The Paradox of /ˈnɪgə/:

Ex·cite·able Acts, Ex·cess·able Moments

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Abstract

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As a historically racialized utterance, *nigger* has been a contested and despised word since the late 17th Century. Now, in the 21st Century, *nigga* is still considered one of the most impactful words in the English lexicon. This dissertation provides one situated and contingent analysis of *nigga* as a moment of *excess* in the Higher Education classroom. I wed Judith Butler's theorizing of ex-citable speech via her analyses of J.L. Austin's influential conceptualizations of speech acts and Louis Althusser's interpellation to Henry Louis Gates' theory of Signifyin(g) in order to interrogate the multitudinous articulations and appropriations of *nigga* as a Signifyin(g) performative. Through my theorizing of *nigger-nigga* as a Signifyin(g) performative, I interrogate the continuity and discontinuity of *use* specific to the English Composition and Literature classroom, as well as within multiple Higher Education classrooms and discussions. I interrogate *use* through the methodology of what I classify as Foucauldian-lite Discourse Analysis, in order to examine *nigger* and *nigga* as *ex-citable speech.* My intention is to interrogate how these utterances inflect and influence constructions of multiply conflicting and complimentary histories, identities, subjectivities and power relationships of professors and students in visible and invisible ways. The *Untitled* Supplemental Image is a metaphor for my methodology. The image is of my mother's hands, which a woven throughout the dissertation, symbolically represents my memory of the first time I heard the utterance *nigger.*

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Dedication

For Speights, Adio, Hakim, Gil, Josh, Yemi, Jackelvis, Sebastian, Sean, Luis

for giving your time,

expressing your thoughts,

exposing your hearts,

sharing your souls…

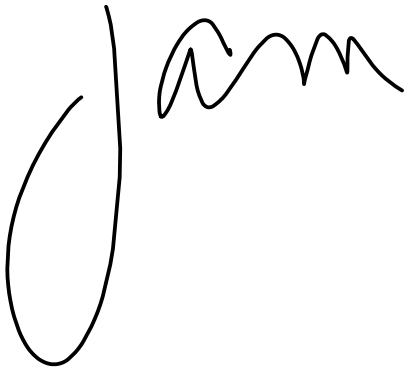
Preface

Dear Reader,

This dissertation is about teaching, words, and language. This is also a text about *nigger/nigga*. While it is not my intention to offend, it is also not my intention to supplicate. It is only my intention to deliberate, converse, offer up. If you and I, together, can begin the conversation, then my work here is done as well as just begun. I am not here to impress upon you my values, nor alter yours. This is simply a talking point, to be taken into your households, communities, classrooms.

In the spirit of Sesame Street: Nigga is the Word of the day

Thank you for the conversation,



PART I: The Word in the World

Chapter 1: Introduction

Unspeakably more depends on what things are called than what they are… the name and appearance, the importance… have gradually… grown… on and into things and become their very body… [and] becomes almost always the essence in the end… —Hilary Lawson

Patricia J. Williams (1991) in her text *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* begins with a parable about the power of Words. In it, the "priests," as they are so named, are masters of the Word. It is only through them that the Word can exist and, because of their increasingly intricate mastery of, over, and within the Word, they ascend to the level of gods (small g). But it is their godlike status which also becomes their undoing, their failing, their boredom. Some, not all, realize the *meaninglessness* of their Word Games and Word Magic and decide to chuck it all. Dressing as pilgrims (I interpret this as hiding) they leave their sturdy, well-built and indestructible Celestial City in search of something… more? or less? (either way it can be assumed that their humanist perspective adheres to the philosophy that progress is linear; hence they were looking for something better). It is *in this recursive passage they acquired the knowledge of Undoing Words* and thus they discover what lay beyond their Celestial City, a Deep Blue Sea. But where does their travel get them? Williams narrates that they wandered for *many years* and in this way, much like a Don Quioxte adventure, they end up *half a circumference* away from their City (hmmm… doesn't seem very far…). At this vantage point they can see the City, and it is from this position that they have an epiphany— realizing that the City is an illusion they are now in a place *Beyond the Power of Words.* Satisfied, they drop anchor and once again attain (self-appointed, no doubt) godly status (apparently they have shed their pilgrim status). But what is a god without a worshipper? Williams tells us that beneath the Celestial City lay *dying mortals* whilst at the bottom of the Deep Blue Sea sit *drowning mortals.* The dying mortals are cursed, forced to listen to the violent, thunderous, hooves of the

galloping horses above, while the drowning mortals, confused by the priests-turned-gods' anchors and plumblines, reach for the unreachable chains overhead, believing, regrettably, that these were lifelines for them.

Williams' allegory emphasizes, for me, the brutality of language, and the ways in which it acts aggressively and violently upon humans, forcing us to be caught up in its enticements. We are ever formed in language, in its agency, in its actions, even when we attempt to counter this force (Butler, 1997). Judith Butler (1997) asks: Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? (p. 1-2). In other words, humans are bound to and by language, we are made vulnerable by language (Butler, 1997), and it is this vulnerability, with respect to legal language, that Williams seeks to dissect in her text. Williams admits that she is "…interested in the way that legal language flattens and confines in absolutes the complexity of meaning inherent in any given problem." (p. 6). Like Williams, Black, female, legal scholar, and like Butler, white, female, queer, feminist philosopher, my specific interest in language is also a mark of my profession. I am an English professor; I have always been a lover of books, film, texts, all things written and spoken. But teaching English has caused my wonder about language itself and the ways that we use language as well as the ways that language uses us (Butler, 1997). Both Williams and Butler (in her text *Excitable Speech*) highlight the contradictory, constitutive, incomplete relationship between language and the subject, a contradiction that I too grapple with as I stand in the English classroom. As English professor I teach increasingly intricate Word games—priest and god—throwing plumblines to the students who eagerly fill my classes. But I am also gatekeeper, dispelling secret Word Puzzles and Word Magic for the dying and drowning mortals intent on

entrance to and acceptance in the Celestial City. It is through me that they must pass, learning acceptable word combinations for entry into the esteemed City where dailyspeak and writing are known as Academic Discourse. Yet I am also mortal—physically and linguistically marked as Black female (yes, I am essentializing here), lucky enough (and quite possibly smart enough) to have latched onto an anchor and risen in linguistic status while economically and socially treading in working-class waters. When I look into the Deep Blue Sea, I see my own face reflected back at me and amidst the cacophony of galloping hooves I want to reach with my left towards those silent, desperate hands, while holding steadfast with my right to the solidly built gate; I mean… honestly… reach too far and I just might fall in.

It is because of my contradictory, unstable, illusory position that I begin with Williams' allegory. I am curious for example, about the identities of the priests. "Who are these people?" (Morrison, 2017, p. 29). Are they self-proclaimed gods or was godhood bestowed upon them by some Other? Are they gods simply because they are able to manipulate the Word in ways that others cannot? And does this necessarily dictate that manipulation can only exist according to their rules? Are they gods simply because they know the combinations to the locks (constructed by them, of course) and managed to wall themselves in, a 'gated community' so to speak? Or, like the early settlers in what we now call the United States, did they make it up on the fly—drawing up contracts as a substitute for an oral commitment; procuring signatures in the place of an X; barring slaves from reading and writing; conjuring deeds against Indigenous Peoples.

Or is it all of the above?

While it may be conjectured that Williams' priests-turned-gods are the "founders" of language, self-proclaimed in their own important, segregated selves, I think of them in the same way Toni Morrison (2017) writes about the slave master: "How hard they work to define the

slave as inhuman, savage, when in fact the definition of the inhuman describes overwhelmingly the punisher…It's as though they are shouting, 'I am not a beast! I'm not a beast! I torture the helpless to prove I am not weak.'"(p. 29-30). "I am not a mortal! I am not a mortal!" the priest-gods believe, smug in their esteemed and valued difference as masters of the Word, positioned far above the mortals who are desperate for their acceptance, their admittance, their Love. Unfortunately, the truth of the matter is, there is no Truth, and these priest-gods are only priest-gods because they have been constituted as such. Their play, their word games, their Celestial City is, as they later realize, nothing more than a mirage, an image, created only because the Word(s) exist to make it so. So, really, what the dying drowning mortals aspire to is illusory. Isn't it evident that the priest-gods discovered this which is why they left the Celestial City in the first place? And why, one wonders, did they leave disguised in laymen's clothing? Could it be because in their realization of the fragmentary, fluctuating, incompleteness of the Word, they had no choice but to hide themselves, and hide their truth (truth being incomplete as well)? Much like a fleeing, ousted dictator seeking asylum elsewhere, they knew if they were to be discovered the jig would be up! Better to keep the dying drowning mortals in a state of ignorance; better to keep them in a constant state of desire for entry into those illustrious Celestial Cities in which the Word known as Academic Discourse is bestowed upon them in forms such as Composition-Rhetoric and Comp-Lit. And much like Morrison's (2017) master, the Word is delivered through lashings—in the classroom, when a student struggles to articulate or with the mightiest of instruments, the pen (I once had a student say to me she felt her paper, both literally and figuratively, was bleeding). These are the lashings that the mortals I face receive, some from me, some from other professors of English, other mortals-turned-priests-turned-gods.

And what of The Word? It is the Word that constituted the Celestial City, the boat, the Deep Blue Sea, the horses and their hooves. The Word constitutes the mortals as well as the priests-turned-gods, for without the Word we could not differentiate a priest from a mortal from a horse. But the Word does not only construct concrete objects and sentient beings, it is the Word which delimits suffering, anguish, Understanding and Superstanding (Williams 1991). It is the Word which conjures understanding of allegory and enables one to move Beyond the Power of Words. Williams takes up the interrogation of the Word through the language of contract law with the express purpose of examining "…legal issues within a framework inscribed not just within the four corners of the document—be it contract or the Constitution—but by the disciplines of psychology, sociology, history, criticism and philosophy." (p. 6-7). Leaning in close, she tells her sister (and us, the readers bearing witness to her conversation) what she is cross-examining: "Floating Signifiers" (p. 7) she whispers. The Word in Williams' allegory has multiple meanings, much like her subject position when she wakes up that day. For Williams the entanglement of race, subject position and contract law is also entangled with discourses such as psychology, sociology, history and philosophy (specifically poststructurally oriented philosophical assumptions); for Morrison, race and its discursive 'power' is examined through fiction, layered as well with multiple discourses, including the discourse of the imaginary; for Butler, it is gender, race, philosophy, linguistics, ideology, the State apparatus and theory; for me, it is the provocative discourse of Education, specifically English Education, and its entanglement with race (what bodies are educable?) and language (whose language is worthy of the educated?). Whose knowledge is considered of "most worth?" (The classic "curriculum" question, as articulated by the British philosopher, Herbert Spencer). I am neither priest-god nor

dying, drowning mortal but simultaneously both. Like Williams… subject position is everything. Straddling words and worlds, I am enmeshed in an (Un)Doing of Words...

As a professor of English, I too am interested the Word, in how the language itself, the teaching of English and the discourses we use to teach English "flattens and confines in absolutes" (Williams, 1991, p. 6). I am interested in how the teaching of English denigrates a complexity of interpreted meanings to universalizing, fixed ideologies and theories about language instruction, about usage, about curriculum, pedagogy and praxis. Hence, like Williams, you should know it's a bad day, well actually, year(s). In 2019 then president, Donald Trump, tweeted that four sophomore representatives should go back to where they came from, three of whom were born in the United States and one of whom became a US citizen as a teenager. Deceased president emeritus Ronald Reagan's taped conversations with Richard Nixon indicate that he was calling African Americans monkeys. In August, the news reported a total of 29 dead in El Paso, TX and Dayton, OH after gunmen opened fire in public settings, and this is on the heels of a shooting at the Gilroy Garlic Festival in Gilroy, CA. Trump "dismissed" these two singular events as the work of men with mental breakdowns. In 2020 the world suffocated when we witnessed the eight minute 46 second asphyxiation of a man; we watched the fatal shooting of another who fell asleep at a Wendy's drive-through; we cried globally about the young lady who was fatally shot and died in her sleep. But George, Rayshard and Breonna are but a few of the names we do know (what of the others?). These events force me to think of the ways that people of color have been linguistically castigated so much so that the killing of an innocent 10-, 12-, 13-year old child or the caging of children has been justified. Stuart Hall (1997) tells us that race is a floating signifier; it is a discursive construct, albeit of great import; however, in working like a language, its "…meaning is relational… constantly subject to redefinition in different

cultures, different moments [and that] there is always a certain sliding of meaning, always something left unsaid about race."

Somehow knowing this is no longer enough.

I cannot help but to think about the words, the utterances, the speech acts and performances of the 45th president and how these aid in the construction of the floating signifier, race. If race, as Hall posits, is a floating signifier, then how are we educators of English to tackle the messiness of race as it interplays with the teaching of English? And how am I to enter a classroom of black and brown mortals and knowingly entice them into the Celestial City of the academy when their lives and the media tell them that their children are to be housed in cages along the border, that the consequence of race mixing is an assault rifle and twenty dead, and that the leader of the very country to which they aspire believes they should all go back to where they came from? Each of these material and discursive events is fraught with the floating signifier "race" which, as Williams so poignantly points out in her text, is unstable, highly variable, and empty of value. I cannot help to think about my classes, predominantly attended by Caribbean, Latinx, African students and immigrants who are subjected to configurations of what it means to be of color, immigrant, undocumented, ESL. If, as Hall (1997) posits, race is a floating signifier, then it stands to reason that those words in the English language that construct meaning in race (as well as gender, sexual orientation and [dis]ability) also have the ability to act as floating signifiers, empty of value except within the socio-cultural and historical context in which these are used. These thoughts cause me to wonder about Butler's (1997) opening statements in *Excitable Speech* "To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. But not all name-calling is injurious. Does the power of language to injure follow from its interpellative power" (p. 2)?

My first lesson in linguistic injury occurred on one sunny summer afternoon while my mother was running errands in a neighborhood, not our own, in our Philadelphia hometown. I do not remember the exact time and place, but I do remember the brilliant blue of the sky, the excited cacophony of chirping birds and the pleasant serenity of a summer day. I do not remember my age, but I do remember that I was old enough to jaywalk across a busy street but young enough to hold my mother's hand. And I remember this: the way my mother's face contorted, the quick intake of breath, the way she jerked my hand back, dropped it, let go, as she stopped mid-stride in the middle of a busy street. And I do remember their snickers, of them, the two white boys—they were barely men—who'd caused my mother's flash of hesitation before she turned stony. I did not understand it then, but it was their smugness, which cut the thickness of the air on an already hot summer day, that caused me to wonder. They were self-aware, self-possessed, self-assured as they crossed in front of us mid-street, their too old but too young saunter now much more authoritative than my mother's gait. *Nigger.*

I was almost unsure of what I'd heard; it was muttered so stealthily in the midst of passing cars and chirping birds that it almost flew over my head. "Honkey," she'd returned, quickly, too quickly mind you, as if she needed to do, say, voice something to reassert her place in the world. But I instinctively knew this had no impact on them; their body posture didn't change, their stride maintained its fluidity, and the snickering continued to punctuate the air long after their bodies disappeared. She snatched my hand back into action, commanded "C'mon Joyce!" and with it my little legs trotted to keep pace with her now determined, angry pace. As I ran-walked next to her elongated strides, my hand numbing from the grasp of her fingers, I tried to catch a glimpse of them, neck twisted, head cocked, and eyes looking back to figure out what power they held over the woman I loved and revered. What was that word that caused my

always-in-motion mother to stop mid-pace in the middle of a busy street? She practically dragged me, "Joyce! C'mon! Pay attention!" I tried to peer up into my mother's indignancy, only to wonder at the height of her, her face seeming so distorted, distant and disconnected from me. She suddenly seemed bigger to me; yet, in hindsight, she was smaller in the world.

My mother and I did not have a conversation about that day… have not had a conversation about that day…[1] What I realize now is my mother's quick-footed walk, her perfectly immobile face, and squared shoulders were her way of beating back a linguistic spectacle. Those two young men had performed a hailing (Althusser, 1971; Butler, 1997) and it was through their hate speech that my mother was brought into linguistic existence. Her skin exuded anger, pride and determination, mingled with contempt, fear and degradation. The discursive space formed in the moment of their utterance marked my mother in subjugation, the effects of which showed materially through her body, stony face, irate voice, warrior stance. Yet her verbal retort held no effects. Along with the material **(**non)effects, her retort discursively revealed her acknowledgement of their speech act. Her counter-speech produced ironic counter effects—the boys smiled wider, laughed harder, continued to amble down the street—which reduced my mother's counterattack to mere prattle. Yanking me with her, the business she had yet to conduct was now of utmost importance. We hurried to whatever destination, she completed her transactions and we hastened back into the car. We sped away from that neighborhood and didn't slow until the faces abruptly shifted from translucent white-pink to opaque layers of black and brown. Get off the street. I realize now that was my mother's goal, to remove us from this environment and to return to a space where our discursive lives and material bodies felt at ease.

[1] Until recently, some forty years later, when she learned of my dissertation topic (This will be unpacked throughout the dissertation).

Butler (1997) contends that, "to be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context… to not know where you are." (p. 4). I don't remember where we were, but I do remember that my mother appeared lost that day. My first lesson in linguistic injury is also one of my lasting lessons in interpellative power.

What Word magic did these white men-children possess? *Nigger* meant nothing to me, but it evidently meant something to my mother, and by default, I instinctively knew that "meaning something" was not positive. The word escaped me shortly thereafter. As a floating signifier it held little value beyond that "specific proportion in time" (Butler, 1997, p. 2). It was not until adulthood—a mother myself, an English professor obsessed with words and their meaning, a Teachers College graduate student grappling with poststructural theory, differing conceptions and constructions of identity, the Ivy and all of its effects, blackness, femaleness, feelings of linguistic inferiority, wifehood, motherhood, life!—did this scene play back in my memory. Of course, I had heard the word several times in between the space of that day and the sudden shock of the memory. Yet I. Did. Not. Hear. *Nigger* had become Undone. Yet *nigga* was (Un)Doing. How ironic it is that this same (or similar) word that caused my stoic, no nonsense mother to cringe, is now loosely passed around the tables of the cafeteria or hollered through the halls of the community college where I profess. What does it mean to witness the (Un)Doing of a word that historically belonged to the priest-gods? The paradox of this is the contradictory, conflicting, incomplete messages of the media—acceptable in rap music, on the Grammys, even at President Barack Obama's White House Correspondents' dinner (maybe) yet each POTUS tweet, statement, and slogan (MAGA, Send them back! Clean the swamp!) brings me back to that sunny summer day when I first learned about the Power of Words.

When my mother asks, finally, what my dissertation is about, I tell her it is about the word *nigga*. "Oh!" is all she can muster. I venture to ask her if she remembers that sunny summer day. She cannot. She chuckles, "Well what did I say?" I answer, "You yelled back honky." "Honky? What does that mean?" And I am immediately stumped. What does it mean? I think. "No, I don't think I would have said that word. I don't even know that word." So from whence did I learn this? George Jefferson?[2] "Well, what would you have said?" I ask. "I probably would have said cracker."[3] Cracker? Again, I am stumped. My memory and my visceral knowledge tell me that my mother would have said honky, not cracker. "I'm sure I said cracker. I don't even know the word honky."[4] In response to my dissertation topic she says, "Humph. That's interesting." Although I don't believe she thinks it is very interesting. I know she doesn't like the word, which she made extremely evident when I once texted a question about *nigger* to her. Yes, my 83-year old mother texts, and uses Marco Polo and What's App as

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[2] While I sit writing this introduction my husband sits across from me reading the news. I ask him, "What back in the day rapper or comedian said nigga? Did Flip Wilson say it?" This sends him on a Youtube search for sitcoms in which nigga is expressed. He, like my father, loves *Sanford and Son* and immediately pulls up episodes of Esther, Fred Sanford's sister-in-law, liberally sprinkling her retorts with *nigga*. Then he goes to *The Jeffersons*. He laughs, these were episodes from his childhood (and mine). "This is when comedy was funny," he quips. I think, of current comedic skits which are meant to poke fun at *nigga*, namely Chris Rock's *Niggaz v. Black people* or the scene with Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker in *Rush Hour*. In both cases *nigga* is explicitly defined as belonging to African Americans and this rationale is parallel to my husband's idea of the comedic viability of *nigga*. But in what instances can we move beyond comedy and/or rap? Why is it only "allowable" within these particular discourses of comedy, entertainment and irony; albeit, with limitations? Why is *nigga* censored in other contexts (Spears, 1998) and treated as a universal concept meant to cause derision? Why, for example, are we counting the number of times *nigger* has been written in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or the film *Django Unchained?* Why are institutions punishing professors for reading the word *nigger* in a text by James Baldwin? In this manner I refer to Dr. Andre Perry's (2018) statement *in The Hechinger Report*, "There is no escaping the fact that teachers must use the N-Word. But how they use it makes all the difference. Pretending the word doesn't exist because it makes you uncomfortable is like believing that Trump isn't racist: an act of delusion."

[3] Somehow I feel that cracker arrived later in the African American English lexicon and upon further research learn that honky was first used in the pejorative in 1946 while cracker, although used pejoratively among whites in 1783, was not used derogatorily by black people until Malcolm X referenced it in a speech in 1964.This same term sparked a CNN debate when it appeared in the trial of George Zimmerman, found not guilty of murdering Trayvon Martin who apparently said, "this creepy ass cracker is following me" on the phone prior to the shooting. I still adhere to my version that my mother said honky. Born in 1936, I recall that my mother often used language dating to an earlier timeframe than current usage.

[4] In a subsequent conversation my mother indicated that she remembered the word honky, although she is still unsure about her response that particular day.

well, but on this particular day she did not respond via text. She called me, immediately, and said, "What's this about?" in a very irate voice. Before I could answer she continued, "I don't like that word. I don't even like to see it." She is proud of me, my accomplishments, my determination, my intellect; but I don't know if she is proud of my topic—regardless of its significance to race, language, the teaching of literature and English education.

Butler (1997) asks the questions for me: "Does the power of language to injure follow its interpellative power? And how, if at all, does linguistic agency emerge from this scene of enabling vulnerability?" (p. 2) My mother was vulnerable, no doubt. So Judy,[5] is there a space in which my mom was (is) able to agentially emerge? Joyce, she answers keep reading, "…the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response… the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call." (p. 4) So why didn't I feel, don't I feel, continue to not feel, that my mother's response enabled agency? Judith always has an answer (which I will attend to later); she labels it a "performative contradiction" (p. 89).[6] Maybe the word itself doesn't matter, maybe what matters is that my mother's speech brought her into existence in its ability to counter the offensive.

Some forty-odd years later, during these troubling times of media and government, this memory shocks me into existence. It shocks me because it appears as if *nigger-nigga* is spilling forth from everyone's lips, overtly and covertly. Thus, my fascination with language, with

[5] I do not use Judy to be disrespectful. I use Judy as she uses it in the beginning of her text, *Bodies that Matter*.

[6] Butler (1997) defines a performative contradiction as a kind of speech in which the disenfranchised appropriates the language of the dominant group, claiming it as their own and in doing so challenges the original standard. She contends that in doing so a performative contradiction revises historical standards and is key in future undertakings of democracy.

words, with the *langue* and the *parole*[7] (Saussure, 1971) draws me particularly to this word, *nigga*, and the paradoxical ways in which it is using and being used. It is usually expected of me—as black, as female, as English professor—to have a fully articulated, well-informed opinion about *nigga* (even prior to this research). Yet what do I say to students when I hear them rap, shout, declare *nigga* in the hallway, in the cafeteria, in my classroom while I, too, listen to Kendrick Lamar, Lil' Wayne, Dre and Snoop, Paul Mooney, Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, Esther from *Sanford and Son*, George Jefferson? What conversations should I have with colleagues about recent disciplinary actions against professors who, in their History, Literature, American Studies and Philosophy classes, read from texts, spark discussion, ask critical questions about "the N-Word"? How should I feel when, without trigger warning, my colleague vociferously reads *nigger* while teaching Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? What should my response be to a student who questions Junot Diaz's usage in *Drown* or *This is How You Lose Her*? How do I engage my friend who comments, "I think they're right for taking the N Word out of *Huck Finn*" or "Did you hear that the Department of Education in FILL-IN-THE-BLANK school district banned teaching *Huck Finn*?"

Herein lay yet another paradox: I exist in many spaces; therefore, I have many sometimes-complementary, sometimes-contradictory, and oftentimes shifting opinions about *nigga*. For example, the raunchy language of the 83-year old Caribbean matriarch living next door to me causes a smile to play across my lips, while the 20-something year old bopping down the hall towards class spitting lyrics causes me to cringe; my white male colleague can effortlessly read *nigger* in *Huck Finn* in my presence, while another white-American colleague wouldn't dare. My African American colleague-friends can freely punctuate our conversation,

[7] I will take up a discussion of these terms in the next chapter.

while my son better not even think about it. But hear me out—I am not proposing an argument based on binary configurations in which one group can use *nigga* while another group cannot, nor am I contending that there is a seamless, straightforward, fixed subject/object relationship when *nigga* is uttered. Instead, unlike its predecessor *nigger* I am interested in the Signifyin(g)[8] (Gates, 1988/2014) capacity of *nigga,* the ways in which it exhibits its own linguistic power and agency, and which causes effects not the same as the [Signifyin(g)] speech act itself (Butler, 1997, p. 3). More to the theoretical point, I am interested in how one particularized, historicized, socio-culturally relevant Word has become Undone, is Undoing, and is always, ever in the process of performatively contradicting, Signifyin(g), floating.

I begin with Patricia J. Williams' allegory because her parable, her text overall, critically examines the paradoxical nature of language and its overshadowing, universalizing, essentializing but also complicated force with respect to Subject position. For me, it is the Undoing of the Word, the fleeting, fluid complexity of the Word, and the floating Signification[9] (Gates, 1988/2014) of the Word, *nigga,* that is the foundation of this research. I am interested in how *nigga* performs, enacts, acts, injures while it paradoxically heals, inaugurates, tropes, parodies. I am interested in how its agency impacts Subject position so that its speaker and its listener might have a good or bad day or some other type of day that conjures multiple feelings and positionalities. I am interested in understanding how it flattens and constructs absolutes,

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[8] In Henry Louis Gates' (1988/2014) text *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* he distinguishes between the bracketed (g) to indicate the distinction between the rhetorical construction of black language and the semantic construction of white language indicating that "the bracketed or aurally erased *g*… stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re)naming ritual graphically in evidence..." (p. 51). For Gates, this referential form of agnomintio is based upon the ways in which the African American community developed particularized speech patterns in response to a "parallel discursive universe" (p. 50). As he notes, "…black vernacular discourse proffer[s] its critique of the sign as the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconscious" (p. 51). Gates defines the relationship between these terms as a paradoxical relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity (p. 50).

[9] I purposely capitalize Signification as per Henry Louis Gates' distinction between the syntagmatic signification and the paradigmatic Signification. I will employ the same distinction throughout the text.

while simultaneously splintering into a million pieces, fragmenting those same assumed absolutes. I am interested in how the sting of its lash turns the spotlight away and shines not on the object of degradation but on its creator (Morrison, 2017). I am interested in how its work to injure and flatten the Other, the slave, the black as inhuman, turned itself inside out and upside down so that the dying and drowning mortals are now the priests-turned-gods. I want to explore it, examine it, turn it over and over and over again in an attempt to unlock its combination. It is the Word used both inside and outside of the Celestial City of academia, by both priests-turned-gods (professors) and dying, drowning mortals (everyone else), while I, the gatekeeper-priest-god-mortal, simultaneously hold onto the gate and reach downward, wondering about this Word and its meaning(s) and its relation to other signifiers, contexts, history(ies), and Subject positions.

It is my assumption that *nigga* exists in a range of discursive practices and that an examination of these practices and how they exist within overlapping discourses is necessary to understand present day knowledge productions and shifts in power. If in language there are competing discourses with competing ways of giving meaning to the world, discourses that are historically, socially and politically situated (Weedon, 1997), then there is an endless process of shifting meanings of *nigga***,** which is constantly producing and produced by a range of historicized sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts. By unpacking the multiple ways in which *nigga* constitutes the Subject, a host of shifting meanings and shifting subjectivities can be explored. Hence, when my European-born, Rwandan student who identifies as black raises her hand in my Comp Lit class and indicates she is shocked and offended by Dominican born Pulitzer prize winner Junot Diaz's use of *nigga* in his Harvard Book Store talk, "I mean, he's a professor… and a Jersey Dominican… that's unacceptable for a professor," understanding the

complexity of this two-syllable word is at work. Foucault's (2010) Introduction in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, discusses the discontinuity of a history of ideas, in which attention must turn from the "long period" of a stable, traditional continuous understanding of the underlying shifts and changes to the ways that social institutions, customs and mental attitudes are effects and affected. I want to search for these incomplete, elusive discontinuities with respect to the usage of *nigga*. I want to interrogate "usage," in one, singular, incomplete attempt to explore how *nigga* uses us, and in doing so, detangle my own ambivalences based on my multiply conflicting subjectivities as professor, daughter, mother, self-identifying female of color, comrade in the struggle, friend.

Similar to Williams' critical inquiry about legal language, *nigga*, for me, continues to be discussed using a traditional humanist perspective in which the speaker is the center or the site of language. Scholarship focusing on *nigga* specifically, and racial slurs and epithets in general, are theorized based upon the premise (or humanist assumption) that the word itself transmutes the Subject and carries with it the idea that meaning is a 'portable property' and that language can transport meaning unmediated from one unified subject to another (St. Pierre, 2008). Arguments conceptualizing the appropriateness or inappropriateness of usage create static categories and dichotomies that result from and help to construct essentialist understandings of racially-imbued language. Legal scholar Randall Kennedy (2003), in his text *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* argues that context must be taken into consideration when discussing the use of *nigger*, "the race line… is a specious divide. There is nothing necessarily wrong with a white person sayin 'nigger' just as there is nothing necessarily wrong with a black person saying it. What should matter is the context in which the word is spoken—the speaker's aims, effects, alternatives. To condemn whites who use the N-word without regard to context is simply to

make a fetish of *nigger*" (p. 41). Hence, I want to explore what *nigga, nigger, niggah, nizzle, nicca, neezy* mean at any given moment, framed by the discursive relations within which it is located. Just as the raced or racial Subject is socially constructed based on a range of discursive, cultural and material contexts and practices**,** so too is *nigga,* the meanings of which are constant sites of struggle over power (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). Traditional understandings of language itself have viewed it as the effect of the speaker's experience; hence, specific words within a language have socially and culturally been placed within limited boundaries of meaning based upon a singular historical context or social practice with little wiggle room for transformation or recontextualization. Currently, the socio-historical and socio-cultural power vested in *nigga* continues to uphold illusory qualities of language as a concrete artifact that concretizes experience, identity and most significantly, agency.[10] My interest rests in the transformational power and agency of *nigga* as a word that has the potential to expose "…the contradictory character… of the universal" (Butler, 1997, p. 89). Hence, in order to interrogate the contradictory nature of *nigga* as well as what I will call the discontinuity of *use* I ask the following:

- What processes and/or systems exist that allow particular forms of use of *nigga* in particular contexts over others?
- In what ways have discourses governing erudite knowledge come to regulate—or not—local subjugated knowledges with respect to *nigga?*

[10] It should be noted that for the purposes of this paper I am using agency in the way that it is referred to by Toni Morrison (1993) in her Nobel Pulitzer prize address and in Butler's (1997) *Excitable Speech*. In other words, agency is articulated through language. As linguistic and material subjects, who "do language," notions of agency are expressed through speech. I also refer to Mazzei's (2013) critique of agency as a humanist concept in her essay, "A voice without organs: Interviewing in posthumanist research," which critiques voice (and subsequently agency) as emanating from one essentialist subject. Instead, she contends that it is an "enactment of researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis" (p. 732). Based on these conceptualizations, I view agency as emanating from language, but also an enactment of multiple subjectivities, articulations, histories, knowledges, and power(s).

- If the classroom is the potential space for critical intellectualism, then in what ways—if any—is it possible for *nigger/nigga* to participate in this process?

If I were to explain this research to my mother, this is what I would say: I can remember sneaking to listen to Richard Pryor on a .33 and quietly giggling, hand clapped over mouth, so my girlfriend's parents didn't catch us. I can remember my son at age seven walking into the kitchen, *nigga* rolling effortlessly off his tongue, couched between song lyrics. I can remember being brought into my own linguistic existence when, at the age of 18, you forbade me to date a white boy (I went on the date anyway), telling me the only thing a white boy could ever want from a black girl (me) is her (my) black pussy. It was the only time I can vaguely recall you using the word *nigger* in my entire lifetime, I think, and if you don't recall saying it, then it is the only time that I *felt* like nothing more than a *nigger*. I can remember when, on a sunny summer day, in the middle of a busy street, two Word magicians hailed you, and as a consequence, you let go my hand.

Sometimes I can still feel that nanosecond of emptiness, my arm still extended upward reaching for her as her newly constituted subjecthood distanced itself from me. It was the first time I saw her differently, through the linguistic "power" of those white boys, as she saw me, years later, through the eyes of yet another white boy who wanted to take me on a date. It is that space, that fracture—the condensed historicity (Butler, 1997) of a contestable past, an unpredictable present and unknowable future—that exists between my mother's hand and my own, that I wish to address. Of her own text Williams (1991) states, "I want this book to occupy the gaps… what I hope will be filled in is connection; connection between my psyche and the readers', between lived experience and social perception, and between an encompassing historicity and a jurisprudence of generosity." (p. 8)

For myself, for this research, I want to explore the space, the expanse of forty years, between my mother's hand and present day. I want this research to explore *nigga's* evolution from inflammatory speech to insurrectionary speech (Butler, 1997). I want to examine *nigga* as an utterance (as speech and/or conduct), and what constitutes "use"—Hearing? Thinking? Viewing? Reading? Saying?—and what processes exist that allow for particular forms of use in particular contexts, i.e., in the street, in the hallways, in the cafeteria, over others, i.e., in the English literature classroom. I am interested in knowing what magic the media, comedy, entertainment possess to demean and derogate but also inaugurate and institute knowledge/power. I am interested in the historically situated socio-cultural context which makes certain usages permissible and desirable while others are not. I am not only interested in *why nigga* is contained or constrained, I am interested in *how* it has come to be constitutive of the social body. Examining "commonsense" societal articulations of whom can and cannot say *nigga* is not my primary concern as "the universal explains nothing—it is there to be explained" (Williams, 1999); however, as a local, daily practice, I am interested in the regulatory statements which dictate its usage and the ruptures and/or discontinuities which make certain statements "false". I am thinking of the ways that I, and students, and faculty are subject to and made subjects of institutionalized discursive practices which regulate one's speech and/or conduct (Butler, 1997) so that a student can scream *nigga* in the hallway, disrupting class, but an esteemed professor is reprimanded and required to take sensitivity courses for reading *nigger* from *The Fire Next Time* aloud. I am hoping to explore the systems at play both inside and outside of the classroom which allow *nigga* to exist (or not) in specific historically contingent discourses.

In addition, I intend to explore this forty-year expanse of my own psyche in conjunction with the paradoxical (im)possibilities of *nigga*. Today I am professor, woman (not girl), African American (I prefer Black), but there was a sunny summer day when I was simply *nigger*, and in our present situation, media, the police, and certain governmental officials tell me that I, and my students, still am/are. I want this research to be one of many multiply inflected, simultaneous conversations about the racialized Word (floating signifier) *nigga* within socio-cultural, educational, psychological and historical discourses, all of which impact the English classroom. *Nigga* is a curiosity for me, and much like collectors of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe (Pearce and MacLure, 2009), I want to construct a cabinet of curiosities,[11] in which I can place floating signifiers such as race, utterances such as *nigga*, multiple identities of presenting as hetero (but in actuality queer), and comparatively weigh, uphold, examine, and display them.

My mother sent me a text, "What are you getting your PhD in?" I can visualize her at the senior center telling anyone who will listen, "My daughter is getting her PhD," and updating them about my progress, "She's no longer a student, she's a doctoral *candidate* now. She's writing her dissertation." She will show pictures of me and her only grandson (I am an only child after all) and her voice will brim with pride about my (our) accomplishments. I don't text back, I call her. "English Education," I say. "Oh… well… whatever that means," she laughs. "I don't even know what it is you're doing. All I know is you're getting your doctorate." I chuckle as well; I am driving so I have a bit of time, all the while thinking to myself that time shouldn't matter, she has sacrificed so much for me… Upon realizing that she dropped my hand she grabbed it, squeezed it tightly while hurrying me along; she whisked me out of that strange

[11] See C. Pearce and M. MacLure's article titled "The wonder of method" in the *International Journal of Research and Method in Education* which takes up the discussion of the cabinet of curiosities.

neighborhood so as to protect me from any further linguistic assaults. "Mom… well… English education encompasses many things…you see the study of English is…"

And so begins this journey with the elusive, inflammatory, insurrectionary, paradoxical utterance *nigga.*

Please lean in close.

1.1 Nigga Event #19022019: "Niggas Ain't Shit"

During our discussion of "The Pura Principle" D.[12] says it, "Niggas ain't shit." This is her second use of *nigga* in class, her second use in reference to the main character, Yunior, her second reference to men and the ways they disregard, humiliate, objectify women. Her statement, "niggas ain't shit" is her summation of the mistreatment of women who place their faith, trust, honesty, commitment in a relationship that goes off the rails due to the male's (in this case the main character Yunior of *This Is How You Lose Her*) infidelity, lies, misconduct, disregard and lack of compassion. "Niggas ain't shit" is meant to articulate the expectations and disappointments of a young Dominican (self-proclaimed) female who has possibly witnessed said abuse and dishonesty in her own relationships or those of her friends and family. "Niggas ain't shit" is meant to criticize the Afro-Caribbean, diasporic, heteronormative patriarchal masculinity (Diaz, 2012) of a "typical" Dominican household, of Afro-Caribbean men, of men in general, who do not or cannot respect monogamy, intimacy, women, love.

The first time she used *nigga* referring to Yunior's mistreatment of Madga from the short story "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars," I wondered why she felt comfortable using the word. I

[12] It should be noted that all names of individuals and places are pseudonyms. Additionally all permissions have been gathered and signed by participants. This Dissertation has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Teachers College Columbia University and documentation can be found under IRB #19-396. It has also been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Institutional Research Assessment, Planning and Research Committee at the site location of this research.

wondered if it was due to my opening of the semester with Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" a story based in 1955 in which the main characters use *nigger*—the grandfather as a racial epithet towards Negroes and the grandson simply because he thought that's what they were. I was standing at the board, writing notes, and she muttered it… *nigga*… I turned, looked at her, wondered what I would or should say in this *excessive moment*—that which exceeds the norms proposed as proper and natural by those with social order (Orner, Miller & Ellsworth., 2005, 111-112). Were others offended? Startled? Indifferent? Was I? The room seemed not to shift. I noticed no intake of breath, no glance in her direction (she always sits in the corner seat, far left, first aisle, last row). I hesitate, not knowing whether or not to shift the conversation to the utterance *nigga* while asking myself, how would this, could this, disturb the current lesson?

Standing in the front of the room, at the chalkboard, representing the one "in control," I am met with "excess"—a spillage or slippage in which language oozes outside of the boundaries of what often are assumed as "acceptable" utterances based on normative discourses of the college classroom—for which I must, *we* must respond response-ably (Miller, 2005). A dialogic atemporal space potentially opens up in which author and text (Diaz and *This is How You Lose Her)* no longer exist in the realm of canonized historical artifact, spoken about as documents, which "in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say…" (Foucault, 2010, p. 7). Instead, the literature becomes living, breathing texts of modern-day practices, meanings and knowledges, monuments "placed in relation to [the historical present to]… form totalities" (Foucault, 2010, p. 7). D.'s comment is as much about the text as it is about her life or the lives of those around her. For me, these spontaneous moments can be perceived as the historicized violent past of *nigger* now ruptured based on the historical present of daily language practices. These are moments of excess, in which I must be

aware of my own positionality as professor, African American, teacher-educator, researcher, woman; these are moments in which I must "remain on the hook" and be "response-able" (Miller, 2005) for the ways in which I both articulate and encourage my students in "the sweaty fight for meaning" (Miller, 2005). And yet, as excess, these moments are also ex-citable (Butler, 1997) as the boundary between what is speakable and unspeakable is ruptured, "defying the conventions that govern our anticipatory imaginings" (Butler, 1997, p. 90-91) of what is sayable or unsayable within these particular social, cultural and historical moments and contexts within the English classroom (Orner, et al., 2005). Do I take this moment to explain the historical significance of *nigga*? Do I explain to her that, based on her ethnic background, many would say she has no rights to its use, (while Diaz himself uses it)? Do I critique her essentialist labelling of men? And could any or all of these abled responses silence her? How does one ably respond response-ably?

I choose to say nothing and continue with the lesson, and it is this acquiescence, cloaked in the shroud of silence, that allows D. to say it again on this occasion, and this time she says it twice! "Niggas ain't shit." And later, "See? What I tell you? Niggas, man," she exclaims as we continue the discussion of Yunior. What shapes D.'s "Niggas ain't shit?" Possibly her own experiences with Dominican men or men in general. In addition to her own constituted experiences, there is the discourse of heteronormative monogamy; there is the discourse of Dominican masculinity "and the way that… Caribbean, African, Diasporic, heteronormative masculinity gets understood, the way it gets articulated, and the way it also gets expressed… and… practiced, and the failures of the people who are being… interpolated by it, the failures of them to live up to some of the expectations." (Diaz, 2012) There is the intersectional discourse of Love and Sexual Intercourse, which meet at the crux of the text. Yet there are other discursive

formations that, while disparate, integrate in this excessively excite-able moment. There is the enunciative modality (Foucault, 2010) of the classroom space, a space in which, as professor, educator, examiner, grader, gatekeeper, priest-turned-god, I am the authority, the intellectual superior, the knower of all things textual; I. Am. The. Text. I am supposed to know the answers, know exactly what Diaz is thinking, why he thought it, why he wrote it. And based on the current discursive construct of education, which ironically places me at the center of each student's educational accomplishments, I am supposed to give them the answers so that these can be regurgitated in a comprehensive essay. Somehow, I become Diaz, it is through my lips that Diaz speaks.

So, when are such moments overly excessive? Should the Teachers College Columbia University professor have been disciplined when she read *nigger* from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*? Should those graduate students, students studying to become teachers themselves, have complained, reported her, demanded that she take sensitivity courses, ultimately causing her to leave the institution? Who, at the time, was speaking—the author or the professor? When discussing a civil rights case with a student during his office hours, tenured Emory Law School professor Paul Zwier recollects a memory of his civil rights activism, telling said student that he was called a *nigger lover* by a white racist. The consequence of sharing this private moment resulted in a formal complaint by the student, being barred from teaching and termination.[13] While both examples are fraught with multiple meanings, the speaking subject is essentialized as racist, inappropriate, insensitive, unfit to teach. In both moments, the utterance of *nigger*, while

[13] Since the writing of this dissertation Paul Zwier has been reinstated at Emory Law School. For more on this case see the following links: ABA Journal, The FIRE News desk, Inside Higher Ed, The Atlanta Journal Constitution, The Emory Wheel. It should also be noted that Mr. Zwier apparently also said *nigger* in class when discussing a case of about prejudice and discrimination. Coverage about Mr. Zwier's usage is not consistent in each news report.

citational, is "…ineffective [in] capturing an original slur by whoever is being reported: *whatever offense the report commits is endorsed only by the reporter.*" (Anderson and Lepore, 2013, p. 30). "Use" is ruptured as the utterer is constituted on the basis of the insult, not the reporter of a past or embedded insult. Anderson and Lepore (2013) continue, "slurring is *non-displaceable:* a current use of a slur cannot be employed to discuss a past or future use without incurring a current infraction." (p. 30). While these instances could easily be simplified to the unsayability of *nigger* based on the racial make-up of both professors, what is at stake is a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1978) in which conduct (and/or speech) is governed and governable within horizontal relationships between those classified, categorized and regulated within the institution of Higher Education. The utterance *nigger* is constitutive of the subjects, the relationship between subjects, and the power relations embedded within the webwork of bodies-subjects-classroom-institution. What does it mean to govern ourselves and others? Anderson and Lepore (2013) caution:

> In academic discussions…, it's easy to convince oneself… that particular uses of slurs are inoffensive… As a safeguard against such inurnment, we strongly urge you always ask yourself how a targeted member, perhaps accidentally overhearing you, would react to your usage. You'll find, as we have, that much of what seems suitable is definitely not. (p. 31)

Thus, is the cautionary note to think before you speak?

I fear that this form of governmentality has the potential to produce flattened hierarchies, essentialist subjectivities, and in the morass of governing ourselves and others we gain and/or lose historical perspective, the ability to be creative in our governability, and mimic the sovereign power we hope to dismantle. Butler notes,

> …a politics that begins and ends with the policing function is a mistake… the question is how is that person… renewing and reinvigorating racist rituals of speech… how do we exploit their ritual function in order to undermine it in a more thorough-going way, rather than stopping it as its spoken. What would it mean to restage it, take it, do something

> else with the ritual so that its revivability as a speech act is really seriously called into question. (as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 166)

Randall Kennedy (2019), in his disquiet about Philip Adamo, Augsburg University professor who, after a reading of Baldwin and subsequent discussion of 'the N-Word,' and who lost his teaching schedule and took a leave of absence, urges "this episode vividly illustrates the embrace of illiberal conformity that is sadly ascendant in academia."

Once, when my son was small, while playing with two action figures (dolls), he said to me: "This is the bad guy and this is the good guy." I asked, "What's going to happen?" And he answered, "The good guy is going to vanquish the bad guy." "So what happens to the bad guy?" I prodded. My son looked thoughtful. "Does he die? Does he go to jail? What happens?" "He's punished!" My son exclaimed, "He's punished because he's a bad guy." "Hmm," I say, "but why can't you teach the bad guy how to be a good guy? So, then he can also be a good guy." The look on my son's face was utter consternation, and while his furrowed brow brought forth laughter from me, it also spoke of how the comic book industry, cartoons and Marvel Universe mimic our Justice System—aiding in the construction of individual superheroes who roam the halls looking and listening for linguistic bad guys—better to punish, because they can never be good. So, what do we gain and lose when our willingness to govern becomes enmeshed in forms of sovereign power, disciplinary power, and governmentality (Foucault, 1978) that simply stop the speaker but not the spoken (which is the real goal here, right?).

In that excessive, *ex-citeable* moment I wanted to say something to D., wanted to ask, "Why do you use that particular word?" Wanted to turn to the class and begin a conversation about *nigga*, but my own confusion and uncertainty stopped me. How does one intellectualize racist language? How does one allow for such a vitriolic, hated word to become part of a larger discussion about language, gender, race? How does one approach (im)possible speech (Butler,

1997)? And in this particular instance, why is the self-proclaimed cheater, Yunior (of Diaz's work), the character who cannot, no matter how hard he tries, remain monogamous, be the representative of *nigga*? Why does D.'s use cause me to pause in ways that Diaz's does not? Ironically, while I have read past Diaz's purposeful -er insertions many times, each time D. exclaimed *nigga* (with an -a) I was made to feel disconcerted.

"Nigga's ain't shit" is not specific to the classroom setting, to the text, to Diaz or his characters, but is a particularized speech act within specific sociocultural spaces, an assemblage of practices and ways of thinking which converge on this excessive, in-the-making meaning-full (Miller, 2005) moment. "Nigga's ain't shit" is metaphorical, idiomatic, anachronistic. Yet, as part of what could potentially be considered subjugated knowledge, or in the words of Diaz (2012) a "local ecology," in the classroom, this speech act ruptures academic discourse—it is not erudite knowledge. However, its entry into the classroom reveals its interdiscursive context, i.e., 'nigga's ain't shit' as a site of power is understood by the students of the classroom (myself included) as more than a critique of the text, but a critique of heteronormativity, Caribbean, African, Disaporic, Dominican masculinity as symbolized within the text. While I am symbolically positioned as professor (standing in front of the class, imbued with the right to teach due to my educational background and employment at the college) 'niggas ain't shit' subjugates me, constitutes me, so that I am on par with D. I understand the force of this speech act—can reflect upon my own past relationships and those of heartbroken friends. I, too, am constituted within the discourses of monogamy, fidelity and marriage, blackness and femaleness, and what each of these mean in relation to the Diaspora. In a classroom of seven men and nine women, "nigga's ain't shit" does not cause a flutter, a glance, a shrug. When I turn to survey the classroom some of the women are nodding; E. is looking back at D., R. is smiling, J.'s look is

smug. None of the men respond; Y. doesn't even look up from his phone. Within the context of the story, the classroom, the social practices of these 20-something students, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality or gender, "niggas ain't shit" is understood not as a racial epithet or slur, but as a critique on conceptions of faithfulness, loyalty and honesty. No one, myself included, responds to D. No one verbally questions her statement; no one expresses deep concern or relief. No one comes to the aid of Yunior, attempting to justify his infidelity, or Diaz. Instead, each of us allows "nigga ain't shit" to hold a certain amount of weight in the classroom. The paradox of *nigger-nigga* in the classroom is its allowability through literature, as long as it is not spoken by student or professor—James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Mark Twain, Willliam Shakespeare, Junot Diaz. Why do we teach texts without further discussions of language? More significantly, why do we read texts but censor and govern speech?

Class conversation continues and at some point an exasperated J., slamming her hand on the desk, "I don't understand Yunior at all." I smile half-heartedly, gesture towards D. and say, "Well, niggas ain't shit." D. smiles, nods, "I'm telling you!" Even Y. pipes up, "Well, you know his behavior just doesn't make any sense. I mean, dude, what is your problem? He keeps getting caught because he doesn't really understand or know how to maintain a healthy relationship." And class discussion takes off. I imagine that the spell is broken. But what is performative pedagogy[14] if not also the failure to respond, the failure to be response-able, the choice to step away from the "sweaty fight" and the in-the-moment choices we make in attempting to construct meaning-full experiences (Miller, 2005). I can dream a million scenarios of what could or should

[14] I take this term from Miller's (2005) *Sounds of Silence Breaking: Women, Autobiography, Curriculum* in which Orner et al. note that teaching becomes performative "…when educators teach in ways that exceed representation" (p.115), and these teaching events "leave no *visible* trace afterward" (p. 124). Performative teaching is situated, unrepeatable, and contextual. Performative pedagogy cannot be universalized, categorized, or reproduced.

have happened… instead Patricia J. Williams' parable is inverted; I am made mortal in-the-moment and "niggas ain't shit" the authority.

Chapter 2: Signs, Signifiers & Signifyin(g)

"Mom do you know what a *real nigga* is"? –17-year old son

White folks made up nigger and don't want me to say it…I say nigger a hundred times every morning, makes my teeth white… I say it, you think it; what a small white world.
–Paul Mooney

Words empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meanings, and always equipped with a secondhand memory. –Trinh T. Minh-ha

Paul Mooney's[15] final quip "what a small white world" reveals the irony of his willingness…no… his freedom and choice to say *nigger*. While there are predictions that those classified racially as White will be in the minority by 2045, Mooney's statement has more to do with linguistic sarcasm than population. Critiquing usage, his final declaration asserts that thinking *nigger* and saying *nigger* both exist in the realm of usage, a usage which my seventeen-year-old felt compelled to question after it filled the space of my car. "Mom, do you know what a *real nigga* is?" I wondered if all my talk about *nigga* had negatively affected him, and all my theorizing—my ontological and epistemological orientations, my conceptual framework and theoretical lens, my pedagogy and methodology, my poststructural framings—did nothing for me in that moment. "I'm not sure. Do you?" He attempts an answer, first yes, then, "No I don't think I know what a *real nigga* is. I'm going to look it up." He pulls out his phone.

[15] I will later explore the discourse of entertainment as a space through which the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of *nigga* satirizes and puns thus constructing multiple tensions between Mooney as entertainer and his audiences. However, I begin with his statement as a segue into "the word and the world," a theoretical, albeit incomplete, exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of how I intend to explore *nigga's* usage.

There is ambiguity based on *how* Mooney is "using" *nigger*, i.e., pun, epithet, slur, mimicry, and what meanings are taken up in his usage, just as there is ambiguity about one's status as a *real nigga.* Instead, multiple intersecting meanings exist, each of which contain a secondhand memory (Minh-ha) of a historicized past which cannot be erased nor constrained (Gates, 1988/2014). The contention that my son and Mooney share, which is also what Trinh T. Minh-ha explains, is that words can live and die, take on new meanings with an attached memory. Hence, the possibility of language having a life of its own is not necessarily farfetched, even if one's ability to reach beyond fixed conceptions of language continues to be the normative practice. Morrison (1993b) too, likens language to a living breathing entity in her Nobel Prize for Literature address in which she uses the bird as a symbol for language, trapped in the hands of a young person who has the choice to free the bird or crush it. These quotes, taken together, critique language as living, (en)acting and *being* in the world.

My son reads:

> Contrary to popular belief, a Real Nigga is someone who will always be 'themselves', not someone who goes on killing sprees and doesn't care about anything. But, being a real nigga, being yourself means showing everything about yourself but your weaknesses, knowing them at the same time. It's all about being real and true to yourself. The opposite of real is fake. You don't have to be black to be a real nigga, but it helps. Being in the hood carrying a gun talkin shit is not being a real nigga, because when the police come you will be crying for your mom. Being a real nigga is doing whatever you do, doing it best, not pretending to be a wannabe thug like everybody else. Bruce Lee is a real nigga. Chuck Norris is a real nigga. Most rappers (e.g. Lil Flip, G-unit, D4l, Gille da Kid) ain't real niggas. (UrbanDictionary.com)

After reading, he surmises, "So I think a *real nigga* is someone who is himself. Doesn't follow others and go around carrying guns and stuff." I ask if that makes him a *real nigga.* He says, "I don't know, I guess. I don't carry a gun and I don't follow behind other people…"

My son's interrogation of a *real nigga* parallels my own wonderings about *nigga* especially as these are "used" in the English language classroom. While it can be argued that there are multiple complementary and contradictory "uses" for *nigger* in Mooney's statement, when *nigga* is read from Baldwin, Hurston, Hughes or (in recent publication) Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* by a racially-marked white reader, its secondhand memory has the potential to supersede multiply inflected understandings of use and usage, thus constituting the reader of the text as racist, insensitive, prejudice. But in such a case, I wonder, whose word is it, the reader or the writer? And whose use? One possible lens through which to interrogate the discontinuity of use is by exploring *nigger, nigga, nigguh, niggaz* through the contention that language (words) die and are reborn, and through rebirth new meanings are created which exceed the speaker (Butler, 1997). Gates (1988/2014) points to this in his text *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism,* "a signifier [word] is never, ultimately, able to escape its received meanings, or concepts, no matter how dramatically such concepts might change through time" (p. 54). Instead he contends that, especially within African American Vernacular English (AAVE) rhetorical troping of Standard (white) English takes place in which received meanings are turned upon by vertical substitution, i.e., Signifyin(g)[16] (Gates, 1988/2014). Using Gates' argument, Mooney's comedic portrayal of *nigger* acts as pun and irony, in effect Signifyin(g) upon its secondhand epithet; however, the allowability of *nigger's* ironic Signification is not solely due to Mooney as speaker, but also because Mooney is a *real nigga,* doing what he does best, within the discursive realms of comedic entertainment, which constitutes him as sovereign speaking subject (Butler 1997), one of many identities he takes on, albeit incomplete. I think of my Introduction to Literature student who would ask of Mooney the same question he posed in

[16] I will explain Gates' definition of Signifyin(g) in subsequent paragraphs.

class in his critique of Junot Diaz's short story "Nilda," "but why would he use the -er instead of the -a? Why would he use the white version instead of the black one? Why is he talking like a white man?" Others in the class agreed with him… vehemently. Much like my discussion with my son, I did not feel as if I had a plausible answer to his question; it was an excessive moment (Orner, Miller and Ellsworth, 2005), one in which my and my students' subjectivities, knowledges, histories and power relations overflowed beyond the classroom discussion. In retrospect, I think of Mooney, "What a small white world." And I think of the definition read to me by my son—[INSERTING MY STUDENT HERE] "Ade was a *real nigga* the day he asked that question in class."

