (1990) calls a 'reactivation' which retrieves and recenters the initial and ongoing CONTINGENCY of sedimented representations of Black speakerhood. Thus, reading with the analytic FUNGIBLE(LY) FUGITIVE BLACK SOUND provides for the subversion of both normative constructs of language and speakerhood and the traces of fungible Black sound which persist in representations of Black speakerhood, with both *relata* of modernity's central antagonism unsettled through a subversive exercise of (re)interpretation.

It is also vital to point out that scholars have connected forms of signifyin(g) in the US with coordinate language practices in the Black communities of the

Caribbean and the African continent (e.g. Abrahams 1968; Gates 1988; Piersen 1999; Mbembe 2001). Hence, the specific sort of reinterpretation that I propose for the texts of the present archive plausibly extends to entextualizations of language practices in these communities as well. Moreover, as a broader analytical point, the proposed intervention undercuts the reproduction of universalizing, Eurocentric genres of speakerhood and knowledge formations regarding language, as it aims to 'transform dominant forms of knowledge from the point of view of the non-Eurocentric rationality of subaltern subjectivities' (Grosfoguel 2002:221). Put another way, the reinterpretation of canonical texts through the prism of signifyin(g) and thus Black epistemologies realizes a 'non-conformist, destabilizing and indeed rebellious theory and practice' (Santos 1998:97) that can desediment ossified hegemonic race-language discourses, unmooring us from their reflexive reproduction so that we might think and act differently and transgressively.

To now illustrate how fungible(ly) fugitive Black sound can help us to read, understand, analyze, and (re)interpret transgressively, I undertake a rereading of a key passage from *Ways with words*. What follows is a fieldnote of a conversation with Annie Mae, whom Heath (1983:64) describes as a 'cultural broker', about Teegie, a Trackton child. A close reading of *Ways with words* demonstrates that a remarkable number of claims are built from the analysis of this lone fieldnote; it is the lynchpin of her claims about Trackton children (lined numbers added for ease of reference).

(1) Fieldnote of a conversation with Annie Mae (Heath 1983:64)

1   He gotta learn to ᴋɴᴏᴡ bout dis world, can't nobody tell'im.
2   Now just how crazy is dat?
3   White folks uh hear dey kids say sump'n, dey say it back to 'em, dey aks 'em 'gai 'n'gain 'bout things,
4   like they 'posed to be born knowin'.
5   You think I kin tell Teegie all he gotta know to get along?
6   He just gotta be kéen, keep his eyes open, don't he be sorry.
7   Gotta watch hisself by watchin' other folks.
8   Ain't no use me tellin' 'im: 'Learn dis, learn dat. What's dis?' What's da'
9   He just gotta léarn, gotta know;
10   he see one thing one place one time, he know how it go, see sump'n like it again, maybe it be de same, maybe it won't. He hafta try it out.
11   If he don't he be in trouble; he get lef out.
12   Gotta keep yo' eyes open, gotta féel to know.

This is essentially the sole 'corroboration' of Heath's hypothesis about the unpredictable—and ultimately subrational—language of Trackton from the mouth of a Trackton resident. Conceiving of fungible(ly) fugitive Black sound now as an intervention provides for a reinterpretation of Annie Mae's comment which, due to the nature of signifyin(g), should not be mistaken as the final word on the matter.

Annie Mae's comment signifies on white folks, their presumptions about language and knowledge, and Heath herself. Considering each line number in turn,

the analysis is as follows: In line 1, Annie May introduces the importance of learning to know, indicating that children are born neither immediately able to know about the world nor capable of being directly informed about it; line 2 asks an apparent rhetorical question which inversely expresses the obviousness of the fact that children must learn to know; line 3 describes white folks' attempts to TRANSMIT knowledge by asking display questions about LABELS; line 4 comments on how ludicrous these attempts are; line 5 indicates that Heath may also hold such beliefs (but she'd be a fool, if she did); line 6 emphasizes the importance of active learning; line 7 artfully plays on the meanings of 'watch'—to take care and to pay attention— both of which may apply to either word token; line 8 reinforces the misguidedness of white folks' beliefs about language and teaching; line 9 contrasts these silly beliefs with a sober understanding of the temporal progression of learning to know; line 10 introduces the importance of experimentation and experience for learning; line 11 suggests that children miss out on knowledge and community if they do not learn to know (by active, experimental, and experiential learning); line 12 concludes by emphasizing the import of awareness and the connection between affect and learning and/or knowledge. Hence, Annie Mae contrasts a conspicuously referential, mechanical, and facile view white folks hold about language and knowledge (lines 3, 4, and 8) with a view that emphasizes activeness, experience, experimentation, process, affect, and community (lines 1, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12). And, besides suggesting that Heath may hold the facile view, Annie Mae's comment, when considered in relation to an ethnographer who is apparently expectant that Annie Mae can or will specifically LABEL, refer to, and TRANSMIT what is actually involved in talking, understanding, learning, and knowing in Trackton, signifies on Heath. Ya dig?