So does part of usage dictate what Gates (1988/2014) identifies as agnominatio (or lexical derivation), in his own alteration of signifying to Signifyin(g)?

> The bracketed *g* [in Signifyin(g)] enables me to connote the fact that this word is, more often than not, spoken by black people without the final g as "signifyin." This arbitrary and idiosyncratic convention also enables me to recall the fact that whatever historical community of Afro-Americans coined this usage did so in the vernacular spoken, in contradistinction to the literate written usages of the standard English "shadowed" term. The bracketed or aurally erased *g*… stands as the trace of black difference in a remarkably sophisticated and fascinating (re)naming ritual graphically in evidence here. (Gates, 2014, p. 51)

Likewise, *nigga* aurally erases the -er of *nigger* in a (re)naming ritual in which the -er version is a secondhand memory (Minh-ha) shadowing the AAVE term. Poet and playwright Jabari Asim (2007) attributes agnomination (the dropping of the -er for the -a) to the late 1980's rap group N.W.A. (Niggas Wit Attitude) and their debut album, and signature song of the same title, *Straight Outta Compton.* Quoting rapper, actor and activist Mos Def, Asim writes,

> …when we call each other 'nigga,' we take a word that has been historically used by whites to degrade and oppress us… and turn it into something beautiful, something we can call our own… it truly becomes a 'term of endearment' (p. 223-4).

Although Asim acknowledges that N.W.A.'s exploitation of *nigga* is "…overtly self-conscious… infused with macabre wit and…positively Ellisonian" (p. 222), he cautions against non-critical usage of *nigga* from those artists and laypersons who "mindlessly utter the epithet [as] a form of… shackl[ing] ourselves to those corrupt white delusions—and their attendant false story of our struggle in the United States" (p. 233). In other words, outside the realm of what he determines as critically engaging art, Asim questions the legitimacy of *nigga* without its attendant historical narrative; he contends that gangsta rappers, "the henchmen of the white supremacist agenda" (p. 222), "…keep alive dangerous stereotypes linking African Americans to laziness, criminal violence, and sexual insatiability" (p. 222). He surmises that gansta rap epitomizes its own "existential riddle… 'What is a nigga'?" (p. 222).[17] This is what W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/2003) has labeled the double consciousness:

> …no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world… a peculiar sensation… of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (p. 16-17),

of the African American psyche, both black and American. For gangsta rap this double consciousness would be a commingling of slave, *nigger* (American), colored (American), Negro (American), black (American), African-[American], *nigga* (Black… American). Asim (2007) contends that the answer to this question is fraught with struggle, irony, inconsistency, and contradiction, "striving for progress through the few legitimate channels available to them…[gangsta rappers] choose to embrace the absurdity of life by becoming a nigga" (p. 222).

In a previous conversation, after listening to the lyrics of *Kyrie Irving*, I ask my son what *nigga* means. He answers that it means a black person. We are driving again, and much like Mr.

[17] And quite possibly this mirrors my consternation about my son's rap-related existential question, "What's a *real nigga*?" I am unsure of my (or his) existential connection to the word.

Petto's defense when speaking about Riley in "The S Word" (McGruder, 2008), I wonder if I am affecting my son's inside voice. I decide to interrogate, knowing that at any moment the conversation can easily come to a close with a roll of the eye, a sigh, a shrug and decisive silence.

"Who uses it?"

"Blacks and Spanish."

He continues by explaining that he never heard a white person use it and I cannot call to mind any white rappers except for Eminem. I ask if anyone can use it, and he replies that they choose to. Then I hit him with the depth of the conversation: Do you use it? He hesitates.

"Yeah."

Miraculously he continues, "Blacks should be allowed to use it but whites, no. That's a word for a black man…I don't know about a black woman, but a white man better not ever say it to me because he's gonna get punched, socked, anything, on the face. Blacks can say it. Any race can say it except whites because they say *nigger* and it's a racial term when they say it."

I don't know if I taught him this or if the floating Signification of race has somehow "floated" into his psyche. Instead, I respond with, "Mmmm."

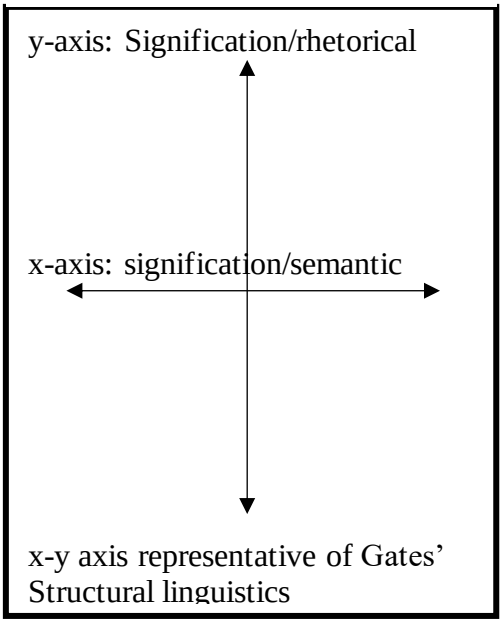
He is silent. He places his ear buds into his ears. The conversation is over.

If, as my son contends, *nigga* only belongs in the mouths of people of color, then, as Gates (1988/2014) theorizes, *nigga* is an example of Signification. In black vernacular Signification valorizes the signifier, stressing its materiality (sound) and devaluing the concept (signified). This form of language play was a counter strategy during slavery, enabling slaves to send warnings, plan covert meetings, and satirize their masters; Gates theorizes these rhetorical

linguistic moves as existing within the structure of the language itself. Hence, through his application of post-Enlightenment linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's (1971) theory,[18] Gates' framing of Signification is based upon the theory that black vernacular is composed of arbitrary units, devoid of meaning, which acquired meaning based on the differences within the larger linguistic and social contexts of white English. In order to conceptualize this, Gates provides the reader with Saussure's x-y axis, placing black vernacular (and Signification) on the rhetorical y-axis (See Fig. 1). Signification serves as a "language of blackness" (p. 72), "coded dictionaries of black tropes" (p. 69), which defined their circumstances, served as a form of linguistic independence and communicated embedded meaning(s) in and about the world in which they survived.

Figure 1

X-Y Saussurean Linguistic Axis



At age 14 my son tells me that his best friend's sister laughingly calls him a black nigger. But it's okay, mom, he tells me, we were just playing. Again, we are driving. I grip the wheel, knuckles aching, as I visualize the scene I ask him to lay out before me: We always play like

[18]Gates draws upon theories from Freud, Saussure and Lacan, to show the interrelation of Signification and signification. Saussure's (1972) breakdown of the sign into the signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept) theorized that the relationship between the word and its meaning is arbitrary, "… actually has not natural connection with the signified…" (Saussure, as cited in Williams, 1999, p. 37); however, the speaker is bound to the language of that community. Prior to Gates' theorizing of the Saussurean sign, Levi-Strauss (1950) extended this theory in his privileging of the signifier over the signified. He contended that there is a gap between signifier and signified which resulted from a host of signifiers in society which contribute to the production of an infinite number of new meanings (Williams, 1999). Levi-Strauss terms this influx of signifiers over signifieds "floating signifiers" which "represent an undetermined value of signification, in itself devoid of sense and therefore susceptible to receive any sense" (Levi-Straus, as cited in Williams, 1999, p. 52). Based on this, he argued that social reality is governed by the laws of language. Again, I will not take up space going into the specifics of Levi-Strauss' arguments, which moved the structuralist view further along the spectrum towards a poststructural theorizing of language (which is where we are headed!), but I bring up Saussure and Levi-Strauss in order to introduce some foundational aspects of floating signifiers, a term Patricia J. Williams whispered to her sister in her opening chapter.

that. I was chasing her up the steps. At the time my son's friend (best friend) was white, and, while I am off studying peace education in Uganda and Rwanda, he spends the two weeks of my absence at his house so that he can travel to and from the alternative-instruction, predominantly (almost all) white private school I had chosen for his K through 8th grade education. During my trip, my husband phoned me, "Call DXXX," he says. I learn that, as per usual, my son has had a verbal altercation with his father. DXXX apologized as she told me that she made the executive decision to allow my son to remain at her house on weekends (over the course of my trip there were two), rather than go to his father's house (as I'd arranged). Without going into details of the relationship between my son, his father and myself, I appreciated the fact that she was protecting him. I was not home to act as buffer between my son and his father. DXXX instinctively knew, without my telling, that the relationship was strained, and her motherly instinct overturned all pre-arranged plans—he was to remain at her home until I returned. I knew he was well-taken care of. So now, speeding down the highway, what do I say about *nigger* to my son, to his best friend, to his sister, to his best friends's mother without reducing them to sum zero racists? My next trip to Africa would have to wait.

My son is braver than I. I can't say at his age that I would have had the courage to ask (or tell) my mother what any form of *nigger-nigga* meant, and, if I am to go back to that bright sunny day of my childhood, it took me until well into adulthood (and this research) before I could develop the courage to ask her what exactly was meant by those two boys walking by us on the street. This is what I mean by the atemporality of language and the ways in which its effects exceed not only us but also space and time. My son heard *nigger*, knew what it meant, and because it came from a white girl's lips who he deemed as friend, or at the very least, the sister of his best friend, he saw this as okay. But ironically he asks, "Mom what's a *real*

nigga?"—a reiteration of Gloria Naylor's (1986) question when she heard it in her third-grade class from "…a small pair of lips that had already learned it could be a way to humiliate…" My son, too, had heard *nigga* countless times (in music, not from me), before he felt it necessary to interrogate its construction as it singed the air in my compact Honda Civic, yet his experience (his subjugation) with being *called* a *nigger* by a pair of equally thin lips was different from that of Naylor. What then of *use?*

There is a rippling that occurs with each reiteration, consequences that are not always visible and that can emerge in subsequent generations. There is a rippling effect… a performativity, a contradiction, an inverted interpellation (Butler, 1997) in which the *niggers* are calling themselves *niggas* and justifying themselves as real. Makes their teeth white (Mooney, 2010). The struggle, irony, inconsistency, and contradiction of my son's public vs. private hearings are situated in the absurdity of double-consciousness which Asim (2007) articulates through the words of Chester Himes:

> Racism introduces absurdity into the human condition. Not only does racism express the absurdity of the racists, but it generates absurdity in the victims… Racism creates absurdity among blacks as a defense mechanism. Absurdity to combat absurdity (Himes, as cited in Asim, 2007, p. 219).

(Gangsta) Rappers, then, combat this absurdity by embracing the very term that has been used to degrade them, labelling themselves, per Asim, as both targets and agents of their oppression (p. 221). As such, the "macabre wit" that Asim identifies in Niggaz Wit Attitudes (NWA) specifically illustrates Ralph Ellison's contention that blacks have a heritage of responding to and coping with oppression with mirth, humor, irony and wit, defined by Gates (1988/2014) as Signifyin(g). However, Asim cautions that descendants of gangsta rap have failed to produce art that critically engages and contextualizes *nigga* as a word with a tenuous racially-charged

history, the blueprint which has been adhered to since N.W.A.'s inception, which defines *niggas* as misogynistic, violent, hypersexualized, and homophobic.

Unlike Naylor, my son does not have the luxury of climbing into my lap and listening to my answer. His unconscious hearing is not based on private talk in his grandmother's home full of extended family members who weigh in on community behaviors. His listening is exclusively public, especially since my own renderings of *nigga* have rarely, if ever, been in his presence. *Nigga,* for him, derives from the latest rap song or hip hop video, broadcast on BET and/or MTV, a movie, a peer, a stranger even, but our small nuclear family has not employed our right to daily exercise/exorcise *nigga.* Unlike Naylor, his question does not come from a place of confusion, upon hearing the word pass between foreign lips, a forked tongue with malice-laced intonations/intentions. His question relates to subtext, to type of nigga, *a real nigga,* spoken by one of many nationally syndicated entertainers whose album he probably downloaded on iTunes. His question is less about the noun and more about the adjective and the ways in which it situates other usages of *nigga,* in his words, *broke nigga, hood nigga, bitch nigga.* Ironically, any of these have constructed meanings, which he understands, but *real?* What exactly makes a *nigga* real? Unlike Naylor, *nigga* has become so commonplace in public social practice that I'm sure he uses the word himself.

Unlike Gloria Naylor, my son lives in an era where *nigga* is no longer the issue, instead the issue has become how *real* a *nigga* is. What we have here is not an issue of who can and who cannot say *nigger-nigga* (Mooney might argue that everyone in his audience says it or can say it) but in what discursive contexts is *nigga* sayable? It is no secret that language construction, much like racialization, has historically been segregated in the United States, as Gates contends. However, while these segregated systems each contain particularized structures

based on their constitution of separate realities, they are intricately tied to and relational to one another. While Gates identifies black vernacular as a "carefully structured system of rhetoric" (p. 49) and a "black (re)doubling" (p. 54) of standard white language, both systems "constitute social reality" (Weedon, 1997, p. 22). Gates particularizes Ferdinand de Saussure's (1971) structuralist theory of language that reframed Enlightenment theories of language, which contended that language came from within. Instead Saussure argued that language does not belong to the rational, fully conscious subject, but is inherently its own system. This Saussurean theory of language contends that meaning is not intrinsic but relational, in other words, "…meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language" (Weedon, 1997, p. 23); hence words (Saussure and Gates use the term signs) only acquire meaning through their relationship to other words (signs), what he terms a language system (Saussure, 1971). This break from previous ideas about language meant that the idea of a fixed rational self with a consciousness that exists prior to language was no longer justifiable. For Saussure, there are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language (as cited in Williams, 1999, p. 37); hence, "Without language (*langue)* thought is a vague, uncharted nebula" (Saussure, 1972). Gates' departure from Saussure elaborates a black hermeneutical principle so as to present a "carefully structured system of rhetoric" (p. 49) specific to African American language systems. In presenting his theory of rhetoric and semantics, Gates turns to Saussure's concept of the sign arguing that it is not the sign that has multiplied, but the signifier, which "…has been doubled and (re)doubled, a signifier in this instance that is silent, a 'sound-image'… *sans* the sound." (p. 50). I contend that the doubling or (re)doubling that Gates identifies is synonymous with the linguistic term reduplication, in which a word or part of a word is repeated for grammatical or figurative intensification. In this case, the (re)doubling emphasizes the play

on differences between *nigger* and *nigga* which mirrors Gates' assertion, "the relationship that black 'Signification' bears to the English 'signification' is paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity." (p. 50). What I argue then is that *nigga,* while paradoxically different (and oppositional) to *nigger*, is inscribed within its relational identity.

But again, what then of *use?* This (re)doubling is both a method of lexical derivation, the process of forming a new word from an existing word, and a mode of figurative intensification, the rhetorical troping which is the heart of Signifyin(g). Gesturing towards Derrida's differance and its suspended relationship with the verbs differ and defer, Gates continues with an explanation of this (re)naming, reconfiguring Saussure's theory, where a sign is made up of the signifier and the signified. Instead, spoken black vernacular which has Signified upon formal English use and convention has occurred at the level of the conceptual (signified) and at the level of the sound-image, the signifier. "Black people vacated the signifier, then—incredibly—substituted as its concept a signified that stands for the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition" (p. 52). In this way "rhetoric… has supplanted semantics in this most literal meta-confrontation within the structure of the sign" (p. 52). In other words, Saussure's sign = signified (concept)/signifier (sound-image) which is representative of standard English signification is, in black vernacular, replaced with sign = rhetorical figures/signifier, i.e., Signification.

Unlike a chain of signifiers that operate on a horizontal syntagmatic axis, black vernacular operates as vertical substitution; therefore, Saussure's theory that the signifier is fixed and unchangeable is fallacious. Instead, Gates employs Bakhtin's terminology of the double-voiced word, "…a word or utterance… decolonized for the blacks' purposes 'by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its own orientation'" (p. 55).

Hence, in black vernacular the signified is replaced with rhetorical meaning, essentially unfixing and simultaneously refixing the sign. This free range of play is meant to register both the condensed historicity of the utterance as well as its citationality and iterability (Butler, 1997), i.e., its performativity (Butler, 1997). *Nigga* as the signifier usurps the sound-image *nigger* and as a result its concept is erased and replaced with rhetorical structure. In other words, based on Gates' arguments, hearing or seeing *nigger* invokes a specific concept, the racist ideology of a person of African descent, a slave, a black person regardless of context. In opposition, *nigga* invokes a range of rhetorical possibilities potentially disconnected from racist ideology, while simultaneously (re)citing (Butler, 1997) its secondhand memory. Gates defines his theory of Signification as a counter-linguistic act, which incorporates both past and future meanings as well as immediate and consequential effects.

So where did *nigger* and Signifyin(g) derive? Gates (1988/2014) and Asim (2007) provide an explanation for this:

2.1 The Transatlantic Passage of the Signifying Monkey

> Gates introduces the Yoruba cosmology of *Ifa* or *Orunmila,* focusing specifically on Esu-Elegbara,[19] otherwise known as Esu (pronounced Ā shoo), a trickster figure of divine mediation and interpretation. As per Gates, the system of Ifa is a "system of interpretation… a marvelous combination of geomancy and textual exegesis…" (p. 11). Within this system Esu is positioned as divine interpreter, mediator, trickster and divine

[19] I am only focusing on Gates' theory of oral black vernacular as paradigmatic, what Gates identifies as rhetorical troping of standard English. Gates' research on Esu within the cosmology of *Ifa* is meant to construct an inherently African foundation for his later discussion of African American literary criticism. While I am highlighting the origins of Esu and his North American descendent, the Signifying Monkey, what is of import for this research is Gates' theory of Signification or Signifyin(g), which he purposely capitalizes in order to distinguish it from the standard English term signification or signifying. For a fuller understanding of Ifa and the orisha Esu, please refer to Gates' text.

linguist who is connected to both the heavens and the earth and therefore has the capacity to speak, interpret and translate the will and desire of both the gods and humans. For as one *oriki* (a narrative praise poem) indicates, "'Collective mouths is the name by which Esu is called [since] each of the four hundred…deities gave segments of their mouths to Esu on the day that he became mediator… thereby [s/he] became the mouthpiece for all…" (p. 43). Hence, it is through Esu that followers of *Ifa* can hope to understand and make sense of their life circumstances (their *ori* or destiny*)*. As such it is necessary to first pay homage and make sacrifices to Esu/Legba before making sacrifice to one's individual orisha (personal god), for although each individual was born with a specific fate, it is through Esu that this fate is revealed and/or changed. Without sacrifice to Esu, who translates the divine language of Ifa, one's fate can be withheld.

The many characteristics and functions of Esu include, but are not limited to, individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminancy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, flux, mutability, process, displacement and deferral (Gates, 1988/2014). Through these varied characteristics, and for Gates' purpose, Esu serves as the *orisha* of the literary critic; he is symbolically the interpreter of the Gods, and, as such, is figuratively viewed by Gates as embodying the "methodological principals of interpretation itself" (p. 11).

I will not take up space articulating the ways in which Gates explains the intricacies and complexities of Ifa; however it is of import to note that within the cosmology of Ifa, Gates views Esu as "…the figure of formal use and interpretation… a meta-linguistic principle…" (p. 40) who "reads" or interprets the oracles of Ifa (a phonocentric system that Gates classifies as vocal writing), as a method for which the

African American literary critic can adopt when interpreting a text. He cites, "The language of the Ifa oracle is of the textual, or discursive, order, precisely because it is mediated, like writing" (p. 44). Esu defines the conditions of all discourse, a function that Gates argues poststructural criticism ascribes to writing (p. 46). Esu's importance is based on his relevance as the interpreter of the system of Ifa, without which the system would collapse. Gates indicates that s/he is the "…dynamic of process, the dialectical element of the system" (p. 43); s/he is double-voiced; s/he is analogous to the ways that rhetoric is attached to speech; s/he is the liminal space which "'falls between intent and meaning, between utterance and understanding... [s/he is] the metadiscourse of the speech act of Ifa" (p. 47). Gates provides the reader with this explanation of Esu/Legba in order to articulate a specifically black (African) hermeneutic tradition. His articulation of Esu's orgins as well the specific practices of Esu serve as a conceptual framework for his theory on African American literary criticism.

However, it is ultimately not Esu that Gates believes acts as the conduit for African American literary criticism; instead, it is the Signifying Monkey, Esu's distant cousin who survived the Middle Passage and migrated from the Caribbean to the United States. Esu's North American descendent, the Signifying Monkey, became "through a displacement of African myths in the New World… a major character in the surviving oral variation in a New World black culture" (p. 17). Gates notes that one possibility for the survival of the Monkey is due to the racially demeaning analogies drawn between African Americans and monkeys. However, it is through the lyrical poetry and troping narrative of the Signifying Monkey that Gates offers his theory of Signification, counter to, and in opposition of signification. Hence, before unpacking this theory and the ways

in which I am conceptualizing it in my study of *nigga*, it is necessary to provide a brief background of the Signifying Monkey.

As per Gates, "If Esu-Elegbara stands as the central figure of the Ifa system of interpretation, then his Afro-American relative, the Signifying Monkey, stands as the rhetorical principle in Afro-American discourse" (p. 49). The image of the monkey originates from a Yoruba myth of origin, which explains how Esu became the mediator of all languages. In this myth, Esu receives sixteen palm nuts from monkeys in a tree. With these nuts and the counsel of the monkeys, Esu is able to travel the earth and learn from men. With this newly acquired knowledge he returns to the heavens and informs the gods. In this way, Esu becomes mediator between heaven and earth. In other West African tales the monkey is figured as Esu's companion or, in the Fon of Benin, the monkey is Esu's child. While the myths concerning the relationship between Esu and the monkey vary, Gates' research on spiritual practices in the Caribbean and southern United States reveal that the monkey traveled with Esu and survived the Transatlantic voyage from West Africa. Specifically, the conflation of the monkey and Esu is significant in Afro-Cuban mythology, in which the monkey emerges from the water as Esu himself. In any case whether the monkey and Esu merged or if the monkey "left [Esu's] side at Havana and swam to New Orleans… the Signifying Monkey remains as the trace of Esu, the sole survivor of a disrupted partnership. Both are tropes that serve as transferences in a system aware of the nature of language and its interpretation" (p. 25). While Gates identifies Esu as the interpreter of written text, the Signifying Monkey represents what Gates identifies as the "trope of tropes," a representation of the troping nature and

rhetorical strategies specific to African American discourse; while Esu is text based, the Signfying Monkey is a symbol for orality.

Why is this Transatlantic legacy significant? While Gates' process is to explicate a black hermeneutical tradition and thereafter move to rhetoric and semantics, the history(ies) of Esu and the Signifying Monkey open up the possibility for exploration of how and why, in spite of a legacy of theft, chattel slavery, bondage, oppression, linguistic erasure and linguistic violence, a specific African American linguistic identity has/had/does have and continues to have the possibility to emerge and with it the potential to inflect speaking practices and teaching practices of the English language. In many ways, while African American vernacular can potentially be viewed as a truly "American phenomenon," it is modulated internally by, as Gates posits, the English practices of the dominant white community and externally by a symbolic, possibly visceral, connection to cosmological practices from the African continent.

Although Gates provides a thorough explanation of Esu and the Signifying Monkey for the purposes of laying out his theory for interpreting African American literary texts, my overview, albeit brief, of Esu and the Signifying Monkey is my truncated attempt to present background for Gates' theory of Signifyin(g) with respect to contemporary language practice. Much like the bond between Esu of West African cosmology and the Signifying Monkey of African American narrative, *nigger* and *nigga* share a genetic code, both of which have an etymological connection to the Latin word for black, *niger* (Asim, 2007, p. 10). Asim (2007) indicates, "Some [lexicographers]… contend that 'nigger' was intended initially as a neutral term. Citing the presence of 'nigers' in the 'learned discourse' of the seventeenth-century anti-slavery activist Samuel

Sewall, they suggest that the word acquired a derogatory character over time, picking up various spellings along the way" (p 10). This transoceanic and transformational aspect of *niger* runs parallel to Gates' theory of the Signifying Monkey. His voyage and survival are a metaphor for the transatlantic passage of *niger*, which can be traced back to John Rolfe's 1619 diary in which he wrote "'twenty negars' had arrived on a Dutch man-of-war." (Asim, 2007, p. 10). Hence, the body of the African and *nigger* are intimately conjoined, making the arduous journey to the New World simultaneously. Additionally, the transformation from the African-centered Esu to the African American Signifying Monkey can potentially be viewed as representational of the transformation of *niger* to "…any form—nigger, niger, negur, negar—especially since 'Negro' (as a term for black Africans) had been part of the English vocabulary as far back as 1555" (Asim, 2007, p. 11). As the Signifying Monkey stands as the brother, companion, friend, descendant to Esu, *nigga* serves the same function to *nigger*. Gates contends that *Esu* made the transatlantic passage to the Americas, but what stepped off the boat was the Signifying Monkey; likewise *negar*, *niger*, *nigger* also traversed the Atlantic from Africa and Europe to the Americas landing in the Southern ports of the first colonies, ultimately transforming, like Esu to Signifying Monkey, to *nigga*.

Through the lens of black vernacular, Gates is able to push the limits of structural linguistics, opening up Saussure's concepts of signification to the linguistically segregated African American community, whose language, ironically, is constructed as vernacular (even by Gates). For Gates, the agency of Signifyin(g) and Signification stems from the ways in which black vernacular acted as a counter language to white standard English. As Gates contends, "Some black genius or a community of witty and sensitive

> speakers emptied the signifier… and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts…I tend to think, or I wish to believe, that this guerilla action occurred intentionally…" (p. 51-52).

What, then, is the guerilla action inherent in *real nigga*? Because I am unable to respond to his question, bodily, I feel threatened. The question "What's a *real nigga?*" inaugurates a new reality, one that exceeds both my son and myself. While r*eal nigga* is punning, parodying, satirizing, Signifyin(g) much like Mooney's "*nigger* 100 times a day," it is open to multiple interpretations; it is contestable based on who says it, when it is said, where it is said and how it is said. *Real nigga* then, is always already[20] incomplete, yet how do I convey this in a meaningful way to my son? How are my competing selves—researcher, educator, historian, black, American, woman, mother—at work with my understanding of *real nigga? Real nigga,* situated within the discourse of rap and hip hop music, constitutes the subject far differently than *real nigga* within the discourse of comedy, within the prison system, or in the classroom, which are dissimilar to Barack Obama as a *real nigga* or Frederick Douglass as a *real nigga,* both of whom my male Dominican student announced as such one day in class after reading an excerpt from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* "Yo that's a real *nigga*!" he exclaimed after learning how Douglass taught himself to read and write and escaped to the North. "Him and Obama, *real niggas!*" *Real niggas* and the requisite *gansta niggas* are the characters Othello (who murdered his white wife) and El Hadji (who was impotent with three wives) as characterized by my black American female student in my Comp Literature classroom. *Real niggas* are altered and

[20] Meaning givenness, this phrase is often used in structural and poststructural theory giving priority and determining power to language that pre-exists all individuals and determines the consciousness of human subjects.

alterable, constituting each subject who is hailed as a *real nigga* in competing and contradictory ways.

Gates' argument about Signification and Signifyin(g) allows me to think about how an utterance like *nigga* enacts as an embedded trope, particular to the speech of black Americans. It also provides a foundation for the historical origins of a black discursive universe which exists autonomously within a larger discursive field of Standard English with an internal coherence that is based on substitution rather than co-occurrence. Essentially Gates verifies that Saussure's "initial idea of the sign as a simple bond between signifier and signified has been displaced by a far more complicated mechanism wherein the sign summons up an infinite chain of associations." (Gadet, as cited in Williams, 1999, p. 44). Gates' argument reveals "the difference that blackness makes within the larger political culture and its historical unconsciousness." (p. 51). The vertigo, chaos and ambiguity presented through the empty signifier is left open to "all of the rhetorical play" (p.59). It is the same vertigo, chaos and ambiguity I experience when I attempt to articulate an answer for my son. I think Asim would tell my son that it is the absurdity of racism that constructs terms like *real nigga*. But absurdity itself is an ambiguous term.

Hence, rather than ask, is or should or why is *nigga* sayable, the question becomes *how* has *nigga* become sayable in specific historical contexts over others? And based on this, *in what ways* is *nigga*, as sayable (and allowable) acting/performing/existing when said? Randall Kennedy (2003) acknowledges "there is much to be gained by allowing people of all backgrounds to yank nigger away from the white supremacists, to subvert its ugliest denotation, and to convert the N-word from a negative into a positive appellation." (p. 139). But what is to be gained in the moment when my 14-, 16-,17-year old son interrogates his own identity through the lens of *nigger* or *real nigga*?

Age 20, again in the car (he won't drive and this drives me crazy), now home from his second full year of college. He tells me that a lot of the white boys on the soccer team use the word *nigga* amongst themselves. By this time I have heard him say the word and asked him to stop, by this time he knows my dissertation topic, although I am not sure if he understands the premise. He is telling me this within the context of his friend, E., who will not be returning to the school. "Yo E was funny. I mean funny. I'm really gonna miss him." "Well," I suggest. "You can always keep in touch. And isn't he from Philly? You can visit." "Yeah, E was a cool ass white boy. The only thing is… he said *nigga* a lot." "Really?" "Yeah, he never said it to me though. He knew not to do that. But with other white guys he said it." "But not on the team?" "Nah, we don't do it in rugby. It's not our thing. But the soccer guys, they say it amongst themselves, like in the caf and stuff, never to anyone else. Never to us. They better not say it to me. If they did I would…" he punches the air. I wonder if he remembers being called a black *nigger* in jest during his 8th grade year by a petite white girl, one that he was chasing. "Yeah but even though we're mad cool, like mom, E is so funny, he knows he can't say that word to me."

In retrospect I did not answer my son's question at all, Google did, and this is problematic for me. But even after years of data collection, reading, research, writing and analysis, I do not have one answer, I have many. I think of a comment by Dr. Ernest Morrell when speaking of his own son, "How far do we go back to teach him what this means today? Do we start with the 16th Century or the 18th Century?" I have lived so intimately with *nigga* that I have become simultaneously overly sensitized and desensitized. All along I thought that I had all but destroyed the barrier between researcher and researched. It was not until my son asked, "What's a real *nigga*?" that my research became personal, *really real.* There is no authentically *real nigga,* because what is deemed as real today, can easily change tomorrow; what *nigga* is

perceived as today is not necessarily what *nigga* was yesterday, nor could it be what *nigga* is tomorrow. In all actuality, a *real nigga* can change from minute to minute because a *real nigga* is only as "real" as the moment in which it articulates a reality. A *real nigga* is only "real, authentic, legitimate" based on the ways that it Signifies in a particular moment, particular context, and based on particular discourses, and even that lasts for maybe a nanosecond. Yet, much like my practice of Nichiren Buddhism in which three thousand lifetimes exist within a single moment, within that nanosecond a million realities exist. I must admit that I am relieved my son does not consider himself a *real nigga*, and as much as I have tried to unpack the complexity of *nigga*, as much as I have attempted to argue for the disjuncture between insult and injury, or the ways in which *nigga* is Signifyin(g), I realize when the word is located in the mouth of my only child, I cannot accept it. How's that for reality? I cannot subordinate my experiences, histories, memories. I cannot forget my mother's face. I hear it, on one or two occasions within the company of a specific audience and within a specific context I've said it; I listen to others say it and use it, but I cannot think of my son's *linguistic beingness* (Butler, 1997) tied in any way to *nigga*. I would hope, like my student M.'s statement, "replace the word nigga with King because how easy is it for us to say 'We gonna kill that king.'? It's easy to say 'I'm gonna kill that nigga,' but it's not easy to say 'I'm gonna kill that king'"—that my son won't think of himself as a *real nigga* but believe of himself as a real king.

2.2 Nigger artifact 1957/2018: Nigger v. nigger, Signifyin(g) at work

The distinction between the two parallel universes of signification and Signification can be made by examining past and present usage of *nigger*. The 1957 black and white photograph of the Woodlawn High School boycott shows white male students who refused to go to school due to integration of schools in Birmingham, Alabama (Link to Image of Woodlawn Boycott, 1957) In contrast, a second image shows Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones, aka Nas, and his then wife Kelis Rogers on the red carpet at the Grammy Awards in 2008 (Link to Image of Nas and Kelis, 2016). While within both images the sign *nigger* is on display, the Grammy image Signifies upon the Woodlawn boycott; the 2008 image carries the semantic meaning of its secondhand memory *nigger*, and could potentially be read as a counter-linguistic act to the 1957 display of *nigger*.

The Nas-Kelis scene opens up multiple readings of *nigger* that are ambiguous, fluid, unfixed, and partial. However, if I am to apply a Saussurean lens, the individual speech act (*parole)* in both images conveys the social practice of specific historical contexts. The students of the Woodlawn boycott are individually and collectively representing the rule-bound *langue*, "a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of *parole*…" (Saussure, as cited in Williams, 1999, p. 42) of their time period. Syntagmatically, *nigger* on the placard of the male students in Woodlawn is a fixed sign relational to the whiteness of the boys themselves. Based on the collective and individual language practices of the 50s, *niggers* is a "two-sided psychological entity" in which the sound-image, a "psychological imprint of the sound… on [the senses]" is intimately tied to a concept, a "mental representation of the meaning" (Williams, 1999, p. 35),which invokes the sign (black people) of which the boys hate. The image itself, along with the placard, conveys the social phenomenon of the 1950s, and

while, without context, it is unclear what the boys are boycotting for/against in a material sense, what is clear is that they are psychically (and in many ways through material action, i.e., the boycott itself) boycotting *niggers.* Thus, as evidenced in the image of the boycotting students, racism, segregation, discrimination and prejudice are normative social practices; therefore, "We hate niggers" conveys the relationship between thought and language and constructs the reality of this specific time period. However one critique of Saussurean linguistics also insists that *langue* places constraints on individual freedom due to its normative nature (Williams, 1999). There is no evidence in this image of a non-normative opinion about the psychological impact or linguistic use of *niggers.* The image itself is a constraint, literally and figuratively, in that it limits the boys' and the photographer's (we should assume that the photographer is also white) freedom to express anything other than hating *niggers.*

As Williams (1999) contends, however, due to the arbitrariness of the sign, over a period of time a sign can mutate. Although "the sign is a legacy of a prior epoch [in which it] is resistant to deliberate modification" (p. 37), the relationship between signified and signifier can be modified due to shifts in the normative nature of language and reality. As an example, Nas and Kelis have chosen to don the word *nigger* exposing it in placard-fashion on their bodies while standing on the red carpet of the Grammy's. While ironically, they wear the word *nigger* as opposed to the more contemporary *nigga* it is interesting to consider how the relationship between signifier and signified has mutated. While I have intentionally placed these images next to one another, as an isolated image, Nas and Kelis' visual statement acts as a (re)doubling of the utterance (Gates, 1988/2014). It is through the lens of Gates, that I point to the Signifyin(g) tropes of antanaclasis,[21] pun, play, and irony. Nas and Kelis psychically, psychologically and

[21] Antanaclasis (/ˌæntəˈnækləsɪs, ˌæntænəˈklæsɪs/; from the Greek: ἀντανάκλασις, *antanáklasis*, meaning "reflection", from ἀντί *anti*, "against", ἀνά *ana*, "up" and κλάσις *klásis* "breaking"): in rhetoric it is a literary device

physically satirize themselves as *niggers.* Wearing *nigger* symbolizes labeling and naming, invoking the psychological and mental imprint of its historicized meaning. Nas and Kelis' *nigger* exists within:

> a particular language-state… always the product of historical forces, and these forces explain why the sign is unchangeable… the double-voiced relation of the two terms under analysis here argues forcefully that 'the masses', especially in a multiethnic society draw on 'arbitrary substitution' freely, to disrupt the signifier by displacing its signified in an intentional act of will… repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g)… (Gates, 2014, p. 56)

Additionally, through antanaclasis, the mimetic representation of *nigger* functions as an absent present in which the "…shadowy revision of the white term…demonstrate[s]… that a simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe exists within the larger white discursive universe." (Gates, 2014, p. 54). By positioning these images side by side, the simultaneity of these parallel discursive universes allows for a (re)doubling based on the irony with which *nigger* is deployed. Are Nas and Kelis stating "We are *niggers*?" Are they labeling others as *nigger*?[22] And in what context is *nigger* being articulated based on their participation in the Grammys and the red carpet tradition? Is, for example, *nigger* sayable (and allowable) in this moment? Possibly they are critiquing the relationship between artists and the music industry as one of tension, prejudice and segregation. Possibly they are promoting Nas' soon to be released album of the same name. Regardless of my assumptions, what is clear is the citationality and iterability of *nigger,* reiteratively introduced as a new reality in a specific time and place, as counter-language on the paradigmatic y-axis of African American vernacular (Gates, 1988/2014).

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in which a word is repeated but with a different meaning or its repetition is used in two or more senses. As a pun it is often used in slogans (such as above) or advertising.

[22] As background, Nas and Kelis were promoting Nas' forthcoming album titled *Nigger.* Their choice in clothing caused a mixture of responses by viewers ranging from shock, to concern and disgust. Subsequently, Nas' album was released with the title N as opposed to his original plan.

Context and audience are also at play—the red carpet, the import of the Grammys, the entertainment industry and the media are each discursive regimes that bump up against *nigger*. In contrast to the Woodlawn boys, which is representative of the social phenomena of the 1950s, what audience is *nigger* meant for at the Grammys? It can be assumed that the image of the Woodlawn boys is meant for the collective society of Alabama, those who do not like *niggers* and those who are *niggers*. Multiple assessments of this message can be made of the Grammy *nigger*. What's more, while *nigger* in Alabama can be surmised as hate speech, most evident from the subject-predicate "we hate," is this a memesis of hate speech when the speakers are black American? Is meaning deferred due to the contradictions and disruptions between act and comprehension? As Gates suggests, does this fail to be hate speech because it is rhetorical? What I postulate, as I hope to expansively explore and interrogate through this text, is the non-voiced interpellation of *nigger* as performative primarily because it is unconstrained, breaking from both its origin as well as the context in which it is situated. Paradoxically, Nas and Kelis are both the addressers and the addressed (addressed to/by whom?) revealing the disconnect between *parole* and *langue*. It is through these multiple possibilities of *nigger* that Nas and Kellis are implicated.

Hence, while *nigger* retains its secondhand memory reminiscent of the 1950s, it simultaneously produces new meanings and realities, disrupting the relationship between signified and signifier. As per Gates, *nigger* in this image is rhetorical; the signifier has been emptied out and the signified is replaced with rhetorical devices. Nas and Kelis' *nigger* is *parole* (individual speech); however, due to its rhetorical structure, it is unclear as to how this represents the rule-bound *langue* of African Americans, or rather, there are multiple ways to interpret this representation. Also ambiguous is the relationship between language and reality. Whose reality is

being represented? What does this reality consist of? What has occurred between 1957 and 2008 that makes this new reality of *nigger* allowable or not? And yet, *nigger* (circa 2008) constitutes all of the historical, social and political effects attached to *nigger* (circa 1957). The 2008 *nigger* is taunting and goading the 1957 *nigger* while simultaneously reinscribing it. Concurrently, are Nas and Kelis Signifyin(g) the Grammy's? the music/entertainment industry? race/racism? *nigger* itself? themselves? and/or the Woodlawn boys who in turn are mocking the Federal government, the Supreme Court, *Brown v. Board of Education,* the State of Alabama, education, schooling, desegregation through their act of signification.

Ultimately, *nigger,* on the red carpet at the Grammys is a legitimation of a new and future form.

Hoodie (a haiku interlude)

black males in hoodies

are criminals, white males in

hoods are protectors

Chapter 3: from Signifyin(g) to post-Signifyin(g), the DimenSions of Language

'Read it,' my grandfather said. 'Out loud.' 'To Whom It May Concern,' I intoned. 'Keep this nigger-boy running.' I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible man*

My cell phone lights up. It's my son.

Before I can say hello, "Mom… I hate this school."

He is at the college I did not want him to attend. We battled, but his insistence on playing football at the collegiate level superseded my cajoling, pleading, insisting, demanding, that he attend a different institution.

"What's up?" I brace myself for one of his usual diatribes—the food, the classes, the team...

"Mom, this school is racist."

"Really…." I semi-drawl, and I flashback to Convocation. I sat in the audience and attempted to count the number of faculty of color on the campus, not black, just faculty of color (notice I said "attempted"). I flashback to a conversation I had with a very lovely African American student during same Convocation, 'How many people do you have working in administration who are black?' She hesitates, thinks, 'Oh! There's the lady in the Bursar's Office.' 'Oh?' 'Yeah, the one who takes our payments.' I smile sweetly.[23] I flashback to the

[23] The irony of this young lady's response was that I'd had a phone conversation about the same woman about a week prior. Through six degrees of separation my mother had procured the phone number of an African American woman who lived in the community. My mother too was concerned about the racial demographics of the campus and community and wanted to ensure her grandson's protection. After I said hello and explained the purpose of my call, her first words were, 'Yeah, there's not too many of us up here.' It was through this same conversation that I learned of the one mother-figure on campus who counseled and nurtured many of the African American students who felt isolated and ostracized, often inviting them to the church she attended. She worked in the bursar's office.

auditorium, in which the incoming freshman class was required to assemble; I noted the majority of black and brown men and women, 'but there are no faculty of color,' I thought. I flashback to the first day of drop off for football practice, the field was teeming with muscular men of color. At convocation the president announced that unlike the national trend of American universities, their male student population exceeded the female student population with a ratio of 51% to 49%. I wondered the ratio of student-athlete to student-non-athlete or the demographics of race.

"Yeah mom, when you look at the pictures on the walls, you know, in the Athletic Hall of Fame… they're all white. Everyone is white."

"Okay." I flashback to one of our many arguments over school selection, and my husband's comments about the school. He laughs, "It's whiiite. I mean It. Is. White. And it's in the mountains. It's gone be colder than a muthafucka."

"So?" my son counters. "I grew up around white people. I went to school with white people."

My husband interjects, "Yeah but not *these* white people. They're a different kind of white."

I recall thinking of *The Stepford Wives* when I first stepped onto campus. Everyone was khakily dressed, with navy blue collared shirts.

My son had only been exposed to a certain *type* of white person, the type that allowed him to live with them for two weeks while his mother was off galivanting through central Africa, the type that would call him a black *nigger* in jest while horseplaying. My son's only concern was with the physical size of the team. It was not his first choice, but it was the cheapest choice, since I did not helicopter mom him and force him to attend the school of my choice. Learning also occurs through experience.

"Rea-a-l-l-y." I respond to my son's latest phone call.

"Yeah, and guess what else."

"What?"

"I was at this party…" I sit up—up until this point I was half-listening. These calls had become consistent.

"Yeah…"

"So… after the party I'm standing outside and this white girl comes up to me and starts talking to me."

"Okay…"

"She's drunk and talking and I'm like, Okay, what does this girl want?"

My son (and forgive me for my bias): Athletic. Handsome. Black.

"The next thing you know this security guard runs up and he's like, 'Miss, are you okay?' And I'm like is she okay, she started talking to me!" His voice raises, his tone heightened. I know he didn't say it, I know he thought it. All parents claim to know their children, I will not claim this in its essentializing totality, but I will say I can predict certain characteristics about him.

"So she's like, oh I'm fine, and then he turns to me and says, 'You need to go back to your room.' Mom I didn't do anything! I was just standing there! She walked up to me!" He is insistent.

"So what did you do?"

"I was like… I was like… I was pissed."

"And?"

"Mommm, what was I supposed to do? I walked back to my room. But I didn't *do* anything! Mom this place is so racist. I don't mess with white girls… not *these* white girls."

And the lesson, through experience, had been learned—"what could be truer, after all, than a subject's own account of what he or she has lived through?" (Scott, 1991).

I knew he would walk back to his room. I knew he was fuming, and angry, and muttering, but I also knew my son would listen, not make waves. It is his experience. It is his choice. I can only pray that he always comes home to me. I can only pray that whatever his choice, he is able to live with his choice… and come home to me. I can only pray that he has the "freedom" and the opportunity to call me and recount his experience from his dorm room, not the inside of a police station… or not at all.

Asim (2007), in his interrogation of the use of *nigga*, parallels the macabre wit of rap group N.W.A. to that of Ralph Ellison who installs ironic, dark humor to underscore the psychic reality of black lives. In his critique, Asim notes that it is the absurdity of racism that causes African Americans to "embrace the derogatory language that has long accompanied and abetted our systematic dehumanization" (p. 234). However, while he likens N.W.A. to Ellison, he cautions against public consumption, contending that "out in public… we depend on polite speech…" (p. 230) to serve as a unifying societal force. Asim, therefore, only supports the "use" of *nigger-nigga* among lay folk in the privacy of one's own home. Paradoxically, he points to the absurd paradox of *nigger*, citing examples of private usage which contradict public personas—Abraham Lincoln is reported to have told *nigger* jokes in private, while publicly he issued the Emancipation Proclamation; Robert Parker's memoir *Capitol Hill in Black and White* details his employment under President Lyndon B. Johnson, who regularly used the word *nigger*

in private conversation and directed it to Parker—yet Johnson was key in transforming the racial landscape of America through the passage of three Civil Rights acts; ironically, it is alleged that even Malcolm X has used the word *nigger* in private, while publicly standing for equality and social justice for all African Americans (Asim, 2007). Asim's point here is to highlight that regardless of one's usage privately, public decorum insists that everyone should conduct themselves based on those attributes which would serve the betterment of society writ large.

However, while he admits to private usage, Asim questions the utility of *nigger-nigga* within black people's language, public or private, excepting the realms of critical art, scholarship, journalism and history. Likening the use of *nigga* to the ways in which slaves were forced to create meals from scraps, e.g., chitterlings from the discarded entrails of pigs, he cites "…now, in the twenty-first century, to subsist on our former master's cast-off language—even in the name of revising it—strikes me as the opposite of resourcefulness. Our modern vocabularies, unlike the empty larders of slaves, are well stocked" (p. 231). In his final pages, Asim's poeticism is evident. He dreams of a world where *nigger* is no longer an epithet, a joke, a sign of camaraderie, a trend, gimmick or hyperbole. Likening history to god-like status, he cautions that to take an ahistorical approach to *nigga* is "blasphemous [and] counterproductive" (p. 232). In terms of public consumption for African Americans, Asim urges black folk to dismantle white corruption and determine new and inventive language practices that could ultimately construct "a new and invigorating reality" (p. 234).

What is missing for me in Asim's (2007) criticism of "usage" is an interrogation of the psychic life of the subject,[24] and how the subject is both formed in and dependent upon language

[24] While I will return to a larger explanation of the term subject in subsequent passages, to be clear, I here use the term subject as defined through the poststructural theorizing of Judith Butler. Specifically, I highlight Judith Butler's (1997b) explanation of the subject in her text *The Psychic Life of Power*. As Butler notes, the subject is a "linguistic category;" hence it is not interchangeable with terms such as person, individual or self. Instead, the

and multiple discourse(s) for existence (Butler, 1997). I liken Asim's (2007) acknowledgment of a "new invigorating reality" with respect to Butler's (1997) interrogation of injurious speech in her text *Excitable Speech*, in which she revisits her notion of performativity through the lenses of J.L. Austin (1975) and Louis Althusser (1970). For Butler injurious speech can undergo a "new invigorating reality" (p. 212) in which "there are any number of subversive and radical ways of turning around and responding to the call" (p. 212), what Althusser (1970) identifies in his theory of Ideology as a hailing. The tenuousness, vulnerability and/or unpredictability (Bell, 1999) of said speech makes it *excitable.* "…'Excitable' speech is '*ex-citable'* [because] it may be wrested from its prior contexts and cited so that it Signifies (my edit) against its utterer's *original* (my addition) intentions and expectations" (Bell, 1999, p. 212, 214). For Gates the excitability of which Butler theorizes is embedded within the rhetorical troping known as Signifyin(g); however, although this speaks to the rhetorical structure (or rhetorical substitution) of *nigger-nigga* within the linguistic structure of African American vernacular, it does not account for "a theory of the psyche… the vulnerability or the unpredictability of subject constitution" (Bell, 1999, p. 164). One way of interrogating this psychic life is by situating injurious speech within the domains of performativity and interpellation because it provides the means for examining both the discursive acts which constitute subjects and the speech acts of subjects (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999).

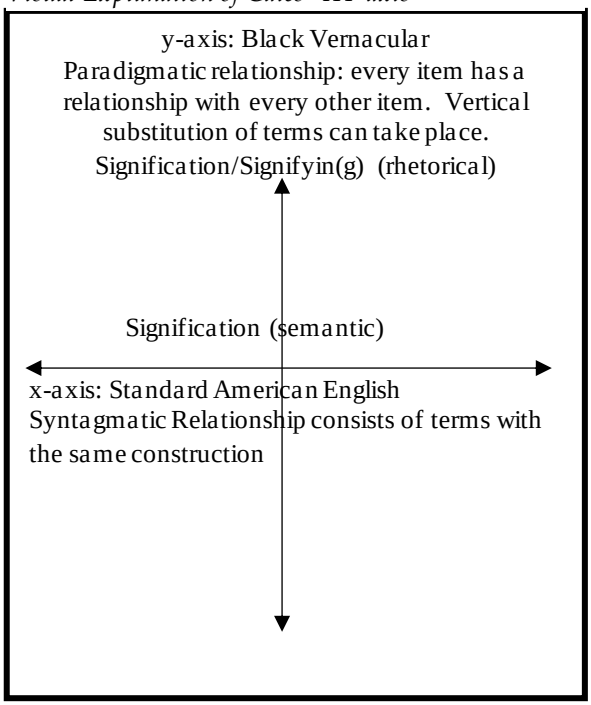
In order to further this argument, it is first necessary to return to Gates' reconfiguration of Saussure's x-y axis and his conceptualization of the distinctions between black and white speech. Gates concedes that, while he initially introduces the idea of a collision or parallel universe, this

subject, as a linguistic category, is a site whereby the individual is able to "achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency" (p. 11). In other words, the individual only becomes an individual through its "subjecthood," i.e., by being brought into existence as a subject through language.

distinction is more cogently representative of a perpendicular universe (p. 54). Gates places black vernacular on the paradigmatic y-axis (Fig. 2) as such because "Signfiyin(g) concerns itself with that which is suspended, vertically: the chaos of what Saussure calls 'associative relations,'… which a speaker draws on for figurative substitutions" (p. 54-55). Gates insists that Signification is inclusive of all "…the free play of… associative rhetorical and semantic relations" (p. 55) which signification quite often excludes. He also posits that the black vernacular of Signification cannot exist without its white counterpart signification. Signification, he suggests, is the slave's trope which incorporates all other rhetorical tropes, "…including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes)… hyperbole, litotes and metalepsis (Bloom's supplement to Burke) [and] aporia, chiasmus, and catechresis…" (p. 57). He adds to this list, tropes specific to black vernacular, e.g., rapping, dissing, cracking, jiving, and testifying, (Smitherman, 1977, 2000). Yet, while Gates identifies this perpendicular relationship as a mode of formal revision, interrogating the multi-dimensionality of language reveals this "relational-ship" as a form of *revisitation*—the inclusion of both its citation and its revision.

Figure 2

Visual Explanation of Gates' XY axis



To begin, a move from the structural to the poststructural[25] is one way (although not the only way) to reconceptualize Gates' discussion of Signification and black American vernacular. By paralleling Butlerean theorizing of the performativity of excitable speech, my focus is on the discursive construction of subjectivity, i.e., the ways that language constitutes the subject's interiorization of normative discourse(s) as well as the ways the subject articulates that interiorization for her own existence, and the role of social institutions and forms of power that govern social relations (Weedon, 1997). While in Chapter II I highlighted Gates' (re)configuration of the Saussurean x-y axis, this theory is further complicated through Lacan's decoupling of the signifier/signified relationship in which he argued that the signifier belongs to the realm of *langue,* which is synchronic, while the signified belongs to the realm of *parole,* which is diachronic (Williams, 1999, p. 56). "Meaning is now produced, not by the signifier indicating the signified, but in the production of other meanings through the metaphoric and metonymic relations of the signifiers with other signifiers" (Williams, 1999, p. 57). This idea of the sliding or floating signifier, much like Gates' (2014) theory, reorders the signifier/signified construction based on substitution, thus allowing for the production of new (multiple), and I would contend incomplete, meanings. Through a poststructural lens rhetorical modes of Signifyin(g) discursively perform in multiple ways as speech acts while simultaneously constituting the subject. In order to bridge this fissure, I will begin my analysis and reconfiguration of Gates' theory with Jacques Lacan's[26] interpretation of Saussurean linguistics,

[25] To be clear this I am not identifying the move from the structural to the poststructural as linear, nor am I conjecturing this move as a commonsense notion of progress in which one theory is better than the other; instead this move is meant to further complicate understandings of language beyond the foundational theory of Saussure.
[26] I in no way intend to produce a psychoanalytic analysis of *nigga*. However, I contend that there needs to be research and scholarship on the psychoanalytic processes involved in the use of *nigga* by African Americans.

as it is through a brief, partial "nod" towards Lacan that I hope to begin to make sense of subject constitution.

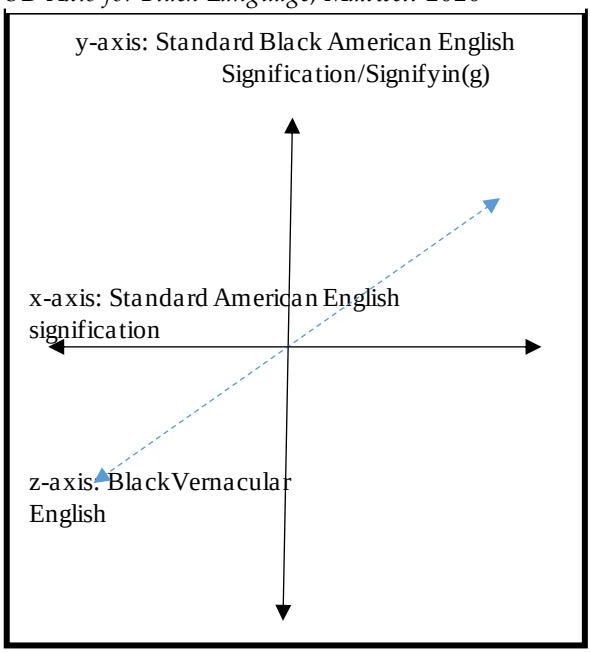
Lacanian theory (1997) posits that a child is born an unconscious slate and is then made into a human subject through language, "language does not reflect reality, it creates it… language is thought… is the *world of words* (my emphasis) which creates the world of things…" (Lacan, as cited in Williams, 1999, p. 57, 60). Lacan's contention is that the construction/constitution of the subject is only made possible through language, external to the subject as the subject is born with no language, no identity, no consciousness. Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of subject constitution contends that words give permanence and regularity to human perceptions; therefore, language allows an object to be present even when it is not. Language also unifies people even when signifiers shift, and language only "lives" based on people's agreement. The paradox of this is the arbitrariness of language; hence, different groups of people agree differently about the meanings and use of words. However, all laws are embodied in language, including ideas about identities, roles, relationships etc.(Williams, 1999, p. 58-59). Per Lacan, these premises reveal that the consciousness of the subject cannot exist external to, outside of or separate from language. It is only through the "symbolic order of language and society" (Williams, 1999, p. 55) that the conscious can exist.

For the African American, this consciousness is doubled (Du Bois, 1903/2003). Scholars, particularly Du Bois, argue that due to the socialization, historicization and politicization of African Americans, as a people we consciously, subconsciously and unconsciously operate psycho-socially as both American and black, a double consciousness or two-ness in which the person must view herself through the eyes of both Self and Other while ironically being "othered." Gates' theory of Signification would therefore contend that in order

for this consciousness to be reflected through rhetorical troping, the language must also be doubled. Gates employs Bakhtin's notion of the double-voiced word, a word that is "half someone else's [and] exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" (Bakhtin, 1975, as cited in Gates, 1988/2014, p. 1) until it is reappropriated and populated (Gates would say decolonized) "by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has—and retains—its own orientation" (Gates, 1988/2014, p. 55). This two-dimensionality of language reflects the double consciousness of black Americans, both black and American, both *nigger* and *nigga*. Gates' representation of Black English on the Saussurean semantic axis is a two-dimensional representation of the intersection between Standard English and African American vernacular.

Figure 3

3D Axis for Black Language, Maxwell 2020



However, in order to provide a more distinct representation of subject constitution of the black American subject as made through language, a reconfiguration of this diagram only would require a two-dimensional plane which potentially (and partially) represents the double-consciousness of black American subject(hood). In contradistinction, Figure 3 (See QR below) shows, a two-dimensional plane perpendicular to the one-dimensional plane of Standard American English creating a three-dimensional[27] representation. The three-dimensional model (see Figure 3 QR code) represents the two-dimensionality of Black English (Standard Black

[27] I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Vincent Wrice, Senior Professor of Computer Science at Union County College for his critical theorizing and discussions with regard to this theory.

American English intersecting Black Vernacular English) based on the theory of double-consciousness, which is then placed perpendicular to Standard American English (SAE). While the x-axis represents semantic SAE, the y-axis represents Standard Black English (SBAE) and the z-axis represents Black Vernacular English (BVE).[28] Thus, lifting Gates' theory from a two-dimensional representation to a three-dimensional configuration represents the multiplicity of blackness: American, black American and black [but also, American]. The language structure of the African American subject is constituted along these three axes and, in various disciplines has been labeled in a myriad of ways, including code-switching, Ebonics, translanguaging. However, for the purposes of my theorizing I have labeled these as SAE (Standard American English), SBAE (Standard Black American English) and BVE (Black Vernacular English) to initially postulate Signifyin(g) as a mode that is more than rhetorical substitution, but also as its own mode of subject constitution that exists within the discursive practices of the subject. Through the lens of Gates' structuralist theory, the y-axis of SBAE is the fine line between BVE and SAE. SBAE is both syntagmatic and paradigmatic; it is a combination of both signification and Signification and represents the linguistic duality of the African American. By way of example, it is use of the word *nigger* by Nas and Kelis on the red carpet at the Grammys, a speech act which exists within yet also exceeds multiple linguistic universes. While Gates proffers rhetorical substitution as one facet of the discursive universe of SBAE and BVE at the structural level of the language itself, through a poststructural lens there are multiple, intersecting ways in which language and discourse(s) constitute the subject. Through a Butlerean lens *nigger*-

[28] While I have labelled these axes as such, the instability of language allows for movement and substitution in terms of how these axes are identified. For example, based on Jamila Lysicott's (2014) TEDSalon NY performance about trilingualism, potential identifiers of each axis would be Standard English, Patois, and Black English. Additionally, while I label the z-axis Black Vernacular English (BVE) it could also be identified as the more "traditional" usage of African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

nigga constitutes the subject as a "…a 'belated metalepsis', i.e., a substitution which doesn't precede discourse, but which is the effect of discourses which precede it" (Butler, as cited in Salih, 2004, p. 212).

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On an uneventful evening, my son was the effect of both contemporary and historicized discourses which continue to play out through the psyche of others and thus also construct the discourses of United States history. My son was not called a *nigger* on this uneventful evening, but he was made vulnerable (Othered) by the speech acts of others. My son, standing alone, minding his own business was doubly hailed, first by the young white coed who felt it necessary to talk to him and thereafter by the security guard who felt it necessary to act as her protector. Prior to their hailing, my son "did not exist," but through their speech acts he was brought into being. A new form of consciousness took hold as he wondered why she was talking to him, why the guard ran up, why he (and not her) must leave. My son's subjectivity was what Butler (2004) identifies as a belated metalepsis. Unlike the rhetorical substitution within the structure of language of which Gates (1988/2014) refers, as Subject my son became an effect of the discourses which precede him, which precede too, the white female and the guard.

During Jim Crow it was unlawful for whites and blacks to purchase and consume alcohol on the same premises (the mandatory fine was two years' imprisonment). According to my son, this woman was drunk, and it can be conjectured that my son was drunk (or at the very least, had been drinking) on the same campus, at the same party. The College's Standard of Conduct allows for the proper use (I assume consumption) of alcohol on campus in accordance with the law;[29] however, the College encourages abstinence and responsible behavior and does not

[29] The Standard of Conduct does not specify the jurisdiction of this law, i.e., municipality, county, local, or state.

tolerate disruptive behavior. Additionally, the college's code of conduct places the following restrictions on alcohol usage—students must be over the age of 21; no alcoholic beverages in the freshman residence halls; no sale or furnishings of alcohol to students under 21 years of age; no grain alcohol, illegal use of alcohol or disruptive behavior under the influence; no open containers in public places or use of products used for excessive consumption such as funnels, kegs or beer bongs; and finally, no excessive alcohol usage (there is no indication of what excessive means). I do not know if the coed was 21; I do know my son was not, yet regardless of age, or in conjunction with age, my son was constructed as *not* in accordance with the law. Was he being disruptive? Was he holding an open container? Had he (or possibly she) consumed an excessive amount? Or, were they both guilty of the Mississippi Vagrancy Law of 1866, Section 2:

> Be it further enacted, that all freedmen, free Negroes… in this state over the age of eighteen years found on the second Monday in January 1866, or thereafter… unlawfully assembling themselves together either in the day- or nighttime, and all white persons so assembling with freedmen, free Negroes… or usually associating with freedmen, free Negroes… on terms of equality… shall be deemed vagrants…

During Reconstruction the need to protect the virtue of white women caused a rise in lynch law, and laws prohibiting intimacy between black men and white women became known as antimiscegenation laws. These laws governed much of the South (and parts of the North) until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, yet in 2017 the assumption that this woman was 'not alright,' or possibly that in some way her virtue was in need of protection reveals the ways in which these historicized legal discourses continue to subjugate black men. Williams (1991), as well, highlights the 1857 Supreme Court decision of *Dred Scott v. Sandford* in which blacks were determined "unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations" (p. 162). In *Excitable Speech*, Butler (1997a) examines the ways that the subject, through the process of

hailing, can find agency by reciting the very same utterance in which s/he was originally hailed, but for a different purpose. I wonder if by returning to his room my son found agency.

In conversation about the incident, my husband says, "Them people up there where he at, they *whiiite*."[30] When my son initially attempted to counter this statement, my husband responded, "There's different kinds of white people, and those *you* grew up with were liberal white people." Later, he comments, "You know up there where he was at (my son left after his first semester, well… was asked to leave, but that's another story), they call it God's country. He had to see it for himself. In a situation like that he did the right thing, just shut the fuck up and take it back to your dorm." My husband speaks on the y-z axis. A graduate of an HBCI[31] that was geographically located in the same area as my son's college in the mountains of Pennsylvania, he uses specific ways of speaking to articulate his double consciousness. My husband speaks in metaphor, narrative, story, intertwined with humor, irony, parody; it is an interlacing of BVE and SBAE; it is Signifyin(g). "They *whiiite*" is part of the three-dimensional space which makes up the linguistic universe of SAE, SBAE and BVE. "They *whiiite*," and I immediately understand his meaning, while my son, according to my husband, "had to see it for himself."

"Mom I'm not fuckin' with white chicks. I'm just going to stay away. Not say nothin'."

"Good idea Son," my husband inserts, "just stay away. You know suspicion is the modern-day vagrancy law."

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[30] My emphasis of the triple letter "I" and the italics is meant to convey my husband's use of antiphonal structure to exaggerate and emphasize meaning. Gates (2014) highlights the use of antiphonal structures as a form of Signifyin(g) used during slavery to send encoded messages. Similarly, the almost song-like quality of *whiiite* is meant to send a coded message about the political, cultural, social and racial attitudes of the people living in the area in which my son would be attending college through the linguistic universes of SBAE and BVE.

[31] Historically Black Correctional Institution. This term was created by my husband, J.G., as a play on the acronym HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), which I attended as an undergraduate. The running joke between us is we were "undergrads" at the same time. My husband did not return for Grad School, and, as he jokes, "I'm part of the largest black fraternity nationwide."

He walks away.

For my husband, that is the conversation.

But are we in 1866 or 2017?

My son was racialized through the discursive acts of others (who are also subjugated within speech), but these speech acts are fluid and fragmentary, inflected by the contemporary and historical discourses that shape the consciousness of the subject. It is through the intersecting, complimentary and conflicting discourses of law and policy, the State and the Panopticon (Foucault, 1995) which define, govern, and regulate the bodies of my son, the female student, the security guard. The regulation of the psyche of each subject must include

> an account of subjection… [that] must be traced in the turns of psychic life… it must be traced in the peculiar turning of a subject against itself… in acts of self-reproach, conscience and melancholia that work in tandem with processes of social regulation (Butler, 1997b, p. 18-19).

Citing Freud, Butler (1997b) identifies melancholia as a heightened conscience, a condition of which is an incomplete, irresolvable grief (p. 23). Tracing the subjection of the racialized subject,[32] therefore, requires a tracing of both social regulatory processes and "the turns of psychic life" that constitute irresolvable grief. Through a Du Boisean lens the double consciousness of the African American is the psychic internalization (Butler, 1997b) of one's subject(hood), which is constituted through social regulation and regulatory practice, as well as an incomplete, unknowable, unfinishable, irresolvable grieving, a grieving which, when articulated through language, can potentially manifest itself as Signifyin(g), and/or anger, and/or... a multitude of varying and competing effects. Add to Gates' (1997) list of tropes, comedy (Paul Mooney, Richard Pryor, Chris Rock) and/or dark humor (NWA, Ellison).

[32] While the category subject in poststructural theory is a linguistic category, I specifically use the term racialized subject because, I contend, it is through subject constitution that racialization occurs.

As Butler (1997b) à la Foucault (1980) cautions, however, the binary external/internal conception of power as something that oppresses one from the outside is false. Through a Foucauldian lens, power produces 'knowledge of the body'; "power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress" (Foucault, 1980, p. 59). Thus, as linguistic beings, vulnerable to and existing in language, the psyche, as part of the body, is simultaneously subjected to and formed with/in the conditions of power and regulatory practices. As per Foucault (1980),

> If it has been possible to constitute a knowledge of the body, this has been by way of an ensemble of military and educational disciplines. It was on the basis of power over the body that a physiological, organic knowledge of [the body] became possible (p. 59).

In other words, my son is only made a student because of the conditions by which student as a linguistic category is defined, understood, and constituted through the discourse of Education, and it is through this discourse that he psychically understands and accepts his subjugation and subjectivity as student. Yet on an uneventful evening, the regulatory processes governing one situated, contextual interaction between a white female student and a black male student psychically altered my son's understanding and/or acceptance of himself. He was no longer just a student; he was no longer just a student at a party; he was no longer just 'minding his business.' Through the speech acts of both the female coed and the security guard, new (different, alternative) competing and conflicting linguistic categories brought him into existence; categories he neither desired, nor rejected, nor accepted but which simultaneously initiated a new psychic reality for him (thus his simultaneous acceptance and rejection).

My son's (as subject) new knowledge of himself (his double consciousness) was constituted through a simultaneous process of

> …becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject… [yet] power that first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity (Butler, 1997, p. 2-3).

Double consciousness as defined by Du Bois (1903/2003), i.e., the psyche of the racialized subject, or in Butler's (1997b) words, psychic power, takes up the three-dimensional space of SAE, SBAE and BVE. My son was not called a *nigger* on this uneventful evening, on campus, after a party, while he was just a student 'minding his business;' however, through the regulatory processes of competing, conflicting and intersecting discourses as well as the speech acts of others, he was constituted as vagrant, dangerous, suspicious, unlawful.

Translation (in the language of Signifyin(g)): *a nigger.*

3.1 Nigga artifact 04302016: The Intersection(s) of BVE/SBAE/SAE

On April 30, 2016, comedian Larry Wilmore ended his speech at the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner with "So Mr. President, if I'm going to keep it 100: Yo Barry! You did it, my *nigga*!" [33] Ironically, the illocutionary effect of Wilmore's speech act resulted in a chest pound, handshake and bro hug from then President Obama. Obama's physical response to Wilmore's address indicates that the men shared a private moment on the public stage through a speech act that constituted both of them. However, the audience, composed of (mostly white) media pundits, celebrities, politicians and those affording the $300 ticket to what has been affectionately dubbed the "nerd prom," responded with a mix of guffaws, shocked exclamations and chagrin. Additionally, subsequent critiques and criticisms of Wilmore's final words ranged from awestruck to castration. In response to the criticism Wilmore (2016) contended,

> … for me to be able to turn it on its head and have almost a private moment with the president on stage, kind of like a public solitude, where he knew what I was talking about. Usually that's something we only do behind closed doors. But to do it in public, I thought, would be a strong way to end. *And I knew it would be controversial and I was ready to accept the fallout from it.* [my emphasis] (as cited in Sage, 2016, para. 3)

[33] For a full viewing of the 2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner see the attached link: 2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner

While it appears as if both Wilmore and Obama understood the literal and figurative significance of his statement, one possible examination of Wilmore's final words and Obama's final White House Correspondents' address is through my reconfiguration of Gates' (1988/2014) theory of Signifyin(g). While, indeed, both Obama and Wilmore Signify throughout their speeches, both men do so through a mix of SAE, SBAE, and BVE and in so doing articulate the double consciousness/psychic reality of being black and American. This public/private moment, sharable and disallowable, subjectivates and empowers; it is a moment in which the sovereign power of the injurious utterance is inverted. As a performative, *nigga's* production of metaphoric and metonymic relations (Williams, 1999) exist syntagmatically, paradigmatically and as Signifyin(g) along the three-dimensional x-y-z axes. Yet it is through this 3D enactment of *nigga*, an utterance which precedes and exceeds the utterer, that inaugurates a psychic space, partial, fragmentary and incomplete, yet specific to the black American subject.

The irony of the media response to Wilmore's utterance is that *nigger* has been expressed far more frequently in White House political conversations, the Oval office, on the great lawn, in the master suite, than on this particular day, in this situated moment. I would dare to say that *nigger* has been used far more frequently by previous presidents (and possibly our 45th president), comedians, and White House correspondents in relation to the syntagmatic x-axis of white Standard English (as an epithet) rather than as a rhetorical trope more times than I care to know or think about. However, Wilmore's utterance is one arbitrary form of agential speech in which the sovereign performative is conveyed in the inverse as an act with consequences (Butler, 1997a). Wilmore's conscious decision to utter *nigga* at Obama's final White House Correspondents' Dinner, as his final statement of the evening, and more to the point as *the* final statement of the evening reveals, in that constitutive moment, the *ex-citability* of *nigga* as an

"…utterance deemed to be beyond [the] speaker's control, [which] take[s] place within discursive contexts which precede and exceed the utterer" (Butler, as cited in Salih, 2004, p. 212). However solely focusing on Wilmore's decision to utter *nigga* misses the entirety of the discursive event that occurred on this particular evening, one which reflects Wilmore's decision to utter *nigga* in the first place and reveals the constitutive effects of this decision.

As parallel (and because, after all, my foundation is literary) Toni Morrison's (1993b) parable in her Nobel Prize for Literature speech explores language as a living, breathing entity which enacts upon the speaker. In the parable children enter the home of a blind woman determined to disprove her clairvoyance by asking a question that rides solely on her difference from them: her blindness (Butler, 1997a, p 8). They allegedly have captured a small bird, and bringing it to her, ask is the bird dead or alive. Her answer to them is "I don't know… but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." (Morrison, 1993b). Similarly, Wilmore must make a decision: is *nigga* as the bird, interpreted as language in Morrison's parable, dead or alive, dying or living, going to die or going to live? Ultimately, it is in his hands.

In this exchange between Wilmore and Obama, I liken Wilmore to the children, standing before an audience, demanding attention to the unanswerable; yet, on the other hand, in many ways Obama is like the blind woman. He exists both in the center and at the margins of society; "in all fairness my middle name is Hussein," he quips (of his alleged Islamic terrorist background) when commenting on the Koch brothers' financial support of presidential nominees. He has been accused of being a foreigner, reflected in his goad at Ted Cruz, "Ted had a tough week. He went to Indiana. Hoosier country. Stood on a basketball court and called the hoop a basketball ring. What else is in his lexicon. Baseball sticks. Football hats. But sure, I'm the foreign one" (Obama, 2016). New York real estate mogul, reality TV star and past president

Donald Trump demanded a copy of Obama's "real" birth certificate (while we have yet to receive copies of his taxes), insinuating that he is not American born—"it's real" Obama tells the clerk at the Department of Motor Vehicles when she requests his birth certificate.[34] He's been accused of not being black enough or not black at all, to which he ironically declares, "I do apologize. I know I was a little late tonight. I was running on CPT,[35] which stands for jokes that white people should not make" as well as not white enough or conversely too white, "while in England I did have lunch with her Majesty the Queen, took in a performance of Shakespeare, hit the links with David Cameron. Just in case anyone was debating whether I am black enough…," he jests.

Obama is/was/will always be the consummate Other. While he was respected globally, he was often disrespected in his own home.

> Congress now will flat out reject my authority, and Republican leaders won't take my phone calls. And this is going to take some getting used to. It's really gonna… of course… for four months now congressional Republicans have been saying there are things I cannot do in my final year. Unfortunately, this dinner was not one of them.

In many ways he is looked upon as the children look upon the blind woman: he is challenged politically, racially and socially, tested to answer the unanswerable. Someone is always knocking on his door, entering his home and calling him out, attempting to dupe him, embarrass him, challenge him. Both the national and international stage endlessly tried to prove he is not as smart or wise as he is made out to be. Obama's jabs at conservative media, the GOP, Dems and "the Donald," his euphemism for Trump, reveal his "mastery of White mainstream English ways

[34] See White House Correspondents' Dinner video of Obama figuring out what to do once he leaves the White House, 2016.

[35] CPT is a colloquialism for Colored People Time. It is a pejorative declaration meaning people of color (specifically African Americans) can never be on time.

of speaking, or 'standard' English [and] his mastery of Black Culture's modes of discourse…" (Alim and Smitherman, 2012, p. 29).

The rhetorical play of Signification had already begun with Obama's address before Wilmore spoke. Riddled with self-deprecating humor, metaphor, irony and pun, Obama disses, cracks, marks and caps (Gates, 1988/2014). Yet he also uses synecdoche, dysphemism,[36] sarcasm and wit. Walking up to the podium the song "You're Gonna Miss me When I'm Gone" plays in the background, and as it fades away, Obama's first statement to his audience is: "You can't say it, but you know it's true." His final mic drop, complete with the statement "Obama out" and a two finger farewell kiss ironically puns "Peace, nigga!" at the end of an especially wicked lyrical presentation reminiscent of Nas' *Memory Lane (Sittin in da Park)* or Eric B. & Rakim's *My Melody*. This final speech act serves as the trope of tropes (Gates, 1988/2014) in which he displays "…his ability to speak across different segments with the same racial groups ('very high intellectuals' and 'street kids that love hip-hop')" (Alim and Smitherman, 2012, p. 27).[37] Obama Signifies upon his entire Signifyin(g) speech by ending with gestures which exist on the z-axis of BVE.[38]

As an utterance the literal and rhetorical significance of "Obama out!" exists within the intersections of the y-z axis. His double-voiced exit rhetorically mocks his racialization, ridicules his opposition, announces his departure, and triumphs his victory. Existing within the

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[36] In his self-berating way, Obama employs dysphemism, the opposite of euphemism, which is description that is explicitly offensive. Racial epithets are recognized as such. In Obama's case, his reference to CPT and other cracks, jokes, puns that targeted his race were examples of dysphemism.

[37] See endnote 12 in *ar·tic·u·late while black: Barack Obama, Language and Race in the U.S.* by H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman (2012).

[38] In *ar·tic·u·late while black: Barack Obama, Language and Race in the U.S.,* H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman critique white culture's misreading of a pound, a greeting in many African American communities, when Michelle and Obama perform this gesture on stage. In their chapter titled "The Fist Bump Heard 'Round the World" they discuss the ways in which this commonly known gesture in the African American community is misnamed and, as a result, racialized and othered as terroristic, fanatical and exotic. Likewise, Obama's mic drop speaks to a "commonly known" gesture in the hip-hop community as an exit off stage.

linguistic space of both SBAE and BVE, he parodies a gesture understood as a mic drop, the action a performer (usually a rapper) performs before leaving the stage, often done to indicate that "the mic is broke;"[39] it is the last and best performance and no subsequent rapper is allowed to follow his/her performance. Obama artfully performs the lines of famous rapper Rakim (1987):

> I ain't no joke, I used to let the mic smoke/Now I slam it when I'm done and make sure it's broke/ When I'm gone/no one gets on/'cause I won't let/Nobody press up and mess up the scene I set… No interruptions and the mic is broke/When I'm gone, then you can joke.

In other words, *he killed it* (BVE). Obama exemplifies the Signifyin(g) Monkey through African American ritual and performance; hence, Wilmore's discerning comment "I have to admit it's not easy to follow the president" reveals his awareness of Obama's actions and his need to respond in the cultural motif of call and response found in both hip hop and African American churches across the country. Along the socio-cultural linguistic axes of BVE-SBAE, Wilmore is not meant to follow Obama—the symbolic mic drop serves as the end to any future comments, obviously, because the mic is broke. Wilmore also understands Obama's final speech act to represent his blackness, psychically, materially, literally and figuratively; he must respond, acknowledge, participate in the call and response of the public/private sanctity of the black church, of hip hop aesthetics. Yet Obama's performance occurs within the socio-cultural, historical and political discursive universe of SAE, and Wilmore is *expected* to follow—he knows, it is in his hands, it is in his hands.[40]

To return to Morrison's (1993) parable: there apparently is no bird in the children's hands. Instead, they desire more from the blind woman than a simple answer to their mundane

[39] As an example see Eric B. & Rakim's *I Ain't No Joke* lyrics

[40] I purposely repeat this line as Morrison does in her Nobel Prize for Literature speech; this is defined as a type of literary device of repetition known as epimone—repetition of a phrase to stress a point.

question. They demand of her the answers about words, about words and how these shape, exist in, create the world,

> …tell us your particularized world… narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created… tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light…speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures (Morrison, 1993).

But because there is no bird, because the children are able to say, ask, beg, plead, demand their needs, in return the old woman is able to finally trust them. Obama's mirth, his deprecating humor, his puns and jabs "tell us his world in the dark and light places." Reminiscent of the dark humor of Ellison, the irony of Mooney, the hard lines of NWA, Obama responds to the narrative that created him at the moment it was created. He has been allowed into the Celestial City, yet he is constantly reminded that he is a dying, drowning mortal. Now, upon his departure, his subsequent two-finger kiss and mic drop is the Undoing of Words (Williams, 1991). Graciously, gladly, adamantly, Wilmore responds to Obama. In his hands he has decided to release the bird because as he admits, "…he knew what I was talking about" (as cited in Sage, 2016). Wilmore's decision represents the survivability of language and the unlimited possibilities created through language. Morrison (1993) goes on to say,

> The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie… its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable."

Obama and Wilmore's language limns the possibility of the real, imagined and possible life of themselves as well as their audience.

As the actual, Obama's mic drop Signifies the finality of that performance. There are no more words; it is the place Beyond the Power of Words (Williams, 1991). Yet there is also the imagined. Much like my son who was imagined as potentially hurting a white female, Obama's

entire presidency was met with imagined constructions of his race (as both or neither black and white), religion (as not enough or too much Christian or Muslim), nationality (as both or neither American or Kenyan or…). Obama's mic drop and Wilmore's act to follow is the unknowable, imaginable yet unimaginable, consisting of multiple futural possibilities. Obama's metaphorical, ironic, paradoxical, unspoken "Peace *nigga*" through his spoken "Obama out" is acknowledged by Wilmore who in BVE lingo Signifies, "Awright, *nigga*, I got your back." Their psychic constructions articulated through language arc to a place of meaning (Morrison, 1993) to a place Beyond the Power of Words to the Undoing of Words (Williams, 1991)—significant, holy, intimate. It is comedic, yet it is righteous; it is spoofing, and sanctifying. It is punning, while also divine. It is the world that exists in the dark and the light; it is seeing without pictures; it is the invisible made visible; it is the radicalization of the manifold narratives that have constructed Obama over the years. Wilmore reSignifies upon Obama's original Signification by rhetorically picking up the mic and re/dropping it. There is no physical bird, yet there is an ineffable bird, and Wilmore chooses to release it, allow it to take flight and live through the Power of Words (Williams, 1991). Wilmore's decision not to censure, or erase, or deaden *nigga* acts as the trope of tropes (Gates, 1988/2014) converging on and crossing the axes of SAE, SBAE and BVE. *Nigga's* constitutive power expresses "the vitality of language… its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable" (Morrison, 1993).

Thus, *nigga's* constitutive power installs multiple, contradictory and complementary new meanings into the ongoing historicity of a past sovereign performative, one which is simultaneously communicated privately and performed publicly. Because "…we *do* language [which is] the measure of our lives" (Morrison, as cited in Butler, 1997a, p. 7) our survival is central to the question of *how* language is used (Butler, 1997a, p. 9), as well as *how* language

uses us. Wilmore's use, therefore, requires an interrogation of the agency of the speaker and the agency of *nigga* as well. In her excavation of Morrison's parable, Butler (1997a) distinguishes between the agency of the subject and the agency of language itself, articulating that Morrison's metaphor for language as a living thing (that can also die) is a figural substitution in which the act of *thinking* about language as agency in itself makes the agency of language possible. In other words, it is only through language that agency can be articulated. Wilmore's response entered into a linguistic life not solely based on his ability to originate and/or (re)cite *nigga* but also based on its iterability and citationality as an utterance, one that simultaneously precedes and exceeds the racialized subject thus producing its own effects. In this intimate-holy-public-private moment Wilmore and Obama are (re)made as linguistic beings—made vulnerable by language, beholden to language, but also bound within language's articulation. Hence, within the moment of the "doing of *nigga*" (Wilmore's agency) *nigga's* agency, distinct from the agency of Wilmore, is also enacted. Through a Butlerean lens *nigga* acts as a performative contradiction.[41] Articulating Butler vis-à-vis Morrison's metaphor for agency distinguishes between the agency of Wilmore as the individual "doing language" and the agency of language itself, as something that "…produce[s] effects" (Butler, 1997a, p. 8). By doing language Wilmore uses *nigga* both rhetorically and semantically along the SAE, SBAE and BVE axes. And while I can contend that Wilmore is Signifyin(g) in multiple ways by articulating a private-public moment, as an utterance *nigga* agentially Signifies upon its linguistic counterpart, *nigger*. In this sense the double(d) Signification of Wilmore and *nigga* articulates the felicity of

[41]Performative contradiction is one possible discursive strategy for those "who have no entitlement to occupy the place of 'who,' but who, nevertheless, demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them" (Butler, 1997a, p. 90)

language— the expression of the consciousness of the racialized subject, i.e., the three-dimensional space constructed by the intersection of SAE, SBAE and BVE.

Hence, Wilmore's use can potentially be positioned as "…resistance within the terms of reiteration" (Butler, 1997a, p. 12). While Gates (1988/2014) acknowledges that "a signifier is never, ultimately, able to escape its received meanings, or concepts…" (p. 54), to only theorize about the ways that *nigga* is counter-speech to *nigger* potentially forecloses the utterance, framing its opacity and fixity "by the tightening of that link…" (Butler, 1997a, p. 15), and it is through the tightening of this link that agency is restored as "…sovereign autonomy in speech, a replication of conventional notions of mastery" (Butler, as cited in Salih 2007, p. 15). Rather, as a performative contradiction, the linguistic agency of Wilmore as speaker and *nigga* as speech act contemplates, "…how things work at the level of on-going subjugation" (Foucault, 1980, p. 97); hence, *nigga* (and Wilmore's use of it) enacts multiple relationships of power which constitute the entirety of the social body (not just Obama but the audience as well). This form of power (both material and psychic) can only exist and circulate through the "production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse," (Foucault, 1980, p. 93), in this case the already multiply inflected (and infected) discourses which Obama himself acknowledged— race, religion, nationality, partisanship...

Wilmore's "My *nigga!*" is part of a continuous and continual process in which its operations are not based upon a top-down linearity, i.e., Gates' paradigmatic x-axis; instead, its multi-directionality allows for the discovery of "…how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc." (Foucault, 1977, p. 97). *Nigga* is *ex-citable* precisely because, "…the utterance performs meanings that are not precisely the ones that are stated or,

indeed, capable of being stated at all" (Butler, 1997a, p. 10); hence its reversal, reappropriation and rearticulation become a "…repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open" (Butler, 1997a, p. 38).

While "My *nigga*!" intersects the axes of BVE, SBAE and SAE inaugurating a new reality which crosses discursive boundaries, it simultaneously ruptures the discursive context(s) framed within this particular linguistic event, the WHC dinner. *Nigga* speaks to and for those who have said it or thought it in their small white worlds (Mooney). Yet as a double-voiced word, "…decolonized for [Wilmore's] purpose…" (Gates, 1988/2014, p. 55), *nigga* articulates the double(d), tripled, multi-consciousness of the racialized subject, in which the vulnerability of the subject is formed through psychic, social and historical phenomenon (Butler, 1997b). Wilmore's use of *nigga* exceeds its originary subordination as hate speech, although it ironically contains within its connotation the shadow of its original meaning. *Nigga* places the subject (both speaker and receiver[s]) in subjugation, yet rather than interpellating as hate speech, *nigga* acts as a performative contradiction, in which "…agency begins where sovereignty wanes…" (Butler, 1997a, p. 16). Hence *nigga* ruptures the conceptualization of sovereign autonomy by hinging upon the ways that it has the potential to exist as both agency of/for/with(in) the speaking subject while also producing its own innumerable consequences.

The power of *nigga* as a performative, much like Michel Foucault's (1980) argument about power as "exercised" in his text *Power/Knowledge*, "must be analysed as something which circulates…" (p. 98). Gates' discussion of black vernacular, and his requisite two-dimensional representation, simply shifts sovereign forms of power from one linguistic domain to an alternative linguistic domain, albeit one that is intersecting, complementary, contrasting, combative and oppositional. However, by reading agency as circulatory it potentially allows for

a complicating of Gates' rhetorical structure as something that is in constant motion[42] rather than existing on a conceptually linear paradigmatic y-axis, i.e., three-dimensional space. By shifting the conceptualization of Signification from rhetorical linear structure of substitution to a circulatory interactivity, which "…function[s] outside, below and alongside… on a much more minute everyday level…" (Foucault, 1980, p. 60), then it is possible to attempt to understand Signifyin(g) as it manifests itself in multiple domains, practices and discourses in conflicting and complementary ways. Hence, while Gates introduces Signification as a form of counter-speech, organized and constructed within the black community as a means of communication independent of yet intersecting white speech, this same form of linguistic play can, through a Foucauldian lens, be understood as a micro-power that is exercised at the level of daily life (p. 59) operating on the very bodies of individuals (Foucault, 1980, p. 97) themselves. As such, the intersecting x-y axis that Gates proffers can be reimagined.

The shift from the ideological framework of sovereign power to practices of power—"power at its extremities… where it becomes capillary… where it installs itself and produces its real effects" (Foucault, 1980, p. 97), is evidenced through Wilmore's private-public speech act. Butler asserts that she takes the Foucauldian notion that contemporary power is not sovereign in contemporary discourse (p. 74); instead, it is a set of practices actualized at all levels and should be studied, per Foucault, at the level "of ongoing subjugation… at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours…" (p. 97). *Nigga's* use was at the level of ongoing subjugation, of which it constituted the subjectivity of the entire audience of the WH dinner, as well those who viewed, streamed, followed this particular usage during this particular historic event. Not only are

[42] A discussion of this is in the next chapter

Obama and Wilmore constituted as subjects, but society is made vulnerable through this usage while simultaneously participating in and rejecting this ongoing subjugation, one which is materially and psychically recognized as part and parcel of the consciousness of America.

Wilmore's final statement, "So Mr. President, if I'm going to keep it 100: Yo Barry! You did it, my *nigga*!" intertwines SAE, SBAE and BVE structurally. As speaker, Wilmore conveys Morrison's (1993) contention that, "what [becomes] transparent [are] the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (p. 17). "*Nigga*!" enacts as a performative contradiction that subjects, subjectifies and subjectivates as it also globally and historically inaugurates; it articulates the

> …denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric [imaginations as]… both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and representation, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability… [it] makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom (Morrison, 1993, p. 6-7).

Wilmore's agency is not a replica of previous forms of sovereign power that consist of a 'mastery over'; instead, agency consists of the multiple unknown possibilities of linguistic beingness, i.e., being bound in language. Additionally, *nigga's* agency highlights Kennedy's arguments about the complexity of *nigger* as a truly American word, "…its linguistic richness… has insinuated itself—for bad but also for good—across the wide expanse of the American cultural landscape" (p. 91). *Nigger*, while known globally, is a uniquely "American" word; *nigga*, also known globally, is uniquely African American. Hence, it is through Wilmore's use that *nigga* is able "…to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers [and listeners]… [*nigga*] arcs toward the place where meaning may lie… its felicity is in its reach

toward the ineffable." (Morrison, 1993). As both felicitous and ineffable Wilmore's *nigga* articulates socio-cultural and historical conceptualizations of power, identity, race, and knowledge. *Nigga* inaugurates a new reality between two racially marked black men, both astute in their own right, and through a chest pound (BVE), a handshake (SAE) and a bro hug (SBAE), they communicate privately and publicly their social, physical, political worlds, their psychic identities as racialized Subjects, as well as the psychically imagined reality of a highly historical racialized society (Morrison, 1993). Wilmore's "My *nigga*!" interpellates Obama who turns and responds, and in that holy-intimate-public-private moment their communication arcs to a place of Refined Understanding called Superstanding (Williams, 1991)… "'Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done together'[43]… *my nigga*."

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When I was a child I had a toy kaleidoscope. It was about the size of a paper towel ring, blue in color, and when I looked inside and turned the eyepiece the multi-fragmented, multicolored pieces would shift creating a moving set of snowflake-like designs. I liken this kaleidoscope to the shifting constitutive power(s) of *nigger-nigga*—ever-moving, ever-transforming, made up of a million pieces, situations, contexts, histories and events in which each piece individually contains within it multiple possibilities, yet together construct new and varying meanings which rupture and change with each turn, each inverse interpellation, each performative contradiction (Butler, 1997a). Hence, while Gates allows me to think about a black discursive universe, one in which Standard American English, Standard Black English and Black vernacular English exist in complementary and competing ways, what is missing for me vis-à-vis Gates is the relationship between language and consciousness, language and subject

[43] Taken from Morrison's Nobel Prize speech

formation, and one's dependency on and vulnerability to language. And while I acknowledge that Gates' focus on Signification is for the purpose of introducing and explicating a theory of African American literary criticism, as a discursive act Signifyin(g) is one of many possible ways to contemplate the speech act of the subject as an articulation of and about the racialized subject's psyche. Put another way, Signifyin(g) agentially performs the psychic ambivalence and melancholia[44] of the African American It is at this juncture that I would like to contemplate the discursive agency of *nigger-nigga* as constitutive of the subject as well as the ways that its subjectivating nature is shaped by surrounding discourses.

[44] In Chapter 4 I will explore Judith Butler's theory of psychic power and melancholia.

Chapter 4: from post-Signifyin(g) to poststructural Signifyin(g): Ruptures, Disruptions and Semantic Looping

White people invented him [*nigger*]… I am not a *nigger*... and if it's true that your invention reveals you… You're the *nigger* baby, it isn't me. —James Baldwin

In *Take this Hammer*[45] James Baldwin reSignifies *nigger* by inverting its possibilities and placing these upon white society. He contends that *nigger* is an invention of the white psyche, a word, utterance, performative that white Americans created based on their internalization of fear. Ultimately Baldwin tells his audience that he gives them *nigger* back stating, "I gather that *nigger* is necessary where it's unnecessary to me so it must be necessary to you. So I give you your problem back… " Baldwin's logic critiques the processes of subjection and internalization within the psyche, a process that Butler (1997b) discusses in *The Psychic Power of Life.* Baldwin, pre-dating Mooney's comedic play on the word *nigger,* places the burden of *nigger* on white society, contesting that *nigger* has been constructed and necessitated through their psyche. Hence, Baldwin's discursively symbolic gesture performs the inverse of the intended illocution. His discursive play of detachment and reattachment of the epithet onto the psyche of white America invokes Butler's (1997b) contention that power, originally viewed as external, "assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (p. 3) In other words, as per Baldwin, the psychic power of *nigger* is internal not external, its power is exerted from within not without; thus, the invention of *nigger* reveals something about the psyche of the inventor (the speaking subject) not the invented. Baldwin's discursive act brings to the fore a component of Butler's (1997a) argument, "if hate speech acts in an illocutionary way, injuring in and through the moment of speech, and constituting the subject through that injury, then hate speech

[45] See excerpt: Who is the Nigger, excerpt from *Take this Hammer* by James Baldwin

exercises an interpellative function" (p. 24). Yet she interrogates this reasoning by asking what occurs when an interpellation fails, or in the words of Austin (1975) misfires? More precisely, she asks what are the effects when the intended interpellated subject fails to turn, fails to acknowledge the interpellation, or responds in a different, unintended way? (Butler, 1997a) I add to this these questions: if the interpellated subject is able to discursively rupture the interpellative act of the illocution *nigger* by discursively reassigning it to the psyche of the speaking subject, its inventor, then what is the consequence of reinvention, i.e., *nigga*?[46]

In order to interrogate *nigga* as an utterance, one that exists and Signifies within the domains of BVE, SBAE, and SAE, it is necessary to examine its iterability as an agnomination of *nigger* (Asim, 2008). As has been argued by scholars, entertainers, intellectuals and the general public, *nigga* (unlike *nigger*) is an African American word, for use only within the African American discursive universe, and while this "general rule" holds water, its "use", even within the African American community is fluid, fluctuating, ambiguous and incomplete. My focus on *nigga* as reinvention is not founded in discerning its historical origins. Instead, much like Butler's (1997a) link between Austin's speech act theory and Althusser's interpellation, my intention is to bridge Signifyin(g) as the speech act of the subject and performativity as a discursive act which constitutes subjects. In so doing, I would like to further complicate Gates' Signification by examining it more thoroughly as a failed interpellation, through which the

[46]It should be noted, that while I previously linked *nigger-nigga* contending that *nigga* is the cousin to its originator *nigger*, moving forward I will delink these utterances in my attempt to interrogate the performative aspect of each. And, while I partially subscribe to one (of many) commonly held beliefs within the African American community (and possibly external to that community) that *nigga* is a reinvention, reconstruction, and/or linguistic counter strategy to *nigger* in which African Americans took a derogatory term and reconfigured it for their own purposes (Asim, 2008; Gates, 2014; Greene, 2014; Harriot, 2018; Kennedy, 2000, 2003; Smitherman, 1977, 2000), my intentions in deinking these terms is to examine the each utterance as a performative speech act, each with its own consequences, which while acting distinctly, also intersect, complement and contradict.

illocutionary force of *nigger* is subsumed within the perlocutionary force of the performative *nigga*.

4.1 The Speaker *is not* the Doer of the Deed: Butler's Critique of J.L. Austin

To begin, I briefly highlight Butler's (1997a) interrogation of Austinian and Althusserean theory in order to further my argument about the performative force and failure of *nigger* and *nigga*. If as per Butler (1997a) an illocutionary performative is one which produces immediate effects and produces what it names, then it stands to reason that *nigger's* illocutionary consequence is immediate injury; hence its effects also produce what it names. In other words, in the process of naming *nigger's* intent is to produce injury. In her interrogation Butler (1997a) notes that Austin's (1962/1975) illocutionary speech act privileges the speaker, thus constructing a stable speaking subject analogous with an actor who, through his/her speech act, enacts what she names. For Austin (1962/1975), even in cases where the speech act is not fulfilled based on the speaker's intention, the speech act itself is not deprived of its performative nature. Hence *nigger* as illocutionary speech carries the weight of the injury even in cases where the injury is not fulfilled, such as in the case of Baldwin's linguistic counter speech act or Mooney's comedic performance. Austinean theory would label Baldwin's turn and delinking of himself from *nigger*, placing it back into the discursive and psychic realm of white Americans, as infelicitous, a failure due to situation and speaker but fulfilling the definition of performative nonetheless. It should be noted as well that Austin categorizes speech acts, specifically those of an illocutionary nature, according to first person present indicative tense (Butler, 1997a). In this way, Austin attaches the performative nature of the speech act to the speaker and in doing so the speaker is the doer of the deed. However Butler (1990), in her analysis of gender, reconfigures the idea of the fixed subject who agentially prefigures language. Instead, quoting Nietzsche from *On the*

Genealogy of Morals, "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (as cited in Butler, 1990, p. 33).

In her reflections about speech act theory Butler clarifies that many scholars privilege the speaker over the act, "they think that the speech act is something performed by a subject, performed on another subject, or part of an address that one subject makes to another" (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 165). However, for Butler, complicating Austin's theory requires examining the ways in which the constituted subject then comes to speak using the same discursive utterances for a different purpose.

> …the question [is] how to find agency the moment of that recitation or that replay of discourse that is the conditions of one's own emergence… Althusser gives me interpellation, the discursive act by which subjects are constituted, and Austin gives me a way of understanding the speech acts of that subject" (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 165).

Hence through Butler's rearticulation of the performative speech act, hate speech especially exercises an interpellative function and it is through Althusser that we can examine the performative function of racist and sexist slurs. In this way Butler is exploring both the speaking subject and the constituted subject of said speech. While Austin's primary focus is the conventional procedure of the performative—

> that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances…[in which] the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked (Austin, 1975, p. 26),

and whose illocutionary effect still exists even in cases where the speech act is not fulfilled, i.e., felicitous, for Butler this conventional procedure is a ritual that acts in accordance with Althusser's interpellation. Butler articulates the ritualization of convention by noting that Austin's speaking subject "speaks in a voice that is never fully singular" (Butler, 1997a, p. 25). In other words, Austin's speaker is reiterating a previous linguistic convention, a formula, as

Butler (1997a) notes, in which, "the ritual dimension of convention implies that the moment of utterance is informed by the prior and, indeed, future moments that are occluded by the moment itself…(p. 25). In Baldwin's example, he is the doer, although he is not the inventor of *nigger*, thus his speech act is citational. Ironically, the power of *nigger* to injure is so ideationally strict that even in cases where the doer's usage of the performative is infelicitious and/or unhappy (Austin, 1975), i.e., the speaker of the said performative does not carry out, intend or conduct him/herself in the manner of the performative, the speaker is held accountable for the injurious language.

Yet, if the illocutionary effect of *nigger* as epithet is injury, the question remains: Does Baldwin, as speaker, as doer of the deed, injure the receivers of his speech act? Does *nigger* as illocution produce immediate effects of injury? Is it possible to think of *nigger* as also effecting perlocutionary effects, those effects which follow, over a course of time, but only when other conditions are in place (Butler, 1997a)? I think here of critics of Quentin Tarantino's *Django* who felt that Tarantino's deployment of *nigger* was excessive, even though *Django* is a period-film based during the time of slavery and our ex-slave protagonist killed all the slave-holding, racist southern whites, murdered Samuel L. Jackson's antagonistic and subversive character, burned down the symbolic representation of slavery (the big house), witnessed the murder of his white liberator and Savior (which means he would not live a life of indebtedness or ingratiating gratitude) and rode off with the girl in the end. So too, Samuel Langhorne Clemens also known as Mark Twain, friend of Booker T. Washington and avid abolitionist, continues to be criticized over a century after his death about his use of *nigger* in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Condemnation has varied but typically comes in the form of censorship and/or removing the text from curriculum or, more recently, sanitizing the text by removing *nigger* for a more palatable

word. In both cases, who is the doer of the deed—Tarantino, the characters of his film, or the actor hired to play the character? Likewise, should we apply first person present indicative tense to Twain as speaker, the characters of the text, or the person (professor or student) who reads the text in class? Who then is the interpellated subject—the intended receiver of the epithet, the audience, the readers? I cannot with utmost certainty define Twain's or Tarantino's intentions to injure; however, with respect to *nigger* I will venture to contend that in both instances, use of *nigger* while producing the immediate effect of injury is also infelicitous.[47] Yet both Twain and Tarantino are treated by critics as a belated metalepsis, "a subject-*effect*... retroactively installed by the law at the scene of the crime…" (Butler, as cited in Salih, 2002, p. 105). In other words, as Salih notes, in order for a disciplinary measure to take place, someone (or something) must be constructed as the site of injurious and obscene speech. In both cases Twain and Tarantino are the site of injury without consideration for the ways in which historical and contemporary discourses shaped each narrative. Butler asks "does tracing the injury to the act of a subject…

[47] Austin (1975) categorizes two primary types of infelicities—misfires and abuses—which he categorizes even further according to the intended or unintended cause of the failed performative. For Austin, even in cases where the speaker had every intention of carrying out a particular speech act, specific conditions must be met. Under the category of misfire, one could say that the subcategory misapplications applies to both Twain's and Huck's use of *nigger*. Both author and his character use *nigger* according to convention, however, based on their intention, their use of *nigger* is infelicitious as its intended purpose is not injury. Within the category of abuse, it could be argued that both Twain and Huck perform an insincerity. Huck, through Twain, utters the performative *nigger*; however, he is not properly oriented towards the convention of the utterance. In other words, while he uses the utterance conventionally, his actions throughout the text, as well as Twain's overall message do not support the intended and unintended meaning of the word. Tarantino's usage, ironically, fulfills the illocutionary intent to injure within the film yet this is disrupted based on the speaker of the utterance. While *nigger* is deployed with the intent to injure, it is equitably used by both whites and blacks; hence injury is based on a range of meanings. Even in the final scene in which Django has maimed the antagonist Stephen, a slave who has benefitted from his position in the big house, the dialogue which passes between them is riddled with *nigger* and for even more ironic effect, the final line of the film, stated by the captured Rodney is "Who was that *nigger*?" a rhetorical question directed at the heroicism of Django. How then to "classify" the performative *nigger* as *used* by Tarantino? To some extent it could be contended that, while *nigger* is used within the historical framing of U.S. slavery, within context of the speech act Tarantino, through his characters, is Signifyin(g). Each individual utterance takes on a range of meanings which do not necessarily produce what it names, i.e., the intention to injure based on racial division. From the Austinian perspective this would be a misexecution in which the context allows for a performative speech act to complete itself but the performative itself fails.

not unwittingly stall the analysis of how precisely discourse produces injury by taking the subject and its spoken deed as the proper place of departure?" (Butler, as cited in Salih, 2002, p. 105). Placing Twain and Tarantino as the site of social injury establishes the transitory and fluctuating indeterminancy of *nigger* as performative. It is *nigger's* ability to subjectivate and subjugate as both an illocution with immediate effects and as perlocution from which consequences occur over a period of time that call into question the privileging of the subject as the site of injury.

In terms of illocution, Butler critiques Austin's definition of the "total speech situation," arguing that this is uncapturable based on space and time. According to Austinean (1975) speech act theory, the effects of the illocution are immediate and its force known once the total speech situation is identified. However Butler (1997a) interrogates this by contending that "the temporality of linguistic convention… exceeds the instance of the utterance…" (p. 3). As such, the speech situation is not contained solely within the moment of execution. Instead, "the 'moment'… is a condensed historicity…" (p. 3); it is a speech situation that includes past and future evocations, undefinable based on space and time. Critics of the canonical *Huck Finn*, for example, claim that students of color should not be required to read racist language in a setting where learning is meant to be or perceived as equal; "our kids don't need to read the 'N' word in school… they deal with that every day out in the community and in their life. Racism still exists in a very big way," contends Stephan Witherspoon, president of the local NAACP chapter in Duluth County, Georgia (as cited in Louwagie, 2018, para. 7) about the recent decision of Duluth County School district to remove *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Huckleberry Finn* from the curriculum. Possibly, Duluth County's move to censor literary texts is an example of a 'stuck place' (Miller, 2005), a space which, due to the limiting effects of educational discourses, establishes a control over the utterance which paradoxically and contradictorily proliferates what

it seeks to constrain. (Butler, 199a7). Possibly, in an attempt to "standardize us all" (Miller, 2005), the Duluth County schools have removed literature from the curriculum rather than view the teacher and student as a "postmodern subject—a dynamic subject that changes over time… situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses" (Bergland, 1994, as cited in Miller, 2005, p. 234). This eradication of the canon immediately constrains and contains any opportunity to

> formulate questions and practices that enable us to challenge the 'stuck places' in our work as teachers, students, administrators and researchers with questions that, in the very process of their construction and articulation, move and change our learning, teaching and research (Miller, 2005, p. 239).

Hence, Twain's text becomes the site on which the "law" (in this case educational law endowed with the privilege of "…juridical domain as the site to negotiate social injury" (Butler, as cited in Salih, 2002, p. 105) must place blame. In so doing, the "total speech situation" is condensed to the moment in which *nigger* is read or spoken in the English classroom rather than the condensed historicity of past and future locutions. In the case of Twain's *Huck Finn*, the power of *nigger* to injure is so ideationally strict that even in cases where the doer (Huck) does not carry out what could be perceived as racist conduct (he not only helps Jim hide and travel down the Mississippi so as not be sold down South by his mistress, but also strategizes to help Jim escape when he is subsequently caputured) the text and Twain, and to some extent the teacher, school district, and school board are held accountable for the injurious language As a consequence *nigger* is treated as an immediate injury in which the students are the interpellated subjects who, protected by the law, are prevented from turning to or from the utterance. Yet the teacher, school and/or school district are constructed as the belated metalepsis, i.e., site of injury, "…retroactively installed by the law at the scene of the crime" (Butler, 1997a, p. 105). Yet I ask: What crime has been committed? What would it mean to construct *nigger* and *Huck Finn* in the

inverse? In other words, like Baldwin, Mooney, nay even Morrison's contention that it is the master, not the slave, who is savage, what would it mean to understand the utterance *nigger* not as the injury of the victim, but as the psychic workings of its inventor? And how might we construct such meanings through a contemplation of the discourses surrounding both the construction of *Huck Finn* as well as contemporary society? What would it look like to "create space" for *nigger* in the classroom with an understanding that its construction is a function of the American psyche?

Peter Messent (2011), author of the *Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain,* writes in *The Guardian,* that Twain himself was ant-racist and a friend of Booker T. Washington in the midst of a community which was staunchly racist. He also highlights that Twain played an integral role in the funding of Tuskeegee Institute and helped fund the first African American to attend Yale Law School. Messent's (2011) concern with the sanitization and censorship of *Huck Finn* is based upon Alan Gribben's (senior Twain scholar) newly released versions of *Huck Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* which have substituted words for *nigger* and Injun. While Messent agrees that *nigger* is one of the most vitriolic words in the English language, one that can cause anger and humiliation in parents and children who hear that word spoken and/or read a sum total of 219 times (as is the number of times that *nigger* appears in *Huck Finn*) he contends that this "…is not necessarily a reason for replacing it with a gentler (bowdlerized) term" (para. 3). The author continues with a quote from Twain: "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning" (para. 4).

While I agree with Messent's position about the sanitization of Twain's texts, I think, to some extent, his privileging of Twain as antiracist misses the point about *nigger*. Whether

Twain was racist or not, his text is a canonical literary work which, through a specific lens and discourse, constructs the historical, social and cultural fabric of the United States, a country, I would contend, which needs not be sanitized for 21st Century sensibilities. In response to NAACP chapter president Witherspoon, I proffer the words of Talib Kweli Greene (2014) who argues that *nigga* is a symptom which, at least in the present, cannot and should not be censored. "It's not the word *nigga* that should die, it's racism. You don't cure an ailment by attacking the symptom, and black people who call each other *nigga* is most definitely the symptom, not the cause of racism" (para. 16). While Greene is arguing for the freedom and right of African Americans to use *nigga* (not *nigger*) I highlight his point as a means of identifying the root vs. the symptom. Likewise, *Huck Finn* is not the cause of racism; hence, its censorship does not fend off the racist speech and/or conduct that students of color are subjected to or made subjects of in their daily lives. However, placing the text (and *nigger*) within the historical context of the discourses surrounding its inception as well as critically examining the historical present with respect to both *nigger* and *nigga* as performative utterances begins to paint a different story about *nigger* and, possibly, will bring pause to those students who gleefully sing *nigga* out in their communities while listening to the latest rap song.

4.2 A Failed Interpellation: Butler's Critique of Louis Althusser

As Butler notes, "for Austin, the subject who speaks precedes the speech in question. For Althusser, the speech act that brings the subject into linguistic existence precedes the subject in question" (Butler, 1997a, p. 24). Again, to be clear, as hate speech the immediate effects of *nigger* is injury, but what of the (re)invention *nigga* whose immediate effects are not necessarily of an injurious nature? It is through the Althusserean model that Butler (1997a) continues her

interrogation of sovereign speech and questions the "force and faultlines" (Butler, 1997a) of inflammatory turned insurrectionary speech. Butler (1997a) admits that she is reading Austin through Althusser in which she complicates Austin's theory by examining the ways in which the constituted subject then comes to speak using the same discursive utterances for a different purpose. Butler asks in what ways can the subject, previously interpellated by past meanings "…become then a subject capable of addressing others who is neither a sovereign agent with a purely instrumental relation to language, nor a mere effect whose agency is pure complicity with prior operations of power" (Butler, 1997a, p. 25). It is through Althusser that Butler critiques sovereign speech noting that interpellation only accounts for the "…authoritative voice, the voice of sanction…" (Butler, 1997b, p. 6). By challenging the sovereign power of the injurious utterance Butler contends that "it is possible to effect linguistic and semantic breaks with prior histories and contexts" (as cited in Salih, 2000, p. 214). For Althusser (1970) the repeatability of conventional actions and practices, even at the level of ideas, is governed by and inscribed in ritual. Althusser uses the example of the policeman yelling at the passerby who turns and acknowledges the policeman. Butler (1997a) notes that the moment of recognition by the passerby, who may or may not be the individual being hailed, is also the moment of constitution, yet she wonders what unknown possibilities exist within that moment of turning. What could potentially occur if the passerby did not turn, or in turning, performed a response not in accordance with the ritual of interpellation? Butler contends that while Austin's primary focus is the conventional procedure of the performative, this conventional procedure is a ritual that acts in accordance with Althusser's interpellation. She articulates the ritualization of convention by noting that Austin's speaking subject "speaks in a voice that is never fully singular" (Butler, 1997a, p. 25). In other words Austin's speaker is reiterating a previous linguistic convention, a

formula in which the ritual dimension of convention is (at the moment of utterance) "in some sense… an inherited set of voices, an echo of others who speak as the I" (p. 25).

The threat of hailing, then, is based on a ritual previously performed by a sovereign subject; yet, within the moment of interpellation, the constituted subject has the potential to elicit a response that is yet unknowable/unknown, and in doing so, the sovereignty of interpellation is breached. Butler (1997a) complicates Althusser's interpellation by noting that he proposes the possibility of "bad subjects" but does not consider the levels of "disobedience" that can ensue in response to the interpellation of the law (p. 82). She argues that rather than a refusal, there is possibility of rupture,

> where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command…" (p. 82).

Butler (1997a) contends that the intention of the law to produce a lawful subject instead produces something more; this results in a failure of the performative, which in turn "… creates more than it ever meant to, Signifyin(g) (my edit) in excess of any intended referent" (p. 82). Hence it is the *ritualization* of the speech act in accordance with its interpellation through which, "specific psychic and social workings" (Butler, 1997b, p. 6) have already been inculcated into the conscience of the subject; yet a breach of ritualization opens up the possibility for other forms of speech, i.e., ex-citable speech.

Butler (1997b) furthers this argument in *The Psychic Life of Power* in which she attends to an analysis of subjection—the ways in which the subject is simultaneously subordinated and initiated by performative power. It is through her interrogation of the psyche that she calls into question Althusser's interpellation stating that it only accounts for "the performative power of the authoritative voice [as] figured speech" (p. 7) without taking into account discourses that do

not privilege the spoken word or a model of discourse which has the potential to counter Althusser's sovereign model.

Through her interrogation Butler thus is questioning the "…vulnerability or the unpredictability of subject constitution" (Bell, 1999, p.164). In the case of *nigger* the rupture of both the illocutionary force as well as its interpellative power can occur in multiple ways. The infelicitious failure of interpellation can be in the form of sarcasm and comedy such as in the case of Mooney who chooses to say the word 100 times a day or dark humor such as Ellison's mirthful laughter, which fills the protagonist's dreams. It can be returned to its inventor, such as in the case of Baldwin's psychic inversion, or fashioned into an ambiguous statement as in the example of Nas and Kelis. Finally, it can be Signified as in Larry Wilmore's statement at the White House Correspondents' Dinner.