It warrants emphasis that the fugitivity of this (re)interpretation cannot be uncoupled from traces of fungible Black sound. Specifically, Annie Mae's words are preceded on the page by Heath's (1983:64) claim that Trackton speech acts characteristically exhibit a 'discrepancy between the referential functions of utterances and their intended social function', and as discussed earlier, the loss of systematicity for referential function undercuts the possibility for 'rational' speech. Moreover, it is precisely the positioning of Black speakerhood as a 'known quantity' vis-à-vis traces of fungible Black sound and the claim that signifyin(g) constitutes a fugitive language practice which license the reinterpretation.

This type of reconfiguration has several affordances. First, this form of fungible (ly) fugitive Black sound problematizes the 'ethnographic authority' (Clifford 1983) of the text by supplying an interpretation of what Heath could not 'hear', thus unsettling the overall text. Second, this strategy promotes transgressive reading practices that enact what Fuentes (2016:78) calls 'reading along the bias grain', which she explains in the following: 'like cutting fabric on the bias to create more elasticity, reading along the bias grain expands the legibility of . . . archival documents'. In this study, the relevant archival documents represent

Black speakers that, however impermanently, might be imaginatively recovered from the negations of these texts. Third, this reinterpretation unsettles the *relata* of the relations of antagonism holding between fungible Black sound and hegemonic modernist/colonial genres of speakerhood, denaturalizing the traces of fungible Black sound associated with representations of Black speakerhood. In other words, reading signifyin(g) practices as forms of fugitivity enacts a 'reactivation' (Laclau 1990) which makes apparent the contingent nature of the fungible, radically negative aspects of representations of Black speakerhood, subverting such qualities and allowing us to think and imagine transgressively. Fourth, the continuities of signifyin(g) in Trackton and signifyin(g) as a (re)reading practice are encompassed within a multiplex Black 'universe of discourse' (Mitchell-Kernan 1999:311) made possible within a field of 'black epistemologies… contending with antiblack [ethnographic] surveillance' (Browne 2015:21; Pannell 2022). Such discursive and epistemological formations, mobilized in resistance to the ethnographic (and disciplinary) white perceiving subject, comprise and intimate 'strategies for inhabiting unlivable worlds' (Snorton 2017:7). In this case, signifyin(g) as a realization of fungible(ly) fugitive Black sound might escape the carceral logics associated with the white listening and disciplinary subject that extend *inter alia* from racial anxieties precisely because signifyin(g) skews 'the relationship between intent and meaning' (Gates 1988:53) and thus never produces a final, determinate sense. In essence, the radical flux and potentiality of signifying as a transgressive practice of (re)interpretation showcases how fungibility and fugitivity figure two sides of the same coin within Black epistemologies dealing with anti-Black surveillance and violence; situated within such epistemologies, where these resistances can be effected, echoed, and extended, this reconfiguration aims to carry out such strategies, such designs—in a word, such PLAYS—with words.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article is to engage in a project of representational and cultural politics that locates new sensibilities, aesthetics, concepts, and tools for an alternative model of Black speakerhood—alternative, that is, to an anti-Black alterity. I first developed the notion of Black sound in parallel with that of Black flesh. I then engaged in a textual analysis of ethnographies of communication carried out in Black communities to show how their representations of Black speakerhood bearing the trace of fungible Black sound imply a genealogical link to cultural deprivation discourses. Next, I identified signifyin(g) as a language practice which provides for Black fugitivity, ultimately arriving at the analytic category of fungible(ly) fugitive Black sound. I further demonstrated how signifyin(g) is a fugitive language practice through a rereading of a key passage in *Ways with words*. In total, these interventions invite those who read and analyze with them to seek out discursive spaces that remain outside of the apprehension of the racializing surveillance of ethnographers who have targeted Black speakers to ask: what was not heard?; what

was not possible to hear?; and what imaginaries of Black life and futurity are projected by the unheard/unhearable?

N O T E S

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[1]Race is also disavowed for 'Townspeople'. Heath (1983:157–60) lengthily describes the differences between Black and white middle-classes but claims that the main divide holds between 'old timers' (old money) and 'new timers' (*nouveau riche*).

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Address for correspondence:
Justin Lance Pannell
University of Pennsylvania
139 Valley Blvd.
Wheeling, WV 26003, USA
pannellj@upenn.edu