As a reinvention of *nigger*, *nigga* exhibits illocutionary and perlocutionary effects and constitutive elements separate from those of its counterpart. As an utterance which takes on renewed meanings while also maintaining its originary illocution, *nigga* Signifies (Jacobs, 2002) upon *nigger*. Signifyin(g) then, is not solely a structural counter-punchers' strategy of rhetorical associations, it is also a reconfiguration of interpellative power in which the constituted subject as non-sovereign speaker turns in a way that ruptures the ritualization of the authoritative voice as figured speech. Signifyin(g) is one of many forms of disobedience in which the "bad (or oppressed) subject" refuses the interpellative call or responds in a manner that ruptures the call creating a failed performative. Hence while *nigga* retains some of its illocutionary force to injure based on its secondhand memory (Minh-ha), *nigga*'s perlocutionary force (which ironically is also its faultline) is its constitutive act as a Signifyin(g) performative, a type of performative that constitutes the subject in multiple, rhetorical, unknowable ways. Signifyin(g)

performativity establishes itself on the x-y-z axis of speech, itself ex-citable because it contains within it a condensed historicity and an unknowable future. It serves as the link between the discursive acts which constitute the subject and the speech act of the subject.

An example of a Signifyin(g) performative act which disrupts the performative power of interpellation is parody. In the article "Appropriating a slur: Semantic looping in the African-American usage of nigga," Andrew T. Jacobs (2002) contends that by mimicking the policeman's actions behind his/her back, the interpellated subject is Signifyin(g) disrespect, which can be open to a range of possibilities as it ruptures the expectation of interpellation. As explained by Jacobs (2002),

> it is helpful to think of the former term as 'Signifyin(g) on' (or critiquing) something whereas the latter word 'signifies' (or means) something but does not inherently involve a critique. Thus, to parody the motions of a police officer behind his or her back 'Signifies on' the officer and 'signifies' one's disrespect… [it is] a counter-puncher's strategy, an act of resistance against an oppressive force.

This interpellative aspect of Signification articulated by Jacobs with respect to Gates' theory is also taken up by Butler—parody is also citational; it is an "…act that recalls prior acts, requiring a future repetition to endure" (Butler, 1997a, p. 20).

The citational performance of parody disrupts Althusser's conventional procedure (as well as Austin's illocutionary speech act) because the subject is repeating the actions of the policeman for the purpose of entertainment, amusement, resistance, agency as well as citing previous forms of parody, thus articulating "all of the associations that a signifier carries from other contexts" (Gates, 1988/2014, p. 55). This "counter" performative (known as a performative contradiction or inverse interpellation in Butlerean terms) is ritualized as a rhetorical trope, (re)citing the original purpose of the interpellation while also disrupting it. This speech act is not based on the sovereign agency of the authoritative speaker; instead,

> untethering the speech act from the sovereign subject founds an alternative notion of agency and, ultimately, of responsibility, one that more fully acknowledges the way in which the subject is constituted in language, how what it creates is also what it derives from elsewhere (Butler, 1997, p. 15-16).

As a failed interpellation, delinked from the sovereign subject, the constituted Other (re)cites, (in)cites and ex-cites, i.e., Signifyin(g); hence, the previously hailed (constituted) subject of Althusser's example has ruptured the hailing, refusing ritualized and conventional acknowledgment by returning it to its originator in a new manner. This is much like Baldwin's refusal to accept the utterance *nigger*. Additionally, the agency of the language of parody itself can potentially be distinguished from the agency of the constituted subject. If, as Butler (1997a) posits, language has the ability to injure, then it also has the ability to disrespect, entertain, humor, and amuse. Quoting Paul de Man, Butler indicates, "…a trope is… animated at the moment when we claim that language 'acts'…language posits itself in a series of distinct acts… its primary function might be understood as this kind of periodic acting" (p. 45). The trope of parody therefore is an act in which there is a "continuous present of 'a doing'" (Butler, 1997a) that exceeds the constituted doer. Yet once the hailed subject, the interpellated 'doer' parodies the police, the act of parody itself is the doing of language in which the trope is animated at the moment in which "the speech act… is performed bodily…the simultaneity of the production and delivery of the expression communicates not merely what is said, but the bearing of the body as the rhetorical instrument of expression" (Butler, 1997a, p. 152). In terms of the racialized subject, this bodily performance is both literal and figurative, a speech act with its own effects.

For Butler, interpellation produces the body both discursively and socially, a type of social performative that is "…ritualized and sedimented through time… central to the very process of subject-formation as well as the embodied, participatory *habitus*" (p. 153). Quoting Bourdieu, she cites: "The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not

represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it back to life.'" (p. 154). In the case of the police officer, parody is an enactment of a range of discursive moments that are performed bodily. The bodily "performance" of parody, in its mimicry, exceeds the original interpellated subject in multiple directions, but in-the-moment of doing it is a miming of the sovereign power; it is a miming of Ideology as defined by Althusser, and, if I am to read the act of parody through Gates (1988/2014), it is a miming or Signifyin(g) of sovereign white power structures and the white discursive universe. In this way, Gates' subject-centered form of Signification can also be explored as a continuous line of reSignifications which are continually ritualized through rhetorical troping, revealing the ways in which we use language but are also used by language. Hence, the discursive doing of parody in Jacobs' (2002) example of Signification transitively animates the social subject who is inhabited by the ritualized act of troping.

4.3 Semantic Looping[48] and the Reinvention of *nigga*

I introduce Jacobs (2002) because his discussion of semantic looping is one possible theory for understanding the purpose of the reinvention *nigga.* He uses the example of parody in order to exemplify his discussion of Signifyin(g) with respect to *nigga* as a linguistic parodying of *nigger*. Citing three rhetorical modes—agnominatio, semantic inversion, and chiastic slaying—he contends that the racial epithet *nigger* has been transfigured to *nigga* as, "a positive term that carries with it a critique of racism." Jacobs identifies this process as semantic looping, a process "in which a new term derives meaning by continual reference to an older, existing term." It operates as a form of reSignification in which the appropriated epithet or slur is reinvented and

[48] See Jacob's article for visual examples of semantic looping of semantic inversion, agnominatio and chiastic pattern. (link included in References)

renamed by the oppressed group as a form of reverse discourse (Foucault, as cited in Jacobs, 2002). Hence if one accepts Foucault's postulation that

> 'discourse is not life; its time is not yours,' it will be possible to appropriate and re-cite a word such as [*nigga*] in ways which will rob that word of its historic power to wound (this does not mean that subversive redeployment is a straightforward matter, or that all words may be resignified this way) (Salih, 2000, p. 214).

According to Jacobs (2002), the semantic looping of *nigga* occurs based on three rhetorical devices which fall under Gates' theory of Signifyin(g). Agnominatio, the alteration of one or more letters in a word, and semantic inversion, the reversal of meaning of a word, are evidenced by the dropping of the -er for the -a and the reversed meanings from insult to approval. For Jacobs, these two tropes together enter *nigga* and *nigger* into a semantic loop as there exists a constant interplay between the two words which must occur for new meanings to arise. Add to this Jacobs' contention that chiastic slaying occurs through constant interplay in which *nigga* as a repetition of *nigger* reverses the positionality of African Americans from object to subject. Citing an example from Gates (1988/2014) Jacobs provides an example of chiasmus[49] as used by Frederick Douglass: "You have seen how a man became a slave, you will see how a slave became a man." Like the slave-object which writes him/herself into subjective existence (a trope Jacobs contends is the foundation of the slave narrative), through "the semantic inversion of 'nigger'/'nigga', dehumanized blacks speak themselves into human subjects through the act of speaking [and naming]" (Jacobs, 2002). For Jacobs one cannot exist without the other and it is only through chiastic slaying that the repetition of *nigga* rests upon its constant Signification or parody of *nigger* in a continual semantic looping representative of "the context of continuing

[49] According to the Baldick's Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms, chiasmus is a literary term in which the terms in the first of two parallel clauses are reversed in the second clause. This can be in the reverse order of words or parallel ideas. An example of chiasmus is John F. Kennedy's infamous statement: "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country."

racism, [which] requires 'nigga' to recurrently signify on (i.e. assert the falsity of) the slur." (Jacobs, 2002). Jacobs illustrates the linear chiastic pattern as derived from Douglass' text by overlaying this with the semantic loop of *nigger-nigga* in order to express "the recurrent Signification" and continuous looping.

It is Jacob's (2002) discussion I turn to in order to make sense of the shift of interpellated speech acts with respect to *nigger* and *nigga*. Jacobs contends that *nigga* is emblematic of a uniquely African American consciousness, a double consciousness, and it is this double consciousness which aids in the survivability of the African American in the face of an acute, never ending racism. He calls to mind Du Bois' infamous question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" by noting that the African American is constantly aware of his/her precariousness as a "problem" in U.S. society. Through Jacobs' theory of semantic looping *nigga* Signifies on *nigger* in multiple ways —it puns, it parodies, it critiques, criticizes, and mimics. Through a Butlerean lens, it is in this moment that Gates' Signifyin(g) subject can potentially "…find agency [in] that recitation or that replay of discourse that is the conditions of one's own emergence" (as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 165). Hence Signifyin(g) is both rhetorical and citational. Even in the materially discursive act of parody, the "…action echoes prior actions and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition of citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices" (Butler, 1997a, p. 51). The performative act of parody results in a redoubled action of the threat of interpellation… turning one part of that speaking against the other" (Butler, 1997a, p. 12).

It is through an examination of Jacobs (2002) theory of semantic looping that we can begin to imagine how the illocutionary force of *nigger* as inflammatory speech turns upon itself into the performative *nigga* with its requisite multiple, fragmentary, rhetorical and incomplete

meanings. Jacobs' (2002) theory is one possible lens through which we can comprehend the ironic capacity of *nigga*. Hence, Butler's (1997a) interrogation into the failed interpellation is made possible; *nigger* "fails"[50] due to its parodic Signifyin(g) sidekick *nigga*—or does it? Perhaps this is the ironic agential nature of Signifyin(g). Scholars, entertainers and activists have argued extensively for the allowability of *nigga* in contrast to the disallowability of *nigger*; for example, Michael Harriot (2018) contends in his article "Why it's ok for Black People, but not White People, to use the N-Word, Explained (again)," "It's *our house.* It's *our word.* But it is either disingenuous or stupid to pretend that double standards don't exist. Words are *supposed* to have double standards." As such, Signifyin(g) ruptures "the fantasy of sovereign power in speech" (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 164) through a complex level of embedded tropes, figurative substitutions and language games in which language is being done and is itself the doing. In that doing the subject is submerged, subsumed, unable to step out of language (Butler, 1997a).

In effect, the ritual of conventional procedure has the potential to be substituted with the ritual of troping in which the language itself acts, and the speaking-centered subject is potentially decentered, or at the very least speaks him/herself into existence as an object-turned-subject. In this sense vulnerability, possibility, and ambiguity are part of the constitutive discursive act as well as the speech act itself. In practice, Baldwin has enacted what Butler defines as a failed interpellation or performative contradiction. However, I would conjecture that Baldwin's performance is not a form of Signifyin(g), i.e., rhetorical troping. In contrast to the language play of Paul Mooney, Nas and Kelis, Barack Obama and Larry Wilmore, Baldwin's shift is not

[50] I purposely use the term fail here as Butler uses it to convey the ways in which through citationality, utterances exceed the speaker and take on new meanings. Fail is in no way indicative of a dismissal or diminished sense of the illocutionary force of the word *nigger*.

comedic, rhetorical or ambiguous, although it is sardonic, caustic, and paradoxical. Instead Baldwin's response enacts a loosening of the link between subject formation and the process of becoming a subject through a disruption of the interpellative illocution *nigger*. This delinking is furthered through the semantic looping of *nigga*. *Nigga* (re)cites the illocutionary force of *nigger* as injurious yet simultaneously disrupts Althusser's (1970) interpellative in which the constituted subject must turn in recognition. The subjectivated-objectified object-subject ultimately does not speak or speaks in such a way as to disrupt the convention. In the interplay of doing and being done by language, *nigga* represents the "colonized subjectivities" (Diaz, 2012) of the subject-turned-object-turned-subject through a rhetoric of chiasmus. *Nigga* has become one of the confounding language games (Williams, 1991) in which the dying-drowning mortals have tricked the priests-turned-gods who continue(?) to float outside the Celestial City (that is, if global warming, oil spills, melting ice caps, and corporate pollution haven't ruined the waters).

4.4 The Tesseract-Effect: An Incomplete, (Im)Possible 4th Dimension

Yet in what way does *nigga* as Signifyin(g) performative constitute the subject? Butler (1994) explains,

> ...the subject in speech is always both more than itself and less than itself in any given speech act…what it speaks is not simply its own speech but it speaks a life of discourse and it is installed, as it were, in a life of discourse that exceeds the subject's own temporality (as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 166).

While as utterance *nigga* Signifies on *nigger*, it also requires an interrogation of the ways in which the subject is formed within the power relations that oppress, regulate and suppress the subject (Butler, 1997a). Butler (1997a, 1997b) contends that the subject must simultaneously accept and reject this power; without this submission and denial, the subject ceases to exist. In

effect, Butler's questioning of what makes the subject "turn" when hailed by authority, what theory of conscience is necessary to understand what and why this subject "…accept[s] the subordination and normalization effected by that voice… in inaugurating a social subject" (p. 6), can be one of many entry points for an exploration of the African American psyche, the "double consciousness" of which Du Bois (1903/2003) speaks.

Butler (1997a) notes:

> the opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable become part of the very 'offense' that must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival. The resigni-fication of speech requires opening new contexts, speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence producing legitimation in new and future forms (p. 41).

Butler (1997a) identifies the subject's turning as "… a tropological inauguration of the subject… [which] remains permanently uncertain" (p. 3-4). She comments that "… 'turn' is, rhetorically, performatively spectacular; 'turn' translates the Greek sense of 'trope' (p. 4). Hence, if we are to understand the subject's turning in Althusser's interpellation as a type of rhetorical troping, then in this instance, Gates'(1988/2014) theory of Signification potentially exemplifies the interrupted, disrupted, ruptured interpellative act and constitution of the African American subject. In this vein, Signifyin(g) is both a "turning towards" and "turning away from" Althusser's authoritative voice; paradoxically, this form of rhetorical troping can also be explored, as per Butler (1997a,) as a "turning outward" and "turning inward,"

> …the structure of self-incarceration… the ways in which the subject turns against itself by passionately attaching itself to the law that subjects it… the prohibitions instituted by the law… are constitutive of a subject that *requires* subjection in certain crucial senses" (Salih & Butler, 2004, p. 243-44).

Hence Gates identifies black language as a form of independence, but this is also effected through "…the subject's paradoxical dependence on a discourse it does not choose" (Salih & Butler, 2004, p. 243). Much like Hegel's master/slave in which "the master… reemerges as the

slave's own conscience" (Butler, 1997a, p. 3) or Douglass' (1845/2004) discovery of his own wretched condition upon learning to read, Signification can be explored as a discursive rhetorical troping of the very discourse that places one in subjection. In this way, Signification can also be explored as a mode of contradiction, much like Jacobs' (2002) example of the person who parodies the police, in which the paradoxical, yet simultaneous, turning inward and outward parallels the semantic looping of *nigga* and *nigger*.

But still… if I am to consider how discourse acts and enacts upon the subject, much like my reconfiguration of Gates' original two-dimensional construction of language, Jacobs' semantic loop can be carried one step further. While the three-dimensional axes (Figure 3) visually represents the intersection of Standard American English (SAE), Black Standard American English (BSAE) and Black Vernacular English (BVE), how does this account for those social practices and power relations which inflect and infect subject constitution? Put another way, how might we account for the vulnerability of the subject constructed through the regulatory principles of discourse? As well, while Jacobs (2012) provides a theory for the way in which *nigga* Signifies upon *nigger*, how does this account for the constituted subject? The rotating tesseract[51] also known as a hypercube is an extension of a three-dimensional cube which is meant to represent 4D space. As shown in the link, the tesseract is animated because through movement the tesseract as a visual 3D object depicted in two-dimensional space figuratively represents a fourth dimension. It is this fourth dimension that I would like to interrogate as an (in)visible space in which discourse exists, one which the racialized subject both accepts and rejects, turns towards and away from. The movement of the tesseract is representational of the

[51] See the link for a visual representation of a Tesseract.

ways in which, based on Foucault's (2010) conceptions of knowledge/power, language is fluid, transmutable, and multi-directional. It also represents the ways in which discourse, subject constitution and language practices interact, intersect, complement and contradict. It is through this animation that Jacobs' (2002) conceptualization of semantic looping can be perceived as well. Hence, it is in one single utterance of *nigga* that multiple intersecting actions occur (on the BVE, SBAE, & SAE axes). As performative contradiction there is the Signifyin(g) of the word itself through a chiastic semantic loop which continuously interplays between *nigga* and *nigger*. Additionally, there is the speech act of the subject, i.e., the rhetorical troping or Signifiyin(g) (which includes both illocutionary and perlocutionary effects) in which the speaking subject articulates through *nigga* the multiply contested and competing dimensions of a racialized consciousness. There is also the discursive act of performativity in which *nigga* and the discourses which surround it place the subject in subjection. I posit, therefore, the tesseract as a representation of these fluctuating yet congruent aspects of *nigga*.

While *nigger* and *nigga* have been analyzed as epithet, slur, insult, humor, irony, camaraderie and vindication, its contradictory, rhetorical troping, its citationality, ex-citability, and iterability recasts it as a "contagious word," one "that is meant in part to counter the force of that other contagion..." (Butler, 1997a, p. 124), racism. As both Randall Kennedy (2003) and Jabari Asim (2007) acknowledge, "complete eradication of *nigger*-as-insult" (Kennedy, 2003, p. 137) is impossible based on vestigial racism; conversely, scholars such as Arthur K. Spears (1997) and H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman (2012) view positive connotations of *nigga* as a socio-cultural linguistic practice of reclamation, an example of "black people coloniz[ing] a white sign" (Gates, 1988/2014, p. 52). However, in order for this contagion to take root, Butler (1997a) contends that it "can only be articulated in response to a challenge from (its own)

outside" (p. 90). The irony of *nigga* as a linguistic tool within the African American ethos is also paradoxically the absurdity of its capacity for reSignification, i.e., troping, reversal, iterability, and ex-citability. In response to Richard Delgado's (1993) statement that words such as *nigger* and spic are degrading words that have no other connotation, Butler (1997a) writes,

> …these words become phenomenal; they become a kind of linguistic display that does not overcome their degrading meanings, but that reproduces them as public text and… in being reproduced, displays them as reproducible and resignifiable terms (p. 100).

In essence, *nigga's* reSignification, consists of the ways it works as a neutralized, normalized, generalized (Spears, 1997) performative contradiction. Butler (1997a)continues that this "constitutes… an ironic hopefulness that the conventional relation between word and wound might become tenuous and even broken over time" (p. 100). If we are to "dream" of this moment, as Asim (2007) laments, then the dream's potential for reconfiguration and recontextualization is always, already an incomplete space in which *nigga* as a Signifyin(g) performative consists of the subject's (un)willingness to turn in response to the call. This dream must also account for "…the two-way nature of interpellation" (Salih & Butler, 2004, p. 245) especially within the situated and contingent psyche of the African American subject which, through the mask of double(d)-consciousness, both rejects and has a "passionate attachment" to the law, what Butler calls a "'strange scene of love'" (Salih & Butler, 2004, p. 245).

4.5 Nigga Event #03242015: "Cuz I'm that Bigger" *nigga* as Signifyin(g) performative or "a strange scene of love"

> I mean… you know… this school is okay. I'm here now because, to be honest, I fucked up. My parents are cool with it. I mean… as cool as they're gonna be. It's not like I'm not going at all. I'm here to get my grades up. And it's not like they can do

anything about it now. School was never really my thing. I was always about sports, sports, sports and making money. My brothers and sisters all get good grades but me, I wanted sports, having a good time and making money. So, when I messed up, I was going to quit altogether. But my mom kept saying no, you gotta go. You need that piece of paper to do what you wanna do in life. I'm dealing with the consequences though.

I was the only black freshman recruited on the squad. There was one or two of us here and there but like most of the black guys were upperclassmen. So… you know… I was the shit. I got caught up in partying and being the man on campus. Once I get my grades up, I'm gonna transfer back and finish.

Being the only black guy is like… well… it benefited me, and it was the opposite at the same time.

I hooked up with a lot of white girls… that was the benefit. It was like... they wanted something different. I went to a lot of white parties and you know being the only black guy in the room is like… I don't know… it's like great cuz the chicks are like, oh you're different than other black guys, let me try this out. What's up? I mean I went to an integrated school, so I knew how to talk to white girls, black girls, Spanish girls, Asians. I guess they liked how I carried myself. I wasn't trying to be like them and for them that was different. But I was cool because I was with the football team. The football team had a bad rep cuz we came to the parties; we always had a bunch of drinks. Girls always migrated to us. So other teams gave us looks. We'd go to other sports teams' parties, you know, like lacrosse or soccer, and recruit. We'd be like come to the football house and they'd all leave cuz we threw the best parties. I was a part of the cool group, but I was the only black one in the freshman class.

So the white chicks kept coming, and coming, and coming, and coming back. They knew where my dorm room was… until I disappeared. But I got heat from some of the white boys cuz it was like, "Yo why she messing with you? She one of the hottest chicks on campus so why is she fuckin with you?"

And I'd be like, 'I'm that nigga!' That's what I would say to them. Word for word. And they would be mad as hell and go about their day.

They hated that shit.

Had Richard Wright been writing in the 21st Century rather than the 1940s (early to mid 20th Century), I imagine a newly historicized Bigger "Bigga"[52] Thomas facing a linguistic lynch mob of white men who discursively place him on trial for the deflowering of white women across campus. The captured Bigger of Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* has been accused with the double felonies of murder *and rape* of his employer—the smart, spunky, beautiful, upper class *white* Mary Dalton, and his girlfriend—the alcoholic, impoverished, blue collar, *black* Bessie Mears. While Bigger is definitely guilty of the double murders, he is not guilty of the rape of Mary Dalton.[53] This accusation is doubly ironic because Bigger actually does have nonconsensual sex with Bessie prior to killing her. This subsequent act of violence against Bessie is more of an afterthought during his trial, yet the discovery of semen in Bessie leads the prosecutor to *imagine* a rape of Mary Dalton (I mean, if he raped his girlfriend, then it

[52] I use the pseudonym Bigga partially as a revision of the 1940s Bigger Thomas from Richard Wright's *Native Son* but also in its more contemporary scope, as a reclamation of the late Biggie Smalls, aka The Notorious B.I.G. aka Christopher Wallace whose fame and lyrics as a rap icon of the 1990s continue to impact the hip hop community, and who freely employed *nigga* in his lyrics and boasted of the number of bodies he had (*trans.* BVE for number of women he has had intercourse with).

[53] This is not, in any way, to denigrate, dismiss, diminish or compare the act of murder to the act of rape. Nor am I attempting to compare or dismiss the murder/rape of Bessie Mears. My intention is to interrogate the specific issue of sexual misconduct as a parallel to my interrogation of the ironic use of *nigga* within the context of sexual proclivities.

stands to reason that this Afro-American "Sampson defiled a white Delilah" (Wells, 1892, as cited in Royster, 2016)). And while these violent acts of Bigger deserve much more attention than I will provide, I point to Bigger's imagined act of violation against Mary as a segue into Bigga's imagined act of violation with (not against) young white coeds on a college campus.

In Wright's final chapter of "Fate" he initially chooses to silence the captured Bigger. Lying in his cell, he refuses food or communication while awaiting his trial. Furthermore, when forced to face a sea of excited white faces and flashing bulbs, Bigger faints, yet another bodily manifestation of being silenced. Wright's double silencing of Bigger parallels the double silencing of Mary and Bessie by Bigger's hands, both of whom Bigger feared would talk and reveal him, but it also symbolizes the historical silencing of black male bodies (as well as women), and this silencing is as much linguistic as it is physical. Bigger must be silenced (both literally and figuratively) due to the very real act of murder as well as the *imagined* act of being "criminally intimate" with Mary Dalton. Writing in 1940 (about 1930s Chicago, IL) it is ironic that Wright chose not to have Bigger hanged when he was pulled off the roof of the building he was hiding in, (a structure I assumed represented Bigger's imminent lynching, since public lynchings were historically a part of the public discourse of the northern state of Illinois—in June of 1893 an angry mob in the state of Illinois hung one Samuel Bush after he was accused, sight unseen, of rape (Wells, 1892, as cited in Royster, 2016, p. 122). Yet in *Native Son* rather than being carried off by a crazed, violent mob, stabbed, dismembered, hung, castrated, or riddled with bullets, Bigger is granted the "civility" of a trial, legal counsel and representation, and forgiveness by the boyfriend of the now deceased Mary Dalton. Ironically, while Bigger is guilty of two murders and the rape of his ex-girlfriend, he knows that he is only being held accountable for one, that of Mary Dalton, while Bessie's exposed body during the inquest is merely a prop:

> Bessie's death had not been mentioned during the inquest… they were using his having killed Bessie to kill him for his having killed Mary… though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white that he would be punished... he felt a deeper sympathy for Bessie… He knew that Bessie… would resent her dead body being used in this way." (Wright, 1940/2005, p. 331).

This comparison is in no way meant to diminish the murder of either woman in Wright's text, but I am using the text in the way that Bessie's body is being used—"The black girl was merely 'evidence.'"(Wright, 1940/2005, p. 331). In the modern-day Bigga's inquest, the white male students who approach him on campus were no more interested in any nameless, faceless African American woman than the jurors cared for the body of Bessie Mears. Instead, their confrontation focused solely on "defending the 'honor' of *all* white women, *demi-monde* included" (Wells, 1892, as cited in Royster, 2016, p. 52, emphasis in original). By the end of the text Bigger admits to what he surmises he is, a killer for good reason (Wright, 1940/2005, p. 429). He killed therefore he will be killed, but the killing of Bessie is meaningless, her life, much like the lives of the senseless lynchings of black Americans in the South, is not grievable.[54] It is the life of Mary Dalton that Bigger must atone for and 80+ years later, Bigga, another self-proclaimed lady-killer (pun intended), must atone for his actions with countless white women; however, it is not the women who are at fault, it is Bigga who has committed "rank outrage" against the guardians who protect the honor of white women (Wells, 1892, as cited in Royster, 2016). As documented in the text *Southern Horrors and other Writings: The Anti-lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900,*

> …the miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; … it is death to the colored man who yields to the… attraction in white women. White men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women" (Wells,1892, as cited in Royster, 2016, p. 50-51).

[54] I use this term in the way that Butler (2016) questions whose bodies are grievable in her text *Frames of War: When is ?Life Grievable?*

Wells (1892) articulates that the issue of the 'race question' with regards to the protection of white Southern women is illustrated through the methods used within religion, science, law and political power (as cited in Royster, 2016). These methods justify false accusations, brutality, incarceration and lynchings by "honest white men [who] concede the necessity of intelligence… against government by ignorance" (p. 57).

Over one hundred years later, it is the "intelligence" of these young men who demand an explanation of Bigga's actions as a necessity against what they perceive, at best, as a quandary, and at worst, a wrong. Yet while the discourses of religion, science, and law have been reconfigured by society and in the process transformed knowledge and social practices, the actions of these students reveal the historical impact of previous discourses on contemporary society. Hence, landmark legislation such as the 14th Amendment (1868), Sweatt v. Painter (1950), Brown v. Board (1954), and Loving vs. Virginia (1967) serve as precedent for the overturning and eradication of many racist, discriminatory, segregationist and anti-miscegenation laws at the macro-social and macro-physical level of government and control; however, these transitions in legal discourse have not necessarily eradicated horizontal relationships between individuals and/or communities nor has it eradicated the management of bodies through the methods used in education, economics, collegiate sports, professional sporting organizations, media, entertainment, or the sciences of psychology and human anatomy. The sedimentation of social and discursive tactics of governmentality (Foucault, 1978), which control, dictate, and manage the behaviors of both the individual and the collective, reveal a different complex institution of power and its effects. With respect to Bigga, modern conceptions of sexual prowess are emergent based on the ways in which it is discussed in media portrayals of African American

athletes, covert hypersexualized beliefs about black male heteronormativity, and overt imagery of black (hyper)masculinity as evidenced in hip hop culture.

It is through Bigga's own necessarily incomplete characterizations wherein constitutive elements of his as well as the coeds' identities are evidenced. Bigga is "different" from the perceived linguistic and socio-cultural normativity of black men; while not "trying to be white" he is appropriate enough in demeanor, social behavior and dailyspeak to be deemed as "safe," and cool to "try out" (i.e. engage in sexual intercourse, although this same term also means to engage in a sporting activity, ironically in some linguistic circles, I think here of Shakespeare's *Othello* as well, sport is also known as sex). His membership as the "only black freshman" on the football team additionally constructs certain constitutive effects of Bigga as racialized subject and object of specific types of knowledge based on the discourses of collegiate sports, All-American football, and the science of human anatomy. Much like Jesse Owens, Arthur Ashe, Moses Fleetwood Walker, Jackie Robinson, Kenneth Washington, George Taliaferro, and Earl Lloyd (and at one point O.J. Simpson), Bigga is/was "safe" due to his inclusion in an exclusive organization in which he is materially marked as different, yet socially and culturally marked as belonging, acceptable, acculturated and/or assimilated. Coupled with historical discourses of scientific racism which employed physical anthropology, anthropometry, craniometry and eugenics to justify physical, intellectual and genetic differences between races, covert beliefs of black men's intelligence, muscularity, strength and prowess can be traced to theories such as Carl Linneaus (1767) and his five varieties of human species, Benjamin Rush's (1799) negroidism, a hereditary skin disease that could infect whites through sexual intercourse, Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon's (1854) categorization of the Negro as a creational rank between the Greeks and chimpanzees; Thomas Jefferson's (1785) *Notes on the State of Virginia*;

Karl Vogt's (1864) *Lectures of Man* that genetically linked blacks to apes; and Samuel George Morton's (1839) craniometry data, which "proved" the inferiority of the Negro's brain size and capacity. In conjunction with these historical discourses of "objective" science, the modern sports fanatic, intellectual, commentator, and fan continue to exhibit social and cultural beliefs and practices that uphold theories of superior strength, muscularity and athleticism. Taken together, these (re)cite the historically articulated pseudoscientific texts that served to uphold practices such as slavery, sharecropping, segregation and anti-miscegenation. Bigga's self-proclaimed "I knew how to talk to white girls" civilizes his "faculties of memory, reason, and imagination" (Jefferson, 1785) so that he is viewed by himself and his female peers as "not like them," i.e., not "in reason much inferior" (Jefferson, 1785). At the same time, however, he is a "despoiler of virtue…because he succumbs to the smiles of white women" (Wells, 1892, as cited in Royster, 2016, p. 50-51).

The discourse of scientific racism, however, is not solely evident in scientific texts and journals. The 2008 *Vogue* cover of Lebron James and Gisele Bundchen photographed by Annie Leibovitz (See link for Image of James Lebron and Gisele Bundchen, 2008) was criticized for its imagery reminiscent of a King Kong figure and victimized white woman. Consequently (and ironically) this was the first time *Vogue's* cover featured an African American male. This cover, and subsequent discussion about the mirror images, further reifies African American athletes as beasts, superhuman, and overtly desirous of white women (paradoxically coined the OJ complex, yet another discursive play on words). One could conjecture from an initial reading of the headline of the original image, "Destroy this Mad Brute," that brute refers to the brutish, black ape-like beast walking along the banks of the river, club in one hand and innocent woman fainted, distraught and possibly clubbed by the beast in the other. However, upon closer

inspection (and after some research) one might come to realize that this image (though still questionable in its use of imagery) served as propaganda against the Germans during WWI stepping onto American shores with Lady Liberty in his grip. Hence, the fear of militarism, represented on the pickelhaube helmet is countered with the entreaty to enlist in the U.S. Army.

However, this imagery is much less figurative in the 2008 version. Ms. Bundchen's dress is of the same ochre as the Lady Liberty blue in the original image. The wooden club labeled with the word kultur has been substituted with a modernized version of U.S. kultur, basketball, yet James sports all black and his muscularity mirrors that of the original image. As well, James' countenance and posture mimics that of the German ape—while the sleeveless black pullover he dons accentuates his muscular arms, his facial expression is practically an exact replica of the 1917 mad brute. Finally (and/or ultimately) within James' grasp is the beautiful Brazilian-born Gisele Bundchen (who is ironically of German descent). The irony of Bundchen's expression, much like the irony of the unnamed visitors to Bigga's dorm room is reminiscent of statements by J. C. Duke:

> There… is a growing appreciation of white Juliets for colored Romeos… there are many white women in the South who would marry colored men if such an act would not place them at once beyond the pale of society and within the clutches of the law." (as cited in Royster, 2016, p. 50).

The lovely Bundchen returns the camaraderie and affection to James—each has an arm wrapped around the other (although upon closer inspection it is not quite clear where Bundchen's left arm is positioned, perhaps it was photoshopped out of the image altogether). Nonetheless, her countenance, posture and attitude negate the distress, angst, and fainting fear of her predecessor; instead she smiles and exudes confidence. Rather than appearing captured and victimized in the clutches of James, Bundchen stands upright, her five foot eleven inches

appearing deceptively equal to that of James' 6'8" frame. As a result, her persona shifts and reframes this original image from one of fear of the beast to mutuality.

I highlight this revisitation of Harry Ryle Hopps' 1917 WWI propaganda poster as yet another statement within a field of statements that underscores the positionality of African American men in society. While scholars have criticized Leibowitz for her (dare I say obvious?) choice of framing, positionality, color, and expression of James and Bundchen, much like the parallel images of the 1957 Woodlawn Boys' boycott and Nas and Kelis on the red carpet at the Grammys, Leibowitz Signifies upon Hopps' 1917 poster. In her revisitation, she creates an excitable moment, one in which the citational aspect of the contemporary image simultaneously presents the discursive power of the original image (which can never be fully delinked) as well as a new alternate discursive reality, one with its own effects. Within this new reality, interactions between white women and black men are *allowable*; however, due to the historical discourse of anti-miscegenation—evidenced in legal discourse, pseudoscience, social practice, and media images—the allowability of interracial intercourse is simultaneously disallowable, inappropriate, obscene. It is through this constitution that the young men approach Bigga. Hence, while his actions on a multi-raced, gendered, sexed campus are *allowable* and even *permissible* between consenting adults, the Tesseract-Effect[55] is clear. Allowability and permissibility are tenuous due to the shifting, intersecting, competing historical, social and cultural discourses about sexual interactions between black men and white women.

In this present-day inquisition, Bigga faces a linguistic mob of white men who seek to, dare I say protect?, the purity (and I use this word ironically) of the "hottest white women" on campus. In this present-day inquest Bigga speaks, thereby avoiding the linguistic death of his

[55] I use this term to highlight the fluid, continual impact of historical discourses that, while incrementally changing over time, continue to permeate present day knowledge/power.

predecessor Bigger. When Bigger finally is "given voice" (only in the privacy of his cell) it is an attempt to articulate the psychic power of the depressed, oppressed, repressed, colonized subjectivities of the racialized subject. It is through these revelationary thoughts that the reader comes to understand the contradiction, chaos, ambiguity and incompleteness of the double(d) consciousness of the racialized subject:

> 'I don't know. She didn't do nothing to me'… 'She asked me a lot of questions. She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her.'… 'Mr. Max, you know what some white men say we blacks do? They say we rape white women when we got the clap and they say we do that because we believe that if we rape white women then we'll get rid of the clap. They say we do things like that and they say it to kill us. They draw a line and say for you to stay on your side. And then they say things like that about you and when you try to come from behind your line they kill you. They feel they ought to kill you…' (p. 350-351).

On campus, Bigga has figuratively and literally stepped from behind this line evident in his peers' attempt at reminding him of his place. However, unlike Bigger, who chose silence in the public setting and only verbalizes his thoughts in the private sanctity of his cell with Mr. Max, Bigga literally evokes the "I say it, you think it, what a small white world" theory from Mooney's performance. Through an act of Signifyin(g) that intersects the SAE, SBAE and BVE axes, Bigga names himself— "I'm that *nigga*!" Through the rhetorical device of irony, the sardonic humor and biting sarcasm of that naming, inaugurates a new, unforeseeable reality that contains within it the historical past, the in-the-moment present and the unknowable future, in which both the speaking subject and the interpellated subject are made vulnerable by speech. However, as performative, *nigga* elides strict ideational usage; hence it is *ex-cite-able* due to its tenuousness, unpredictability, and ambiguity. Wrested from its original meaning, while simultaneously reiterating this meaning, *nigga*'s ex-citability is its troping of *nigger* through a reversal of both meaning and context.

The irony of Bigga's statement, produced through naming, reflects the mirthful language of Ellison's grandfather, the double(d) consciousness of the racialized subject who is the subject of, subject(ed) to, subject(ed) by and subject(ed) within language. Bigga, much like Bigger and the grandfather, cannot step outside of language (i.e., *nigger-nigga*) and it is through their individual acts of speech and/or conduct (naming, flight, laughter) that they simultaneously accept and reject the constitutive effects of *nigger-nigga.* In Bigga's case, during the moment of this linguistic lynching, he Signifies through his final speech act of naming; hence, "I'm that *nigga!*" inaugurates a semantic looping of a historical reality: white mob + black victim (labelled as victimizer) = *nigger* (and lynching). Bigga's self-naming loops back upon *nigger* yet simultaneously disrupts this hailing: white mob + black victim (self-named as vindicator) = *nigga* (and linguistic survival). In doing so *nigga* acts as a performative contradiction. The performative power of *nigga* erupts and disrupts the internalization of norms and subjection; hence as the racialized subject, previously interpellated by past meanings, Bigga challenges the sovereign power both of the injurious utterance and the sovereign power of interpellation through an ironic naming process.

To be clear, as an insurrectionary speech act *nigga* serves as a counter-puncher's strategy (Gates, 1988/2014), one in which the hailed subject fails to turn, fails to acknowledge, instead discursively rupturing the illocutionary effects of *nigger* by reassigning it to the psyche of the *original* speaking subject, its inventor. The consequence of this is a shift in sovereign power to "a set of practices in which power is actualized." (Butler, 1997a, p. 79). The shift occurs through the citationality of a naming process (a set of practices) by the racialized subject, which usurps the sovereign model of power instigated by the community of white men. And while this community of men did not literally *say nigger*, their inquiry of Bigga's relations can be read as a

symbolic courtroom in which Bigga is placed on trial for his skin color. In other words, their questioning of *why* the hottest white women on campus would choose him can be translated to why would the hottest white women on campus choose a *nigger*.

While Butler claims that the one who speaks hate speech deprives and subordinates, Bigga's reinvented (re)use of the word ironically reinstates his "performative power, a performative power that some see as a linguistic condition of citizenship… [a] necessary condition… in the public domain." (Butler, 1997a, p. 81). It is through ironic (re)naming, i.e, Signifyin(g) that a sovereign trope, *nigger*, becomes a trope of tropes, *nigga*, (Gates, 1988/2014). Through the performance of Signifyin(g), Bigga frustrates the inquiry of his peers insinuated in that historical 4th Dimension of segregationist, racist, anti-miscegenation discourses that disallow interracial intercourse. Use of the utterance *nigga* neutralizes the (understood, invisible) illocutionary consequence of *nigger*. In use *nigga* inaugurates the interpellated subject and creates a failed interpellation—while the subject is hailed through the imperative command (*nigger* is understood), it also "runs the risk" of a bringing that subject into language who counters with the very language used to subjugate. Simultaneously *nigga* as performative contradiction (with effects of its own) ruptures the historic injurious nature of *nigger* through its "reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer" (Butler, 1997a, p. 178). In the process of reinventing *nigger*, Bigga not only names himself as *nigga*; he renames himself as *that nigga*, a specific type of *nigga*, one worthy of the love and attention of white coeds. This ironic renaming performs what Gates calls a reversal; hence, in the process of naming, *that nigga* is "…unmoored from prior context, and enter[s] into the labor of self-definition" (Butler, 1997a, p. 163) while also (un)naming the now othered addressees.

That nigga creates a reversed injury, one in which the addressee [is] out of control, suffers a loss of context and suffers the disorientation of one's situation (Butler, 1997a, p. 4). The addresser-turned-addressed is thus "put in one's place… but such a place may be no place [at all]" (Butler, 1997a, p. 4). *That nigga* names the other as *not that nigga*, the injurious effects of which are a racialized and sexualized constitution of the subject. In this Signifyin(g) Monkey "trickster" moment, relational difference is created between the racialized speaking Subject and the Other, thus constituting both within the discourses of masculinity, race, sexuality and heteronormativity. Bigga's recognition and naming of himself constitutes the Other through emasculation, de-racialization, and de-sexualization, a reversal of James Baldwin's (1965) "Going to Meet the Man" in which the white male protagonist Jesse attains a symbolic sexualized manhood at a lynching he attends with his parents as a child. In this scene, Jesse watches in horrific fascination as one member of the lynch mob castrates the offender (Klotman, 1985). The injurious illocutionary force of *that nigga* is loose, in flux, and ambiguous. It is a linguistic "violence" absent of the physical violence that is often linked to inflammatory speech, such as in the title of Matsuda et al.'s (1993) *Words that Wound*. It is speech, not conduct, symbolically silencing the other through a process of disorientation and loss.

Sovereign speech is no longer in play through the speech of "the white man," a discourse which Bederman (1992) contends evolved in the late 19th Century as a response to the changing landscape post-slavery. "The white man" as a discourse was rooted in traits purported to be internal to the white Anglo Saxon, industrious, adventuresome, strong-willed, tenacious and *civilized*, a *racial* trait *inherited* by Anglo Saxons and other "advanced" white races (Bederman, 1992, p. 9). Through a campaign of racialization, masculinity, civility, and sexualization "the white man" as discourse subsequently othered anyone considered *not* or *non-white* (this includes

those "ethnic" whites who immigrated to the United States). As Bederman notes, woven within this discourse was the discourse of racial and gender hierarchy with respect to civilization. This linked white male supremacy to human evolution conflating the concept of civilization with "the white man." In so doing, ideologies such as protecting the white female became part of the psyche of white men who needed to not only uphold the virtue of white women but also the manliness of white men in contrast to the savagery and unmanliness of black men. Bederman (1992), in her reading of Wells' *Southern Horrors*, reveals how Wells invoked inversion in order to show that black men, imagined as savages and beasts, are the epitome of stoic, reserved manliness while the murderous white men were cowardly, unpassioned and savage. Wells (1892) contends that black men fell subject to the carnality of white women; hence, it was the white women who were lustful and wicked, not the victimized (and often innocent) black men. She further points out the uncivilized manner of the white women who, upon discovery of their illicit but often agreed upon affairs or fearing the birth of an interracial child, claimed rape and in extreme cases watched their lovers burn, as quoted in the example of Edward Coy of Texarkana in January, 1892: "When she came to apply the match Coy asked her if she would burn him after they had 'been sweethearting' for so long" (Wells, 1892, as cited in Royster, 2016, p. 54). Since white women were by nature the weaker sex, frail in body, mind and spirit, then it "made sense" that they would succumb to the wily character of the black man. Lynching, therefore, became institutionalized through the law, eugenics, psychology and the Christian church; hence, white men of the 1900's were constructed as "patriarchs, avengers, righteous protectors" (Bederman, 1992, p. 13). These historical regimes of truth continue to impact 21st Century sensibilities so much so that a group of white male college students felt it "their duty" to question Bigga's relations with several white women on campus some one-hundred-plus years later.

Likewise, these modern-day, young, white men instituted the same mob mentality. Through the discourses of "the white man"[56] solidified through cultural artifacts such as Chicago's 1893 Columbian exposition (Bederman, 1992), racialized traits of superiority and inferiority were supported by scientific and biological journals, and legal discourse—all of which justified the lynching of any black man believed to have defiled a white woman. The young white males who approach Bigga are justified in their questioning of him based on historical media discourse as well, which justified lynching as appropriate, necessary and manly. Black men were fabricated as natural rapists who succumbed to their baser natures and natural passions. Citing Wells, Bederman (1992) cites *The New York Times* and the *Providence Journal* as characterizing lynch mobs as maintaining a "quick and quiet demeanor… stern and firm behavior" (p. 14) thus characterizing the mob of white men as manly and in control. As well the *Evening Scimitar* writes,

> …patience under such circumstances is not a virtue. If negroes themselves do not apply the remedy without delay it will be the duty of those whom he has attacked to tie the wretch… to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Sts., brand him in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon him a surgical operation with a pair of tailor's shears" (Wells, 1892, as cited in Royster, 2016, p. 49).

Yet, in the year 2020, how might we account for the genealogy of race and more specifically racialized utterances in the ways that Foucault (1995) articulates: Western cultural practices which transitioned from sovereign power, e.g., institutions of slavery and Jim Crow which constructed particularized knowledges with respect to *nigger*; to disciplinary power, in which citizens (de)normalize race through insidious processes of "self-racialization," race

[56] I find it ironic that the phrase "the white man" continues to be in use during the 21st Century. "The white man" has been colloquialized to represent "the government," "the system," or any social, legal, political, economic institution of which blacks (or people of color) feel disenfranchised, disempowered, or simply left out. As Bederman (1992) shows the phrase "the white man," "…worked as a synecdoche…[it] simultaneously invoked the manly white males who were 'civilized' and 'civilization' itself." (p. 8).

languaging and Othering, e.g., the influx of social media, rap culture, and educational practices with respect to *nigga*? Based on historical discourses of the past, constructions of the racialized (white) subject[57] place the white male students in the role of protector, questioner, judge and jury, and the racialized (black) subject as weak, unmanly, lecherous. However, present-day ideologies about athleticism and black male athletes, sexual prowess and sexual freedom, as well as competing views about liberal ethics and philosophical liberalism, individuality, liberty and rights constitute the racialized subject as an amalgamation of past and present (and unknowable future?)— simultaneously sovereign and subordinated, free and (un)free (as well as not free), actor and acted upon during particular, contingent moments.

I'm that nigga! as speech act neutralizes centuries of oppression in one contingent moment as noted by Bigga, "They hated that shit!" Hence, the sovereignty of inflammatory speech is replaced by Signifyin(g) speech, an inversion much like Wells'(1892) use of inversion in her anti-lynching campaign. Wells' argument maintained that lynching, used erroneously as a tool to contain/constrain the lustful nature of black men, instead satisfied the lustful nature of white men, who through their own rapes and murders allowed their savage natures to rei(g)n free. Likewise, through Signifyin(g) Bigga is able to use the white mob's language (and/or thinking) against them. In the process of naming, *nigga* constitutes Bigga as the site of manliness, based on sexual prowess, hypermasculinity, and hyper-heterosexual behaviors[58]

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[57] Recent scholars of whiteness studies have explored whiteness as racialized, a sociological, economic, and cultural turn from previous notions that race studies was inclusive of people of color and excluded whites. See Applebaum (2016), Alcoff (2015), Butler, (2010), Guess (2006), Frankenberg (1993), Morrison, (1992), Roediger (1991), Du Bois (1890, 1920), Baldwin, (1963).

[58] Scholarship surrounding this shift in the black man as defiant, sexualized, heteronormatized, and above all, manly, focuses on the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *The Legend of Nigger Charley*. As Asim (2007) notes, "Nigger Charley…like Sweetback… is shown having sex while whites watch with a mixture of resentment and admiration." (p. 183). These films of the early and mid-seventies reflected on the screen a new image of black men (and women, e.g., *Cleopatra Jones*) who were sexually provocative and promiscuous, heroic and unafraid, who stood up to "the man" (a term which solidified itself in the 1890s according to Bederman, 1992).

thereby constituting the white mob as desexualized and emasculated; therefore, the inverse of Butler's (1997a) original statement applies in this instance, "sovereignty wanes where agency begins." Read yet another way "I'm *that* nigga" mirrors "(You) are not *that* (or *this*) *nigga*." It is through an examination of the usage of *that* in Bigga's speech that the shifting modes of relational power can be located. His declaration as *that nigga* versus *a nigga,* i.e., *I'm a nigga,* rejects the notion of epithet through the intersection of the y-z axes SBAE and BVE. Had the indefinite pronoun *a* been used, the host of meanings attached to his statement would be situated in a different set of political and social realms. However, it is strictly through the use of the demonstrative pronoun/determinate adverb *that,* which allows for the performativity of *nigga.* As determiner, *that* acts as a reference that is observed [or heard] by the speaker. If we are to apply the terminology of *that* as determiner, we must also contend that Bigga hears his own interpellative speech act. To continue, as demonstrative pronoun, *that* also refers to a specific thing previously mentioned, known or understood. In this case the citationality and iterability of *nigga* semantically loops back to *nigger* thus invoking Mooney's "I say it, you think it." In usage, *that* also singles out and ascribes distinctive features. For Bigga, these distinctive features are racialized hypersexuality and hypermasculinity in contrast to the white mob's (non)racialized hyposexuality and hypomasculinity. *That* as reference is assumed to be understood or familiar to the audience being addressed based on the vernacularity of BVE and SBAE. *That nigga,* as rhetorical substitution, is familiar to the audience, even in cases where this dislocates the addressed. Hence *nigga's* satirical, ironic and loose dimensions ritualize a continuum of contexts. As adverb, *that* refers to degrees of looseness or openness, as in the example, I'm not *that* hungry. In Bigga's speech as well *that* as adverb refers to the degree that Bigga is a *nigga* and conversely the degree to which his addressees are not *niggas.* Hence, *nigga,* with its

attached determiner, reveals a demonstration of Signifyin(g) which establishes multiple meanings; it breaks strict ideational usage of *nigger* through parody of the epithet while simultaneously supporting its usage as epithet.

In this "strange scene of love" Signifyin(g) (the doing in language) enables linguistic agency and survival of the interpellated subject while the original sovereign speakers are subordinated. Bigga's insurrectionary speech thus constructs the failed interpellation. Crossing the xyz axes of SAE, SBAE and BVE "*I'm that nigga*!" articulates the double(d) consciousness of Bigga as simultaneously recognizing and rejecting the unspoken, intended injury, one which he disrupts in an ongoing process of becoming through language. Bigga linguistically survives because of the survivability, through semantic looping, of *nigger*. Psychically, Bigga both accepts and rejects (turns towards and away from) his subordination. Yet his turn, read as the Greek word trope, disrupts the interpellation. His social and linguistic presence as *nigger* is upended by his newly vocalized social and linguistic presence as *nigga*. Read another way, "*I'm* that nigga" injures the addressee: "(*You*) are *not* that (or this) nigga." Read this way, Bigga's use of the first person present indicative tense makes this a statement of fact. Through his own ironic discursive act, he invests his body as the "historically specific imaginary ideal" (Butler, 1997a, p. 91) placing himself in subjectivation and thereby twisting the intended injury through his own recognition of his subject(hood) as the semantically looped *nigger-nigga*. However, in so doing he places limits and exclusions on the white mob, the subjectivated (racialized) Other. While Bigga is subjugated as *nigger* based on the white mob's repudiation of black male masculinity and heteronormativity in opposition to their white manly heteronormativity, the counterattack to this repudiation is an acceptance, dare I say acclamation, of discourses constructing black male sexualization. As early as the 1500s discourses in biology, psychology and religion, particularly

Christianity, determined that scantily clad non-Christianized, uncircumcised African men were promiscuous, sexually deviant, and lustful. During slavery, this served as justification for purchasing men with large genitals who, it was believed, had the ability to produce robust offspring.[59] This belief later became the justification for the lynching of innocent men who lusted after white women.[60] As illocution *nigger* has been psychically internalized as part of the "social regulation of psychic life" (Butler, 1997b, p. 167) as normative and normalized; however, it is through the trope ("turn") that this melancholic ambivalence (Butler, 1997b) has become and continues to be threatened/threatening. Per Freud, Butler (1997b) identifies melancholia: "…precisely the effect of unavowable loss… A loss prior to speech and declaration" (p. 170). It is not my contention here that we *do nigger,* yet it is through utterances such as *nigger* that the constitutive force of race is done. This unavowable loss is the consequence of being born into a discourse in which *nigger* as performative utterance *always, already* constitutes the subject. Signifying(g) as one of many possible responses/alternatives/substitutions to melancholia is the articulation of the psychic ambivalence of the African American who simultaneously accepts and rejects the performative nature of *nigger,* as well as its cousin *nigga*. Due to Bigga's discursive (re)construction of his body, sovereign power is no longer invested within the discursive act of the white mob. Much like Wells' (1892) antilynching campaign in which she utilizes the discourse of civilization to show the inverse of white American behavior to that of black Americans, Bigga inverts the sovereign epithet using it against the white mob and reinvigorating it for future unknowable possibilities (Butler, 1997a).

The psychical consequence of the racialized subject exists as a result of an (un)grievable loss which cannot be (re)captured (Butler, 1997b). It is a loss which was conceived at birth and

[59] These discourses applied to the identities of black females as well.

[60] I point to Baldwin's (1965) text "Going to Meet the Man" as an example of this.

prior to. Both Bigger and Bigga's final words articulate what Homi Bhaba (1992) calls melancholic discourse, which is a response to the "…congealment of a history of loss…" (Butler, 1997b, p. 169). This congealment sediments as internalization (Butler, 1997b) and projective disincorporation (Bhaba, 1992). Bigger's final epiphany is shared with Max,

> 'They wouldn't let me live and I killed… Maybe it ain't fair to kill… I didn't want to kill! But what I killed for, I *am*! What I killed for must've been good! I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em' (Wright, 1940/2005, p. 429).

This ironic epiphany as well as Bigga's Signifiyin(g) performative are both "psychic tropes of internality… a set of spatializing tropes for psychic life, domiciles of preservation and shelter as well as arenas for struggle and persecution… [these] constitute some of the fabular discursive effects [of melancholia]" (Butler, 1997b, p. 171).

Hence melancholia draws the distinction between the psyche and external forces which press upon and regulate the psyche (Butler, 1997b). However unlike Freud, Bhaba identifies melancholic loss as "a mental constellation of revolt" (p. 65). Hence, while Freud explores melancholia as a psychic space in which the melancholic berates himself and/or grieves a loss viewed by state authority as ungrievable (Butler, 1997b), Bhaba (1992) contends that the "…address…in melancholic discourse—when it 'incorporates the loss or lack in its own body, displaying its own weeping wounds—is also an act of 'disincorporating' the authority of the Master" (p. 65). Bigger's final epiphany frightens Max so much so that he falls silent, averts his eyes, shifts nervously and leaves without looking back at Bigger, even when Bigger calls to him. Likewise the group of male students are enraged by Bigga's final statement as they go about their day. In both cases, the addressed subject is silenced, and it is within this silence that we see a "*new* form of agency and identification… that contest[s]… the sententiousness of rationalist

agency (Bhaba, 1992, p. 59); the sovereign agency of the Master has been both usurped and surrendered. "I'm that *nigga*!" is an open wound. "I'm that *nigga*…"

> …says: All these bits and pieces in which my history is fragmented, my culture piecemeal, my identifications fantasmatic and displaced; these splittings of wounds of my body are also a form of revolt. And they speak a terrible truth. In their ellipses and silences they dismantle your authority: the vanity of your mimetic narratives and your monumental history… my revolt is to face the Life of literature and history with the scraps and fragments that constitute its double, which is living as surviving, meaning as melancholia. (Bhaba, 1992, p. 66)

Chapter 5: The Post-Colonial Nigger

…it could be because her body trapped in a racial imaginary, trapped in disbelief—code for being black in America… —Claudia Rankine

> ***July 2014, the post-colonial nigger****: My friend and I are co-teaching a summer course at Teachers College. We are planning an activity for the next day's class in which we will model the telling of a moment of consciousness. My friend will explain the exercise and its purpose, and I will be the first to share a memory. I tell my friend that I will be sharing a childhood memory—the first time I heard and experienced the shock of the word nigger. She is hesitant. She needs to process it. She is concerned that it will be too shocking? too off-putting for the students. I rebuff. They're adults. It's a graduate class. It is my memory. She tables the discussion, let's talk tonight. Later, we talk, and I choose to tell the story anyway. I am thanked by a student for sharing such a powerful "story." After class my colleague-friend says that at first she was concerned but the moment I began speaking she realized that she'd forgotten how good a storyteller I was. But I wasn't telling "story" as she defined it, I was witnessing memory.*

When I was young, elders would say "don't tell stories;" my grandmother would scold, "It's not nice to tell stories, Joyce." My father, when knowingly defending his friend's ability to fabricate tall tales would comment, "Oh… he's just tellin' stories." In our dailyspeak "don't tell stories" translated to "don't lie, don't fib." As a child one also couldn't say the word lie when one wanted to point out a falsehood of another child (never an adult), the appropriate

nomenclature was "telling stories. " A storyteller was one who fabricated, manufactured a counterfeit truth, in essence, a liar. It wasn't until one was a teenager or young adult, in the company of one's peers and far from the ears of parents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors, that one could use the accusatory, pejorative term lying. My friend, peer, colleague and co-instructor unknowingly called me a liar, a flashback to my eight-year-old self, the one taught not to "tell stories," *but I wasn't tellin' stories, I was witnessing memory*.

Morrison (1984) tells us, "Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way" (p. 385). For Morrison it is "the pieces (and only the pieces)… which demand… respect… attention… trust" (p. 386), and it is with these pieces that she is able to create. In all actuality my piece is not the word *nigger*, a word I barely heard, would not have heard, had it not been for my mother's hand. My piece is the hand itself, which opened suddenly, hung in mid-air, releasing its connection to me. It was not until then, in that moment when she let go my hand, that I heard or realized or ingested the word *nigger*. The "moment of consciousness," the one which my friend was hoping to "model" to the class (although in hindsight I am not sure one can model consciousness), lay "…*in medias res* from in-between…" (Bhaba, 1991, p. 57) some forty-odd years later. My "moment of consciousness" was not *nigger* itself, it was the shock of my mother's sacrilegious betrayal. It was only for a second, maybe less, but it was just enough for my own realization to sink in—there was something out there greater than me, a simple word which altered my mother's gait, the contours of her face, her hands. Realizing her own faux pas, she snatched at my fingers. Her grip tightened, squeezed, suffocated. She yanked me forward, her hand now an

alien force commanding and imposing rather than guiding and leading. It was and wasn't my mother's hand. This is the piece that motivates me, from which I can create.

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My intention throughout Part I is to present one theoretical paradigm of language practice through which I plan to interrogate *nigger-nigga* in use. Hence while Gates (1988/2014) develops his theory of Signifyin(g) for the purposes of constructing an African American literary analysis, Signifyin(g) allows me to think through a type of speech act specific to a community of speakers who have historically been constructed as the subject-object of white, Westernized discourses. And while Signifyin(g) does not fall within the realm of speech act theory, I interpret it as

> …one of the salutary features of postmodern theory [which] suggest[s]… the disjunctive, fragmented, displaced agency of those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that forces one to think outside the certainty of the sententious" (Bhaba, 1991, p. 56).

By placing Signifyin(g) in tandem with Butler's (1997a) theorizing of excitable speech, I am conceptualizing it as both performance and performative, a type of reversed or contradictory interpellative enacted by the subject in subjugation. Through her marriage of Austin and Althusser, Butler gives me the language to discuss Signifyin(g) as a speech act in which a community of racially subjugated speakers might come to use the very same speech used to subjugate in a different way, for different purposes, possibly and/or potentially as a site of agency. For Butler, it is necessary to locate hate speech within the first and second dimensions—how a speech act brings a subject into being and how, through speech, the subject reiterates its own discursive identity (as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 165).

For me, the dimensionality of Signifyin(g) requires an examination of a possible third and fourth dimension. Signifyin(g) as speech act is semantic, pragmatic, and rhetorical, specific to a

community of marginalized speakers which through its rhetorical reiteration brings the subjugated subject-object or object-subject (Bhaba would say postcolonial, Spivak would say subaltern[61]) into being in unimaginable, incomplete, conflicting ways, ways that *do not necessarily* replace and/or evacuate sovereign speech but instead lay "…outside the liberatory rhetoric of idealism and beyond the sovereign subject…" (Bhaba, 1991, p. 56). Signifyin(g) expresses openness and ambiguity (i.e., its paradigmatic and rhetorical dimensions), as opposed to closure and certainty. Thus, my expansion of Gates' (1988/2014) Signifyin(g) is meant to revisit his theory through the practices of language itself. In doing so, my intention is to examine Signifyin(g) as more than a "counter-puncher's strategy" in literary analysis; my intention is to examine Signifyin(g) in *excess*, as *excitable*, in order to disassemble binary configurations, which close off further interrogations of how, when, why and in what way an utterance such as *nigga* performatively acts rhetorically.

Additionally, I wed Gates to Butler in order to reposition Gates' sovereign speaking subject. While Gates primarily focuses on the structure of language itself within a community of speakers, I am also thinking of the historical discourses which constitute the racialized subject, and more to the point, how these historical discourses have become internalized. Gates's (1988/2014) Signifyin(g) places the speaker at the center, in which the "…speech act is performed by a subject, performed on another subject, or part of an address that one subject makes to another" (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 165). Hence, rather than sovereign subject, I

[61] For more on Homi Bhaba and Gayatri Spivak's references see the following sources. I will acknowledge these theories in later parts of the dissertation.
Bhaba, H. K. (1991). Postcolonial authority and postmodern guilt. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson & P. Treichler (Eds.) *Cultural studies*. (pp. 56 – 68). Taylor & Francis Group
Spivak, G. C. (1988) Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.) *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. (pp. 271-313). Macmillan Education: Basingstoke

am grappling with Gates' community of speakers as a "belated metalepsis," i.e., the effect of a discourse that precedes them. As such Signifyin(g) signifies a failure to turn, a troping of the Ideological address (be it verbal, textual, aural or virtual) and, ultimately, it is an appropriation of the discourses in which one is constituted (Bell, 1999).

I acknowledge that the very use of "subject" within poststructural theory potentially poses a problem for the racialized subject, as this term is fraught with the gaze of the West; hence the very act of becoming through speech is always, already inflected by the discourses of the authority, thus producing for the racialized subject what Gates identifies as a (re)doubling of speech, a speech representative of the double(d) consciousness of the racialized subject that is both of and counter to sovereign speech. Bhaba (1991) identifies this type of counter speech as a third space which "…does not simply revise or invert the dualities but *revalues* the ideological bases for division and difference." (p. 58), yet this is a space from which the subaltern cannot escape (or can it? I continue to grapple with this). I acknowledge as well, scholarship that contends that poststructural theory erases identity categories, dismantles critical engagement or action research, and disrupts theories specific to marginalized communities. While I am essentially (re)defining Signifyin(g) through Butler's articulation of the failed interpellative or the performative contradiction, I liken this to

> … a tremendous articulateness… syncopated with the African drumbeat into an American postmodernist product: there is no subject expressing originary anguish here, but a fragmented subject, pulling from past and present, innovatively producing a heterogenous product…" (West, as cited in Bhaba, 1991, p. 58).

Marrying Signifyin(g) to poststructural theory parallels the semantic looping (Jacobs, 2012) of *nigga* and *nigger*. In the words of Kennedy (1999-2000) *nigger* (*nigga*) is a truly American

word; it is a word that traversed the Transatlantic Passage, only to arrive, take root and thrive on United States soil and in the U.S. psyche.

In my transition from Signifyin(g) to post-Signifyin(g) to poststructural Signifyin(g) I am grappling with the Butlerean problem of how the racialized subject reiterates "the discursive conditions of its own emergence" (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 165), conditions, I contend, that are both material and linguistic. Through a poststructural paradigm I question the ways in which Signifyin(g) "…speaks from a moment *in medias res,* from in-between unequal and often antagonistic sites without the certainty of imagining what emerges or happens at the end" (Bhaba, 1991, p. 57). In other words, what forces are at play when one (re)names oneself the very inflammatory term used to oppress, even when that term is used within different conditions and contexts? For me, Signifyin(g) potentially incorporates a fourth dimension, a dimension in which the subjugated subject has psychically internalized the historical discourses of the West, reiterating these unequal, antagonistic sites for one's own materialization. Bhaba (1991) tells me that this process of social enunciation or "enunciative agency" emphasizes

> …the relation between temporality and meaning in the *present* of utterance, in the performativity of a history of the present… a more *dialogic* process that attempts to track the processes of displacement and realignment that are already at work… (p. 57).

Theorizing Gates' Signifyin(g) through a Butlerean lens is meant to explore this dialogic process through rhetorical troping while also acknowledging the albeit incomplete specificity of the psyche of the marginalized, oppressed racialized subject, constituted and constituting through the very language meant to oppress. Ironically this is the language (and theory) which I also cannot step out of, the very language that Gates (1987) questions when he asks,

> …can we as critics escape a mockingbird relation to theory, one destined to be derivative, often to the point of parody… can we escape the supposed racism of so many theorists…

> aren't we justified in being suspicious of a discourse in which blacks are signs of absence?" (p. xviii).

Bhaba (1991) tells me that "the strategic objective of being 'outside' is not to be outside theory but to be its exorbitant object, to overcome the pedagogical predictability of the sententious professor…" (p. 57). But what had I "overcome" if my memory was reduced to mere story? My friend's "pedagogical predictability" rationalized and foreclosed my memory using traditional forms of knowledge; I was linguistically made as subject-object or object-subject. Yet my memory is what Bhaba (1991) identifies as a "time-lag," a space outside of the sententious, outside of the need for closure, a liminal, "…iterative, interrogative space produced in the interruptive overlap between symbol and sign…" (p. 59). Bhaba defines this time-lag as having a "descriptive history," based on a "productive, hybrid 'betweenness' (p. 60).

Hence, while my friend was focused on function and intention, my focus was on signification (Bhaba, 1991) and meaning. Rather than memory, I was articulating a rememory, a return to memory, a revisitation of memory (Morrison, 1984), an act which disrupted linearity, rationalization, and my friend's Western, essentialist idea of modelling a moment of consciousness. Rather than step outside theory, I attempted to relocate, reinscribe and reappropriate narrative theory (the purpose of the exercise was meant as a segue into narrative theory) through an affective experience of subjugation, domination and oppression, one that was non-sententious, one that I rememorize because of my mother's hand. My psychic wound, the wound that I wear on the surface of my skin like an open sore (Fanon, as cited in Bhaba, 1991) is the discovery and loss of my own body, of the realization that out there in the world was something bigger than my own self-absorbed subjectivity, that out there in the world was something that could separate me from my mother, that could sever our bond. One word… and she dropped my hand.

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In hindsight my friend was correct. I am a good storyteller because that is what I told the class—"a story." My heightened consciousness or melancholic condition was not due to the loss of an object of identification (Freud, as cited in Butler, 1997). My irresolvable grief is/was the discovery that I am the lost object, the objectified subject—the *nigger*. Hence, much like the melancholic of Bhaba (1991) and Fanon, my body is the loss, my "consciousness" was "at a loss;" it is a loss into which the racialized subject is born, through which the racialized subject becomes (Butler, 1997b). There is no referent, no object, except for the racialized subject itself enmeshed in discursive fields of subjugation. It is a loss for which Bhaba (1991) comments that the linear, rationality of sententious thought does not accommodate (although it is within this melancholic condition that revolt is possible). But in my telling of story, my "witnessing of the past," I told the class "what happened,"—that is, what I think I remember, not my rememory (Morrison, 1987/2004). I told them the whole, not the piece, not the piece that I respect, attend to, trust.

Chapter 6: Mappings, or A Word about Methodology and Hands

You can't use an old map to explore a new world. —Albert Einstein

In the introduction of Part I, I indicated that I wanted to explore the 40-year expanse between my mother's hand and my own; in other words, I want to explore the historically inflected discursive transformations that have caused an evolution of *nigger* as illocutionary epithet to *nigga* as insurrectionary, fluid, ambiguous speech with illocutionary and perlocutionary effects. As well, I am interrogating my own (in)abilities to hear *nigga* as it bounces around my English classroom, my workplace, my home life, and my community while I simultaneously rememory my first "hearing" of *nigger*. Throughout Part I, I weave the Origin of Words myth by Williams (1991), the theoretical perspectives of Gates (1988/2014) and Butler (1997a, 1997b) with rememory (Morrison, 1984, 1987/2004), experience (Scott, 1991), and narrativizing (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011) in order to situate (as if this is ever fully achievable) and contextualize my theoretical framing while also exploring the shifting psychological and psychical impact of *nigger-nigga* contemporaneously. It is Foucault (2010) who tells me that we must not refer to discourse solely based on its "…distant presence of origin, but treated as and when it occurs" (p. 25); hence, my "treatment" (interpretive analysis) of the utterance "as and

when it occurs" is reflected in the aside[62] (St. Pierre, 2000), layered tellings[63] (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011), story-truth and happening-truth[64] (O'Brien, 1990, as cited in Schaafsma and Vinz, 2011, p. 74-5), pastiche[65] (Schaafsma and Vinz, 2011) and writing stories[66] (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005). Relationally, my rememory of my mother's hand serves as the metaphor for my hearing and not hearing *nigger-nigga* "as and when it occurs." Her hand serves as the document of a personal, micro-history situated within a macro-history of racialized language, subjectivity, and power, which I entered (was born into, became conscious of) while holding (and

[62] St. Pierre (2000) defines the aside as a "centuries-old theatrical convention, as a textual space where… 'part of the actor's lines [are] supposedly not heard by others on the stage and intended only for the audience'" (p. 271). St. Pierre uses the aside to speak to the reader without the rest of the text hearing her. For me, the aside works in conjunction with the other pieces in the text. The dual performance of the aside is its blurring of fictional reality and actual reality. The actors who "do not hear" the speaker, ironically also "hear" the speaker as it is part of the actual reality of the performance. Unlike St. Pierre's interpretation, the aside works for me as a blurring of fictional reality and actual reality in which, while speaking to the reader, the text performs as if it does not hear (fictional reality) while actually knowing or hearing (actually reality). I define the aside in this way for two reasons: 1) it works in conjunction with my observational methods, defined in this section as a mix of eavesdropping, overhearing and listening. 2) The historical reality of African Americans' survival often depended on and continues to rely on "not hearing what was actually heard." An example of this includes the "house nigger" who served, labored, slept in the plantation house and pretended not to hear conversations at the dinner table, in the bedroom and elsewhere in the house or on the plantation. In a material sense the house nigger is the physical manifestation of the aside—s/he is present absent, seen but not heard while also heard but not seen, simultaneously useful and useless as s/he is "cast aside." Contemporary instances of this along the SBAE and BVE axes are labelled as ear hustling, bein' nosy or (in Philly vernacular) newsy.

[63] Layered tellings are "a stitched together boundary between the explicit and the implicit, in the interstices of what is said and left unsaid, and certainly in the spaces of silence, in the assumed, in the unquestioned. One story generates further stories." (Schaafsma and Vinz, 2011, p. 16). I layer the telling of my first instance with *nigger* by revisiting and retelling the rememory through varying lenses and perspectives.

[64] Schaafsma and Vinz (2011) identify Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* as an example of metanarrative in which, through the narrator's telling, O'Brien complicates observation, memory and the construction of "truth." Quoting from the short story "Good Form" they highlight "…story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth…" (p. 75). I use this terminology to represent the (in)ability to (re)create the past (or present) as it "occurred" based on the fragmentary, incomplete nature of language and its inability to present a static, universal Truth or reality in one clear, concise, linear form. Given my Butlerean and Foucauldian influences, "truth" can only be partial based on the incompleteness of language, the shifting of subject position and the contingent nature of experience.

[65] I use the term pastiche as Schaafsma and Vinz (2011) define it, as an interaction of multiple data. "…pastiche is built on intertextuality. 'Each text acts on the other so that texture results. The effect is kinetic, giving a dynamic quality and a sense of immediacy as the separate pieces deliver new meaning…" (p. 110)

[66] See Richardson, L. & St. Pierre, E.A. (2005) "Writing: A Method of Inquiry" which discusses the writing story as a space in which the writer-researcher incorporates and/or writes about one's life outside of the qualitative research process and product as a way to contextualize qualitative inquiry, research and writing in what has often been legitimized as a separate activity of daily life.

subsequently not holding) her hand. I ended Part I focusing on her hand, the piece from which I can create; this is where my methodology begins.

In the *Untitled* photograph of my mother (see Supplemental Image), I want to imagine that my son, the photographer, captured her in rapture. Perhaps she is in thought or preparing to wash the neverending amass of dishes that somehow finds its way into my sink, or perhaps she is just resting, her 84-year old self taking a moment of reprieve from the chaos of the time. What struck me initially was the beauty of the photo (while I simultaneously agonized over the pile of dishes, the dingy yellowed tile, the spot on the door), and my son's eye in-the-moment as he documented the sanctity of an everyday woman in an everyday space. When I showed my mother this image her first comment was "Oh my god, look at all the wrinkles in my hand." But those wrinkles mark time, age, evolution, discontinuous histories. Did she ever imagine using those hands to pull the lever for Barack Obama, only to witness Donald Trump in office eight years later? Born in 1936 what does it mean to (un)imagine not voting? Did she ever think she'd be quarantined while also Zooming and texting with friends? What are her worries when she sees images of young black males on TV? (I am reminded of a phone call we had when, after seeing the now infamous image of Trayvon Martin, she exclaimed, "He looks like Tsulu!") Or maybe she is in supplication, in prayer; I often hear her praising the Lord, her hallelujahs reverberating through our non-religious home while she gives thanks for another day. Yet, while she focuses on the wrinkles in this image, I focus on "the silent murmuring… the tiny, invisible text that runs between and sometimes collides… (Foucault, 2010, p. 27).

I have found that traditional methods of inquiry do not necessarily "fit" the poststructural orientations I have presented in Part I, nor do these methods and theoretical frame necessarily

"complement" the study of one historically situated epithet such as *nigger-nigga*. The commonsense assumption that language is transparent and expresses already existing facts does not account for the "plurality of language and the impossibility of fixing meaning once and for all." (Weedon, 1997, p. 82). Through the lens of poststructural theory, language offers a range of meanings, outcomes, subjectivities and experiences that are "vulnerable at a particular moment depend[ing] on the discursive power relations within which they are located." (Weedon, 1997, p.82); hence, it is through language that subjectivity is constructed as opposed to the commonsense belief that language erupts from a "conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject" (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). Instead, poststructural theory contends that language "…is not the expression of unique individuality' [but the ways in which] it constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific" (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). As such subjectivity is "…a site of disunity and conflict, central to processes of political change and to preserving the status quo" (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). This fluidity of subjectivity, according to Weedon, is constructed through language,

> … the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested… it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed* (p. 21).

The historical, cultural, political and social usage of *nigger-nigga* then is based on the situated, contextualized instance in which it is spoken and the multiple positions of the subjects(s) (both speaker and listener/hearer/audience).

The plurality of language as a basic premise of poststructural theory as well as the temporary, unfixed, possibility of multiply shifting meanings call into question the potential rigidity of traditional qualitative research methods and subsequent presumptions about qualitative concepts such as authenticity and truth. Through a poststructural lens, multiple

"truths" can exist simultaneously in one moment "specific to the discourses within which [these] are produced." (Weedon, 1997, p. 82). Additionally, through a poststructural lens there are multiple "truths" which contradict, complement and intersect simultaneously. "T/truth" is malleable, shifting, fragmentary (ironically if there were only one Truth, with a capital T, there would only be one definition, understanding and "use" of *nigga*). Hence, I frame this research through a poststructural lens based on the fleeting, unfixed, plurality of the utterance *nigga* itself, and the ways that surrounding discourses and specific materialities of differing socio-cultural-economic contexts construct varying meanings, interpretations and subject positions. My intentions in this dissertation are not solely based on commonsense articulations of *nigga* as an utterance which can only be "used" by a particular racialized group of individuals, as this situates *nigga* within the humanist construction of speaker-centered language ownership and practice.[67] Instead, I am thinking about "use" and in what historicized, situated contexts usage is allowable, permissible, desirable (or not) based on existing competing discourses and power relations. Put another way: how do varying, competing, conflicting interpretations of "use" allow for particular forms of speech in particular contexts over others? I am also interested in *how nigga* has come to be situated (or not situated) within particular discourses. Examining "commonsense" societal articulations of whom can and cannot "say" and/or "use" *nigga* is not my primary concern as "the universal explains nothing—it is there to be explained" (Williams, 1999); however, as a local, daily practice, I am interested in the ruptures and/or discontinuities, which, in specific contexts, make certain statements "false."

[67] It should be noted that I am in no way disavowing the commonsense notion that *nigga* is appropriate for particular groups over others, I am merely opening up the discussion for further analysis of *nigga* that *moves* (i.e., post-, as in poststructural and postcolonial) this conception. Moving beyond is specific to exploring new terrain in language and is not meant to be a temporal "moving past" or a quick fix as in "moving away from." Instead, through a poststructural orientation, I am contending that there are multiple possibilities for exploring, discussing and understanding *nigga* and that through shifting subjectivities, multiple interpretations can (and should) exist.

The richness of *nigger-nigga* as a word that "acts" rhetorically and semantically, syntagmatically and paradigmatically in unimaginable ways was the premise for Part I as a means to expound upon speech act theory as a theoretical lens through which to examine *nigger-nigga*. As reiterated in the conclusion to Part I, I have theoretically placed Gates (1988/2014) in tandem with Butler (1997a, 1997b) in order to establish my analysis of *nigga* as speech act of the subject as well as a discursive act with constitutive elements. By analyzing *nigger-nigga* through the theoretical lens of Signifyin(g), performativity and semantic looping, my interests lie in opening up a space in which *nigga* can be examined based on its illocutionary and perlocutionary functions within/as part of American English. This in no way is meant to diminish or dismiss the explosive, volatile and violent aspect of *nigga* (i.e., *nigger,* as part of the semantic loop), nor is it my intention to argue for or against *nigga* as acceptable or unacceptable in natural language (this is based on my own shifting subjectivity). While I acknowledge the affective element of *nigga* as an utterance that elicits a plethora of emotional and/or physical responses, I also acknowledge that scholarship with/in Higher Education, including but not limited to pedagogy, policy, and curriculum/instruction is fraught with ambiguity about how and when *nigger-nigga* should be cited, quoted, read, discussed, addressed, or considered as sayable and/or unsayable; this is the "intention" of Part II. I do not offer answers. Given that I am acknowledging the poststructural rejections of "meanings" as universal (and thus able to be "found" based on the researcher's "discovery"), my conclusion will not consist of a "findings" section, nor does my research allow for replication in any sense. My poststructural orientations suggest that there are multiple possibilities (not necessarily conclusions) which are unfixed,

malleable, and constructed based on the current discourses that "govern" a particular historicized moment.[68]

The layered telling of my first experience[69] with *nigger* infuses my dissertation because it is the starting point of my historical timeline. It is one of many multiply fragmented silent murmurings beneath the continuity of historicized racial discourse which is predicated upon discourses of the (pseudo)Sciences and Social Sciences, such as Eugenics, Biology, Law, Psychology, Sociology… So what of the Humanities, such as Philosophy? English? Art? And how do particular discourses impact the teaching of English? While the historical beginning of *nigger* is documented as 1619, for the purposes of this dissertation, I am primarily focusing on contemporary usage within the 20th and 21st Centuries, from my mother's hand to my own. My use of historical documents as indicated in Part I, such as the Mississippi Vagrancy Law of 1866 or Ida B. Wells' documentation in *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all Its Phases* and *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States,* 1892-1893-1894 (Royster, 2016), is meant to demonstrate the ways that historical discourses of the past continue to influence usage in the present. However, I contextualize use through the Butlearean-Gatesean intersections of performative Signifyin(g), subjectivity and the psyche through the Foucauldian-inspired lens of discourse analysis (I will return to this later in this section). As evident in Part I, I am weaving together historical material, present day media imagery and texts,

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[68] More than anything, this dissertation is a thought-experiment, but then again, what dissertation isn't? I continue to grapple with Foucault and his theories. I continue to grapple with his language, thought-process, and conceptualizations. With time my understandings of Foucault and his concepts will evolve; however, for the purposes of this dissertation I identify my interpretation of his theories as "Foucault-lite" and I primarily enter into and access Foucault through other writers, (see Chris Weedon, 1997; Glyn Williams, 1999; Arriba-Allyon and Walkerdine, 2017).

[69] My conceptualization of experience derives from Joan Scott's (1991) definition in "The Evidence of Experience." For Scott, experience must be understood based on "the relationships between discourse, cognition and reality, the relevance of the position or situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge." (p. 783). I will return to this concept later in the dissertation.

literature, observations, conversations and my own reflexive writings; thus, I have chosen a corpus of statements (Foucault, 2010) which both constitutes and problematizes use. In so doing, I sought (am seeking) to conceptualize (rather attempt to conceptualize) an alternative relationship to use,[70] particularly within the realm of contemporary speech practices and the teaching, production, and study of English as an academic discipline. In Part II I offer my situated, biased interpretation(s) of an "archive" of documents, experiences, observations, and statements within a specific, local context in my attempt to interrogate, think about, probe (not necessarily answer) the following:[71]

- What processes and/or systems exist that allow particular forms of use of *nigga* in particular contexts over others?
- In what ways have discourses governing erudite knowledge come to regulate—or not—local subjugated knowledges with respect to *nigga?*
- If the classroom is the potential space for critical intellectualism, then in what ways—if any—is it possible for *nigger/nigga* to participate in this process?
- ~~How might we "create space" for *nigger-nigga* in the English Literature classroom with an understanding that its construction is a function of the American psyche?~~
- ~~What systems are in play both inside and outside of the classroom which allow *nigga* to exist (or not) in specific historically contingent discourses and what forms of regulation dictate this?~~

[70] I define use/usage as: habitual or customary practice, especially as creating a right, obligation, or standard (Oxford English Dictionary)

[71] As per the format of the traditional Qualitative-oriented researched and written dissertation I have placed these here as my "research questions;" however, because my dissertation is a thinking piece in which I am theorizing, conjecturing and interrogating possibilities in speech and language practices, these questions continue to shift.

- ~~How might we account for a genealogy of statements which influence *use* in the ways that Foucault (2010) articulates: Western socio-cultural practices which transitioned from sovereign power (i.e., nigger) to fragmentary, fluid forms of disciplinary power, in which citizens (de)normalize racialized language through insidious processes of "self-racialization," race languaging and Othering, (e.g., social media, rap culture) while simultaneously appealing to "State-sanctioned" institutions in which concepts such as *nigger* were created?~~

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I began this section indicating my grapplings with methodology. To add, I am also ambivalent about my research questions, those questions which I must adhere to as per conventional humanist qualitative research and that I must commit to with the goal of finding, uncovering or determining "answerable" conclusive evidence. Instead, I perceive these as "thought-projections" rather than "research questions." My research questions have proven problematic as my own subjectivity has shifted throughout this process, from proposal writing and rewriting (I could go back to my Research in Writing course), IRB, "data collection," documenting and writing up "fieldnotes," "data analysis" and now, dissertation writing. These questions were written prior to "data collection," prior to the current issues of the year 2020, on different days, during different times, and thus they entered the project based on my differing subject positions. I am somehow wedded to these (as well as others that are included in previous iterations), yet the appropriately trained qualitative-narrative-poststructural researcher knows that this (im)possibility overwhelms and complicates. Some of these I strikethrough rather than delete. I am interested in both process and product (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) in my

writing; hence, to delete would only be a focus on product (and what is the dissertation but a (by)product of a process?). These remain within this product in honor of the process—of the constant redirection in my thinking, my writing, my analysis and inquiry. My ambivalence with my research questions stems from my difficulty in "specify[ing] the different concepts that enable us to conceive of discontinuity" (Foucault, 2010, p. 5). Like Foucault (2010) (as well as many others) I admit to my own stumblings, insecurities, and confusions. I open with these in Part I by introducing the child who witnessed the illocutionary power of *nigger*. It is in Part I that I also weave in my multiple subject positions and how these impact the writing of this dissertation. Yet there are integral parts of this dissertation that continue to confound me. I am unsettled with these and as I move into Part II, I am grappling with how to "match my questions to my methods to my analysis." I turn to Foucault (2010) who tells me:

> 'I am neither this nor that…I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police[72] to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality[73] when we write' (p. 17).

Writing is discovery; it is an act which allows me to think through, try out and discover my albeit incomplete and shifting interiority. I turn now to my methods, through which I will construct my methodology.

The vulnerability I felt in the moment when my mother released my hand is reminiscent of the vulnerability I feel in my grapplings with methodology. Foucault (2010) maintains that

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[72] Based on the current climate in which I am writing, it frightens me "to leave it to our bureaucrats and our police…" considering that our bureaucrats and police are operating as if we live in a police state, one in which the "papers" of people of color are stamped with language such as "illegal," "deportee," "thug," "criminal" and whose bodies and lives are not grievable (Butler, 2016).

[73] Again, I question the morality of our current bureaucrats and police. I cannot subscribe to Foucault's statement to "spare us their morality" as it is their subjective (im)morality that shapes and is shaped by discourses of racism, segregation, hate and violence—all of which impels me to write. NOTE: While we have moved past the terror of the 45th president by electing our 46th president, I do not "trust" that our newly elected bureaucratic leaders can end centuries of -isms, as evidenced by the recent deaths of unarmed individuals (especially children) by the police.

history is no longer a memorization of the past, in which the document served as "inert material" that reconstituted what men said or did (p. 7). Instead he contends that "in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*… it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities." (p. 7). Concurrent with the process of obtaining a graduate degree were/are the family hiccups, as well as local, national and international events, shifts and changes. All of these occurrences were much like Foucault's (2010) silent murmurings, which have shifted, altered, infiltrated my subject positions so much so that I have questioned my own research, my goals and intentions, my purpose, my program, myself. Yet while writing this section traditionally titled Methodology (which, through my poststructural orientations, is an impossible attempt to construct a viable framework or map of the procedures I used to "collect," "identify," "code and categorize," process and analyze my "data") the count for COVID cases in the United States had risen, then president Trump was tweeting White Power, and there were fires in the Artic region. My monument, the metaphor that I place in relation to other documents to form a totality, is my son's photo-documentation of my mother, a COVID photo (because we now live in a pre-COVID and post-COVID era). I begin with this situated event, placing it within the theory of Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* because it is through the metaphorical inclusion of my mother's hand (or hands in general for that matter) that I am able to construct my methods and methodology. Partially bent and wizened, fingernails a burnt burgundy color, silver and lapis lazuli as adornment, her fingers are the extensions, the limbs necessary for holding, gripping, latching, releasing. It is through the hand that one accesses and writes the world.

6.1 Data: The Fingers

Experience and Rememory

My mother's loosened grip caused me to "pay attention" to something I would not have attended to otherwise— the boys' saunter, their smugness. Yet in my rememory it is my mother's hand, the blue of the sky, the width of the street, and (reflexively) my own shocked confusion that appear truer than actuality. Similarly, qualitative research requires a type of focus and attention that goes beyond participant-observation and fieldnotes. Attention (moving forward I will employ the qualitative terminology ***observation***), like Scott's (1991) discussion of experience, is both visual and visceral constituting "…a domain of 'sensuous experience' (a prediscursive reality directly felt, seen and known) that cannot be subsumed by language" (Stansell, cited in Scott, 1991, p. 786). My articulation of what I was seeing, hearing, noticing, feeling, sensing is only made possible through language, yet I am never fully able to articulate the sensuousness of this experience. Instead, I am only able to make sense of the past through repetition, layering and story-truth. Scott (1991) highlights the integral connection between discourse, history, language, subject constitution and experience, noting that

> subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual… Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment (p. 793).

I include experience and rememory as "data points" in order to interrogate multiple possibilities—the vulnerability of the subject as constructed through language, my own subject positions as these shift and fluctuate, and discursive strands of history invisible to History's constructed continuities.

Observations

In order to actually "hear," I had to loosen my grip on what I found appropriate or acceptable as language and simply allow students (and colleagues) to speak in their voice, on their terms. I had to become the 8-year old child, curious and wondering, I had to resort to Williams (1991) portrayal of the mortal, rather than the priest-turned-god who, especially in education, corrects, educates, censors. Borrowing from Brinkmann (2014) I label these moments "instances," "…a breakdown, a situation, people interacting, discourses mobilized, material structures… 'phenomenon… that evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently for use by cultural members'" (p. 723). As in Part I, Part II will include multiple instances in which *nigger-nigga* was uttered, mentioned, discussed, stated or implied, instances in which, through my loosened grip I paid attention to the linguistic and material effects as well as my own wonder (MacLure, 2013). MacLure (2013) offers alternative ways of entering into qualitative inquiry; hence, she articulates wonder as an

> entangled relation of data-and-researcher…which allows for both the discernment of order and pattern *and* is attuned to the lively excess that always exceeds capture by structure and representation, leaving openings where something new, or something else, might issue (p. 228- 229).

While researchers, through the exercise of data collection and categorization, attempt to orderly categorize, label, and classify their diverse, unruly, chaotic "collection," there are spaces for "…wonders and marvels that lie on the boundaries of knowledge…" (p. 229) so that we can "…experiment with order and disorder as new connections spark among words, bodies, objects, and ideas" (p. 229).

As a "method," data collection entailed paying attention to those unpredictable, excessive, in-the-making moments (Miller, 2005) when dailyspeak and language practice erupted around me. These are those moments when *nigger-nigga* came up in "everyday episodes and

situations" in diverse, unruly ways. I have provided examples of these instances in Part I identified as ***Nigga Events,*** those moments when *nigga* exists at the "margins of the classroom setting" (Morrell, 2019) and ***Nigga Artifacts***, those silent murmurings of tiny, invisible texts (public events, occurrences and consumer objects) that intersect, overlap and collide in everyday situations. While *nigga events* consist of specific instances in which I am personally accosted by *nigga* (as participant, or observer, or both) either in the classroom, in literature, on campus or quite possibly in the sanctity of my own home, *nigga artifacts* consist of documented usage of *nigga* within public discourse, i.e., media, law, politics, education. Much like fingers, my "data" are disparate limbs, extensions, jointed digits of manipulation and sensation, which, joined together, work in conjunction with one another to access the sensations, objects, and tools of the world. Like fingers, I see my data as sensory probes used to ascertain properties of objects encountered in the world and in so doing those instances of stumble data facilitate in the construction of my methodology, the symbolic hand, which is used sensorially, functionally, purposefully in the world.

Classroom Visits

"Pay attention, Joyce!" Literally my mother was commanding me to watch where I was going, face forward, ignore the boys and their comment. Put simply, stop dawdling and walk! Yet within the command "pay attention!" exists a range of competing, complementary meanings. "Pay attention" also implied face forward as in stay focused, look to your future (not the past) and where you are headed, focus on your purpose in this moment, ignore the hatemongers and racists who want to impede your (our) progress. "Pay attention" meant be careful, be watchful, stay alert, protect yourself, know your surroundings. Ultimately, "pay attention" imparted a lesson from Black mother to child—this is what they call us, but this is not who or what we are;

pay attention to *me* not them, I will teach you what it means to be a Black woman in *this* society. These biased interpretive revelations, only available to me as I make my current meanings of the past, parallel the observational methods of qualitative research in which we seek to use our senses to make meaning of our participants, the field, words, actions and expressions. My methods therefore consist of observations within and outside of the classroom setting. Over a three-week session, classroom visits to two Introduction to Literature courses taught by two different professors, one by a self-identified white female feminist and the other by a not self-identified white male scholar of Mark Twain, allowed me to "pay attention" to the space[74] by/for/around the utterance *nigger-nigga* when it appears in a text. In both classes, the professors taught literature which included *nigger-nigga*. Through these visits I wondered about systems, discourse, teaching as performance and performative (Miller, 2005) and the subjectivity of both the student and teacher (as well as myself sitting in the classroom) as "…dynamic… situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses" (Miller, 2005, p. 232). My purpose for incorporating classroom observations/visits as a "method" was to experience and observe (through my own biased lens) what I perceive as visible and invisible in the classroom (Orner, Miller, & Ellsworth, 2005); to "unsettle how meanings are made… how researcher, teacher, and student identities are constructed and manipulated" (Orner, Miller, & Ellsworth, 2005, p. 118); and through Janet Miller's (2005) theory of English Education-in-the-making "…take into account specific and thus often unrepeatable moments, contexts, situations, discourses, identities and social and cultural relations of similarity and difference…" (p. 238) (I realize the (im)possibility of this task even as I write it). While visiting, I audio recorded class

[74] Later in this chapter I define space using Foucault's (2010) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

sessions and notated my observations although I am aware that my "fieldnotes," like "paying attention," are highly situated, partial, and incomplete.

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6.2 Methods: The Palm

Writing as Method

"…for me, writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangle *method* of discovery." (St. Pierre, 2005, p. 967) Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) introduce the concept of writing as a method of inquiry in which the qualitative researcher is able to write freely, incorporating various forms of writing, which allow the researcher to "tell and retell" with the purpose of accessing the unknowable, the unforeseeable, and unimaginable, not "'getting it right' [but] 'getting it' differently contoured and nuanced" (p. 962-963). It is through the strategy of writing as a method of inquiry that I am able to access writing as process and writing as product which "…cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of [not, never, un] knowing" (my addition) (Richardson, and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). Hence it is through **journaling, reflections, notations, memos**, **vignettes,** and **writing stories** that I compile ("archive") my stumble data, instances, observations, conversations and thoughts. Within these "categories" I compose, play with language, think, discover, ramble, wonder. It is through writing that I ask questions without answers and discover answers connected to no questions. I, like St. Pierre (2005), assert that *thought happened in the writing* (p. 970). Hence, writing served as a function of data collection and as a method of analysis. St. Pierre highlights types of data that she collected in the writing—dream data, emotional data, sensual data, response data and memory data (p. 970)—all of which she contends could not occur in traditional data collection methods. I discovered writing as process through layered

tellings in Ruth Vinz's Writing Research in which I accessed and interrogated memories not possible to access through traditional data collection methods such as interviewing or focus groups. Constructing positionality memos and pastiche in Randi Dickson's Research Paper: The Teaching of English provided multiple lenses for examining my subject positions (student-researcher-educator-black female/feminist-mother-daughter-wife, to name a few), alternative ways to explore and situate my "data", as well as the intimate relationships I'd developed with my "data" (after all, this is a relationship like any other); and writing my own (un)Becoming vignettes in Janet Miller's Narrative Research uncovered multiple perspectives, subjectivities, inquiries, and conceptualizations about the simultaneity of process and product.[75] As well, through crystallization[76] (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) I draw from literature, entertainment, lyrics, and the arts in order to create a multidimensional product, one in which, based on the types of writing I have previously mentioned (the aside, layered tellings, story-truth and happening-truth, pastiche, and writing stories), interpretive analyses exceed the boundaries of coding, categorizing, analytic induction and deduction.

A Comment on Reflexivity

> Quoting Daphne Patai (1994), Wanda S. Pillow (2003) enters into an interrogation of reflexivity as a methodological tool used to "explore and expose the politics of representation." (p. 176). However, Patai (1994) asserts that "'people who stay up nights worrying about representation'… [are] privileged academics engaged in

[75] I think specifically of J. Miller's (1992) "Mr. Brucker's Good Girl," L. Richardson's (1997) "Louisa May's Story of her Life," and E. Tuck and C. Ree's (2013) "A Glossary of Haunting."

[76] Richardson introduces the concept of crystallization as a poststructural "method" that deconstructs validity and provides for a multidimensional approach rather than the three-sided method of triangulation. She states that in the postmodernist text the crystal "combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities and angles of approach." (p. 963). It is through the crystal that the poststructural qualitative researcher can recognize multiple truths of which, "paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know… we know there is always more to know." (p. 963)

the erotics of their own language games" (as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 176). Similarly, Audre Lorde (1984) contends you can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. The challenge with an anti-colonial identity is that if you are only using language and national identity to attempt to create an anti-colonial identity, then you're in trouble because you are using the tools of the colonizer. As Villenas (1996) argues, I am both the "colonizer, in her university cloak, and the colonized, as a member of the very community that is made 'other' in her research." (p. 712). The tension for me here is that I am in a conflicted space of subjecthood—as subjected, subjugated and subjectified. While "wearing the university cloak," and adopting the "master's tools" I pass[77] as a member of the linguistic community I am researching (or so I assume). As both priest-turned-god and mortal I simultaneously participate in, accept, and perpetuate intricate Word games while also struggling to decipher the games of the Celestial Ivy. Reflexivity as a conflicted space is one in which I ceaselessly question my role, purpose, goals, *reasons* for this research, and quite frankly, *reasons* for the doctorate.

Monday, July 20, 2020: I overheard my mother talking about the pardoning of Roger Stone who, when questioned about his relationship with our current president by African American radio host Morris W. O'Kelly, is heard saying "I don't feel like arguing with this Negro." (Stone, as cited in Romero, 202, para. 9) When O'Kelly questioned his use of the word Negro, Stone's denial was tinged with hostility, "I did not. You're out of your mind." (Romero, 2020, para. 10). In a later response to this

[77] Pass: To pass oneself off as white; to live life as a European American. Obviously only possible for very FAIR Blacks with hair and other physical features that are NEARER, MY GOD, TO THEE. (Smitherman, 2000, p. 225). I am Signifyin(g) on the utterance pass as I use the African American notion of passing in the inverse, in which my linguistic identity is a hybridization. However, through this research I have discovered multiple ways in which my linguistic identity severs me from particular local black linguistic communities, especially as it relates to my subject position as professor. In effect, I am also expected to speak differently from my students.

accusation Stone states that Mr. O'Kelly needs "a good peroxide cleaning of the wax in his ears," and "more time studying black history…" and ultimately "The word negro—even though I did not use it—is far from a slur" (Weiner and Roig-Franzia, 2020, para. 5). To this, O'Kelly posted on his website that Negro is "the low-calorie version of the N-Word" (Weiner and Roig-Franzia, 2020, para. 6). Beyond the fact that I did not know this information because my head has been buried in this dissertation, this occurred days after Nancy Trump, niece to current president Donald Trump, indicated in her recently published book that she has heard him use the N-word on several occasions. When I place these incidents within the context of my research, these become more than data points, more than archivable, collectable, categorizable, codable bits of information. These relegate me back to my childhood, back to a state of wondering shock, confusion tinged with curiosity. It is my affective, nonsententious response (Bhaba, 1991) that makes me turn, interpellated some forty-odd years later by two smug white men, one who insists on portraying a public "victory" stance reminiscent of another smug white man of yesteryear.[78]

I define this as a moment of *excess*[79]—"it is as if the proper power of the state has been expropriated, delegated to its citizens, and the state reemerges as a [non]neutral

[78] I initially considered inserting an image of Roger Stone, arms lifted, fingers extended in the infamous V. Then I considered a side by side photo of Stone and Nixon and also toyed with the idea of inserting the image of Stone's naked back, revealing the face of a Nixon tattoo he proudly flaunts. Instead I decided to include this footnote which will point to an interesting article about Stone's infatuation with Richard Nixon. Not a necessary read, no doubt, but informative. Rotham, L. (2019, 25 January). How Roger Stone connects Donald Trump to Richard Nixon. *Time*. Retrieved from https://time.com/5513051/roger-stone-richard-nixon-donald-trump/

[79] There are several usages of excess throughout the dissertation. J. Miller (2005) defines excess as "a spillage, a slippage occurs for which I must, *we* must respond response-ably." Additionally Orner, Miller and Ellsworth (2005) define an excessive moment as "…that which exceeds the norms proposed as proper and natural by those with social order." I contend that both definitions apply to Roger Stone's comment. However, I follow my statement about excess with a quote from Butler (1997a) because I argue that it applies to the current relationship between Stone (a citizen) and the State, which appears to be the intention of O'Kelly's leading question in the first place.

instrument to which we seek recourse to protect us from other citizens, who have become revived emblems of a (lost)[is it?] sovereign power" (Butler, 1997a, p. 82). At this moment, in this time, on this day (which may not be the same or even similar on another day, in a different hour, moment, instance) it means this: I wonder where those two boys are today. In my estimation they could be about the age of Trump and Stone, younger than my mother but older than me. In my daydream (St. Pierre (1997) would contend that daydreams are a type of transgressive data), those two boys are a young Trump and Stone, arrogant and self-assured. I feel like those boys won that day, and I cannot shake this feeling. It gnaws, tugs at my psyche, sits lump-like in the pit of my stomach. I did not cry then, but the nagging belief that they somehow won a sick[80] lyrical battle brings forth forty-something years of tears. For me, the turn (Althusser, 1971; Butler, 1997a) in this particular, historicized moment is synonymous with a child who spins and spins until she is dizzy, laughingly tottering until she falls (but I am soon-to-be 50, at my age falling is no longer enjoyable). Instead, I spin until I vomit. And while doing so I ask: what is *meaningful* about this research? What does it matter if *Huck Finn* is bowdlerized or censored? What does it mean for a white professor to be disciplined for reading (citing, quoting, saying) *nigga* from a James Baldwin text? I am spinning out of control (cliché, I know). Just two weeks prior I sent a text "It's emotional… I don't know what I'm saying. I don't know what I believe anymore… 2020 is getting to me." And my #callasisterindistress friend and writing coach responds: "Your aha may be that this is not

[80]I use sick in this context as it is used along the BVE axis. In *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, Geneva Smitherman (2000) defines sick as a description of "a person who is very funny, gets lots of laughs from telling jokes, humorous commentary and acting CRAZY. Also *ill*" (p. 260) While this is one definition of sick, another definition relates to being exceptionally skilled, for example a sick lyricist, sick DJ, or athlete, e.g., AI's stop-go and change-of-direction speed was sick! In my example sick is both nauseating and *ill* (in this case dope, amazing, exceptional [yet another example of BVE], although racism and racist language are also unwell).

the end. This is a milepost in the journey and you may have to take a turn from your original path." I call her… voice octaves higher than normal, face burning as I rub my eyes with the butt of my palm while sitting unladylike fashion on the stoop of my home. "I can't," I whine. I am in tears… for myself, for my country, for my mother, for the rememory I wish I could erase.

If, as Trinh Minh-ha (1996) contends, reflexivity characterizes the "'relationship that defines the subject written and the writing subject'" (as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 189) then my relationship to the subject written is unpredictable, erratic, volatile, (in) & (un)stable, uncomfortable, uncontainable, incomplete. As the writing subject (both subjected and a subject with agency), I (as in the Self, not the subject) cannot begin to predict, prepare for, predicate these unknowable, uncontainable moments, and it is often through my own writing that I (incompletely) trace my subjection.[81] Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1996) draws a distinction between reflection and reflexivity: "to be reflective does not demand an 'other,' while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny" (as cited in Pillow, 2003, p. 179). My 'other' is *nigger-nigga* itself.

Pillow's (2003) articulation of reflexivities of discomfort alludes to the 'other' as participant, I am defining the other as the embodiment of an utterance. Butler (1997a) suggests that as linguistic beings, "to be named… brings me into a linguistic world in which I might then begin to exercise agency [if] (my addition) at all" (p. 38). But as Bhaba (1991) highlights, for the postcolonial, s/he must tap into her affective experience and participate in what he labels affective writing, a form of theoretical discourse that is

[81] For a fuller discussion of subjection see Chapter 3.

"commensurate with historical conjunctures" (p. 57). The illocutionary and perlocutionary power of *nigger-nigga* constitutes an affective experience which is not solely of the psyche but also bodily, "…calling someone 'nigger' or 'fag' is doing something, i.e., insulting them so that there is only a difference of degree rather than kind between such verbal abuse and… hitting someone…" (Salih, 2002, p. 100). Hence, through reflexive affective writing[82] I am attempting to trace the relationship between the subject written and the writing subject, to step *in medias res* of antagonistic, unequal sites; to exist at the edge, not the end (Bhaba, 1991). As such, my own tracings of reflexivities of discomfort are not "…a positioning of… clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practices of confounding disruptions—at times even a failure of our language and practice." (Pillow, 2003, p. 193). Ever on the edge, I fear I might step, fall, jump off.

Excavation of Nigga Artifacts

My mother worries about her wrinkled skin. In her vanity she concerns herself with her withering hands, the flesh around her neck, the grays peeking out on her chin; however, I see her material body as history, and much like Caroline Randall Williams' (2020) *New York Times* opinion piece, "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument," I wonder what histories her body could tell, what secrets lay deep between her bosom, what scars she has attempted to erase with cocoa butter (or Oil of Olay) or cover with makeup. Each fold marks time, tells a story, connects the past with the future. If I could excavate each crease, I believe I could find the scar from that historically random exchange on an unknown street in Philadelphia. Maybe there are many scars keyloided over to protect the flesh underneath. My

[82] Pillow (2003) contends "Most researchers use reflexivity without defining how they are using it, as if it is something we all commonly understand and accept as standard methodological practice for critical qualitative research'" (p. 176); hence, reflexive affective writing is how I am defining my use of reflexivity in writing as a method of inquiry.

mother's body, her skin, is a document of flesh, blood and bone (Williams, 2020) which "…was always treated as the language of a voice since reduced to silence"[83] (Foucault, 2010, p. 6). Foucault (2010) tells me that the document is no longer inert material modified based on a unified continuous totality of the past (constructed by the consciousness of [white, heteronormative, heterosexual, Christian] men) but is now being analyzed based on what it says.

> History now organizes the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations… deploys a mass of elements placed in relation to one another to form [new, different, alternative] totalities" (p. 6-7; my addition).

My mother's fingers, skin, palmer flexion creases, adorning ring, nail polish individually tell a story that forms an always shifting, morphing, "totality." As parallel, through an ***excavation*** of nigga artifacts I am attempting to trace the lines, explore the folds, traverse the creases which rupture, disrupt and interrupt use of *nigga*. In my excavation I focus on the material and affective responses of the body, discourses and statements constructed in literature and images, historical documents, legal briefs, rap lyrics and poetry, essays and articles. Using these documents, I will "try to detect incidence[s] of interruptions" (Foucault, 2010, p. 4), those moments in which "*displacements* and *transformations* of concepts" (p. 4) occur. Foucault defines these incidences as

> show[ing] that the history of a concept is not wholly and entirely that of its progressive refinement,… but that of its various fields of constitution and validity, that of its successive rules of use, that of the many theoretical contexts in which it developed and matured (p. 4).

With *nigga* at the center of my unit of analysis, excavation entails examining, interpreting, and interrogating how particular discourses constitute, regulate, and instantiate

[83]Interestingly, in discussions with a filmmaker friend about the terminology used for various age groups and generations we discovered via one Google search that my mother's generation, those born between 1928 and 1945, is labelled the Silent Generation, and anyone from this time period is called a Silent.

subjects, dictate language use and construct particular forms of knowledge by allowing specific statements in particular settings, at particular historical conjunctures (Williams, 1999). Because all knowledge and perception are matters of perspective which change as perspective changes (Foucault, 1969, as cited in Williams, 1999), my concern is with the effects of discourse in the "historical present," and while I am not attempting to "write a history of the present," I am placing a question mark beside (Williams, 1999, p. 81) commonsense notions. Excavation does not solely focus on *nigga* as object in use, but focuses on the particular discourses, settings and space which allowed *nigga* as an object in use to emerge. My method of excavation is based on Foucault's theory that "the unity of a discourse is based not so much on the permanence and uniqueness of an object [*nigga*] as on the space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed (Williams, 1999, p. 86). For Foucault (2010), space means relationships among discourses, institutions, economic and social processes, behavior patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, and modes of characterization (Williams, 1999); therefore, as evidenced in Part I, my method of excavation is meant to interrogate the spaces in which *nigga* emerges (and transforms).

6.3 Methodology: The Hand

Through the abovementioned methods I have highlighted, I propose a contemporary analysis of *nigga,* in which, using a Foucauldian-inspired methodology, I analyze the discourse(s) that inflect its use. My focus in this interrogation is specific to the teaching and language practices at one community college[84] located in the Northeastern region of New Jersey

[84] It is through commonsense notions of qualitative social science research in education that there must be an institutionalized "site;" as such my "primary site" are the two campuses of the community college where I teach. CCC (pseudonym) consists of four campuses; however, for the purposes of my research I will be focusing on the main campus of the college as well as one auxiliary campus. Demographically, the main campus of CCC is located in a predominantly white, upper middle-class neighborhood with a median household income of $76,338. Its population is 93.7% white and 2.58% black. However, the campus itself is predominantly populated by students of

and its relationship to public discourse. Through these instances[85] I am exploring knowledge/power and the historically situated socio-cultural contexts that make certain knowledges/practices permissible and/or desirable while other practices are not. Based on my methodological choices, I am presenting a conceptually oriented dissertation, in which I will utilize interpretive "methods,"[86] including a more current, "post" inflected version of "close reading" (Gallop, 2000), Foucauldian-inspired "mappings" of various "histories" and trajectories of the word.

Woven into these "readings" are my own memories, interactions, and contemplations as I navigate the unpredictable terrain of language use. As is evident in Part I, I have included situations, conversations, dialogue and commentary that include my mother, husband and son.[87] In so doing, I acknowledge the fictitious assumption of *some* qualitative research theories and methods that qualitative inquiry, research and writing exists in a vacuum as if the researcher-scholar-writer is an "armchair ethnographer" made up of one stringent, stable identity, unaffected and/or unbiased by external influences. I also acknowledge my own shifting subjectivities and

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color from surrounding urban areas. In comparison, the auxiliary campus is located in the county seat. The city is predominantly Hispanic (59.5%) with a median household income of $43,831. Eighteen point five percent of the population is black and 18.2% of the total population is white. While core English classes—Introduction to Composition and Introduction to Literature—are offered on both campuses, the student population in the auxiliary campus is predominantly an immigrant population with the largest number of students living in Spanish-speaking households. Additionally, the auxiliary campus houses the English as a Second Language courses and the Associates in Nursing degree, which draws a large immigrant population. I have often heard full-time tenured faculty members indicating that they did not want to teach courses at the auxiliary campuses as these were "the black campuses." In contrast, the main campus of CCC was termed "the white campus." This nomenclature had no connection to demographics but was a result of the surrounding neighborhoods in which each campus was located. I highlight this difference because I assume that differences in use will be distinguishable by campus.

[85] See Brinkmann, S. (2014). Doing without data. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20,*(6). 720-725. "

[86] Various methodologists have produced scholarship which poses questions, thoughts, musings about the fixed rigidity of qualitative research methods in which terms such as data, data collection, voice, authenticity, validity, coding, triangulation (and so forth…) are troubled through poststructuralist, feminist, post-humanist and materialist lenses. I purposely include qualitative research terms in quotations to represent my own notions of the fluidity and variability of these concepts. For some examples see P. Lather (2013, 2016); L. A. Mazzei (2013, 2016); E. A. St. Pierre (2014, 2016); St. Pierre & A. Y. Jackson (2014); Scheurich (2001).

[87] Like Richardson (2005) I "honor the location of the self" (p. 965) through writing stories, in which I situate the entirety of the PhD process and the writing of this dissertation within other parts of my life, specifically family and social ties and personal history.

in-the-moment meaning-full response-ability (Miller, 2005) as I too am made subject of circulating discourses and social practices. My objective, then, is to explore *nigger-nigga* as an object/utterance in use but also to explore my own conflicted, shifting subjectivities and "interpretations" in relation to *nigga*.

I align my methodological underpinnings with FDA, which allows for historical, socio-cultural tracing(s) of the varying discourses that surround, inflect, and impact *nigga* and through which it has become situated. It is through Foucault's discussion of discourse and the construction of the subject that I am thinking about Gates' theory of Signifyin(g) coupled with Butler's theory of excitable speech as these theories speak to "the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" (Foucault, 2010, p. 4). As Foucault (2010) himself highlights in his introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, these "incidences of interruption" (p. 4) take several forms as underlying causalities heretofore unnoticed and/or unquestioned. I have chosen an FDA-inspired approach as well because discourse analysis is interested in the authorization of discourses which, beyond their immediate function, implies a relationship to fundamentals and rules (Williams, 1999, p. 83). Arribas-Allyon and Walkerdine's (2017) interpretation of FDA indicates that Foucault's definition of discourse

> does not mean a particular instance of language use—a piece of text, an utterance or linguistic performance—but rules, division and systems of a particular body of knowledge… it specifies the kind of institutional partitioning of knowledge… it also refers to techniques and practices through which objects, concepts and strategies are formed (p. 114).

For me, an FDA approach entails examining both the

> Anglo-American[88] traditions where discourse is construed as an instance of linguistic usage…[as well as] historically contingent rules that render an expression (a phrase, a proposition, or a speech act) discursively meaningful (Arribas-Allyon & Walkerdine, 2017, p. 115).

[88] Yes… I realize the ironies attached to this term.

Through an FDA-inspired methodology, I am thinking about the impact of various discourses on the usage of *nigga* as an object not external to discourse but… of discourse… constituted and transformed… in accordance with the rules of the particular discursive formations (Williams, 1999, p.86). The "instances of interruption" through which I am interrogating use are Signifyin(g) (Gates, 1988/2014) and performative contradiction (Butler, 1997), i.e., Signifyin(g) performativity. In other words, by taking an FDA-inspired approach I analyze the ways in which, through Signifyin(g) performativity, *nigga* disrupts its own historicity, ruptures rules of use, and is or is not sayable and/or allowable in particular moments at particular times, *not solely due to the race of the speaker*, but due to the discourses that govern specific, situated social conditions. Hence, I explore "the external conditions of its expression (the rules that govern a way of speaking)" (Arribas-Allyon and Walkerdine, 2017, p. 115).

I title my methodology FDA-inspired because, while I employ a Foucauldian approach my hesitation in defining my methodology as FDA stems from the "…awkward tension when one attempts to do poststructural work…should one *claim* to be drawing on a Foucauldian framework there is a very real danger in one's work being dismissed as *un*Foucauldian…" (Graham, 2005, p. 2). Therefore, my methodological "decisions" are based on my particularized exploration of *nigger-nigga* as a speech act, i.e., Signifyin(g) performative, and the ways that the racialized Subject is constitutive of discursive practices which constrain and/or empower as regulated by larger surrounding historical socio-cultural discourses. As Butler notes however, Foucault's discussion of the prisoner (subjectivity and subjectification) is too "unilateral" and "unnuanced." She argues that through Foucault the prisoner is simply "made… as if… the prisoner is constituted mechanistically" (as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 164). It is through Butler (1997b) that I also concern myself with the psyche, i.e., the vulnerability and unpredictability of

the subject, of subjectivity, of language itself. Signifyin(g) is one, albeit incomplete, possibility for theoretically contextualizing this vulnerability and unpredictability, as it is through Gates that I am able to think about the ruptures, i.e., the turn (troping) and rhetorical associations.

Through an FDA-inspired methodology I hope to disrupt current commonsense assumptions which situate *nigga* primarily in an oppositional binary of racialized speech based on the appropriateness or inappropriateness (and the varied assumptions regarding who and what is 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate') with which it is employed. As such, a contemporary overarching social discourse has developed that continues to support the premise that both meaning and usage are inherently fixed and thus erupt from a unified speaker who is the site of speech. This concept relies upon the belief that the racialized subject has an inherently fixed subjectivity, in which language usage is exact, precise, unchanging, and representative of one's one-dimensional, unified, authentic "truth." However, my poststructurally inflected assumptions do not, as often contended by critiques of poststructural theory, equate with an erasing or eradication of identity categories. Instead, because meanings change from one discursive formation to another, an FDA-inspired methodology highlights how

> discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined (Foucault, 1969, p. 74 as cited in Williams, 1999, p. 85-6).

By including my own shifting experiences and feelings about *nigga*, I explore the multiple subject positions that may exist, act and become simultaneously within an individual, positions that are constructed through an exteriorization of discourses as well as through an interiorization of subjectification. In other words, I point to the ways in which multiple subject positions intersect, conflict and complement so that no one unified subject position is *necessarily* primary or sovereign; hence,

> the individual is both the site for a range of possible forms of subjectivity and, at any particular moment of thought or speech, a subject, subjected to the regime of meaning of a particular discourse and enabled to act accordingly (Weedon, 1997, p. 34).

While I do contend that *nigga* derives from particular historical discursive practices governed by specific historical moments, through the lens of FDA it can be argued that within this history exists rupture and discontinuity. By exploring contemporary institutionalized and normalized discourses and the ways these govern social practices and subject constitution, I am examining the consequences of *nigga* within competing discursive regimes, for "it is only by looking at a discourse *in operation,* in a specific historical context, that it is possible to see whose interests it serves at a particular moment" (Weedon, 1997, p. 108). As a highly contestable utterance, *nigga's* social and political specificity is based upon the discourses available and at work at the time of its usage. So I posit: Why is *nigger-nigga* allowable in certain public discourses but not allowable in educational discourses such as curriculum and classroom teaching? Why do "we" demand that white "other" teachers incorporate the African American canon but disallow a discussion of *nigger*? To be clear, my methodological and theoretical choices are not meant to develop conclusionary evidence that supports or refutes usage. Instead through an FDA-inspired approach I seek to examine what Foucault (2010) identifies as *problematizations,* i.e., to study a statement "at the limit that separates [it] from what is not said, in the occurrence that allows [it] to emerge to the exclusion of all others." (p. 119). A la Foucault (2010), my objective is not to "give voice" to the silence, the not said, or never said, or not yet to be said; instead I am interested in the "distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions" (p. 119) which make up the totality of use and the "entangled mass" of discourses that allow for (or don't allow for) the sayable and unsayable. Hence, rather than pose the question of language analysis: "According to what rules has a particular statement been

made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made?" (Foucault, 2010, p. 27), I am methodologically structuring my argument based on Foucault's (2010) question: "How is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?" (p. 27). In other words, what are the "conditions of possibility" (Butler, 1997a) that exist in terms of usage of *nigga* and how are these possibilities subject to and made subject of the existing and current historical discourses?

PART II: The World in the Word

Figure 6

Pastiche of Higher Education Headlines

Chapter 7: The Psychic Space of the Classroom: A Word [against, in, about, of] White Space

The social subject does not exist independently or outside of discourse. …that subject is the function of the statement. Statements position both the subject (originator) of the statement and the addressed in particular ways. —Glyn Williams

There are about 20 students in class. It is cramped, to be cliché, like a slave ship. The desks are packed in tightly with barely enough space to walk down the aisle towards a seat. I sit in the back right corner. There is no room on my desk for my notebook, phone (which I use to record), travel mug of tea/coffee, 20oz. bottle of water, bookbag, laptop and the 561-page *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* book I carry for this observation. The desks allow for a right-handed person (there are no left-handed desks although there is a student who is left-handed) of average build with one laptop or book and notebook. Extra cups, bottles of water, even coffee in spillable containers sit on the floor. Confined to my corner I set my water bottle, travel mug and bag on the floor in the small space between myself and the seat to my left. I put my phone on the edge of the desk diagonal from me since no one is sitting there. I place my book on the desk and my notebook on my lap. I am in the last seat of the first row, legs jutting into the aisle. Back against the wall, I am literally and figuratively cornered, behind me and to my right there is no air. I am wedged into a too tight space with sickly cream-colored walls encasing me.[89] When

[89] The discomfort I describe in this opening passage appears to be the case overall. Students have coffee cups on floors and bags shoved under their desks. It is difficult to walk down the aisle due to student limbs and bags. At one point Prof. C. discusses the importance of notetaking, although he does not provide notes by writing on the chalkboard or using any presentation software. "Well you see writing them down is a much better learning technique than snapping a picture… Writing it down, considering it enough that you put in your own words on your note paper, not exactly what your teachers says but what you heard your teacher say… Taking what your instructor says, funneling it through your mind all the way down to your arm into your hand, and here I am being being handist…" (Prof C., 062019) He addresses the self-identified leftie in the room, "How uncomfortable you must be. (Student chuckles) Institutionally we have thoroughly disregarded and marginalized you because we don't provide you with a left-handed desk. I don't see any left-handed desks in this room, most of them have at least two, which follows the percentage… Ten to eleven percent of the population is left handed, right?" (Prof. C. 062019)

asked to introduce myself, I shimmy to the front of the room, stepping over bags, books, cups etc. Although Prof. C. has indicated that I am observing based on research about the N-Word (he says N-Word, not *nigga*), when I introduce myself and explain my research I say *nigga* and thereafter say N-Word. An erect visibly black man sitting in the front center says, "Say that again?" I say, "nigga?" in a questioning tone and look at him. He responds, "Okay, I just wanted to be sure I heard you right…" From my cramped corner I listen, jot, and record as my colleague teaches (well… actually lectures) *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Twice a week for a full three hour 45-minute class session (with one ten to fifteen minute break) students who have opted to spend part of their summer in an Introduction to Literature course listen to my colleague pontificate, and for the next few weeks that pontification will be about Huck Finn, Nigger Jim and Tom Sawyer. When I review fieldnotes from these class sessions I can deduce that my change in handwriting from legible to completely illegible were the moments when even I drifted off or struggled in that densely packed, confined space. Prof C., my colleague, was/is a traditional lecturer (although I can't say he'd agree with this term). He once entered the classroom, addressed the waiting class, "Children"[90] and dropped his version of *Huck Finn* onto the desk with an authorial THUD.

On alternate days I visit a completely different classroom space. This classroom is in the same hallway as the first, two doors down, but the difference in space and light and air is alarming. While Prof. C.'s cramped conditions (no fault of his own) metaphorically reflect the

[90] I do not believe Prof. C. intended to be demeaning to a classroom of adults and no one visibly appeared offended by his address. However, as a community college, the population at CCC is largely "non-traditional" (essentialist labelling at its best) attracting career adults, working parents, and degreed immigrants who must obtain licensure based on U.S. standards. Again, while no one appeared visibly offended, I wondered about the 30-something black (not necessarily African American) man who always sat centerstage, erect and prepared, who simply stared at Prof. C. after this comment (I learned later that he owned his home and was married with children).

content and structure of a novel like *Huck Finn*, in this classroom space Dr. C.[91] and her class of eight are discussing Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes and the empty brightness of the room reflects Dr. C.'s pedagogical style as much as the texts reveal movement and transition in literature. In this class, I have choice. No one sits on the front row. I choose the back row, corner seat on the far left, next to the classroom's picture window. Of the eight (which dwindled down to six by the end of the summer session), most sit in the middle or on the far right. I am the only person in the entire row. I spread out. To my left, under the window, is a large white ledge which stretches the entire wall, wide enough to sit on. The window allows us to see out into the interior courtyard of the college. I use this ledge for my water bottle, travel mug, additional books. I am able to place my bag in the seat in front of me. I even have the luxury of pulling the desk to my right closer if I so desire. Although I am in a corner desk, there is about five inches between the desk and the back wall, painted of the same cream-colored hue as every classroom in this hallway, including Prof. C's classroom. There is ample space in the aisles to the left and right of the row of desks, allowing for ease of passage. Due to the brilliant brightness of the room, I wonder if these two classrooms, located in the wing of Humanities, configured in the same manner—sturdy, wood desk at the front of the classroom, tech pod to the right, entrance to the left; five rows of six desks each—are the same size and dimension. During my introduction, on the first day, I say I'm conducting research on the N-Word and then as follow up I mutter *nigga*.[92] A very vocal Nigerian Muslim woman asks, "Which one are we talking about?" I

[91] The use of Prof. C. and Dr. C. is purposeful. While I chose the same letter C as pseudonyms for both professors, distinguishing characteristics are based on pedagogical style, curriculum and classroom space. This section is meant to focus on the psychic space of the classroom and its effects, not individualized names or identities, although this will also be highlighted in the Chapter as it relates to psychic space.

[92] For purposes of research, I typically do not say N-Word unless prompted by someone else. In the first narrative above I indicate that I used the N-Word after initially saying *nigga* based on my colleague's usage. However, I typically say *nigga*, often explaining that I am purposefully using the word when discussing my research. I am not sure why but in this moment I chose to say 'N-Word' (possibly because there were fewer students so I felt more

respond, "Do you mean the -er or the -a?" and this is followed by, "What about the -o?"[93] from a Latinx student. Before I can answer the vocal Nigerian woman, who will heretofore be known as K., exclaims, "O? What o?" In order to make this *excessive moment* meaning-full (Miller, 2005) my colleague, Dr. C., begins a discussion about language use and the right to language, with a diagram on the board which focuses on the binaries of Structuralism and the attack of these binaries in poststructuralism. She uses this as a segue into the lesson for the day, Zora Neale Hurston's essay "How it Feels to be Colored Me" and her short story "Sweat." From my open-space window seat, I note the readiness of the students to talk, engage, ruminate while Dr. C. positions herself behind the tech pod, the window ledge utilized as her leaning/sitting post. "Hurston chooses to write in colloquial Southern Black English. This is the conflict in contrast to Hughes or other authors who argue for writing in Standard English based on appealing to a white readership and audience." (Dr. C, Obs. 062019).

These descriptions are not meant to compare the pedagogical styles of Prof. C. and Dr. C., although I realize that a few of the adjectives I have littered these descriptions with create images of a cramped and congested lecture and an open discussion-based classroom. Nor am I attempting to focus on the ways in which the identities of the students and/or professors (as well as their learning and/or teaching style)[94] construct specific intellectual experiences of freedom or

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vulnerable and exposed, possibly because the class was majority female, or possibly due to the fact that the class was noticeably and predominantly immigrant).
TO THE READER: Placement of these narrative-observations is not based on chronological order. I bring up this minute (yet significant) point to highlight that responses from one class did not reflect my decisions in the other. Additionally, as per my methodology, I use the methods of layered tellings and pastiche by interweaving data into a textual narrative, based on significance of metaphor, themes and tropes, not chronology.

[93] This student's question has had a revelationary effect on me since she was most likely referring to the Spanish term *negro* whereas in U.S. English Negro (usually written with an uppercase N) has a completely different connotation. Future research on hybridized language use and variations in spelling and meaning is necessary.

[94] I recognize that these factors affect the teaching/learning experience; however, for the purposes of this dissertation, my analysis is meant to explore the psychic space of the classroom as an ironic contested space in which the use of *nigger-nigga* is part of contestable language.

constraint. Instead, I am interested in what Connellan (2013) describes as the "self-contained opposite" (Clair, 1998, cited in Connellan, 2013, p. 1543) "where authority and freedom sit side by side." (Connellan, 2013, p. 1543). Connellan (2013) links psychic energy to the spatial properties of white, thus exposing the tensions between freedom and conformity in the university setting (Connellan, 2013) and, by default, the classroom.

Connellan's analysis can be traced back to Derrida's (1980) "Mochlos; or, the Conflict of the Faculties" in which he speaks to Kant's (1978) *Conflict of the Faculties,* which contend that the university is not natural; instead, it is a "theatrical representation" (p. 3) in which the university is a simulacrum of the social order authorized by the state where "…knowledge [is] a little *like* an industry… professors [are] *as* trustees… (original emphasis)" (p. 3). Echoing this, Connellan (2013) cites Foucault stating that the "'disciplinarization of knowledges' became a process that allowed 'State apparatuses to centralize knowledges' (p. 1544). Using Foucault's (2004) theories of the panopticon and power, Clair's (1998) aesthetic theory, and Butler's (1997) discussion of the psychic life of power, Connellan (2013) interrogates the architectural and institutional use of the color white as a material which creates institutional order and controls subjects. This space, both literally and figuratively, is constructed based on an invisible 'superimposed grid of order' "the lines of [which] are rendered invisible because the psychological colour of the grid and therefore also of institutional power is white on white" (p. 1531). White, as an "absent-present" that is both visible and invisible (Connellan, 2013), generates a "white space" that psychologically and psychically institutionalizes bodies within the grid; bodies are made into subjects through the discursive function of naming—student, professor, staff, administration—and it is through this discursive process that the subject is able to exist. For Connellan (2006, 2013), white, as well as the bland, neutral shades, flat lines and

surfaces of the physical space perform a type of "…whitewashing… [which]…coerces people (of whatever race or ability) to clone themselves accordingly" (p. 1545). As subjects, these bodies adhere to an invisible grid of whiteness that renders them and the institution normatively white (Connellan, 2013); a white which overflows from the walls and enters a psychic space. To answer Butler's (1997b) question, "What is the psychic form that power takes?" Connellan (2013) contends that if power is discursive and has no recognizable singular form, its energy can exist in the bland, neutral form of white; as such, it has the physical and psychical ability to control bodies in space (p. 1545). Hence,

> …the subject who actually enjoys the white space is superficially uplifted by it and feels important as well as superficially free and secure, and… offers no resistance to the white space, to which in fact s/he is enslaved. This type of… unconscious subjection is, according to Butler (1997b), a 'fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose' (Connellan, 2013, p. 1546).

The spatial and temporal power of whiteness is both everywhere and nowhere (Connellan, 2013). At the literal level, white illuminates the classroom space, allowing for clarity and focus in its everywhere-ness while it simultaneously creates silence, order, and discipline existing as negative space "…the space in design that has 'nothing' in it, but… that allows for unseen action" (p. 1547). As mentioned previously, the walls of these two classrooms are cream painted sheetrock and unadorned cinderblocks. If not for the color (or possibly in spite of), the undecorated and featureless barriers would resemble the institutional walls of a prison. Those walls constructed of sheetrock consist of the same yellowish white of an unkempt hospital. The flooring consists of a similar neutralizing creamish-white tile and beyond the garish, neon light fixtures the ceiling is of the same creamy white as the walls. The boundaries between wall, ceiling and floor blur at the edges due to the lack of variation in color.

Further, each desk is constructed of chrome with a neutral, bland beige desktop and chair. Left-handed students do not have the privilege of a desk conducive to their occupational needs with the armrest situated on the right of the chair, not the left. The size of the desktop allows for no more than one device and the chairs (with their attached desktops) are unforgiveable—any rotund person would be unable to slide (from the left opening) into a desk. The institutional message here: there is focus in discomfort, as long as that discomfort controls the body and the eye of the student-subject. The aesthetic design of the classroom space is the consequence of what Connellan (2013) describes as a "homogenization of space [which] operates in parallel with the homogenization of knowledges in the university, a site where, since the early 19th century knowledges could be disciplined." (Foucault, 2004, cited in Connellan, 2013, p. 1543-1544).

The campus itself also embodies the ambiguity of freedom and constraint. Ironically, while there is a county park located on the East side of the campus, no classrooms face this park. Instead, the administrative building which houses the President and Vice President stands between the park and the campus, acting as a boundary between the external world and the building(s) of the campus. Much like Connellan's (2013) description of Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town, South Africa,[95] CCC's gaze is inward. The windows located on the left side of the rooms face the interior courtyard, which while somewhat aesthetically pleasing are meant to be part of students' peripheral vision. Desks "face front," thus positioning the professor '*as* trustee' (Derrida, 1980, p. 3) and sovereign. This promotes "visibility [as] a condition of stay here" (Connellan, 2013, p. 1541). In other words, students' attention must remain in the classroom, in their books, on the professor. Also like Pollsmoor Prison, the low-rise, non-descript buildings of CCC are meant to portray "ordinariness… [and] normativity in appearance." (p.1538). The

[95] See Connellan's (2013) discussion of Pollsmoor Prison in her article "The Psychic Life of White."

exterior racially white, economically affluent, residential community in which CCC is geographically located has prohibited any structure higher than three stories. In contrast, the auxiliary campus, located in a predominantly immigrant, Latinx and Black, working class, commercial area boasts of high rise structures of five and seven stories which command an entire city block.

The operation of power/knowledge as a psychic white space in the Composition-Literature (Comp-Lit) classroom at CCC is both a consequence and a source of the physical space of the classroom itself. While I have introduced the ways in which the physicality of the space is inhabited by the power of white, creating the conflicting yet complementary "self-contained opposites" of freedom and conformity, the absent-present of psychical whiteness exists based on historical and social discourses surrounding the educability of bodies, homogenization of knowledge, and a belief in American "white"[96] ideals. The operations of power in the invisible white space of CCC's Comp-Lit classroom reflect historical discourses and materializations (in both the literal and figurative senses) of standardization as a means of social control. Hence, it is through an explanation of Connellan's (2013) discussion of the psychic space of white that one can interrogate *use* of *nigger-nigga* in the classroom.

[96] As clarification I am making a distinction between psychic whiteness, racial whiteness and the color white. As Connellan posits it is through the color white that specific forms of power have the ability to take shape and construct specific types of knowledge. For the purposes of this chapter I am defining psychic whiteness as a type of power-knowledge that is infused within the literal and figurative college classroom space and is assumed by the subjects of that space. Critical theories such as Critical Race Theory would identify this as a form of white privilege or white racialization that exists externally to the individual and oppresses the student in various ways. However, I contend that the power of psychic whiteness is "essential to the formation, persistence and continuity of the subject" (Butler, 1997b, p. 3). In other words, while power, in the form of whiteness, presses on the subject, in its psychic form it is simultaneously taken up by the subject which in turn constitutes the subject's identity.

7.1 Psychic Whiteness in the Comp-Lit Classroom

…I agreed, no… volunteered to read excerpts of "Sweat" for the class after being invited by Dr. C. to participate in the discussion. When Dr. C. begins reading from "Sweat" and attempts to read the first lines of dialogue from Delia, she admits that she won't read the dialogue "…efficiently *'an' you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes'* (Hurston, 1926) because [she] sounds ridiculous saying it." (Obs. 062019) There is general laughter in the classroom. "But look at the words and note that she is writing in the language of the rural South. As we said, this is the language we're going to see in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*" (Dr. C, 062019). It is at this point that I volunteer to read; however, I become aware that I sound equally ridiculous reading the dialogue between Delia and Sykes. In essence, in my eagerness to volunteer, I did not consider my own essentialist viewpoint. Was I a better reader, interpreter or orator of Black rural Southern language? Would I sound 'less ridiculous' or more authentic simply based on the color of my skin? Did I assume that my blackness somehow connected me to the language of the characters? This innocuous belief (adhered to by everyone in the classroom based on their laughter and overall agreement that I should read) that I could somehow read the text "efficiently without sounding ridiculous" exposes the hidden irony of whiteness as a psychic space.

I am Northern born, having lived my entire life in an urban metropolis in the Northeastern region of the United States. When asked, "where your people from?" I can only refer to my father's side. My mother and my mother's parents are Northerners. Philadelphia born—my grandmother came into the world just shy of Du Bois' research for *The Philadelphia*

Negro. My father, a migrant who worked as a chef on the Silver Meteor[97] eventually settled in Philadelphia after meeting my mother. It is through his family lineage that I have had the opportunity to "visit" the South. Yet demographically Dr. C.'s life runs parallel to my father—born in Georgia, she grew up in South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

> I heard lots of people talk this way growing up in the South, not just black people. Some of it's a little more Southern [referring to Hurston's dialogue] because my grandparents lived in Virginia… [but] in fact I became verbal in this. I called my mother momma; I had a thick Southern accent when I moved up here… changed almost instantly as soon as people started saying 'Eww you talk funny.' I adapted. (Dr. C., Obs. 062019)

Herein lay the hidden irony: as subjects immersed in the discourses of race and language, we were subjectivated by and adherents of the assumption that I (as materially Black) could authenticate a Southern Black dialect whereas she (as materially White) could not.[98] This hidden irony divulges normative ideas of whiteness (and by default blackness) that are linked to assumptions about who is authorized to speak (or read) as the voice of the author/character and who can rightfully appropriate authentic language pronunciation and articulation. Hence, Dr. C's concern with "sounding ridiculous" and my belief that I would not sound ridiculous are based on historical discourses, which constitute Standard English as normatively white and Black English as normatively non-white… well, it is called "Black" English isn't it?[99]—the consequence of which is a racialization of forms of English based on historical discourses about language use.

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[97] For more information about the Silver Meteor and the Great Migration of black peoples from the South to Northern, Midwestern and Western cities from 1916 to 1970 see Isabel Wilkerson's (2010) *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. For additional reading about the positionality of black peoples in the United States also see Wilkerson's (2020) *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*.

[98] While I am aware that there are distinctions in variation, register, accent and dialect in the southern region of the United States, my purpose here is not to conflate or essentialize these variations, but to point out the *possibility* of an "affected" Southern dialect by Dr. C. based on her lived experience. Additionally, I acknowledge that racial whiteness, like blackness, is not fixed.

[99] While writing, the paradoxical humor of the label "Black English" became apparent to me, much like Ralph Ellison's dark humor in *Invisible Man*.

7.2 The Racialization of English

This racialization dates back to the 19th Century in which the social philosophy of early America bound the education discourses surrounding literacy to social unity and cultural hegemony. Christian values, industrialization, urbanization and economics discursively constructed the new America as independent, exceptional, and the Promised Land. This embodied an American ideal of progress and national culture and the English curriculum was constructed to reflect these ideals. From 1812 to the early 1900s the English curriculum was based on Christian morals, vocational training, civic training, and citizenship, the goal of which was to produce "a new type of national culture" (Chubb, 1902). Of key importance was the influx of an immigrant population, viewed as intellectually and economically inferior, but needing to be assimilated into the American ideal (Brass, 2012). The standardization of a specific form of English instruction, initially vocational in its orientation and later focused on cultural norms, was constructed based on the ideals of a highly literate population of white, wealthy men and landowners already in existence (Graff, 2001). Due to this highly literate population, it has been argued that America was essentially "born modern;" literacy was an instrument meant to create a national standard for conformity (Brass, 2009, 2016); as such, a literate society dispelled criminality, poverty, and instability and led to progress, economic survival and improved class status (Applebee, 1974, Brass, 2016, Graff, 1979). Labeled "the literacy myth" (Graff, 1979), English was meant to bring "everyone" i.e., immigrants and impoverished groups, nonstandard dialects and regional forms of English, into "…a common tradition of culture and government, a common spirit of responsible republican citizenship, [and] a common language that would

transcend regional dialects." (Applebee, 1974, p. 3).[100] Literacy myth, common tradition, American ideal—statements which continue to exist (albeit distinctively different) within 21st century pedagogical discourses—link the inculcation of knowledge, i.e., the teaching of English, to discursive practices which shape how English participates in the governing of bodies for the wealth, health and future of America. In the past, the teaching of literacy, literature and composition inscribed the State's need for social control, civic engagement and responsibility, and the belief in a unified individualism (now termed hybridity(s), identities, subjectivities).

This form of discipline, based on a sovereignty of whiteness, has become naturalized in the contemporary English classroom. Twenty-first century discourses about progress, social change (often now labelled social justice), inclusion (embedded within notions of diversity and multiculturalism), and citizenship (linked to personal, hybridized identities and subjectivities) reinscribe 19th century pedagogical ideas of socialization, inclusion, "republican citizenship" and cultural norming. It is through the continuous history of these pedagogical practices that the ethics of "wealthy, white, literate males" have become naturalized in the contemporary classroom. Masked within the discourses of Diversity and Inclusion, multiculturalism, and social justice education (to name a few), whiteness remains an absent presence,[101] a hidden irony, a reality within realities (Connellan, 2013) existing as psychic power in the classroom. "Why do I impose formal English on you? Well I *have* to. It's my job—literally. But also it's the expectation that once you're *educated* you will speak Standard English. (my emphasis)" (Dr.

[100] For a fuller history of the teaching of English and English Education as a discipline/field in the United States see Arthur N. Applebee's (1974) *Tradition and reform in the teaching of English: A history*, the articles of Jory Brass (2009, 2010, 2012, 2016) Miles Myers (1996) *Changing our minds: Negotiating English and literacy* and Robert Scholes' (1998) *The rise and fall of English*. While these are not the only texts which provide an encapsulated history of the teaching of English, these are the texts to which I refer.

[101] I use this term in the way Connellan uses it. The presence of white is meant to be both visible and psychic, literal and non-literal, "capable of creating divisions and hierarchies" (p. 1530). Connellan tells us that the physical presence of white affects the social and political design of public spaces, while it also acts as a signifier of racial dominance. (p. 1530)

C. Obs. 062019).[102] In the Comp-Lit classroom of CCC the pedagogical transmission of formal English subjects both students and professors. Hence, even when studying, reading or writing about a text that breaks, opposes or disrupts the syntagmatic x-axis of SAE, subjects internalize operations of psychic whiteness through an acceptance of and adherence to the normative and regulatory power (Butler, 1997b) of formal English.

The authenticity of dialect, language, and culture is *de facto* standardized, homogenized and universalized through a lens of 'formal English'. Within this psychic space Dr. C. did not read for fear of "sounding ridiculous," i.e., not Southern, not rural, not Black, while I volunteered to read with the confidence that I "sounded authentic," i.e., rural, Southern and Black. Connellan (2013) warns of the deceptive power of white to control, indoctrinate and manipulate. Universalizing ideas about the authority of language—who speaks, in what voice, with what level of freedom or constraint—placed us in 'unconscious subjection' (Butler, 1997b). As subjects our 'dependency on a discourse we never chose' (cited in Connellan, 2013, p. 1546) initiated and sustained our "agential choices" to read or not read, to sound ridiculous or not sound ridiculous. This simultaneity of freedom and repression is constituted by the invisible grid of whiteness that instigated feelings of intellectual freedom, discussion and laughter (we all giggled when Dr. C. admitted to her shortcomings with the language), but simultaneously perpetuated the oppressive "rules of whiteness" (Connellan, 2013)—the subject racially marked

[102] This statement is taken from a larger discussion about Black English, Standard English and "…the creativity… the regional deeply felt dialect" (Dr. C., Obs. 062019) in Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*. While the students are reading early 20th Century African American Southern dialect (many said they did not understand it). Dr. C's statement is inculcated within the sanction and institutionalization of "formal English" as normative within the discourse of Higher Education. In this discussion, Dr. C. points to Richard Rodriquez's *Hunger of Memory* and David Wallace Foster's essay "Tense Present" as two authors who voice their opinions about appropriate use of formal and/or (non/in)formal English. The comment above is a partial response to Foster's contention that white professors should not 'impose' Standard English (a formal language) on students of color because in the 21st century there are multiple cultures and multiple ways of speaking and understanding.

as Black as the authentic speaker of Black, rural, Southern dialect while the subject racially marked as White is silenced, made silent, self-regulates and conducts oneself in a space of silence. Thus, psychic whiteness regulated "the stories inside the squares…the lives and creativity of individuals who, because of the invisible parameters around them, [could not] reach their full creative potential…" (p. 1532).

Connellan (2013), citing Clair (1998), tells me that "invisibility is accompanied by silence, and silence can be organized" (p. 1532). In Prof. C.'s classroom the condensed white space emits silence. While the organization of the classroom does not differentiate from Dr. C's classroom, the oppressive silence and space constrictions create, for me, feelings of claustrophobia, which Connellan (2013) notes can be a response to the color white as well. Bodies in this space are silent, unmoving, immobile, lethargic while the authorial drone of the sovereign speaking subject lulls everyone to incapacity. The paradox is that the sovereign Gaze of the professor, situated at the front of the classroom, simultaneously sees and does not see. Their complacent silence intermingles with their silent insurrectionary acts. On my left is the young man who constantly scrolled through his social media. On occasion he would ask me, "What page?" turn to said page in his book and return to scrolling. Two seats ahead, a male student appears to be playing a game on his computer. Three seats ahead in the next row, a student is writing her paper. I can see the MLA-format heading with Prof. C's name and the title *Huck Finn*. On the far left, a student appears to be paying attention until I realize that she is staring at her phone not her book. Another student comes in late, sits, drops her bag, reaches inside and pulls out her Math book. Herein lay the ambiguity of freedom and repression within the psychic space of whiteness. Do these silent subjects freely choose silence? Or are they subjectivated within silence? Is there agency in their silence? Are they splitting their attention

between Prof. C.'s lectures and math or are they passive subjects silently accepting of their oppression?

Within the grid of whiteness the students' inertness reveals not only their subjection to transmission pedagogies (Brass, 2010) but also their complicity in the operational powers of psychic whiteness that orients silence. As Connellan (2013) notes, "the creator of the grid becomes every one of us as we all reinforce its structure by adhering to its constraints. The combination of white and grid ensures that the structure remains whilst the content is repressed." (p, 1532). There is no reading by me or the students in Prof. C.'s course. As a matter of fact, there is very little discussion or student participation. Occasionally, rarely actually, there is a comment, usually by the same racially marked white male student, Z., who sits in the front of the room, his desk situated across from Prof. C's desk. Had it not been for the 20-something students in the classroom, it would appear to be a discussion between two people, better described as a lecture for one. I do not know students' names, I do not speak to anyone except for the young lady seated in front of me, and these conversations usually have nothing to do with *Huck Finn*, especially since she did not even purchase the book. "Did you watch *When They See Us*?" she turns and asks at the end of one class. "NO… not yet… I can't." "Oh my god, I was watching it and I had to turn it off. I'm on the last episode and I didn't want to start crying in class." (Obs. 062019) It never occurs to her that Prof. C. and I might be friends or that I'm a snitch; possibly because I initially helped her figure out how to improve her grade on her previous paper, or possibly because as Black women we adhere to the adage, "Snitches get stitches." While their actions can be perceived as agential, i.e., stepping outside of the grid of whiteness, the student-subjects simultaneously adhere to unified, organized (and oppressive) silence, maintaining their individualized invisibility through surreptitious acts which fit into the

superimposed grid of silent naturalized whiteness. As such, Prof. C's teaching-style as lecturer and orator (a form of transmission pedagogy) discursively and psychically constructs the professor as sovereign intellect and keeper of knowledge and the student as the receiver or receptable of that knowledge. While this can be superficially viewed as a top down approach to power, through a Butlerean/Foucauldian lens, the students as subjects are complicit and accepting of as well as participant in this power relation, which works in and through their subjectivity as silent, inactive listening.

Hence, the structure of the course as lecture-based and teacher-centered superimposed with historical discourses of *rhetoric or oratory* and *belles lettres* (Scholes, 1998) represses the interpellated subject who "turns" or acknowledges his/her discursive category as student through the passive consumption of texts and the passive production of student work. Scholes (1998) highlights that in Higher Education the studies we now call *literature* and *composition* began to evolve in the late 1800s and what was formerly known as composition for oratory became strictly composition. The results of this included a shift in student work from producers of texts to passive consumers of texts… and ultimately a split between composition and literature in which composition is considered low brow and literature became highbrow (p. 10 - 11). Subjection occurs as each member-subject of the class adheres to and upholds the constraining white structure of active-passive lecturing[103] and (in)active-passive listening.

> We talked a little bit about close reading and we're going to do that with the first couple of chapters today… close reading is a skill… it doesn't only exist in English class… Many of you will become businesspeople and you'll have to read communications from your boss and you'll try to, the word I guess would be, read between the lines. Some of

[103] I define Prof. C's lectures as active-passive because on many occasions he would ask a question and, receiving no answer from the students, would answer the question himself or fill the silent space with his own humor. To be clear, there was one significant moment when students responded as a group to his request to "give it up for S." who answered a question correctly. After cheering, applauding and clapping Prof C. followed up with another question to which no one responded.

> you might even go to law school… lawyers close read all the time (Prof. C. Obs. 062019).

However, ironically, there is no 'we,' there is very little talking and virtually no discussion, so how are students learning, discussing, reading, *doing* close reading without possessing or looking at the text? As subjugated subjects, complicit in their subjectivation, they have been institutionalized based on socio-economic discourses that frame education (particularly Higher Education), completion of a degree, and the university itself as a path to social and political respectability, middle-class society, and economic stability. Evidently, and unfortunately, close reading (or any reading for that matter) has nothing to do with this.

As a text *Huck Finn* itself is an aesthetic portrayal of the Great American literary canon, part of an " English curriculum that came into being around the turn of the nineteenth century [which] is still the same English curriculum… [with] adjustments… and many additions…" (Scholes, 1998, p. 80). This curriculum, debated nationally in contemporary classrooms, is inflected by the historical continuity of universal themes and beliefs about literature as indicative of a national (and natural) culture and a transmission of traditional values as an "agent of social control" (Applebee, 1974). The teaching of *Huck Finn* is believed to be reflective of the culture and ideals of a unified yet modern, subjective, mixture in American society. Embedded in this belief is the conception of the student as benefitting from the value of "cultural education" (Chubb, 1902; Applebee, 1974), history as progress (Scholes, 1998), functionality of and connection to the State (Myers, 1996), transactions with the text (Rosenblatt, 1978) and most importantly in the modern English classroom, a larger perspective and understanding of oneself and others in relationship to the world (Freire, 1970/2001; Hill, 2011; Gee, 1999; Gutiérrez, 2008; Sealy-Ruiz, 2013; Street, 2003). These historical yet modern concepts are reiterated in the contemporary English lit classroom:

> The main character is you… the reader. You who is going to interpret the events and the things that we hear about and which are thought about, what the narrator tells us… as interpreters, as I said the other day, a work of satire holds a mirror up to us. . And maybe we don't like what we see… Does it matter…? Yes, of course it does. Because the characters expressed are universals… (Prof. C. Obs. 062019).

Yet while the "gift of literature…[has] little or nothing to do with the actual condition[s] of [the students'] live[s]" (Scholes, 1998, p. 79), the continuous history(ies) of these discourses, naturalized in the contemporary Comp-Lit classroom is predicated on a psychic grid of whiteness. Based on linguistic categories, student and professor are symbolically visible as bodies in the classroom, discursively situated within enunciative modalities which carry their own subject positions (Williams, 1999). Each occupies a particular position; in this case, the discursive activity of the professor is viewed as normative and sovereign; he is the producer of statements (such as above) based on the complex interaction of educational discourse, discourses concerning the teaching of writing, literacy and literature, status as professor, and positionality within the Academy itself. The subject position of the student is complicit in this accepting of his/her subject position as addressee of Prof. C's "truth statements" (Williams, 1999). Both are institutionalized based on normative constructions of Higher Ed, Comp-Lit and the English classroom handed down through the ever-evolving historical discourses that shaped and continue to shape English. At the same time, student and professor are invisible—lectures fall on deaf ears and speech is likened to the teacher in a Charlie Brown cartoon—both are 'formed in subordination' (Butler, 1997b) as a consequence of the psycho-social and historical layers of psychic power. Whether a consequence of Christian morals, progressive ideologies, or critical theories, a normativity of whiteness as psychic power persists. The absent-present of indoctrination, discipline, social control and order, self-regulation, and the American ideal of a literate and literary American citizenship transmutates as psychic whiteness. The subject exists

within/occupies/participates in this psychic space through the simultaneity of visibility and invisibility and it is in this fluid and fluctuating psychic space that silence (in the form of *acquiescence*) subsists.

The spatial, temporal and historical construction of the English classroom organized around the "literary history of England and America" (Scholes, 1998, p. 145), continues to affect and effect an "American" ideal in contemporary times. Naturalized in the present-day Comp-Lit classroom, subjects adhere to a unifying normativity historically construed as American, formal, and Standard, 'regardless of one's racial markings or ability' in which the tension of freedom and authority persist (Connellan, 2013). It is through the absent-present naturalization of psychic white space, however, that the subject is subjugated—simultaneously institutionalized and institutionalizing, i.e., submitting to and being repressed by the multiply competing yet complementary discourses that both effect and affect the Comp-Lit classroom. Hence, while English as a subject and the teaching of English have undergone shifts based on social, political, economic, philosophical and psychological changes, in the 21st century the "American ideals" of two centuries ago continue to permeate academic institutions, naturalized in the classroom and normalized for its subjects.

My intention in this chapter was to tease out my poststructurally informed theory of the psychic power of whiteness in the classroom as a means to discuss the constitutive effects of the Signifyin(g) performative contradiction *nigger-nigga* when in *use* in and outside of the classroom space. My focus on psychic whiteness specifically concerns the complexity of *nigger-nigga* as both inflammatory (marked racially white) and insurrectionary (marked racially Black) speech. "The tyranny of the white wall imposes its own regime of power" (Connellan, 2013, p. 1541), a power that instills itself as psychic whiteness within the architectural design as well as

within the bodies that inhabit the space. What happens then, when the linguistic black spot of American English stands in direct contrast within this space?

7.3 Critical Conversation #17032014: An *excessive nigga moment* in-the-making: The disruption of psychic whiteness

We are in my office, G. and I. The door is closed for privacy, but I am wishing that I could leave it open. There is something about his presence; his demeanor puts me on edge. He is ex-military, Marines, and he carries an air of stoic confidence, aggressive masculinity and controlled authority that I can only attribute to years of discipline, training and defense, and possibly… age. Now, in his forties, he has returned to college believing that matriculating in higher education ensures social and financial security for black men. His gaze is direct; he does not look away, or rather he rarely looks away. He does not smile, nor paradoxically, does he frown. "I'm a Marine, I don't smile" he indicated at one point during our conversation. On the rare occasion when he does smile (I understood his intent to smile) it resembles a slight sneer. His eyes did not "smile" and his mouth only turned upwards at the tiniest portion of the corners of his mouth. The smile appeared more sinister than friendly. His face, imperceptibly immobile is settled into a sort of statuesque superiority, as if sculpted by Kara Walker[104] herself. G. puts me in the mind of Othello the Moor. Much like the Shakespearean version his demeanor, stoicism and speech are like that of a General (he was a Marine, after all). His presence fills the air with a tension, as if he is always prepared for "war." Add to this his uncompromising chivalry, "As long as you're in my presence you will carry nothing. No woman will," he commanded while taking all of my belongings from me at the door of my office.

[104] See images of Kara Walker's (2014) infamous "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby."

During our conference, he tells me about an experience he had with a young male of color in his math class. The student consistently used 'the N word' (G. was adamant that he does not say the word) and because of this young man's disrespect, G. had to threaten to "bust his ass." He begins,

> 'This dude, he comes in and he wants to be black… The first few times I let it pass… Finally, one day I just got fed up. I said, 'Look man do me a favor don't use that word around me.' He goes, 'I wasn't talking to you.' I said, 'I understand that but don't use that word around me. That's all I'm saying. I respect you wanna talk, you go head but just don't use that one word.' You know, now he wants to pop, 'You can't control what comes out of my mouth.' I said, 'I tell you what, you say it one more fuckin time right—' and the class just got SHHHUPPP.'(G., Critical Conversation (CC), 17032014)
>
> (He makes a sucking sound that resembles someone noisily slurping or sucking in from a straw.)
>
> "The professor stopped."
>
> We both start laughing.[105]

G.'s transition from stoic composure to "angry black man" can be indicative of a "Nigga Moment" (McGruder, 2005). In "Grandad's Fight" (Link to Image of a Nigga Moment, 2005) the character Huey provides viewers with a definition of a *nigga moment*, "A moment where ignorance overwhelms the mind of an otherwise logical Negro man causing him to act in an illogical, self-destructive manner, i.e., like a nigga" (McGruder, 2005). McGruder's definition locates a *nigga moment* within the discursive and material world of violence. Based on this particular episode and subsequent episodes, *nigga moment* constitutes the racialized, materially

[105] I bring to your attention G.'s and my reaction to this conversation because it is indicative of the ways in which laughter is often a response of black Americans in situations which are not, in actuality, funny. Scholarship about laughing barrels on plantations (barrels in which slaves stuck their head in order to laugh out of sight or sound of the master or overseer) is currently in its infancy. Ironic humor, slapstick, clowning, and jokes are all forms of humor that black Americans have used in opposition to their oppression. Signifying in the form of wordplay, throwing shade, bussin, cappin, markin' also mix derision, degradation, or trauma with humor. Hence, I would conjecture that our laughter was our response to the silence, fear and shock caused by G.'s statement, but also our knowledge that this was a dangerous moment for him and the student.

black, male Subject as aggressive, potentially violent and illogical—all of which cross age, economics or social class; hence, much like the character Grandad, who unfortunately finds himself in an altercation over a parking space (you know, some stupid *nigga* shit),[106] G. succumbs to what "most *nigga moments* revolve around… anger" (EE, Critical Conversation (CC), 20032015). EE's description of the causes of a *nigga moment* can be further contextualized in the discursive origins of this event. McGruder's definition posits two utterances which performatively construct the racialized subject—negro and nigga. Negro constitutes the racialized black subject as logical, rational and peaceful, *nigga* constitutes the black male subject as illogical, irrational and (self)destructive.

Paradoxically, the episode further explains that white men do not have *nigga moments* because they avoid potential altercations and are not irrational, violent beings. Yet while McGruder's commentary is meant to be comedic, searing and sardonic, it is situated within the discourses of political thought, scientific racism and racial demography. The violent irrationality believed to be materially located in the body of the Negro as a "real distinction which nature has made," (Jefferson, 1785) is a consequence of early pseudoscientific postulations and political ideologies about the differences in physical, mental and moral characteristics of both whites and blacks. As a respected thinker and politician of his time, Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) and his *Autobiography* (1822)[107] merged "biology and politics, science and morals, fact and values, ethics and aesthetics"

[106] While I am using irony to cite McGruder (2005) in this conversational aside, it must also be noted that while I label the verbal disagreement between G. and his classmate as a *nigga moment* and use this as a lens through which I am analyzing *nigga* as a Signifyin(g) moment of excess in the classroom, it is also ironic that the disagreement was specifically about the utterance *nigga*. I will return to this contradiction later in the analysis.

[107] Later Jefferson writes letters to Benjamin Banneker (1791) and Henri Grégoire (1808) commending both on their talents and intellect and admitting his own hesitation about the intellectual inferiority of the black race. See Thomas Jefferson Letter to Benjamin Banneker, Philadelphia, August 30, 1791 and Letter to Henri Grégoire J. Mss., Washington, February 25, 1808.

(Appiah, 1996). His contention that the negro "proceed[s] from a want of forethought, which prevent their seeing a danger til it be present [which] when present, they do not go through… with more coolness or steadiness than the whites," (Jefferson, 1785) shaped political and social discourse about physical, intellectual and emotional distinctions between whites and blacks. Likewise, within the discourse of racial anthropology, writers such as Arthur de Gobineau (1853) contended that there were distinct physical and intellectual differences between the three dominant groups—white, black, and yellow (p. 146)—owing to geographical location, cultural development, and religious practices. Based on these distinctions, de Gobineau (1853) contends that any intellectual, cultural, artistic, moral or civilized advancement of the negro is individual in nature (not group related) and is due to his admixture with a superior European society: "there is a great difference between imitation and conviction. Imitation does not necessarily imply a serious breach with hereditary instincts…" (p. 74). These attributes of the racialized (black male) subject, constructed by scientific, anthropological, social, political, physical and psychological discourses (Appiah, 1996) during the socio-political climate of the late 18th and mid-19th centuries, are reiterated in the biting social critique of McGruder's 20th century comparison between white men and black men.

Nigga moment as excitable speech is an example of what Butler (1997a) defines as a condensed historicity, simultaneously including past and future invocations that exceed the utterance (and/or the utterer) itself. Through a continuity of use *nigga moment* links historical discourses of biological and genetic racism, i.e., white men and black men inherently behave differently due to their blood and color, to a contemporary nonempirical belief system,

> Nigga moments are like when you're at the grocery store and someone's checking out and they know good and well they don't have enough money to pay for their groceries but they put em on the belt anyway… and… now they wanna stop the line and hold up

> traffic at the grocery store because they can't pay for it. That's something that we would call a nigga moment. (EE, CC, 20032015)

However, as a performative contradiction, *nigga moment* is a parody of its discursive history. As an utterance it rhetorically loops back to the historical discourses that constitute the binary negro/nigga (not as an individual but as a linguistic category) which in turn subjectivates the racialized (black) subject. As a speech act, McGruder's *nigga moment* Signifies on these historical discourses through the use of parody and humor. As Signification *nigga moment* is the rhetorical trope of metonymy (Gates, 1988/2014). It is a substitution for a range of discursively and socially constructed behaviors applicable to "the behavior of black men who act like *niggas*." However, within this metonymical relationship exists metalepsis. The phrase "acting like a *nigga*" is metalepsis for "acting in an illogical, self-destructive manner" (McGruder, 2005) or (as in comedian Chris Rock's (1996) *Bring the Pain*) to respond to mundane issues nonsensically. Within this metalepsis however, the metonymical use of *nigga* must be understood. Metonymically *nigga* is being used as an ethnophaulism which conceptually (and literally, I might add) refers to black peoples. Hence, there is an immediate discursive association between responding in an illogical manner to mundane issues and blackness. The person who "acts like a *nigga*" is responding with less steadiness than a white man (Jefferson, 1785). Thus, the illogical behavior is linked to material color and the racialized (black) subject is performatively constructed as *nigga*. As a metonymical association, *nigga moment* is understood as a particular raced (and gendered) social practice of the *nigga* (or the negro who inherently has aspects of the *nigga* in him). While use of the contemporary phrase *nigga moment* citationally refers to constructions of black subjects during the 18th and 19th centuries, as linguisitic practice it is delinked due to its "ownership" within a community of racially-marked black speakers. Therefore, as speech act, there is a shift in the racist/racialized formation and transmission of

knowledge/power. The Signifyin(g) force of *nigga moment* is its contradictory, performative power.

"In my community if you say nigga you more than likely been through… a few nigga moments. Black people just realize it's a nigga moment and identify with it" (EE, CC, 20032015). EE's theory of usage may be one lens through which G.'s anger can be understood. G.'s desire to "bust [his classmate's] ass" was based on his classmate's response when asked to refrain from saying the word *nigga*[108] in class. "You're not even of my persuasion but you're trying to act, walk and talk like me...."[109] (G., CC, 17032014). When I ask G. to articulate what 'wants to be black' means, he rebuffs, "You know what I'm talking about." Within the midst of his telling, "You know he tries to have this swagger. Tries to wear his pants down around his ass. You know the whole stereotypical black thing. Baseball cap, hoodie, you know all the stuff that you see young black men wearing. That's what he wanted to wear." (G., CC, 17032014). Ironically, G. does not wear hoodies, baseball caps or sag his pants (at least not on campus),[110] nor does he say (use) the word *nigga,* indicating that the word takes him back to an earlier time when "we were repressed, we did not have a say… we have worked so hard to try to get out of that… and when I hear that word it brings all of that back to me." (G., CC, 17032014). G.'s

[108] While I analyzed this by labelling it a nigga moment, I am in no way diminishing G's response or his emotional value. I also am not making a claim that his response was illogical, without merit or unnecessary due to the mundanity of the situation.

[109] G's definition of blackness is based upon specific cultural and racialized connotations. In his comment he indicates that someone who "acts, walks and talks *like him*" (my emphasis) in a specific way is acting black. The irony of this is that G. does not act, walk or talk in the ways that he describes as black. Yet he includes himself as a representative of specific cultural and social norms related to "acting black." When I challenge G. on these conceptualizations, he explains that there are certain things that are black and that black people do. "Every race has its own idiosyncracies." For G., when a person takes on the characteristics of another race, that is being fake. He continues to argue that whites and blacks have specific behavioral differences and that according to one's race people need to "be who you are" even if they live in a neighborhood of a different race. His argument is that when people take on the characteristics of another race, they are not proud of "being who they are." When "you take on the characteristics of another race then you're being fake and that's what I don't like."

[110] Part of G.'s dress may be due to his military background, but his attire is also reflective of his age. Having chosen to attend college later in life, G. would be categorized as a "non-traditional" student,. While this was never discussed, I suspect that G. is in his mid- to late forties.

conflation of his classmate's desire to be black based on his dress, mannerisms and dailyspeak with (in his opinion) the inappropriate usage of *nigga* in the classroom reveals the paradox and absurdity[111] of usage itself. On the one hand, G. abhors the utterance, stating that it is unacceptable in the classroom setting and in public spaces (he indicated he or the person would/should remove themselves in a public setting). This is an approach that resonates with Asim's (2007) contention that public decorum requires a politics of respectability (Higginbotham, 1992) for the betterment of society writ large, yet through his description of his classmate's decorum, G. also links usage to a material and psychic blackness.

> 'You are not black, be who you are… I can't tolerate that and I don't care if it's a negative accent[112]… don't try to perpetuate something that you don't know anything about. You're not a part of it… I went to a predominantly white high school but that doesn't mean I tried to act white. I am who I am. I'm a black man in a white school. I'm not gonna walk like you; I'm not gonna talk like you and I'm proud of that…I don't wanna be like you.' (G., 03172014)[113]

G.'s *nigga moment*-in-the-making is based upon the absurdity of racism (Asim, 2007) in the classroom setting. For G., *nigga* as a semantic loop of *nigger*, is a racist epithet. To add to the absurdity of the epithet is the absurdity of the student's caricature of blackness, in which his attitude, walk, talk, demeanor can be potentially read as a mimicry of blackness, i.e., a type of

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[111] I use absurdity here in the ways that Jabari Asim (2007) uses it when discussing the absurdity of race. See Part I, Chapter 2

[112] In his tirade G. says, "This little Indian kid… he was Arabic. Some form of Arab." It is unknown as to whether or not the student is ethnically Indian or Arab, and I do not correct G. and tell him that Indian and Arab are different nationalities/ethnicities.

[113] There is much to be said about G.'s explanation of racialized identity; (un)fortunately, my intentions are to explore how usage of the utterance *nigga* constitutes the subject positions of the students (and professor) in this moment. However, G's ideas about race reveal a continuity with early conceptualizations of race as biological and genetic. In our conversation G. connected ethnic-racial identity to behaviors, dress, decorum, speech patterns and language use; hence, this unknown Indian-Arab-Middle Eastern student was not being true to his ethnicity. As he states, "First, you have no concept of the struggle that we went through… based on his ethnicity. Secondly don't come at me like you're part of my race, cuz you're not." G. indicates what he cannot tolerate disrespect, especially a "kid disrespecting an adult" and what "*pisses* him off" (his emphasis) is someone who pretends to be something s/he is not, i.e., part of a race that s/he has no claim to. He even questions the role of the parents and contends that he [the student] probably "acts black" to fit in with his peers; however, for G. social environment does not determine one's authentic ethnic or racial behaviors, "be who you are, don't pretend to be something you're not."

blackface.[114] Paradoxically, due to the perceived racial makeup of the speaking subject, use of *nigga* in the classroom constitutes the speaker/user as "fakin' the funk" or "pretending," a characteristic that G. detests. G.'s articulation of his classmate's appropriation of blackness through the articulation of *nigga* coincidentally reveals the incongruous belief that if *nigga* is to be expressed, it should be expressed by someone who is materially black, "there are certain things that are Black and that Black people do." (G., CC, 17032014). He indicates that even when someone of a different ethnic or racial background lives in a predominantly black neighborhood and has lived experience with urban dress or language, that person should not assume the "persona" of that racial group. "Every race has its own idiosyncrasies." (G., CC, 17032014).

The irony of this supposed essentialist thinking is particularly reminiscent of the polygenists of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries who maintained that distinct racial differences existed that determined discrete variations in intellect, genetics, physicality and ultimately social order. As such, the historical discourses of racial and physical anthropology, polygenism, eugenics, and racial determinism exist prior to the subject position of G. through which his subjectivity is constituted. I highlight this observation because, in combination, these elements constitute the speaking subject as superficially racist,[115] which, as Asim (2007) contends, "expresses the absurdity of the racists and generates absurdity in the victim," thus creating in

[114] Dating back to as early as *Othello*, the theatrical caricature of blacks by white actors in early America theater began in the 18th century but took root in the 19th with the infamous Jim Crow characters of the early 1800's. This practice entailed painting one's face and hands black with grease paint, burnt cork or shoe polish, enlarging one's lips and exaggerating one's speech patterns, walk, dress and overall "swagger." To be clear, I am not accusing this student of enacting the historically racist trope of blackface; however, I am placing this within the context of G.'s perceptions in order to interrogate my argument of usage in the classroom.

[115] I am also not accusing this student of overt racist behavior; I am merely interrogating the ways in which, through my interpretation of G., the student's language and actions can be potentially perceived as a caricature of Black cultural and social norms. Through this lens, the student's language, dress and behavior can be perceived as that of the minstrel who exaggerates characteristics of Black speech and dress for the purpose of racist humor, for example.

blacks a defense mechanism, 'absurdity to combat absurdity' (p. 219). G.'s *nigga moment*, then, can be understood as a defense mechanism meant to combat the absurdity of the constitutive effects of racist language and racist behavior. Through this lens, *nigga moment* as illogical act (McGruder, 2005) instead can be viewed as an act of absurdity,[116] as self-defense and/or agential. "When you're in a class with someone for an hour and it's like 'hey nigga this,' 'my nigga that,' c'mon man, chill wit that." (G., CC, 17032014).

It is in this *excessive moment* that bodies, subjectivities, pleasures, fears, histories and power relations overflow the protocols, norms, and forms of the 'psychically white' classroom space due to the historical and political discourses of race and racism (Orner, Miller and Ellsworth, 2005, p. 113). While the speaking subject is not materially marked as white, within the white space of the classroom, *nigga* becomes unsayable and disallowable due to its interpellative power as racist speech. What's more, while the speaker of *nigga* is not directly addressing (i.e., hailing) G. (nor does he appear to be using *nigga* as hate speech), the performative power of *nigga* places both speaker and listener in subjection, creating a scene of enabling vulnerability (Butler, 1997a). It is in this vulnerable space that the subject psychically experiences melancholia, an irresolvable grief of the historical past that cannot be contained within the protocols and norms of the Math class. This condensed historicity paradoxically creates a contradiction in which the utterer's intended meaning is circumvented, the consequence of which is an excessive *nigga moment*-in-the-making—a moment in which the overflow of bodies, subjectivities, pleasures, fears, histories and power relations is due to the absurdity of racism. It is in this excessive moment that Signifyin(g) occurs. As witness to the speech act of the subject, the subject who is symbolically hailed performs an inverted interpellation,

[116] I use absurdity based on its connotation within the philosophy of language as something of a paradox that can be true, is logically consistent yet contains contradiction, much like Asim's (2007) argument about racism.

inaugurated in speech to counter the offensive call (Butler, 1997a). In this instance the speaking subject is *dissed* or in the words of G. himself, "I actually had to punk him." Hence it is through the Signifyin(g) speech act of *putting down* and *sounding*[117] that the event known as a *nigga moment*[118] occurs. It is through these rhetorical strategies that the melancholic subject disincorporates the sovereign authority (Bhaba, 1992) of *nigga,* thus establishing a "*new* form of agency" (Bhaba, 1992), i.e., the *nigga moment*-in-the-making.

As noted in the footnotes below, a *nigga moment* is both discursive act and rhetorical trope. As rhetorical trope (Signification) it identifies specific characteristics of a designated event within Black speech. As discursive act (performative) it constitutes the subject in partial and incomplete ways based on context, situation and perspective. Yet within the psychic white space of the classroom, specifically the situated, contingent space of G.'s math class, both *nigga* and *nigga moment* are *excessive,* disrupting the normative grid of whiteness that contains and constrains. G.'s confrontation (his word) with his classmate causes the entire class to psychically shift—everyone, including the professor, stops and waits in shocked silence for G.'s (and his antagonist's) next move. "The professor stopped. He looked and I said, 'Excuse me professor, no disrespect, but I'm about ready to buss his ass and I'm telling you right now'" (G., CC,17032014). As a Signifyin(g) performative, *nigga* disrupts the psychic space of the semantic x-axis known as Standard American English. 'Yo my nigga,' located on the y-z axis of Black Vernacular English is disallowable in this space based on its disruption of the syntagmatic chain

[117] Dissing, punking, putting down and sounding (sounding off in some linguistic circles) are listed as figures of Signification by Gates (1988/2014). Citing Roger D. Abrahams text *Talking Black,* Gates contends that "Signifyin(g) is primarily a term for rhetorical strategies… often called by other names depending on which… form it takes… '*signifying*... [is]… a term not only for a way of speaking but for a rhetorical strategy that may be characteristic of a number of other designated events.'" (p. 84-85) On the y-z axis of SBAE and BVE these figures of Signification are both syntagmatic and paradigmatic, both speech acts and linguistic conduct.

[118] Paradoxically, *nigga moment* is also a figure of Signification. It is a rhetorical speech event that encapsulates figures of rhetoric in black speech as well.

(Easthope, 1983, cited in Gates, 2014, p. 65) of SAE. As stated previously, G. is not being directly addressed (as said student indicated by his statement "I wasn't talking to you" when G. asked him to stop saying *nigga*); therefore, much like Gates'(1988/2014) literary argument about disruption as rhetorical substitution, within the classroom space of semantics (a psychically white space), *nigga* offers no fixed position of the receiver as subject of the discursive act. *Nigga's* location on the rhetorical y-z axis of Black English as well as the opacity of the speech event disrupts linguistic whiteness, thus establishing an excessive moment-in-the-making in the classroom.

As well, within the discursive act of disruption, *nigga's* condensed historicity places the racialized (Black) subject in melancholic subjection. For G., *nigga* is a sign of disrespect and nonconformity operating within the classroom, "we all conformed to the rules of the classroom…" (G., CC, 17032014). Hence, the indoctrination of discipline, self-regulation and social control was disrupted by the speech act of the speaker. In order to regain or reassert conformity in the face of the absurdity of racism (from both the utterance and the speaker) the melancholic subject must turn in a moment of recognition.[119] Yet in turning, the melancholic subject ruptures the rhetorical ritualization of disruption and substitution. Through rhetorical disciplining, i.e., *punkin', dissin'* and *soundin',* which also exceeds the grid of the classroom, the melancholic wrests *nigga* from the classroom space and agentially Siginifies through the creation

[119] It should be noted that G. felt as though his professor was not "man enough" to handle the situation so he had to. According to G. the professor appeared "non-confrontational;" however, it is the responsibility of the professor "to keep *control* (my emphasis) of his students and to ensure that nothing is said or done that would infringe on the liberties or freedoms of any other student…There's certain things that as men you just don't do, or you can't accept. If you're a teacher, any kind of teacher, if you're in a position of authority you can't allow your authority to be jeopardized for any reason regardless of the situation. I feel that because I am an older black man even though you are my teacher, especially with this professor, you weren't man enough to handle this situation, so I had to. Now does that mean that I disrespect you? No. I respect your authority as a teacher. But as a man, that's something totally different" (G., CC, 17032014). I believe that further theorization of the categories "professor" and "man" need to be attended to in further inquiry.

of a *nigga moment*-in-the-making, one in which the racialized (black) subject articulates his psychic ambivalence by simultaneously accepting and rejecting (i.e., disrupting and conforming to) the psychic space of the classroom. This form of discipline and disruption is indicative of horizontal power relationships in which students manage themselves and their peers, a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1978) in which bodies internalize forms of social control within the institutionalization of the classroom and govern themselves and others accordingly.

G.'s choice to manage his classmate is based upon institutional norms of what is sayable and acceptable within the classroom space. He does this through his own use of Signifyin(g) rhetoric: "So I squared on him and I said, 'What?! Do you still have beef!?!'" (G., CC,17032014). Within the situated, contingent classroom space of G.'s math class, *nigga* as Signifyin(g) performative disrupted the syntagmatic x-axis of SAE and its constitutive elements as Black speech, consequently disrupting the psychic white space of the classroom. In turn the rhetorical response of G. enabled a type of classroom agency in which the normative behaviors of conformity and regulation reasserted itself, for as G. admitted, after that interaction the student "calmed down."[120] I label this a *nigga moment* based on the complexity, irony, and contradictions at play in language use within a discursively constructed "reality" as well as based on McGruder's satirical construction of the racialized black male subject as *always already* irrational and violent. While Negro constitutes the racialized black male as logical, rational and composed (G. as retired marine and older student), *nigga* constitutes the black male subject as illogical, irrational and self-destructive (G. ready to 'bust his ass'). However, while I label this

[120] G. admits that the student's behavior did not completely change. After this incident the class began to complain and the professor managed the situation by asking the student to leave. This solution however was temporary in that the student would hand in his assignments, leave the class, only to return the next day with a quieter version of the same behaviors. G. also admitted that the student continued to say *nigga*, and as a result he (G.) just "stayed away from him."

interaction a *nigga moment*, unlike McGruder, I think of this moment as defined by EE (CC, 2015):

> It's something that's trivial that gets blown out of proportion in a negative light... but there's a purpose behind it, so there's a reason behind you having those feelings and even though they might not necessarily be what you think of as positive feelings they actually do come from a positive place… like outrage and things like that… its vanity, its pride, those are the basis for feelings in *nigga moments*.

While *nigga moment* as defined by McGruder connotes a negative effect, which is the linguistic construction of a particular event designated to those events, spaces, contexts in which illogical acts between black men occur, the *nigga moment* in-the-making that I describe can be interpreted as a discursive representation of experience (Scott, 1991). It constitutes a racialized subjection of the materially black subject only because black people recognize a *nigga moment.* Yet, *nigga moment* is fluid, unstable, unfixed, evident in conflicting articulations and divergent constructions of situated contexts. EE's elucidation of a *nigga moment* as an event that potentially comes from a "positive place" acts as a metacitation that reveals limitless interpretations and contestations.

If I may provide an alternative definition then, a *nigga moment* is a discursively constructed experience, event, occurrence based on multiply intersecting context(s), audience(s), power, social and individual practice(s) impacted by competing, contested discourses. However, even this definition is limited. A *nigga moment* is only possible through continual repetition and reiteration. Both *nigga* and its moments are in excess, including past and future connotations that are multiple, complicated, unstable and unlimited. It is a construction of knowledge of a particular social practice as well as an exercise in language precisely because it brings into existence a particular (racialized) experience. It precedes the event it both names and describes. It is a moment where 'the absurdity of the victim combats the absurdity of the racist.' It is a

moment of disruption, substitution, and Signification. It is a moment of irrational and absurd agency, a "mental constellation of revolt" (Bhaba, 1992, p.65). It is an in-the-making moment… in-the-making because it is a situated moment, specific and unrepeatable, and fraught with context, discourses, identities and social and cultural relations of similarity and difference (Miller, 2005, p. 238).

Chapter 8: To Teach or not to Teach… A Truly American Word in a Truly American Institution

What, one wants to ask, are Americans alienated from? What are Americans always so insistently innocent of? Different from? As for absolute power, over whom is the power held, from whom withheld, to whom distributed? —Toni Morrison

I read: "*You sho is one aggravatin' nigger woman!"* (Hurston, 1926). There is a 'whoa' and a few murmured exclamations from the female students in the room. "Um…so there we are, dealing with the N-Word[121] in our class." (Dr. C., Observation, (Obs.) 062019). It is the inaugural performance of *nigger* in the classroom, spoken by Sykes to his wife Delia, spoken by me to a class of students and their professor. In my mouth, *nigger* as slur is sayable, as it is also sayable by the character Sykes, a Black husband speaking to his also Black wife. In Dr. C's mouth, *nigger* is translated to 'the N-Word.' At the level of utterance, Dr. C's metonymic substitution is still a type of use. While Dr. C. "will never allow herself to say it," it is Killer Mike who claims saying the N word is like saying *nigga*—everyone knows what you're thinking, everyone is thinking the same thing. Even within the confines of the text, Dr. C. will not *read* the word *nigger.*

> '*So de white man throw down de load and tell de* N *man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he has to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks…* what Hurston says is… the black woman has to pick up that burden because it has to be picked up… I think… one of the most profound things she ever said was the idea that the N woman is the mule of the world" (Dr. C., OBS 17062019).[122]

[121] Dr. C. does not say *nigger* or any derivative of *nigger*. At one point she read niggardly in Hurston's work and prior to its reading said, "I'm gonna say it," as a trigger warning for a word that sounded like nigger but has no connection to the racial epithet. She has made this crystal clear by apologizing profusely each time she is met by *nigga* in the text. In contrast, I am free to say *nigger* and *nigguh* as an observer and visitor to her classroom.

[122] It should be noted that I read this same passage to the class verbatim.

For Dr. C. the utterance *nigger-nigguh*[123] is unsayable and disallowable, even within the context of the literary text or as part of an academic discussion. Syntagmatically the N-word replaces *nigger-nigga* on the x-axis of SAE; while not rhetorical it substitutes as an allowable euphemism. This substitution, however, is only semantic replacing *nigga* within the structure of the sentence and within the discursive universe of standard (white) English. Unlike the Signifyin(g) performative *nigga* itself "the N-word" does not trope, nor is it part of the discursive universe of SBAE or BVE. Instead, its use as substitution is the effect of a racist discourse which precedes the speaking subject, i.e., a belated metalepsis (Butler, 1997a), a discourse which the speaking subject discursively refutes. This refutation is based on the installation of the speaking subject as the site of injury. Use is ruptured as the utterer is constituted on the basis of the insult as opposed to the citationality of the original slur or usage. Dr. C's (non)use usage is based on her belief that she will commit an infraction which would then fall into a regulatory domain and disciplining of the speaking subject by the sovereign power of the State, in this case the Administration and/or Board and/or Hearing and Appeals Committee of the college. However, while I contend that use is ruptured due to the possibility of a future (un)knowable infraction, *nigger-nigga* is still *in use* through the euphemistic substitution of the N-word. Hence, while Dr. C. *says* the N-word, like Paul Mooney and Killer Mike contend the receiver thinks and/or knows and/or accepts this euphemism as *nigger* or *nigga.* In use the N-word ensures that speech is not prosecuted as conduct[124] and that the site of injury remains within the text itself, attributable instead to the characters of Hurston's text. Conversely, I can *read nigger*

[123] While I have used the -a ending of *nigger* up until this point, I purposely use the -uh ending as Hurston does in her text.

[124] Throughout the chapter, my use of the word conduct is based on Butler's (1997a) definition: a "…kind of speech that acts, but it is also *referred* to as a kind of speech that acts… hate speech may be a saying that is a kind of doing or a kind of conduct, it can be established as such only through a language that authoritatively describes this doing for us…" (p. 96).

while Dr. C. cannot because in the psychic space of the classroom, my usage is not interpreted as conduct. Ironically, while my speech is protected in a myriad of ways, both on and off campus, my skin is not.

"*Miss Watson kept pecking at me and it got tiresome and lonesome. By and by they fetched the niggers in and had prayers, and then everybody was off to bed.*" (Prof. C., Obs., 17062019) In Prof. C's class there was no trigger warning, no apology, no hesitation, or stutter. I am following along, appreciating Prof. C.'s affected Missourean drawl of 14-year old Huck, until such time when I simultaneously read and hear *nigger* (not *nigga* which I hear much more often). I look up expectantly, shocked actually, searching for an intake of breath, an uncomfortable seat shift, an "ahem," or at the very least a glance in my direction (one much like the Latinx student does in Dr. C's class every time *nigger, nigguh, niggah* or any other conversation about Black Americanisms comes up in class). He stops. His voice changes; it drops in register and takes on the authorial voice of professor. He is Prof. C., not Huck. "That's the first time we see the word. The first time it appears in the text. And notice it's not used in anger. It's not used as a deliberate insult." (Obs. 17062019) Without apology or announcement Prof. C. has read the text verbatim, a white man, reading a text by a white male author about a white male character who literally says *nigger* in reference to the Black characters (slaves) in the story. No student in the class seems to be affronted by Prof. C.'s interpretation of Huck's usage, actually there appears to be little if any movement at all. Instead, I note the stoic pose and intense stare of the one racially marked Black man who sits with arms crossed, book open two rows from the front, and I interpret his intensity as disbelief. Prof. C.'s *reading* of *nigger* (not even *nigga*) receives little comment:

> 'And this would have been the practice. Let's get everybody together for a prayer. Now again the idea is nominally at least, that the slave holder believes that his slave is not as

human as he is and I'm not a hundred percent certain that that slave holder would see one of the family slaves as having a redeemable soul. As being eligible for sanctification or salvation for that matter.'

"So why pray with them?"

"Yeah exactly, why pray? Maybe it saves their Christian conscious."

"Yeah"

"So why wouldn't he use the word slave instead?" a black male student asks.

"Because the N-word as we try to euthanize it was a common word in common speech by people in Huck Finn's social class and certainly in Tom Sawyer's social class. Sometimes it can be used insultingly. Sometimes it can be used in anger. But for the most part the way Clemens uses it throughout the book is a simple description, and you know I don't mean to undercut the horror of the word. I don't even try to undercut the horror of the word, it's a simple description" (Obs. 17062019).

It is through this example we see a distinction in use. In conversation Prof. C. says the N-word; however, when reading, Prof. C. says *nigger*, citing verbatim what is on the page. In this case the argument that *nigger* should not be said, cited, or read by a white professor under any circumstances[125] is vacuous. Prof. C., who has been teaching at the college for over thirty years, reads *nigger* through the eyes of Huck, Jim, Tom and ultimately Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens[126]) himself. Why then is Prof. C. an exception to the norm? More to the

[125] While I cannot contend that this argument is supported by all African Americans, there is a general consensus among people of color that *nigga* "belongs" to African Americans and *nigger*, its distant cousin, should never be spoken except in rare cases by African Americans. While this is a general belief, I have observed that many Latinx youth and youth of color also say *nigga*. However, I have found that this commonsense notion of use is the predominant theme and/or topic of conversation; *nigger* and *nigga* are primarily discussed based on who can or cannot say it, with the dominant reason being that one's physical markings (skin color) determine this.

[126] Born Samuel Langhorn Clemens, Mark Twain was a pen name that he invented first to shield his identity while writing some sketches about the Nevada territorial legislature. Through this name he developed a reputation and became known as Mark Twain. Prof. C. indicates that when talking about the man he calls him Clemens; however he calls him Mark Twain when talking about the creation of Mark Twain as a persona, as a literary character. According to Prof. C. Clemens referred to himself as Mark Twain. "In fact in anecdote in the 1890's, the late 1890's the entire Clemens family was staying in Austria for the about 20 months. Listed under name he would write Samuel L Clemens, under home he writes Hartford, Connecticut and under occupation he writes Mark Twain. Being Mark Twain became what he did. Mark Twain was very definitely a public figure. That's essentially what Samuel Clemens does; Mark Twain is his twin status, Samuel Langhorn Clemens cut in two and sharing himself with this character he called Mark Twain." (OBS. 062019)

point, what other exceptions exist across university campuses, exceptions which receive no local, state or national coverage in Higher Education magazines? It is no coincidence that public discourse about *nigger* in Higher Education focuses on those cases in which the professor is reprimanded or disciplined due to his/her saying of *nigger-nigga* in the classroom setting. Yet what of those examples where a white professor says *nigger-nigga* and no action by students or the "State" is taken? Or those cases in which a Higher Education committee takes no recourse? Kennedy (2003) contends that appropriateness or inappropriateness should not be the crux of an exploration of *nigger/a/ah*. Instead, *nigger-nigga* represents a "rhetoric of complexity" (p. 138), which "emerges as a postulated and open-ended *ideal* that has not been adequately encoded by any given set of legal convention" (Butler, 1997a, p. 90). Unfortunately, evidence of these cases is limited, excepting my observation of it in Prof. C.'s class. Hence, if the sum total of sayability and allowability has boiled down to the racial markings of the speaking subject,[127] why has Prof. C. been allowed to read *nigger* for the 30-something years he has taught at the college without any disciplinary action? "Every time I walk by his classroom I cringe. And then I look inside and see brothas sitting there looking pissed as shit," confided one colleague. Yet this colleague (or those students) never felt the need to have a discussion with Prof. C. or to complain about his vociferous reading of the text.[128]

Based on my observations Prof. C.'s reading of *nigger* is *allowable* since, as a Twain scholar, *Huck Finn* is a seminal text in his literature classes, and his teaching /lecturing of the text is historical knowledge at the college. Yet his discrimination between reading the text (i.e., *nigger*) and teaching the text (i.e., the N-word) are significant. Prof. C. does not address the

[127] To be clear, I am in no way justifying or opposing the sayability of *nigger-nigga* by persons of color or not of color, nor am I contending that this word should or should not be part of American English parlance. However, I arguing for a much more nuanced assessment, argument and analysis of *use*, especially in the college classroom.
[128] Also of note, Prof. C. rarely, if ever, closes his classroom door. Anyone walking down the hall can hear him.

class or anyone in the class with the utterance *nigger,* thus avoiding a possible infraction as the site of injury. However in *reading* the utterance, Prof. C. in voice, cadence, and accent attempts to mimic the dialect of the characters of the time thus performing the text. This aural move by Prof. C. highlights much of the discussion surrounding Twain's stylistic choices. While Twain's choices for distinctions in dialect have been condemned as "…a low grade of morality; it is couched in the language of a rough, ignorant dialect…systematic use of bad grammar and an employment of rough coarse, inelegant expressions" (Fischer et al., 2003, p. xxiv), the same dialects have also been lauded due to Twain's portrayal of "…riverside people who 'do not have the air of being invented, but of being found.'" (p. xxv). Twain is commended for his ability to write "actual speech" and in so doing *nigger* is deployed by Prof. C. as it would have been spoken by the people of this time period, fear of present-day infraction aside. Clemmons even introduces the text with an explanatory note to the reader, one that Prof. C. capitalizes on through his alterations in voice, accent and register:

> In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect, the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary "Pike-County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guess-work; but pains-takingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.
>
> I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding. –The Author. (Twain, 1884/2010, n.p.)

While Prof. C. admits that he is not "an expert of dialects," he has written an article based on the theories of experts of Twain's dialects who have taken apart the narrative and note that Clemens' characters do speak differently.[129] Specifically, the three main characters— Huck, Jim

[129] Prof C. notes, "…you start to notice that the Duke and the Kings speaks differently, and they too speak differently from Huck, and that Silas Phelps in Arkansas speaks differently than a Missouri native… [Clemens] creates a little joke. Questioning as always with every attempt at humor, there's a serious undertone. The idea that most readers won't really get [is] how hard

and Tom—occupy three distinct social classes which determine their distinct speech patterns. "What dialect they use. What words they use. Often social class determines education which determines the size of individuals' vocabulary [and] affects how [they] speak as well." (Prof. C., Obs., 062019). While Clemens painstakingly worked to reproduce an oral tradition based on geographic location, social class and race, *nigger* is a term that crosses all class and racial boundaries in the text. This includes Jim's use of *nigger* which is evidence of Twain's construction of parlance of the early 1800s. "You know dat one-laigged nigger dat b'longs to ole Misto Brandish?... all de niggers went in… en I said, 'f I didn' git it I'd start a bank myself…o'course dat nigger want to keep me out…" (Twain, 1884/2010, p. 55). While the elite black middle-class sought to suppress the use of nigger as a form of linguistic repression and hate, nigger was frequently used by laborers, and prior to Emancipation, slaves used the word self-referentially and in conversation with and about others.

> …the word became virulent precisely because black laborers integrated it into their own vocabularies… the label carried so much discursive weight because black laborers spoke it, self-identified as such, and by so doing, subverted notions of race and class identity in the United States. In turn, whites disavowed the words traceable European origins, and by the 1820s largely used it to mock black speech. They placed the onus of black subordination on black people themselves, using African American vernacular to make inequality appear both logical and natural (Pryor, 2016, p. 206)

Nigger took on slanderous proportions by whites who not only used the utterance against blacks, but also misappropriated it as part of black speech. Yet slaves and laborers' early use of *nigger* reveals forms of Signifyin(g) by those who troped racist usage by laying claim to it within their own dailyspeak. In doing so *nigger* as slur took on new rhetorical meanings based on specific speech events within a black community of speakers. Twain's invocation of *nigger* as

Mark Twain worked, how hard Clemens worked. [This is] the genius at reproducing orality [and] the oral tradition. And his master stroke in this novel [is] just letting Huck tell his own story." (Prof. C, Obs., 062019)

actual speech of the character Jim (as well as Huck and others) reveals a complexity of usage and rhetorical strategies that exceed one-dimensional slurring.

In early parlance, *nigger* in all of its varied spellings—negar, nigur, niger, or negre—was used as a term synonymous with black.[130] Later it was used as a distinction amongst classes serving as nomenclature for the specific labor class known as slaves. Yet the "neutral" denotation of *niger* took on derogatory connotations and became the go-to term for institutionalized racism by 1775 (Pryor, 2016). As Pryor (2016) contends the transition of *nigger* from descriptor to category to pejorative is based on several factors.[131] Of course, racism existed prior to *nigger* as epithet; however the transition from *nig[g]er* as descriptor/category to *nigger* as degradation reveals the shift in the discourses which governed the body politic of both blacks and whites. Hence, while slavery allowed for sharp demarcation between the master and slave, during which time the slave, viewed as subhuman, was identified/catalogued/inventoried as *nigger* similar to other necessary commodities for production such as a horse, dog, cow, or pig, *nigger* as epithet was a response to a later shift in discourses surrounding freedom, citizenship, and "inalienable rights," which now included the previously enslaved and their descendants. Writing about the "approbrious" usage of *nigger* in the North as a way to humiliate colored

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[130] Contemporary spellings derive from the Latin niger and in Spanish and Portuguese negro, a common term used as a descriptor for a black person. According to Roberto Carlos Garica (2018) in his essay "black/Maybe." "What you mean when you say the word *Negro* depends heavily on the modifier because Latinos call each other *Negro* all the time: *Negrito lindo* (black and pretty), *mi Negro* (my black friend/brother), or *maldito Negro* (damned black guy)… slurs like *cocolo*, and *monokiquillo* (basically monkey) [were used] when referring to African Americans or other people with strong African features." (p. 57).

[131] As Pryor (2016) notes, "by the 1820s blackness, not slavery, marked people of color as occupying a fixed social class… the word nigger became a slur in conversation with black social aspiration" (p. 205). Her focus on nigger in the antebellum North highlights whites' desire to contain and constrain the movements of free blacks through a process of linguistic castration. *Nigger* as descriptor turned epithet terrorized individuals as blacks sought and acted upon civil liberties and freedoms of the country they were born in and felt they had a right to. Serving as an umbrella term, *nigger* expressed the sum total derision of white society at the time. Pilgrim and Middleton (2001) write that nigger served as shorthand for the caricatures of the Coon, Brute, Tom and Mammy; hence, while each possessed different attributes—from the slovenly, lazy character of Stepin Fetchit to the violent, ape-like Bigger Thomas and the childlike inferiority of Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe—all were viewed as having debased "moral, intellectual, social and physical characteristics." (Pilgrim and Middleton, 2001).

people[132] and "impose contempt upon them as an inferior race" (p. 38) Hosea Easton (1837) reveals that from infancy nigger was embedded in the disciplinary and socialization tactics taught to children by parents and teachers,[133] through which, embedded in their psyche, it became a function of their discursive reality. As a disciplinary technique, *nigger* was used by parents and teachers to control behavior, inculcate morals, teach lessons, and impart values. Ranging from scare tactics such as "the old nigger will care you off…the old nigger's coming" (Easton, 1837, p. 41) to chastisement "you are worse than a little nigger" (p. 41) to moral instruction, which if not followed will result in becoming poor like a nigger, ignorant like a nigger or resembling a nigger, this form of instruction served to construct colored people (collectively) as base and immoral, frightening and grotesque. As Pryor (2016) observes, "children absorbed their racial lessons and reacted with open hostility when they saw real black people." (p. 204). This is illustrated in fictional texts such as Flannery O'Connor's (1955) "The Artificial Nigger,"[134] a story about a grandfather, Mr. Head, who takes his grandson, Nelson, on

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[132] I use this term as Easton himself uses it during the 19th Century.

[133] See Pryor, E. S. (2016) The etymology of nigger: Resistance, language and the politics of freedom in the Antebellum North. *Journal of the Early Republic, 36*(2), 203-245.

[134] O'Connor inserts two symbolic representations of racial discourse during the 1950's which reiterates the arguments of Easton (1837) and the research of Pryor (2016). The first of these is the image of the black lawn jockey statue dressed in a brightly colored horse jockey uniform. The statue could be a metaphor for the lawn jockey statue often placed on the lawns of white middle class suburban homes during the first half of the 19th Century. Various origin stories of the lawn jockey range from the "myth" of Jocko Graves, a loyal slave of George Washington during the Revolutionary War to markers of safe houses along the Underground Railroad. For more information on the black lawn jockey see the website for the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, (www.ferris.edu). The second is the watermelon held by the lawn jockey. The watermelon fruit as a racist stereotype linked to free blacks in the mid- to late- 19th Century, continues to conjure racist stereotypes about African Americans in the 21st Century. For example, in a 2014 satire about a fence jumper in the White House, the Boston Herald featured a cartoon in which the intruder is in the WH bathtub asking Obama if he tried the watermelon toothpaste. During slavery enslaved blacks were given license to grow and sell watermelons by their master who saw this as a benevolent act bestowed upon children. However, post-Civil War the watermelon became a cash crop for free black Americans who grew, ate and sold these as a source of economic freedom and stability. Hence, the watermelon became a symbol for freedom (Black, 2014). For white Southerners however, the watermelon became a symbol of their fear and hatred of the black emancipated body. As a result, whites used the imagery of watermelon against blacks by constructing it as a symbol of black slovenliness, laziness and childishness. See Black, W. R. (2014, December 8) "How watermelons became a racist trope: Before its subversion in the Jim Crow era, the fruit symbolized black self-sufficiency". *The Atlantic*.

a trip from their rural area of Georgia to the urban sprawl of Atlanta in order to see a *nigger*, "'You ain't ever seen a nigger…' 'There hasn't been one in this county since we run that one out twelve years ago…'" (O'Connor, 1955, p. 261). Mr. Head's *slurring*, as both speech and conduct, is meant to parallel anti-black sentiment exhibited by whites in both the North and South who deployed nigger in order to prevent social mobility, construct rigid boundaries for whiteness, and police/cleanse public space (Pryor, 2016).

In contrast, Huck's expedition and relationship with the escaped slave Jim reveals the complex relationship between speech and conduct. Having been taught about *niggers* from his father, Pap, "…prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted… nigger" (Twain, 1884/2010, p. 34) Huck develops a relationship with Jim antithetical to his teaching and upbringing by the adults around him. Instead, his relationship impels him to lie and manipulate the (usually white) people they meet enroute to the convergence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers and eventual freedom.[135] In order to do so, Huck must speak the language of the time (including the utterance *nigger*). Hence, while in speech Huck says *nigger*, in conduct this young white boy acts as an early abolitionist, remaining near Jim even after he is captured and devising a plan to free him from captivity. Prof. C.'s comment "it's a simple description" while potentially dismissive of the complexitites of *nigger* (he admits that his intention is not to undercut the horror of the word) is situated within the discursive reality of the text. And while this discursive reality is a construction of knowledge/power in 1834 Missouri, it is a metaphorical reality situated within the literal reality of 21st century sensibilities. Prof. C.'s ability to read *nigger*, even as descriptor,

[135] While there is much to dissect in the relationship between Huck and Jim, my superficial analysis of this relationship is meant to show how Huck's intentions do not cohere with his use of the word *nigger*.

disrupts current discourse about the ownership of *nigger-nigga,* allowability and sayability by white professors in Higher Education, and the current efforts to sanitize *Huck Finn.*[136]

In recent years, there has been much debate about appropriate *usage* in the university classroom. Shannon Dea's (2020) article "Academic Freedom and the N-word" highlights the complexities of this issue. In response to the recent anti-racism movement in the United States, St. Jerome's University at University of Waterloo in Ontario, CN issued a statement that read, "The University of Waterloo unequivocally believes that there is no place for the use of the n-word in class, on campus or in our community" (Dea, 2020, para. 4). While on its surface this statement reveals the administration's strategy for controlling potential violations of hate speech, particularly in the classroom, the statement produced an altering effect. Black professors criticized administration for their universalizing approach to what could on the surface be considered censorship. Apparently, many Black professors such as Vershawn Ashanti Young (2007), author of *Your Average Nigga,* incorporate the N-word in their classes as part of their focus on antiracist scholarship, research and pedagogy. For these professors, St. Jerome's policy marginalizes them and their scholarship at an institution where they are already in the minority and calls into question the psychically white concept of academic freedom. The complexity of this issue reveals Butler's (1997a) articulation about the regulation of hate speech (or speech that is received as racist, hateful, derogatory or degrading) in the public domain. Butler (1997a) contends that while rights activists of the past focused on physical and concrete forms of discrimination (i.e., direct and structural discrimination), present day concerns are located within

136 See John H. Wallace's (1992) "The Case against Huck Finn" in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn.* Wallace was one of the first to count the number of times *nigger* appeared in the novel. He claimed that *Huckleberry Finn* is not a book which should be used in middle schools and high schools. "I found myself agreeing with him 100%… I mean it's going to take extraordinary complex narrative that describes essentially a simple allegory… It is a book which is just loaded with examples of human cruelty… Huck often repeats a simple sentence 'People can be awful cruel to one another.' (Prof C, Obs., 062019)

the linguistic sphere where "we are no longer considering what constitutes hate speech, but, rather, the broader category of what constitutes a reasonable criteria by which protected speech is distinguishable from unprotected speech" (p. 88).

At Central Michigan University (CMU) the contradictory power of speech vs. conduct arises when one examines the case of journalism professor Tim Boudreau who was released after "saying the n-word twice… in a 2017 media law lecture on 'Hate Speech and Speech Codes at Universities'" (Ruf, 2020, para. 3-4). A student in class posted footage on her Instagram with the caption "Why does he say things like this" (Ruf, 2020, para. 3) as well as an image of Boudreau standing next to a PowerPoint which had two additional slurs on it. Ironically in his lesson Boudreau was using the example from former CMU basketball coach Keith Dambrot who was released in 1993 for racial slurring. Dambrot later sued the college indicating that his First Amendment rights had been violated (Ruf, 2020). In the case of Boudreau, it is the State,[137] based on the evidence of the Instagram post and video, which determined that his lesson *about* hate speech was in fact conduct in which he *expressed* hate speech, yet his subsequent dismissal contradicts The Professional Standard of the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* as written by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and adopted by colleges and universities nationwide. While part of the tenets of academic freedom entails that "College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline…" (as cited in Euben, 2020). Boudreau's subsequent dismissal highlights Anderson and Lepore's (2013) argument that, "slurring is *non-displaceable:*

[137] In terms of my analysis, State refers to those governing bodies established and operating within Higher Ed institutions which develop and enforce policies and procedures with regards to speech and conduct for faculty, staff and students on campus.

a current use of a slur cannot be employed to discuss a past or future use without incurring a current infraction." (p. 30). The State is only able to prosecute an infraction through modern-day versions of governmentality (Foucault, 1978) through which the utterer is surveilled by the very subjects who are indoctrinated into the psychic white space of the university as well.

This is not a justification for saying, reading or quoting *nigger-nigga*. Instead I am pointing to the ways in which the citizenry (students) of the State (academic institution) seek redress to an authority which historically constructed racist discourses that created the discursive reality of *nigger*. While Anderson and Lepore (2013) contend that "in academic discussions… much of what seems suitable is definitely not," (p. 31) what this allows for are interpretations of *nigger-nigga* as a type of conduct (i.e., racial slurring) through the eyes and ears of its citizens who then appeal to the State for disciplinary action. Speech as conduct is now governed and governable within horizontal relationships between those classified, categorized and regulated within the institutions of Higher Ed (the State). The contradiction in this, then, is twofold: 1) the State is always, already linguistically privileged with the power of determining what constitutes hate speech, and 2) the citizen of such speech is always, already positioned as the site of such speech. Paradoxically, this form of governmentality mimics sovereign power and sovereign agency, with citizens thus enforcing and supporting the indoctrination of control through methods ironically constructed by the State Apparatus in the first place.

Contradictory policies and regulations do not end here. Under the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution there is currently no regulation of hate speech. The categories listed under unprotected speech are obscenity, defamation, fraud, incitement, fighting words, true threats, speech integral to criminal conduct and child pornography (Congressional Research Service). *Nigger* was initially used by wealthy, educated, white men (the slave trader, the

plantation owner, the Founding Fathers, the segregationists, the politicians, the judges, lawyers and academics), the same men who crafted the Constitution and established the Rule of Law in the United States. Hence, while *nigger* (or other racial slurs) performatively acted as hate speech and thus as conduct of the speaker, historically it was not prosecuted as hate speech. As well, under the fighting words doctrine there are no clear-cut laws pertaining to hate speech, racist speech, or racial slurs. The fighting words doctrine, established in 1942 in *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, is defined by the United States Supreme Court as "certain...classes of speech, the prevention and punishment of which have never been thought to raise any constitutional problem." (Kennedy, 2003, p. 54). Fighting words are those words that "by their very utterance inflict injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of peace" (Kennedy, 2003, p. 54).

Under this doctrine then, Boudreau's utterance could be classified as fighting words. Fighting words could also be applied to the case of Eric Triffin, Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU) adjunct professor of public health, who was suspended after singing along to a song played by a student in class; the song included the N-word. While Triffin's singing and dancing was common practice (he often began his class by asking a student to play a song to which they sang and danced), on this particular occasion Triffin's singing was met with concern by students who asked the university to punish him (Flaherty, 2018). In response to student demands that his singing of the word was offensive and a FaceBook post by the president of the Black Student Union decrying racial slurring in the classroom by professors and faculty, the university issued this statement, "as a public institution dedicated to the values of social justice, our university abhors the use of racist or hateful words and actions and we will confront these incidents if and when they occur…" (Bertolino, as cited in Flaherty, 2018, para. 11). Should Triffin be held accountable for a song he did not choose? Was he caught up in the music and

simply "forgot"? Was the class having a time of it up until such point as he sang *nigga?* Did the student purposely choose this song to trip Triffin up? I think here of Trevor Noah's argument on *The Breakfast Club* morning radio show when he contended that rappers need to make a non-black version of their songs if they don't want white people singing *nigga.* The breach of peace, then, is not due to Triffin's singing (there is no indication that he was in blackface—which would *really be offensive*) but due to the uproar that the posted video of his singing created. Yet while Triffin did not create the song nor did he choose the song for class on this particular day, as speaking subject he becomes the site of the injury. While Boudreau and Triffin suffered the same fate at two separate institutions, the interpretation of academic freedom in these incidents varies. According to the 1940 *Statement* "Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter that has no relation to their subject." (as cited in Euben, 2002) While it could be argued that Triffin, a public health adjunct, should not be singing and dancing in the classroom as it has no relation to public health, Boudreau, a journalism professor, was teaching a media law class about hate speech and speech codes. Paradoxically, even the language in the 1940 *Statement* draws questions. It states,

> As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that *the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances*. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution (my emphasis) (AAUP *Policy Documents & Reports,* 2001, as cited in Euben, 2002).

It appears as if the judgment of the public, then, dictates that *nigger-nigga* (and racialized language) is not suitable in academic discussions and, when uttered, is both non-displaceable and causes a breach of peace. Thereafter, it is the State's duty to act on public judgement.

Kennedy (2003) continues that African Americans have objected most strongly to *nigger,* as opposed to other degrading epithets; however, this form of public protest is formulaic and vitriolic and misses the intricacies of context and situation. He argues that the situational aspects of *nigger-nigga* must be explored and considered, not the overly generalized attitudes and aspects. If we are to take up Kennedy's assertions theoretically, then Butler's (1997a) argument that "hate speech is produced by the law" (p. 97) and as such "...becomes the legal instrument through which to produce and further a discourse on race...under the rubric of combatting racism..." (p. 97) potentially opens up a space in which to examine the efficacy of *nigger-nigga* as a performative contradiction. The supposition that hate speech *precedes* the court's decision, she argues, is in actuality a consequence of it; hence, the court determines what is and is not legally constructed as socially injurious speech or conduct, ironically holding responsible the speaker of such speech. Placing Kennedy (1993) in conversation with Butler, it would seem that seeking redress in the judiciary branch only serves to further a formulaic process of fetishization of *nigger-nigga*. In other words, "this faith in the reSignifying (my edit) capacities of legal discourse" (Butler, 1997a, p. 98) is itself a contradiction in that it is the law that was formed in racism (Matsuda, 1993, as cited in Butler, 1997c) and that historically upheld the constitutionality of injurious words. What is equally ironic is that those who seek redress uphold the faith in the neutrality of the State and (re)confirm the festishization of hate speech by seeking redress through legal discourse which held (and holds) them in subjugation. The variety of uses and meanings would, a là Butler, expose the performative contradiction, for when spoken, it exposes "the contradictory character of previous conventional formulations of the universal" (p. 89). However, in exposing this contradiction, new boundaries and limits are set, and thus, new challenges "…emerge for those who are not covered by it, who have no entitlement to occupy

the place of 'who', but who, nevertheless, demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them" (Butler, 1997a, p. 90). In the case of St. Jerome's, the now retracted statement creates a prohibitory effect which in its attempt to curtail hate speech simultaneously censors and contradicts the illustrious ethical code of academic freedom.[138] Yet in the cases of Boudreau and Triffin the State's decisions supersede their 'freedom in the classroom'. Butler (1997a) proffers that by allowing the State to determine whether the speech of a citizen is protected or unprotected, part of speech or part of conduct, the site of the injury is located with the utterer and the State becomes a neutral body whose purpose is to protect citizens from those speakers who are then (re)imagined as the dis/mis/re-placed sovereign power. However, the State is never neutral; as the sovereign body it is simultaneously the source and the consequence which enforces and/or refutes the injury.

It is Kennedy (2003) who questions the constitutionality of the fighting words doctrine with respect to First Amendment protections, citing that its basis rests in the fact that the "immediate breach of peace" is established based on the receiver's violent response. He contends that the doctrine privileges the potentially violent victim so that, "rather than insisting that the target of the speech control himself, the doctrine tells the offensive speaker to shut up" (p. 55). For Kennedy (2003) the fighting-words doctrine is problematic in that speech is regulated when

[138] According to *Inside Higher Ed* "Academic freedom means that both faculty members and students can engage in intellectual debate without fear of censorship or retaliation" (Nelson, 2010, para. 2). Counsel for the AAUP outline the specific scope of academic freedom as a subtext of the First Amendment. Of key import is that academic freedom does not have the same scope as First Amendment rights although it can be argued that there is a relationship between the two. The First Amendment was initially created to regulate the exercise of governmental power only; therefore, the constitutionality of academic freedom and free speech apply only to public employers, such as state colleges and universities. While there are exceptions to this, Euben (2002) notes that while "…the U.S. Supreme Court has consistently recognized that academic freedom is a First Amendment right, the scope of the First Amendment right of academic freedom for professors remains unclear" (para. 11). Individual rights of professors are influenced by contractual rights and academic custom and usage (unwritten common law and shared community norms) of the institution, and in many cases tensions exist between individual academic freedom and institutional autonomy. For more on the legal code of academic freedom see Euben, D.R. (2002) "Academic Freedom of professors and institutions: The current legal landscape." *AAUP*. https://www.aaup.org/issues/academic-freedom/professors-and-institutions.

the target of an epithet responds with violence, whereas hate speech is less regulated when the receiver tends to be non-violent (as far as I can tell there was no violent response by CMU alumna Skyler Mills who posted a nine second video of Professor Boudreau; however in the case of Triffin, there was outrage by students of the class and the president of the Black Students Union who demanded his punishment). Paradoxically, while the Supreme Court continues to use the fighting words doctrine as a prohibition again particular kinds of speech, it has not tried a case since *Chaplinsky* (1942) and in the case of *Snyder vs. Phelps* (2011), the Court ruled that "speech cannot be restricted simply because it is upsetting or arouses contempt." (Congressional Research Service). Kennedy also notes that the doctrine of fighting words weakens the mere-words doctrine in criminal law, which insists that mere words alone "...no matter how insulting, offensive, or abusive" (p. 55) are not justified as provocation for violent retribution. While Kennedy (2003) highlights several cases that call into question the legitimacy of both the fighting-words and mere-words doctrines, ultimately, he notes that "reported court opinions are hardly a perfect mirror of social life in America; they are merely an opaque reflection that poses real difficulties of interpretation. The social meaning of litigation is ambiguous" (p. 26).

The contradictions implicit in Higher Education institutions' policies about speech reflect the ambiguity of legal precedent itself. The original infraction and subsequent dismissal of Keith Dambrot at CMU in 1993 (the case Boudreau was citing in his lesson) resulted in the ex-coach later suing CMU based on the infringement of his First Amendment Rights. In *Dambrot v. Central Michigan University, 839 F. Supp 477 (E.D. Mich.1993)*[139] the U.S. District Court for

[139] As background, Dambrot admitted to using *nigger* in his closed door discussions with the team and coaching staff, of which one assistant coach and the entire team was African American. Dambrot also addressed individual players directly who admitted to addressing one another in the same fashion. When Dambrot's use became known outside of the basketball team, the athletic director interviewed players, all of whom indicated they were not offended by Dambrot's address. This became a campus-wide issue when one member who left the team a year prior complained to CMU's affirmative action office. While initially, in lieu of a more formal investigation, Dambrot was

the Eastern District of Michigan granted a partial summary judgment on behalf of the plaintiff's claims. The court ruled in favor of Dambrot with respect to his challenge to "the facial unconstitutionality of the CMU discriminatory harassment policy" stating that the policy was "constitutionally overbroad, limited in content and viewpoint, and vague." (*Dambrot v. Central Michigan University*, 1993).The court permanently "enjoined the defendant university from further enforcement of such policy" (*Dambrot v. Central Michigan University*, 1993). The District Court ruled against the plaintiff's claims of violation of his First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment rights. Hence, while Dambrot proved the unconstitutionality of the CMU discriminatory harassment policy, he was unable to prove that his constitutional rights were violated (Justia US Law). Yet, based on this legal precedent, is CMU in violation of the district court's mandate that the institution cannot enforce its discriminatory harassment policy based on its dismissal of Boudreau? Unlike Dambrot, is Boudreau's speech protected under his right to academic freedom in the classroom?

The contradiction in policy and procedure in Higher Education institutions is most evident in the varied authoritative responses to use of *nigger-nigga* in the classroom. To be clear, I am not positing a universalized practice of discipline to professors (of all racial backgrounds) who utter, read, sing, or quote *nigger-nigga*. Instead I am interrogating the institutional practices within Higher Education decisions based on the contradictory interpretation of *use* as speech and/or conduct as well as "what constitutes reasonable criteria" of academic freedom as distinguishable from unprotected speech. At Princeton, Professor of Anthropology Lawrence

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suspended for five days without pay, his subsequent dismissal was a consequence of campus wide protests and student demonstrations and news coverage at the local, state and national level. CMU contended that Dambrot's language was in violation of the university's "discriminatory harassment policy." Based on this, Dambrot's lawsuit alleged that his "termination violated his First Amendment rights to free speech and academic freedom." He also alleged that there was violation of his due process rights, violation of the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act and for defamation. Interestingly, several members of the basketball team joined Dambrot's lawsuit and also alleged violations of their First Amendment rights as well (Justia US Law).

Rosen began his Cultural Freedoms: Hate Speech, Blasphemy and Pornography class by asking which is worse, a white man who punches a black man in the face or one that calls a black man a nigger? When asked if he was going to continue saying the word (he apparently repeated the word several times) Rosen replied 'yes, if necessary.' This resulted in several students walking out of class (Flaherty, 2018). Princeton University issued a statement asserting that "conversations and disagreements that took place in the seminar are part of the vigorous engagement and robust debate that are central to what we do… we will continue to look for ways to encourage discussions about free speech and inclusivity" (Hotchkiss, as cited in Flaherty, 2018, para. 6). As a consequence of his speech/conduct, no action was brought against Rosen. Instead, Carolyn Rouse, chair of Princeton's Anthropology department (and an African American female) defended Rosen stating,

> [he] started the class by breaking a number of taboos in order to get the students to recognize their emotional response to cultural symbols… students will be able to argue why hate speech should or should not be protected using an argument other than 'because it made me feel bad'… I feel bad for the students who left the class not trusting the process. Rosen was fighting battles for women, Native Americans, and African Americans before these students were born. He grew up a Jew in anti-Semitic America and recognizes how law has afforded him rights he would not otherwise have (cited in Flaherty, 2018, paras. 23, 27).

A similar circumstance occurred in a virtual education class at Duquesne University when Professor Gary Shank said the n-word three times and gave students permission to say it as well. His intention was "to demonstrate a point"[140] (Luciew, 2020, para. 1). As a consequence, Professor Shank was suspended and subsequently fired. However, Shank is filing a grievance against the university and supported by the campus civil liberties group Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which issued the statement, "By firing Gary Shank for

[140] The article does not provide details about the point that Professor Shank was attempting to make.

discussing a tough topic in his class, Duquesne betrays any commitment it purports to have to academic freedom, which protects the rights of faculty to choose whether and how to approach difficult subjects" (Luciew, 2020, para. 3). However, Duquesne's Interim Dean of the School of Education, Gretchen Generett, in her apology response to students, classified Shank's behavior as creating a 'hostile learning environment' (Luciew, 2020, para. 6).

Quoting Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Kennedy (2003) attributes the contradictions in how *nigger-nigga* is litigated to the instability of language: "…'a word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged' but is instead 'the skin of a living thought [that] may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and time in which is it used.'" (p. xviii). Holmes' words are significant in that it is not only the hate speech itself that is unstable, but also the ways in which hate speech is *established …only through a language that authoritatively describes* (Butler, 1997a, p. 96) and that, ironically, is also unstable. The ambiguity in the social meaning of litigation to which Kennedy refers is a consequence of the incompleteness of language, and it is this dubiousness that Kennedy (2003) is pointing out with respects to *nigger-nigga*, a dubiousness, I might add, that defines us as we define it. He contends, "if nigger represented only an insulting slur and was associated with racial animus, this book would not exist... *nigger* is fascinating precisely because it has been put to a variety of uses and can radiate a wide array of meanings" (p. 27).

Thus, exploring *nigga* as speech act and the discourses which govern its use provide opportunities to examine the circulatory power which governs subjects within a social field. Within the present moment, there are similarities, ruptures, contradictions and variations based on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of *use.* These similarities and breaks, however, are not solely predicated on a historiographic excavation of *nigger-nigga* from its earliest

documentation located in the diary of John Rolfe in 1619 to present day rappers such as Killer Mike in 2021. Tensions about the use and appropriateness of the utterance *nigger-nigga* have arisen in the 21st century due to the intersections of present-day anti-Black racism and antiracist pedagogies, scholarship about whiteness and white privilege, and the influx of canonical literatures and technologies[141] that focus on multiculturalism, multiracialism and multigenerationalism of which *nigger-nigga* as performative, as Signification and as utterance is included. While normative sayability and allowability of *nigger-nigga* is predominantly based on the speaking subject's racial makeup, even when *use* is citational, this superficial argument does not account for those instances when *nigger-nigga* is allowable either by the institution or the student-subject, as in the case of Princeton professor Lawrence Rosen or CMU's ex-basketball coach Keith Dambrot, or like Prof. C's continual *reading* of *nigger* in Mark Twain. Nor does it account for usage by youth of color who are *not* African American.

Yet while it is easy enough to say these are exceptions, possibly even anomalies, to the rule, my question is: What exactly is the rule (for usage)? And why is there only one (sovereign) rule? Does the rule change? Can there be multiple rules, if we need rules at all? These questions reveal the complexities of governance and the tensions that the institutionalization of accountability have created. Kennedy (2003) acknowledges

> there is much to be gained by allowing people of all backgrounds to yank nigger away from the white supremacists, to subvert its ugliest denotation, and to convert the N-word from a negative into a positive appellation… the race line… is a specious divide. There is nothing necessarily wrong with a white person sayin 'nigger' just as there is nothing necessarily wrong with a black person saying it. What should matter is the context in which the word is spoken—the speaker's aims, effects, alternatives. To condemn whites

[141] Within the college classroom the use of multimodal platforms has allowed for more access to texts in all disciplines. Hence *nigger-nigga* is not just entering the classroom through literature. From the original writings of race purists to recordings of Blaxpoitation films or lectures to present day music, videos, memes, GIFS, social media, and blogs, the influx of *nigger-nigga* as a truly American word (Kennedy, 2003) is normative in language use, social practice and discourse.

> who use the N-word without regard to context is simply to make a fetish of *nigger* (p. 139, 41).

Because there is no law, policy or precedent that regulates hate speech; and because *nigger* became part of American parlance by those very same men who created and instituted the laws of our country, and because there are inconsistencies and contradictions in how the legal sanctions and university policies are applied.

> The punishment or the admonishment of those who use or misuse *nigger-nigga* is determined by the learning institution. Hate speech is all fair game because it falls under the First Amendment. What academic institutions are doing to sanction or admonish hate speech is under their own volition (J.G. CC, 21022021).

In the case of *nigger-nigga*, what is governable or (not)(un)governable is reasonable criteria by which speech, whether within the confines of private speech, the classroom setting, or citational, causes a breach of peace. Hence in the case of the university governance system, issues of use are a tenuous balancing act. While there is general consensus in the 21st century that African Americans retain academic, social, political and cultural license to "freely" say, articulate, cite, iterate, (sing, scream, shout) *nigga*, policies falling under the rubric of discrimination, harassment, or hate speech, as well as the illustrious moral and ethical codes of free speech and academic freedom, universalize and standardize what is sayable or unsayable in the college community. The consequence of which is the essentialization and commodification of speech in the college classroom and on the college campus.

This is not to say that all speech (especially *nigger-nigga*) should be allowable in every instance, but like Butler I contend that "a politics that begins and ends with the policing function is a mistake…" (as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 166). Instead, how can we be creative in our governability? How do we "exploit [the] ritual function [of hate speech and/or *nigger-nigga*] in order to undermine it in a more thorough-going way…?" (p. 166). How can we develop a more

thorough-going restaging of *nigger-nigga* so that its ritual function and "…its revivability as a speech act is really seriously called into question?" (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 166). How can we challenge the universal so that alternative constructions of 'linguistic vindication' (Alim and Smitherman, 2012, p. 116) is achieved?

The classroom is an "…example of both metaphor and reality… a 'place' where 'realities are woven into realities'" (Clair, 1998, cited in Connellan, 2013, p. 1532). Interlaced into the reality of the classroom space is the metaphorical reality of the text itself, a reality that is simultaneously real and not real, temporal and atemporal. In both Dr. C.'s and Prof. C's classes we enter into an earlier time period in which *nigger-nigguh* is sayable and allowable by both blacks and whites.[142] Both Hurston and Twain include *nigger-nigga* in their text as part of the orality of speech of the communities in which the narrative takes place,[143] situating the reader within the social practices of the mid-19th Century or the early 20th Century. Yet this reality is overlayed by the reality of the classroom space and present-day beliefs and practices about the use of *nigger-nigga* in the 21st Century. It is in this 'place' or space that the professor and students (as subjects subjected by the text) enter. As Prof. C. notes, "that's where fiction comes in, 'cause fiction can exaggerate what nonfiction can't." (Obs., 062019). In both classrooms, teaching is also a performance in that it seeks to represent the world and ideas about the world, "mediated by and through language… not about truth and validity, but about what is visible and what is impossible in relation to a particular audience, in a particular situation" (Orner et al., 2005, p.129). Necessarily, pedagogy is never able to perform a complete representation; instead it produces knowledges that are incomplete and never fully knowable. Orner et al. (2005) also

[142] Allowability in this case is not a justification of the slur. It is allowable based on the discourses of the time.

[143] As an aside, while writing this I began wondering about the contemporary arguments which ban Huck Finn from classes and schools, remove it from reading lists and libraries, and bowdlerize it in the effort to create a more accessible text. Has a similar reaction occurred with reference to Hurston's text?

highlight the necessary incompleteness of the educator. They argue, s/he is "never in full possession of her/[him]self, of the student, or of the texts and meanings s/he works with." (p. 131); however, the "pedagogical relation" is enacted due to the indiscernable, undetectable effects of the 'suspended performance'[144] (p. 130). Hence, both student and teacher are "…in-the-making… in the sense that our pedagogical, professional selves—our multiply inflected and constructed identities…are always 'sites of disunity and conflict', unfinished and incomplete…" (Miller, 2005, p.229). However, the discursive performance(s) of the legal codes, policies and laws with respect to pedagogy and teaching "…expos[e] the contradictory character… of the universal" (Butler, 1997a, p. 89). The English (Journalism, Public Health, Anthro, Sports) educator-in-the-making attempts an awareness of excess and "excessive moments… that which exceeds the norms proposed as proper and natural by those with social order (Orner, Miller & Ellsworth, 2005, p. 11-112). S/he attempts to practice situated pedagogy:

> pedagogy that both performs and is performative, recognizes and acknowledges 'excessive moments,' those moments in which student and teacher identities as well as their practices overflow beyond 'established' policies and procedures that '…drive to categorize, predict, and control both students' and teachers' behavioral and curricular 'outcomes'…' (p. 229).

It is the discourse of institutional autonomy, policy and procedure which institutionalizes subjects within the constraints of a psychically white space, "where [academic] authority and [academic] freedom sit side by side" (Connellan, 2013, p. 1543). However, based on an understanding of the ways in which knowledge is continually and continuously constructed, I would like to believe, I would like to imagine, that in the cases above, the professor/coach was challenging himself against fixed positions, framings, conceptions and standards which place students and teachers in rigid categorizations based on "commonsense" thinking about

[144] Orner et al. (2005) contend that pedagogy is a "suspended performance" in that it is "constantly interrupted and deferred" (p. 130).

curriculum, pedagogy, academic standards, and teaching practices (Miller, 2005). To teach means to take risks, to hope, to imagine, to believe. Like Miller (2005) I believe that teachers and students are "…dynamic subject[s] that change over time… situated historically in the world and positioned in multiple discourses" (p. 232), and as dynamic subjects we exist in language which also changes over time based on historically situated discourses. *Nigger's* transition, evolution, and transformation to *nigga* is just one example of this.

8.1 Critical Conversation #27022019: Homey in three parts "There's a White Racist Inside of Me"

Part 1

We are in my Introduction to Composition course. The Head Librarian, self-identified as white male, is leading the class in Library Instruction as students follow along on individual computers in the Library Instruction lab. I am stationed in the back of the room listening, working, commenting when required, as the Head Librarian (HL) attempts to provide students with an introduction to the college databases so that they can begin research for their final research papers. The students are a bit lost, and I fill in the gaps, quietly responding to quizzical expressions and comments. We have virtually arrived in Academic Search Premier, EbscoHOST, one of the primary databases the students and librarians rely on to search for scholarly, academic peer-reviewed articles.

"So, let's enter a word into the Search bar and see what we get!" says our nervous, but excited guide. "Does anyone have any ideas for something we can search?" The class is quiet, not for lack of interest or rambunctiousness, (this particular class is quite talkative, confident in their opinions and comfortable with their peers) but for lack of clarity and comprehension—many have not conducted research beyond "Siri what is…".

"No? Okay, well I have something we can search. Let's look up homie." As my head jerks up from my computer, I see HL obliviously bent over his computer, while each keystroke projects on the overhead for the entire class. He says each letter as he types. "H" "O" "M" "E" "Y".

Students have completely swiveled towards me, necks strained to snapping point. I cannot stumble to the front of the classroom quickly enough. Rather than accost him at the front of the room while he bends to the task, I take a chair on the first row.[145] "See!" he sounds excited, "there's not much we can locate with the search term homie." I am trying to politely interject, *And say what?* I wonder. I can feel my students' eyes boring into me. There is snickering, teeth sucking in both African American and Caribbean style, mumblings in English, Spanish, Creole, Spanglish. "So since that didn't work, what should we try next?"

I am wondering about the purpose of that particular exercise; what was the pedagogical justification for homie? In what Outcomes and Assessment rubric can we locate rationalization for the word homie? "Any suggestions?" It is my vocal male student with the three phones—one for his main "chick," and two burners for the extras—who speaks. "Ummm how about beavers." There is hushed laughter. The sarcasm is clear to all of us except HL. "Okay!" he gushes, "Beavers it is!" B-E-A- "I hope he spells it right," I hear my adult returning-to-get-her-degree single-parent, football mom mutter. -V-E-R. "Let's see what we get!" <Enter>

[145]Foucault's Panopticon critiques the space of the classroom as mimicking that of the prison. HL stands at the front of the room as all-seeing, all-knowing, yet oblivious to the classes' indignance about homey. He is also blind to the inappropriateness of what he is currently entering as a search category. Miller (2005) discusses this as a "'willful critical blindness'…where our [HL's] pedagogical imaginations may have been sabotaged as well as sabotage, may have been polluted and pollute… visions of what it could mean to… teach and learn across social and cultural difference" (p. 228). I did not enter the space in which he occupied; I could not bring myself to share his spotlight, even in an attempt to disarm him.

Part 2

I enter the library looking for a student while simultaneously looking for an iPhone charger because I am on 9%. Instead, I am greeted by HL at the front desk who greets me with, "Good Afternoon Professor Maxwell! How can I help you today?" His tone is almost shocking in its eagerness, its gleefulness, its cheer. But I want to believe it is genuine… no… I do believe it is genuine. He is desperately trying to fit into his recently forced banishment to the mostly black, mostly Latinx, mostly immigrant campus.

"Oh hey," I reply. "Actually I don't need anything. I was looking for a student."

HL is spunky, rides a motorcycle and a moped and sports a stylish bike jacket and helmet. HL also looks like he stepped out of the mountains of Pennsylvania circa *Little House on the Prairie.* Or a better description would be the Pennsylvania Amish man replete with a mustache-less beard,[146] balding middle and glasses. As far as I know HL is not Amish. As always HL begins talking and I am too considerate to stop him.

"So do you need to sign your classes up for any library instruction? I was hoping you guys would come back so I can redeem myself."

I reply, "No not at this time, although, now that I think about it, we will be back in… a couple weeks." I have just realized that Monday is the first day of April. "I will probably sign up for library instruction… (I hesitate)… next week!"

"Well… I can lead the instruction or get someone else. I still think I didn't do a terrible job. I figure it was either that I didn't do a terrible job and just didn't deliver what you wanted, or I did a completely terrible job." I calculate in my head exactly how many people I told, "HL

[146] Upon googling the proper name of the Amish beard, I learned that Amish men do not wear the mustache because they are pacifists and associate the mustache with the military; hence, the removal of the mustache signifies their disassociation with anything military related.

was awful" and try to read in his eyes whether or not he knows, and who may have been the person to tell him. At this point I can't take it back and I refuse to apologize. He really did do a terrible job.

"Well HL… it was… well some of the students were offended."

The look of shock tells me no one recounted my vent (which was both oral and in email form to colleagues in the English department), and, of course, I know why. I only shared the most terrible part of that fateful day in the library with my African American colleagues and peers (the email was a general concern about pedagogy, professionalized service and instruction on the satellite campus[147]). The sharing was part vent, part humor, part astonishment, but while speaking with HL, I realized that I selectively told those people who I knew would "understand" and who of course would not relay this to HL himself.

I wonder if I should continue.

"Well HL, you shouldn't have used homie."

Shock transforms to puzzled. "I was trying to be relevant, up to date." I wrinkle my brow. *Up-to-date? Even I am not up-to-date,* I think, and shake my head. Before I can go into a lesson about slang and its ever-evolving usage, before I can explain that even as an African American, I am not versed in the current lingo of my students, before I can indicate that other

[147] HL is only at the satellite campus because he is hated by administration. As indicated earlier, HL is spunky. The tension and rift between the administration and faculty on campus is fueled by fighters like HL who will stand up at a board meetings and Assemblies and question their programs, motives and leadership. He is one of the few left; the number of vocal ardent academics has dwindled considerably. Unwilling to deal with a regime that is divisive, defensive and combative, most retired, their years of service maxed out anyway. Many others have found employment elsewhere. And so, as punishment for his provocations, he has been relocated to the squatter camps, a forced removal to Palestine, Pakistan, Soweto. Much to HL's chagrin, he could not protest, even though another librarian asked to be relocated to this campus. In all honesty as the librarian in charge of statistics and data, Front Desk Librarian, Reference Librarian, Library Instruction Librarian is not the space for HL, as he articulated when I asked for Library Instruction, "Well, I can do it. But I don't know how. I've never done it before. You know I'm socially awkward." It should be noted that HL has been retired for over a year and still attends board meetings.

factors beyond color of one's skin dictate local practices (such as age, sexual orientation, geographical location, geopolitical identity, gender, class, education, context, situatedness… I can go on), he drops his head in his hands.

"Thank you for telling me… finally. I wish you'd told me sooner."

Part 3

When I walk into the classroom, my students are silent, not their usual behavior.

"What's up?" I say, looking around the room.

They glance at one another, my smart, spunky Latinx female is turned sideways, looking over at my single-mother, who begins, "Professor… what was that?"

And the floodgate opens.

"Nah see… I don't know if I should be offended or not."

"Noooo… he's just clueless. It was a mistake guys. I don't think he meant anything by it."

"A mistake? He meant something by it alright."

"He didn't even spell it right!" Single mom is flabbergasted.

I sit on the desk, partially at a loss for words. "I'm sorry guys. I didn't know he was going to do that."

"I mean… homie? Why would he choose homie? Who even uses that word?" burner phone snarks. They laugh.[148] Through their laughter they express their mirthful indignation—at

[148] In Mayo's (2008) "Being in on the joke: Pedagogy, race, humor" she highlights the websites *Black People Love Us* and *Rent-A-Negro* which both use humor to critique race. Using Gates (1988/2014) theory of Signifyin(g) Mayo analyzes these two websites. In *Black People Love Us* (http://blackpeopleloveus.com/index.html) the creators parody stereotypes of a white couple with black friends. In *Rent-A-Negro**, creator Ayo places a monetary value on different forms of microaggression, e.g. $200/hour for claiming black friends (characters Sally and Johnny in *Black People Love Us* would need retroactive billing according to Ayo.) In one image of *Black People Love Us,* Sally and/or Johnny is pictured appropriating what they perceive as Black slang. If I was teaching this class currently, I would introduce this article and the website and ask how much they would charge HL for appropriating albeit out-of-date Black slang. *Upon research this website could not be located.

his inexperience with contemporary lingo (his choice of words, his misspelling), at his transgression.

"Well he said he was nervous, he'd never done Library Instruction before."

"That's obvious."

"You know he came from the other campus and… well… he's new here. He was upstairs in an office somewhere. He's never worked with students. He told me he'd try his best."

"His best was homie!" Again they laugh.

Perhaps through Butler (1997b), their laughter is an expression of the racialized subject's psychic turn—a contradictory "jolting combination of pleasure and critique" (Mayo, 2008, p. 244), one in which the laughter itself is the Signifyin(g) contradiction. While they are confused, shocked, indignant about homie, they are simultaneously amused, "he even spelled it wrong." The sardonic laughter of the subjugated racialized subject Signifies upon the utterance homie in that it "offers a way to move from spectator to participant… to be in on the joke… being part of the reason for the laughter and as such being part of the problem." (Mayo, 2008, p. 244). Their laughter is the articulation of their psychic ambivalence in which they simultaneously accept and reject the performative nature of homie.

Single mom reiterates, "And he didn't even spell it right." Her mockery of this is also an act of Signification. To be addressed as homie reveals 'the loss or lack [of one's] own body' (Bhaba, 1992, p. 65). But it is through her mockery of his misspelling that she is able to also disincorporate his authority. (Bhaba, 1992). Not only is HL unable to choose a more appropriate word, he is unable to properly spell the word he chooses.

"So professor is he racist or not?" They turn to face me versus each other.

As "authority" in the classroom, they are asking me to assess HL's behavior as indicative of his moral ideology. I have become Williams' (1991) priest-turned-god, the all-knowing keeper of answers.

I don't know… I shrug. Like them I too was spectator constituted by the utterance homie. Unlike them, my subject-position as both priest-turned-god and drowning/dying mortal (Williams, 1991) casts me in doubled subjection. I am neither and both, incomplete and contradictory.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "I don't think so…" My answer is met with the "yeah right look."[149]

"Guys, I don't know if he's racist[150] or not. But I do know he didn't know what he was doing."

"You can say that again."

"But we need to go back to the library—"

Before I can finish there are eye rolls and sighs. "Guys, maybe we can give him a second chance," says my straight-A Latinx student. "You never know. Maybe he was nervous or something."

"And so let's look up homie because I'm nervous." The comment silences the room.

Finally I offer, "Okay, here's what we can do. I can tell him we don't need his services. I can do library instruction anyway and it will make more sense, or we can find another librarian."

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[149] The "yeah right" look is an expression of incredulity, but the lips are twisted and the head is cocked to one side. Culturally in communities of color, it metaleptically means "sure you're right" but is a metaphor for "we don't believe you."

[150] While I did not have the conversation with them at this juncture, I have attempted to tease out the nuanced difference between racism, prejudice, discrimination and white privilege so that as critical thinkers my students can understand the power behind words, labels and their meanings.

"Yeah that's better." The quieter students are nodding, especially the two young women who struggle with English, who are too shy and/or self-conscious to speak. One even offers, "I didn't know what was going on. I was confused."

"You do it professor."

"Yeah, you do it."

There is consensus. "Professor we trust you. And we already know you. We know what you want and you know what to do. Please do it. Why do we need those librarians anyway? They're always nasty." The traditional fear of the librarian has not changed much; students instead turn to what they know for assistance—Google.

"Okay," I concede. "I'll let him know."

That settled, my intent is to now focus on a much-needed overview of writing a research paper. Many in the class have never written a research paper (a curriculum requirement at the College), some have never written much of anything, for school or otherwise. And while I know this conversation should continue, so that we can unpack why homie was inappropriate by a white instructor to an all-Black and Brown classroom, so that we can critically assess language and its power to subjugate, so that we can critique ways to respond response-ably in meaning-full ways to those unrepeatable moments in the classroom (Miller, 2005), I say, "Okay guys, let's move on. We have a lot to accomplish today."

Before I can transition, Single mom quips, "It would have been better if he said *nigga*."

Part 1(a)

I want to tell you that the remainder of the class passed unremarkably. But it was the nuanced shift in the psychic space of the classroom that was remarkable. It was an excessive moment—one in which my and my students' subjectivities, knowledges, histories and power

relations overflowed beyond the classroom (Orner et al., 2005). One that marked the seemingly innocuous and ordinary as extraordinary. Was HL aware of his faux pas as he continued with his prepared lesson? At the moment, absolutely not. Post-HOMIE, was the class receptive to his instruction? Absolutely not. At one point I did have to interrupt HL and instruct him to steer back on course, "HL we don't have a lot of time and they still need to know how to use the databases." "Oh right! Okay!" he answered in his too-chipper voice. But the misspelled homie burned in the minds of my students for the remainder of the class. The psychic shift in the white space of the library computer lab was their recognition of their own irresolvable grief. HOMEY became psychically internalized as part of the "social regulation of psychic life" (Butler, 1997b, p. 167), as part of the white space that psychologically and psychically institutionalizes bodies within the grid (Connellan, 2013); their bodies were made into subjects through the discursive function of naming. HOMEY. Normative and normalized by the sovereign speaker, homie performatively performed as a "black word" in white space, subjugating each student within discourses of educational segregation and racist language. Like me, their heightened consciousness and irresolvable grief is framed through the discovery that they have been discursively constructed as the object, the objectified subject—the HOMEY.

"Let's try homie! H-O-M-E-Y! Nothing! So this can show you how looking up certain things will bring no results." HL summed up the remainder of the class succinctly—

N-O R-E-S-U-L-T-S.

Part 2(a)

I tick off the number of people I did tell and begin to question my own service to the college, to my students, to my community, to HL. Why hadn't I spoken to him immediately? Why had I let this fester for so long? Why had I felt the need to jocularly retell this story to my

besties and not to HL himself? How do I teach those with white privilege about themselves when I skip, ignore, make fun of a teachable moment?

So now I tell him: "Yes, one student even said you'd have been better off saying the N Word." HL looks horrified, as if he would never. But I understand this particular student's point. In her mind, this would have clarified HL's philosophy or positionality. If indeed racist, then show us your racist card so we know where you stand. Ironically, it would also have proven effective in terms of a viable search option for research purposes. And while her comment was made in hindsight, I wonder how my students would have reacted had HL actually suggested researching *nigga*. More to the point, what would I have done in that moment?

I continue: "Yes, well, in class the following day they asked me if you were racist, or what your deal was. Homie was not the best choice. And HL, you spelled it wrong… incorrectly." Why did I feel the need to correct myself? Was code switching and presenting myself in a particular way so important to me at this moment when it was I who was responsible for his lesson? When it was I who finally had the opportunity to hold the whip?

"A couple of them said they were offended, or they didn't know if they should be offended."

"And that's not me."

Suddenly, I am laughing openly in HL's face. I cannot help it. It is that funny, and I expect HL to join in with me, but he cannot. I see the look of consternation between my giggles, and I place my hands on his, resting on the top of the computer on his desk. "Oh HL, I'm sorry," I splutter, "I don't mean to laugh." But I do. I do mean to laugh. I mean to laugh in the way that Ellison describes the father's ironic laughter, cackling, hearty and nightmarish. I mean to laugh in the way that W.E. B. Du Bois identifies laughter for the African American, "to the black

world alone belongs the delicious chuckle…we are the supermen who sit idly by and laugh and look at civilization" (as cited in Mayo, 2008, p. 245).

My laughter did not connote a nervous giggle, nor was it *entirely* at HL's expense (although I suspect that he thinks it was… and if I want to feign some honesty… it partially was). My laugher was based on this newfound information—HL thought he was being up-to-date. Prior to this moment, I had no idea why HL chose homie as his word of the day. Prior to this moment my laughter was tinged with irony as I digested the audacity of his decision. I did not laugh with my students, instead allowing them their own moment of 'uncomfortable pleasure' (Mayo, 2008) through which they could express their own forms of agency and power. Yet I'd like to think of my uncontrollable laughter as Mayo (2008) describes Black humor: a 'doubled interplay of aggression and invitation… working with and against white bias…" (p. 246) which invites one to think differently and encourages learning. I am laughing too voraciously to explain to him the humor in his attempt at being up-to-date but spelling the word incorrectly, a move indicative of "white desire for black recognition and affection" (Mayo, 2008, p. 247). I do manage to eek out, "you spelled it wrong" between squeals.

HL counters, looking quite mollified, "Look, I'm from Mountainside. Do you know how many Black (or does he say African American?) families are in my town?" I am no longer laughing.

"Negative zero."

"About seven. Well, there's more than that now, but at one time it was seven. I was born in 1941. My grandfather was a huge proponent of the N Word. So, I come from a white town. But I have tried to move away from that. I honestly did not grow up around Black people, and to be honest I always thought that I wasn't prejudice but one day I realized I am. You know there

was an entire period though when I did subscribe to the thinking of the African American race based on their behavior. I thought that, you know, certain behaviors were unacceptable. Like, African American men who are "in your face" (he mimics an "in your face" movement with his head while saying this). I thought that wasn't a way to behave and I thought that was racial, but I realize now that "in your face" isn't racial and that African American men have to be in your face. But it isn't racial."

"But then I'm walking down the hall on the Cranford Campus and two African American men are talking and it's like 'you N' and they're using that back and forth between them. Why do you think that is?"

I hesitate. I am not sure if HL is being rhetorical or if he is asking me to be an authority. "Are you asking me?"

He nods, a slight smile? on his lips. A test? Once again, I am positioned as authority, and it is this situatedness that fetters me. I do not desire to be the authority on *nigga* or racialized language for that matter. I am but one of many voices attempting to articulate one situated interrogation of the fluid, incomplete, ambiguity of one racialized utterance. My answer, which can only be articulated through language, is also incomplete.

"Well honestly HL I think there are many answers to that question."

"I mean if it's so bad why use it?" (The age-old question…)

"Who says it's bad?"

"Well… you know… if it's considered bad, why use it?" (Correction: the age-old "white" question). HL is in good company. An ardent proponent for the eradication of *nigga* comes from British critic Piers Morgan (2014) who contends that *nigga* should be "…tied to a literary post and whipped into such brutal submission that it never rears its vicious head again." Morgan

claims this will not occur until the black community obliterates it from its social and cultural vocabulary.[151] While I won't take the time here to scrutinize Morgan's figurative use of the slave whipping post, I will acknowledge that he incorporates somewhat questionable data, which indicates that *nigga* is twice as likely to be used on Instagram as compared to dude or bro. HL's assertion that *nigga* is "bad" (an ambiguously subjective word in itself) echoes Morgan's (2014) argument that black Americans know the history of the word as a derogatory slur yet "…enjoy the freedom… to say it…in the knowledge that it's become taboo for whites…" (Morgan, 2014). Yet complementing with Morgan's outcry is the NAACP which funeralized *nigga* in 2007. While I don't believe HL's question is based on the taunt "if you can do it why can't I," I do think that the question begins and ends with the basic assumption that *nigga* can only be good or bad, rather than a complex utterance with a range of meanings that exists along a continuum.[152]

"Well, it depends on whom you ask. I mean… even in the African American community there are different answers, and those answers are based on more than just color. It's based on context, relationship, age, situation…" He is nodding as if he understands, "I mean, even if I answered you now, my answer could be completely different tomorrow, in another context or space." Would my answer be the same sitting in a coffee shop, or a bar? It is at this moment that I remember that he knows my research. "And by the way I read that article you suggested. I read two actually, that one and another one that CCC has."

I can tell he's excited. "Yeah well did they help?"

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[151]For a response to Piers Morgan see Talib Kweli Greene's (2014) article "Nigga? Please" where he contends that nigga is a symptom, which, at least in the present, cannot and should not be censored. "It's not the word nigga that should die, it's racism. You don't cure an ailment by attacking the symptom, and black people who call each other nigga is most definitely the symptom, not the cause of racism."

[152] I think here of Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2013) Op Ed article "In Defense of a Loaded Word" in which he argues that there are inappropriate uses of nigger; however, the word itself cannot be buried or eradicated from "one of the most vibrant cultures in the Western world." According to Coates, eradicating nigger is an ironic twist on the politics of respectability (See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's 1992 coinage of this term) in which Black people are being asked to raise themselves to a double-standard that erases context and relationships in human communication.

"Tremendously, especially one of the articles because he is doing exactly what I want to do. He is using empirical research."

HL continues, "No, I wish you had told me sooner. But it's okay. I'm glad you finally told me. Because most people don't go beyond…" He gestures into the great nothingness of the room with his hand.

"I don't know what that means, beyond. Beyond what?"

"Well… it's like this. If I get upset, then it's your responsibility to fix it. I'm angry and I will just sit with that. We can be upset, but we don't go past that. We're upset and that's it, and then we make that the responsibility of the person speaking. 'I'm angry. You did this to me, so now what are you gonna do about it?' We don't…"

"Dialogue," we say simultaneously, and now I am racking my brain for Butler's discussion about inflammatory speech. Butler (1997a) contends that when we simply point out inflammatory speech, the conversation stops and closes the possibility of futural articulations. Because discourse exceeds the speaker based on its historical past and unknowable future, it is the condition of a particularized context and moment. I want to believe that HL would agree with Butler's notion that a politics of speech cannot merely begin and end with policing. Instead, HL's questions, "Why would they do that? If the word is so bad why use it at all?" intuits Butler's arguments:

> … the question is how is that person… renewing and reinvigorating racist rituals of speech, and how do we think about those particular rituals and how do we exploit their ritual function in order to undermine it in a more thorough-going way, rather than just stopping it as it's spoken. What would it mean to restage it, take it, do something else with the ritual so that its revivability as a speech act is really seriously called into question (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 166).

When I ask HL what he thinks about the two young men he encountered who were saying *nigga* in the hallway he answers: "I think they are snubbing their noses. It's showing that they

can use it while others can't. And I would never (he draws his hand across his body as proof) use it. But that's what they're doing. They're using it because they can." (HL, CC, 27032019) HL's argument aligns with Gates (1988/2014). The young men are Signifyin(g), placing *nigga* on the rhetorical y-z axis in such a way that it literally and figuratively substitutes for other words within the context of speech. The restaging of *nigga* in the presence of HL is both performative and performance. While the young men perform a linguistic African American ritual, this is citational. It is a performance that installs them in a "…historicity that is not [their] own' (Butler, cited in Bell, 1999, p.166).

However, HL is also installed in this historicity. By virtue of proximity he, too, is tethered to this moment. As such, although not invited in, he is audience member in which his witnessing is a condition of his own autonomy. "Why use it" is in deference (or reference) to racist discourses of the past "the centuries of bondage, the decades of terrorism, the long days of mass rape, the totality of white violence that birthed the black race in America" (Coates, 2013, para. 10). "I'm a child of the fifties" connotes one singular, static subjectivity, but like Butler argues, this closes the conversation to the ways in which HL perceives *nigga* based on one historically contingent moment.

Instead, through the discursive act of Signifyin(g), the ex-citability of *nigga* is its restaging as a performative contradiction, one that subjugates HL to futural unknowable articulations. His witnessing, much like their performance, is "expropriated by a past [and future] discourse" (Butler, as cited in Bell, 1999, p. 166). HL is witnessing the rhetorical trope antonomasia, the substitution of an epithet or title for a proper name. In part, HL much like Piers Morgan, is missing this form of paradigmatic speech. If I am to refer to Gates (1988/2014) and/or Coates (2013), this is due to the ways in which racialized groups speak within their

communities. However, this simplifies *nigga* within the binary domain of white and black speech that not only universalizes (and essentializes) the speech act, but also misses the disruptions, ruptures, gaps and fissures of rhetorical language in the first place. As witness HL enters this speech event, yet he does not recognize linguistic rupture, the rhetorical troping of *nigga*.

Before leaving HL tells me he doesn't like bullies. He was bullied throughout his school years, including college, "I know what it means to be on the receiving end." He tells me the story of a college pick up football game in the quad. When the game is over, one of the players says to him, "You were the most feared quarterback out there." He explains, "It wasn't because I was exceptionally good. It was because I threw the ball to anyone. They never knew who I was going to throw the ball to, unlike other quarterbacks who threw the ball to the same person every time."

"This," he says, "is how I try to live my life."

"Like homie, we need to dialogue. I mean it could have gone another way. They could have all gotten up right then and there, but they didn't. But it would have been nice to have the conversation."

I respond, "So I guess you need to lead the next library instruction then."

"Okay, and we can have the conversation. I'm open to it. That's why I like education. There's always room to learn." He shrugs, "Hey I'm a child of the fifties. And I have to realize there's a white racist inside me too."

Part 3(a)

In the next class I tell the students that HL would like to have a conversation with them about homie, and they are receptive.

"Okay," says burner phone, "thas wuts up." He is nodding and looking around.

"How about the rest of you?"

Single mom is skeptical, "I don't know Professor. What's the conversation about? Why does he want to talk to us?"

"Well… I told him that what he said was inappropriate and that the class was offended. He was shocked."

"Shocked? You mean he didn't know what he said was wrong?"

"Well how would he know? Did he ever show any indication that he thought what he was doing was offensive?" I point to burner, "He didn't even get it when you sarcastically shouted out beaver."

Burner phone laughs, "Riiighhhttt!"

"But hear me out." I say, "He also said he wants to learn. He'd like to have a conversation. He'd like to hear from you."

"Guys, I think we should do it. C'mon…" says my always conciliatory Latinx student.

"It could be a learning experience for him." I add. "You get to be the teachers."

"But professor you already told him. What am I gonna teach him? What else we gotta say?"

"You can teach him why you were offended. Teach him about what he should and shouldn't or at least think about saying before he actually says it. Much less uses it in a class lesson. You even said he'd have been better off saying *nigga*. I told him that."

"Professor!" The class is incredulous. "You told him that!?!"

"Aww man, why'd you tell him that?!?"

"Professor you be wildin'!!"

Single mom smiles, "Y'all know professor is wild."

"I told him because he needs to know. You can explain that to him as well. Don't worry. I don't think he'll actually say *nigga*."

"Mmm… I don't know. What's the point?" Single mom needs cajoling and those that agree verbally nudge her.

"Cmon. Let's do it. It will be interesting to see his reaction."

"Yeah! I wanna see how red he gets!"

"I need a consensus," I say. "I don't want anyone feeling uncomfortable or like you're being forced. But the point is, he needs to hear from you, not me."

Reluctantly, single mom agrees. "Okay… okay.. if you say so."

"Yesss," burner phone claps his hands. "This is gonna be fun!"

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Author's note: Due to unforeseeable circumstances, this conversation never took place. There was limited time in the class period to include the conversation and HL was too busy to leave his desk to come to our classroom. Thereafter, HL retired and while some of the students were also in my Composition-Literature courses, the moment had passed. Most of the students in this class have since moved on. HL and I occasionally keep in touch, not as much as we said we would, but I wonder about those students. The young woman who was obtaining a divorce from her abusive husband and father of her daughter, and who was fighting him to fulfill his promise to help her gain citizenship. The woman whose sister spent three days in an INS human freezer at the border after crossing illegally with her daughter and who, upon release, was thinking of running if she did not receive good news at her upcoming hearing. Single mom who birthed a football player at the tender age of 15 and who was now finally attempting to obtain a college

degree, yet she fretted over her quite, handsome, muscular now 15-year old son who was popular with the ladies (she didn't want him repeating her "mistake"), and burner phone, who bragged about multiple women (although he 'came out' to me in private) and lived in a shelter due to abandonment by his mother. Had HL known these individual stories, would he have chosen the misspelled homey, and in doing so essentialized their language and their experience into a sum total of black slang? Or would their individual stories have registered with him the way they did with me, compelling him be aware of his own "willful critical blindness" in his pedagogy (Miller, 2005, p. 228). I wonder about them, where they are, what they are doing, how they are surviving. I wonder as well if, within the chaos of COVID, social justice and racial justice issues, the fight for citizenship, parenthood, health, security, and survival, this 'unrepeatable moment' has left any "visible trace of its happening…" as they each make sense of "what counts as valued and valuable… in [their] world[s]" (Orner et al., 2005, p. 131).

Chapter 9: The Polysemy of *nigga:* A Most Contagious Word

…language, image, and experience…Language (saying, listening, reading) can encourage, even mandate, surrender…Image… rules the realm of shaping… These two godlings, language and image, feed and form experience. —Toni Morrison

9.1 Nigga Instance #26102015: Miiiiisssssss: Nigga and the Paradox of Respect

"So I'm like if this nigga…" We are in my office having a student conference about writing, grammar, her paper that she needs to revise. The conversation takes a turn, she is telling me about her boyfriend who is going to Texas for basic training. "He's Mexican," she states, by way of explanation. This is significant because she is El Salvadorean; she has already rebelled against the cultural expectations her parents have placed upon her by not dating a countryperson, and worse yet, "he's Mexican." Now, he was joining the military, an acceptable career choice for her parents' consent. "He needs to do something," she says. She continues about their future together once she graduates and he finishes his basic training. In the midst of her chatter about their impending long distance relationship she comments on the possibility of infidelity. "So I'm like if this nigga… miiisssss…[long pause] he know, I don't play." Threat issued, she continues to discuss his upcoming move. I listen until the conversation seamlessly slips back to the banality of comma splices and punctuation. It is only then that I speak.

Miiisss (often pronounced meese based on accent and/or country of origin), symbolizes respect in various Spanish-speaking countries and cultures. I do not remember how or why I know this. I am not offended when I am addressed as miss. I have had this conversation several times with students and faculty of various backgrounds. Those not understanding (or accepting of) the nuances of the translation often indicate that the appropriate title of respect is Professor (*professora*); hence I (or we in the case of some faculty) should be addressed as such (as an

aside, a student asked me if I am going to require that people call me Dr. once I receive my PhD. While my answer was, 'I have to think about that,' my colleague-friend responded, 'She earned it, it should be used.') In some of my classes students have corrected their peers: "Miiisss!?!" "She's not a miss, she's a professor." Often this is met with an embarrassed, "I- mean- professsorrr." I smile "You can call me miss." Other times I say nothing at all, I watch to see how this will play out, and then there are times when I explain why miss is acceptable for me. In the Spanish language *señora* is a respectful address for a female elder. It is used both formally and informally (i.e., with strangers, family, friends, acquaintances). I accept miss as a substitute for professor because it signals respect. However, after speaking with a fellow graduate student who teaches in both Spanish and English, I learned that in the United States "miss" represents the distance between student and teacher, a usage which is not common in South American countries. This distance is often a carryover from high school, which is more formal and discipline based. "But in English especially, we try to minimize that space. We create a more informal, personal space so the distance gets minimized. Especially our students… they go through an unlearning process… this creates informality" (MIO, Critical Conversation (CC), #022021). Hence, while "miss" is a carryover from a distant, formal educational setting, *nigga* is a reflection of the informal, the personal, the safe space that many in Developmental English, Intro to Composition and Comp-Lit work arduously to create, "a space in which they are able to articulate their ideas, their voice, their identity, if only for the moment" (MIO, CC, #022021).

The irony does not escape me. My student respects me; therefore, she addresses me as "miss"(senora). Not only is my student comfortable enough to discuss her relationship with me (this does not surprise me in the least; as a matter of fact it is all too common), she feels *intimate, informal, relaxed* enough to utter *nigga.* Usage in this case, because she is Spanish speaking,

does not translate to black, as in *negro,* or *mi novio negro.* She did not say: *si este negro*. Instead, the U.S.-based, American English version *nigga* performatively acts as a racialized, gendered distinction. The boundary between professor and student has been blurred, or better yet, ruptured. This was no longer a student conference about grammar, spelling, syntax, structure, this was the intimate language of two girlfriends talking about their… *niggas,* [definition: a common usage among African American women when talking about their boyfriends, as in the following exchange between two black women: "Oh I meant to tell you, yesterday my boyfriend went on an interview and his license is from two years ago. So he didn't get it. He had everything but his license. It isn't updated. Two years! I was like *niggaaa*… I'm tired of being the one."(*Nigga* Statement (NS) #250316)]. As a matter of fact, the formal *usted (Ud.)* has elided into the personal *tú* as evidenced by her statements "So I'm like…" vs. "So I'm thinking…" and "he know I don't play" vs. "He knows I am very serious about our relationship," (the word 'play' in this case is an abbreviation for play games, which is Signifyin(g) on the SBAE-BVE axis for being serious).

This informality is situated within and placed next to the respectful "miiiissss." The informality of her speech as well as her use of *nigga* is subsumed by the respectfully formal *señora,* with these two words literally placed next to one another in her speech. It is through the discursivity of *nigga* that my identity as professor (and to a certain extent the more formal "miss") are superseded by my subjectivity as female (of color) confidant who understands (and may have experienced) how *niggas like to fumble* (NS #050315); I am constituted as friend, who commiserates with the possibility of infidelity and identifies with the female response: *Don't try me nigga* (NS #100315); I am constituted as heterosexual recognizing heteronormative language used between women about their male partners--"it's a form of endearment when speaking to

certain… predominantly black men…" (EE, CC, #200315). Yet while the performative *nigga* personalizes and establishes familiarity, the respectful and somewhat distant "miiiss" situates *nigga* within discourses of academia and cultural norms. As utterances, miiisss and *nigga* complement and contradict, intersect and parallel revealing the ambiguity of formality and informality, intimacy and distance through which, as humans, we relate.

9.2 Nigga Instance #09042015: Giving *nigga* Space

"Yo give my *nigga* some space." My doctoral research class has just ended. It is one of the last hoops we must jump through prior to becoming ABD and each of us is working on various articulations of our research for the dissertation. My peer—white, male—rushes up to me after class. "Joyce, I couldn't wait to tell you this. Guess what happened to me?" "Hey… what happened?" "So I'm on my way here and I'm standing in the train station waiting for the 1. You know, it's around 3:00 so it's crowded with a lot of kids coming out of school." "Mmm hmm…" "So these two girls, I dunno, I think they were Spanish? They're behind me and one of them keeps bumping me with her bookbag. I don't say anything, right, cuz… well you know how the train is at that time." "Mmm hmmm." "Right so, she keeps bumping me and there's really no where to move and then outta nowhere her friend pulls her back and is like, "Yo, give my nigga some space." The look on his face is a mixture of shock, glee and admiration. "Really… and you know she was talking about you?" "Yeah… can you believe it? She pulled her back because she saw that she kept bumping into me. But look at me. I'm as white as can be. You can't get any whiter than me. But that's what she said, 'Yo, give my nigga some space.' Like I'm her friend, or we're cool….so of course I thought of you and couldn't wait to tell you! So why do you think she said that?"

Miron and Inda (2000) assert that racial performativity is the "power of the discourse to procure what it names… its referents [are] inherently unstable, thus making it open to multiple rearticulations" (p. 103). My peer, the referent in 'Yo, give my nigga some space' is produced through a naming process. For my classmate, this naming is fascinating as he links his materially marked body to the utterance *nigga*. Paradoxically, by linking *nigga* to the materially marked (white) subject, *nigga* is delinked from a racialized discourse. To be clear, this is not a rupture, or clean break. Instead, as a hiccup, it reveals the ambiguous, multiple, unfixed rearticulations of *nigga*.

Through the speaker's use of "my" *nigga* is performatively delinked from the materially marked Black body, thus rupturing its connotation (and denotation) as ideationally strict. The ironic contradiction of *nigga* has, through the speech act of the speaker, superseded its historical roots and cultural limits and is now "less stringently ideational" and is "fair game, open and a matter of satire" (Dr. Kirkland, Critical Conversation, 23042017). While I do not believe the speaker's intention is satirical, discursively *nigga* satirizes its strict ideational usage as an epithet through the naming process of the racially (white) subject. Once this removal from the category of epithet occurs, the argument that *nigga* is reappropriated only within the limits of black American speech and conversation is vacuous;

> If it is not maintaining strict ideational use the term varies in its meaning. If the speaker is not maintaining strict ideational usage then the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary forms will all shift. This is based on the speaker's intention, hearer's understanding and context in which it is uttered. The more these play in terms of meaning, the less insulting the term becomes." (Kirkland, CC, #23042017).

"My *nigga*" immediately constitutes the racialized (white) subject as friend[153] or companion to the speaker. As speech act, the speaker linguistically positions my classmate

[153] The phrase "my nigga" is understood along the y-z axis of Standard Black American English (SBAE) and Black Vernacular English (BVE) as a companion, friend, lover, boyfriend, husband. It can refer to either gender and

within the linguistic universe of Standard Black American English (SBAE) and Black Vernacular English (BVE), and while she is not directly addressing him, her speech includes (dare I say embraces?) him through the act of naming. In this speech event, while the possessive pronoun "my" signifies ownership, "my *nigga*" Signifies camaraderie, unity, and good will, thus displacing *nigga's* origins as insult or epithet as well as its racial performativity. *Nigga* ruptures the conceptualization of sovereign autonomy and becomes *ex-citable* precisely because it performs meanings not previously stated (Butler, 1997a); hence its reversal, reappropriation and rearticulation becomes a "…repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open" (Butler, 1997a, p. 38). *Nigga's* sovereignty as racialized utterance wanes as the new articulations "expand the domain of linguistic survival" (Butler, 1997a, p. 41). As such *nigga* is reSignified; it is (re)produced in new contexts and spoken in ways that have yet to be legitimated, thus producing its legitimation in new and future forms (Butler, 1997a). As reSignification, the rhetorical tropes of antonomasia and metalepsis[154] (Gates, 1988/2014) create the ex-citability of *nigga*, "which is at once the deliberate and undeliberate effect of a speaker" (Butler, 1997a, p. 39). Through citationality the racialized (white) subject is brought into a linguistic world by the language of the Other in a language that does not mirror his own (Butler, 1997a). Yet he recognizes himself as the hailed subject, and in so doing, his recognition is a tropological inauguration which is incomplete, ironic and 'permanently uncertain' (Butler, 1997a, p. 3-4).

"So what happened?" I ask.

typically communicates an intimacy or closeness between two (or more) people. For scholarship on this see Geneva Smitherman's (2000) definition in *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner.*

[154] Both antonomasia and metalepsis (as discussed previously) are rhetorical figures of substitution.

"The girl moved. She took her bookbag off and said, 'Sorry.' I told her, 'No problem.' And then the train came. But isn't that cool? I think it's fascinating that she would refer to me in that way."

He doesn't say the word.

I don't miss the irony—while it is cool to *be* "my *nigga*", it's not cool to say what one has been named, even when that naming is embraced. Evidently "the 'constructive' power of the tacit performative… establish[es]… not only a sense of what the body is, but how it can or cannot negotiate space…" (Butler, 1997a, p. 159).

9.3 Nigga Instance #14022019: Black language, Haitian sensibilities: What about this nwa?

"What about this nigga?" Here is the joke: Haitian parents, especially Haitian mothers, will never accept their sons marrying an African American woman (In other words: I. Am. The. Joke). This is the conversation, the joke, that J., P. and I are laughing about in my office. "Or Spanish," P adds. He has decided that, although Haitian-born and immigrant to the United States, he wants to marry an African American or Spanish woman and J, Haitian-raised, born in the U.S. asks incredulously, mockingly, sarcastically, "Do you want to get sent back?" P. laughs, "She already did!"[155] He shrugs, "She'll just have to accept. It's my life." J. shakes his

[155] I have learned through several of my immigrant students that disruptions in the household based on finances, employment, a cultural impasse or unacceptable behavior can result in the child being sent "home" to live with relatives in the parents' native country, i.e., birthplace country. Based on circumstances the child has no choice in this decision. While there are cases where the child desires to be "sent back," there are equally as many cases where the child does not want to go. "Home" evokes a range of possibilities and contradictions as one's connection to it varies by multiple degrees. In this case "home" for J (born in America) and P (born in Haiti) is articulated through the words "sent back" as opposed to "sent home" or "go home." In terms of language use "sent back" is both semantic and rhetorical denoting and connoting that the receiver participate in an action. Through an Austinian lens, "sent back" is a performative in that some action (in thought or deed) is required, i.e., a disciplinary action or a reevaluation. One is "sent back to prison" or "sent back to reform school." Additionally, one can be "sent back to a doctor" and in sports a player can be "sent back to the minor leagues." In other words, to be "sent back" is to return or to be relegated, consigned or demoted. J.'s "sent back [home]" and P.'s response indicate that returning to Haiti. i.e. going 'home' is punitive and/or devalued.

head, "She'll be pissed. She won't say it, but you'll know." P. admits that his mother's primary reason for preferring a Haitian wife for her son is due to the language barrier. We both understand that, but I also remind him that, beyond language, African American women don't "typically" (or on a daily basis) eat or cook the dishes of Haiti (I know I'm being essentialist here). I provide a stereotypical list as evidence— green plantain, avocado with salt and white rice, potato salad with beets, a whole plated fish. We all laugh. I add to the list, "our rice is different. Haitian rice is sticky and we don't eat it with everything." J. exclaims, "Yeah and you buy your rice in a box!" I laugh, "You won't find 50 lb. bags of rice in the typical African American kitchen. Just a small box… and sometimes it's minute rice or boil in a bag…" J. chimes in, "Yeah, what the hell is that? How can rice come in a bag." I add, "And our rice is loose, each grain is separate. You can eat your rice with your hands. We can't or rather don't." From the thoughtful look on his face, it appears as if P. is rethinking this. "You better marry Spanish," I say, "at least the food is closer." J. adds, "Yeah, Dominican!" "Oh no!" P. yells, "my mom is not going for that. I cannot bring home a Dominican. Never!" He turns to J., "You know because of the history and the past..." J. nods. Then P., talking to me but gesturing towards J., "you're talking about me, what about this nigga?"

Within the context of the conversation, I have to wonder if J. and P. consider themselves Haitian, Haitian American, American, black, black American, Caribbean American… or something else? While the conversation itself underscored the socio-cultural distinctions between African Americans and Haitians (both immigrant and US citizen), *nigga*, as P. uses it, becomes a universalizing performative (in the Butlerean sense) that shifts this socio-cultural context.

Neither of us (myself and J.) comment on his use of *nigga,* although I believe I see a quizzical look on J.'s face as if he is determining whether or not I am offended or whether or not his language was appropriate. And if so, what would this offense look like? Should I chastise and correct, educating about the lexical and etymological history? Should I castigate him as the site of injury even as he iterates *nigga*? Should I take offense based on our constructed identities as professor/student, elder/youth, female/male, African American (black)/Haitian-possibly American (black)? Should I take offense because we are sitting in my office in an academic institution in which erudite knowledge, language and discourse is normalized while subjugated knowledges and languages are partially ignored (and eradicated)? Should I take offense as his English professor in which, as priest-turned-god, I should demand that he use "better, astute, respectable" language? Instead, I lose focus on the conversation, wander into my own thoughts about how and why one word enacts universalizing and essentializing subjectification. Based on our conversation, our laughter, our jibes, it could be contended that P. felt comfortable enough to utter *nigga*. Yet in so doing, we are no longer distinguishable by cultural and social constructions of what it means to be Haitian, Haitian American or African American; instead, we are made subjects of one linguistic reified category, black. i.e., *nigga*. "a truly American word" (Kennedy, 1999). When I inquire with another Haitian student if there is a Creole word for *nigga* she replies "Um… not really" (N., Personal Communication, 02062020). Later she writes, "We call *nigga* in Creole 'neg' or 'nwa'" (N., Personal Communication, 02062020). Hence, P.'s speech act is ideationally an Americanism on the rhetorical axis of Black vernacular English.

Within the context of the conversation, I wonder if P.'s rhetorical substitution of *nigga* is his way of presenting himself as "more" Black American and "less" Haitian. Early in my teaching career I learned that, for some, there is a difference between Black and Haitian. As one

female student quipped, "I am not Black. I don't want to be Black. I am Haitian." In other words, the cultural differences between Black Americans and Haitians (and Haitian Americans) are so distinct that individuals identify across ethnic and national characteristics. Black American, in the context of our conversation, is starkly different from Haitian American. As speaker, the reappropriated *nigga* situates him withing the linguistic universe of African American speech and vernacular. As the addressed (J. through naming and me as listener) *nigga* is understood as a Black (not Haitian) utterance. Hence we are all made subjects of the condensed historicity of *nigga* as an utterance spoken by, about, and to Black Americans. So what of Haitians and/or Haitian Americans? Quite possibly, P. was preparing himself for his future with a Black American wife; quite possibly P. saw himself, within the context of his lived experience in the United States and/or Haiti, as Black and/or American (regardless of cultural, ethnic or national qualifiers). Quite possibly he might just like the word *nigga*, which I have been told on more than one occasion by young African American and Latinx youth is the case—"I love nigga," as opposed to the Creolized neg or nwa (or maybe he knew I would not know that word). Whatever the case, I would like to believe that P.'s use philosophically represents his understanding that, at least in the United States, and especially among those United States citizens (I assume) who currently race hate and desire to "Make America Great Again," the color of our skin unites us far more than food and language. While P.'s mother is concerned about a language barrier between her future daughter-in-law and herself, she need not worry about *nigga* or *nigger* for that matter—these two words (with reference to racial difference or racial unification) are universally understood.

9.4 Nigga Instance #28102015: I need an 'A' *nigga*

"Write that down, nigga," my student says to his friend. It is after class. The two young men, both Dominican, are asking about the upcoming midterm. They are conscientious, studious, committed to their education and obtaining a "good grade." I am answering their questions—is it multiple choice, how many questions, will we have to… J. interrupts me, turns to M. "Write that down nigga." "I am nigga," M. has already reached into his bag for a pen. I pause. Wait. He nods with pen in hand, leaning over a notebook he'd placed on the professor desk. I repeat my suggestions. I never comment on their usage.

9.5 Nigga Instance #280520: They're not Black, they're African

"You making up your own rules, *nigga*?"

While I sit in my room attempting to work on the next Chapter of this dissertation, I hear my neighbors' sons outside playing basketball. I hear the word *nigga* twice and I tell my husband who laughs and says "Interesting!" I look out the window to see if I can catch voices, to ascertain which young man said it. Then I question my intent. If I know who said it, what will I do with this information. One of my subjectivities wants to yell out the window and say, "Yo! You can't say that word." Another meddling subject position wants to sit and watch, eavesdrop, overhear and observe. Instead I walk into the next room where my husband is working. "You said interesting. Why?" "Because," he answers, "they can't say that word." "Why not?" "They're not black." "Well what are they?" "Not black." "Well what are they?" "I don't know what they are, but I know what they're not. They're not black."[156]

"They're African," I counter. "They're from Egypt."

[156] i.e., African American

In both instances above, the exchange between young men of color reveals the ways that *nigga* performatively Signifies external to the African American community. Yet while there is much ado about who can and cannot say *nigga*, it is being shouted, quoted, sang/rapped among Gen Z-ers nationwide. Should my Dominican male students be prohibited from saying *nigga* to one another in the classroom? Are the young men engaged in the all-American language games of competitive sport *allowed* to use *nigga* even though they physically present as (and most likely are) Arab? Is *nigga* allowable if they are Dominican or Egyptian by heritage but United States citizens by birthright (what if they are "something else"—green card holder, naturalized citizen, illegal—so many categories… so many boundaries)? Should they be *allowed* to use *nigga* if they identify as Black and/or African American and/or Latino (White or Black) (it should be noted that these have become separate categories[157])? Are they, in the words of Dominican-born Junot Diaz, Diasporic Africans, African Americans, Africans in America or American Africans? Furthermore, as 20-something, Latino-, Arab-, Muslim- "Americanized" youth visibly influenced by hip hop culture, social media and sports, should they be *allowed* to use *nigga* as part of their socio-cultural orientation and dailyspeak? Yet it is through the mediums of hip hop, social media and sports that the linguistic value of *nigga* derives. In both instances, the interpellated responds, thus revealing the acceptance of being named, hailed, called upon as *nigga*. Hence, regardless of their essentialized ethnic or racial identities, their language practices are multiply fragmented and influenced by the discourses that surround them. Whether on the court or in the classroom, whether US citizen or (non)citizen or some other category created by the federal government, whether student, ball player, brother, friend, male, youth,

[157] As clarification, while many African Americans define themselves racially as Black, this category defines several groups including people from the Caribbean, Africa, Europe (or any part of the world for that matter). In contrast, African American is a nationally (and/or ethnic group) similar to Haitian, Dominican, British, Kenyan, French. Any of these nationalities can also be Black.

nigga performatively constitutes their subjectivities, knowledges, histories and power relations (Miller, 2005) in ways specific to contemporary social processes that have been normalized and internalized within their psyche. I could tell my students to stop saying *nigga*; I could ask my neighbors to temper their language, but would it matter? Who am I to dictate their worlds, their experiences, their language practices? Who am I to determine that *nigga* does not "belong" to them? For it is through "the changeable life of [a] term," i.e., Signifyin(g) that we are able to unmoor its negative connotations and use it for an unknown and unknowable future, "one whose contexts are never fully determined in advance… to function in contexts where it has not belonged, [which] is precisely the political promise of the performative…" (Butler, 1997a, p. 161).

9.6 Nigga Instance #12022015: Nigga and the politics of respectability

"Nigga!" My African American student-friend turns and hollers across the expanse of about 20 feet in the middle of the cafeteria. In response, another young woman whom we passed while leaving the cafeteria, turned, the expectant look on her face indicating that she was aware she was being addressed. "Holla at me! Don't forget." The addressee nodded and saluted. Later, on the elevator, I said, "I'd like to talk about your use of *nigga* one day if you have time." Hastily she apologized, "I'm sorry Professor Maxwell. I didn't mean to offend you. That's how we get down."

But I wasn't offended. Just… curious.

When I indicated that I'd like to discuss *nigga* with her, her first instinct is to apologize and explain this is how she and her homegirl talk. This particular student is "non-traditional" (yet another label) because she is an adult student, returning to college for a degree after

spending years in the workforce. I liken her need to apologize to Pryor's (2016) discussion about the etymology of nigger in the antebellum North in which educated African American activists of middle class standing abhorred the use of nigger by black laborers. Although my student and I are both African American (black American) women, her apology stems from her (or my) assumed difference of social and economic class, which supersedes our collective racial identity. As well, our collective racialized subjectivities are superseded by the discursive statements of the institution—as student and professor, as soon-to-be educated vs already educated, as degree-less vs degreed (or pedigreed based on the academic institution granting the degree). The discussion of appropriateness is not a 20th Century or 21st Century phenomenon; activists and abolitionists the likes of Hosea Easton, Frederick Douglass, Fannie Lou Hamer, and David Walker vehemently rejected the use of nigger by laborers arguing that it was an epithet which should not be accorded to black speech. As a discourse this inhabited the social, cultural, economic and political mobility of the Black race. Behavior, morals, music, and religious beliefs became infused with notions of what it meant to adhere to hegemonic ideas of respectability in an attempt to counter the negative stereotypes created by the dominant racial group. The notion of a politics of respectability (aka respectability politics) first coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) included appropriate language use and decorum.

While I can admit that I do not typically yell *nigga!* across the room at work, or home, or in any other space, my student-friend's apology speaks to the continuity of a politics of respectability in contemporary Black behavior. Like my student G. (see Critical Conversation #17032014) opponents of *nigga* typically argue that its racist past should not be repeated by people of color. According to Rev. Al Sharpton, "If you call yourself the n-word you can't get mad when someone treats you like that." (as cited in Coates, 2013). In 2007 Councilman Leroy

Comrie sponsored a moratorium in New York City which symbolically banned *nigger-nigga* in an attempt to quell its use among NYC youth and expunge it from hip hop music. However, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013) argues that

> the politics of respectability is an attempt to raise black people to a superhuman standard… as in all cases of respectability politics, what we are really saying to black people is, 'Be less human.' This is not a fight over civil rights; it's an attempt to raise a double standard (para. 7).

Those who support (or at the very least justify) *nigga* do not solely operate within the music or film industry. In recent conversation Randall Kennedy indicated on CNN's *Smerconish* that it is acceptable to enunciate *nigger* for pedagogical reasons because "it brings home a point all Americans should know about. How can you know about it when you don't know the paradigmatic nature of a racial slur?" (*Smerconish*, 2020). Part of the discussion between Michael Smerconish and Randall Kennedy ties to the May 2020 controversy of Stanford Law professor Michael McConnell who quoted *nigger* while reading text about Virginia's Ratification of the Constitution. While most students in the class were offended (resulting in a written statement by the Black Law Students Association and McConnell's response about pedagogical choice), the one African American student in the class, Andrew Ezekoye, indicated that he was not offended.

> "Scrubbing the word from the quote would have made Patrick Henry appear damn near saint-like… He was not. He was a flawed human being — the unvarnished quote got that point across… I was not anywhere close to being offended. Honestly, to suggest otherwise not only is annoying, but is tiresome. I can make the distinction between gratuitous offense and pedagogically necessary material. This was entirely the latter." (Woo, 2020, para. 37 - 38).

Much like Ezekoye, I too can make the distinction between speech used to denigrate and speech used for reversal, revision or inversion.

9.7 Nigga Instance #12022016:What a small white world

"Nigga gimme my shit. You gonna ask to use my shit and roll your eyes." We are in the cafeteria and I have stopped to chat with students from my Intro to Lit course. J. (Haitian American) and I. (Egyptian Moroccan American) incessantly tease Y (white, I am ashamed to admit I do not know her ethnic background) both in and out of class. Based on my own observational bias, they banter with her because of phrases like "Nigga gimme my shit!" Unlike the black and brown girls in the class, she is much more jovial, interactive, dare I say "hood" and her language is perpetually punctuated with slang colloquialisms. J. and I. laugh, mimic and taunt: "Nigga gimme my shit!" J. repeats in a high pitched squeal while holding Y.'s belongings. She returns their quips and actions in kind. After much back and forth and upon retrieval of said items, she sucks her teeth. Snatching these, she retorts, "Niggas!" (Yet why did I hear niggers?) Other members of the class (two males and one female of Latinx descent) watch their antics. I watch too… and listen.

In my own imagination of the racialized Other, I conceive of Y. as saying *nigger* not *nigga*. Am I guilty of placing the epithet in her mouth as opposed to its more ambiguous descendent? Is this common banter for Y? Is she relishing in the opportunity to use nigga against them? On the surface, I could contend that this was Y.'s moment, her desire, to use the illocutionary force of nigger against two men of color; however, this assumption and/or accusation makes the speaker the site of injury and stops the speech situation at the level of the utterance. However, it is evident from J.'s and I.'s playful responses that neither considers her address a slur. Instead, their mimicking and continued banter reveal their acceptance of her speech act as well as their acceptance of her naming. As speech act Y's retort falls within the

African American Signifyin(g) tropes of dissing and addressing. Her "nigga gimme my shit!" is both playful and biting. Here, a racially marked (white) woman is calling two black men *nigga* without invocation of epithet or slur and without invoking anger, indignation or chagrin (except possibly in me). And what is it in my psyche that causes me to turn in ways that I. and J. do not? They mock her, they laugh, they taunt and they do not "give her her shit." There is an undertone of flirtation, and I flash to Wells (1892) *Lynchings* in which black men were murdered for associating with white women. Yet here, in the cafeteria of a local community college, two black men are bantering back and forth with a white female in a highly seductive and sexualized way. On both sides there are discursive acts of Signifyin(g). They diss, cap, jibe in ways that supersede the racialized boundaries often placed on the sayability and allowability of *nigga*. In effect, their entire linguistic and material performance is, for lack of a better word, fun. *Nigga* is tossed back and forth in linguistic play as part of ordinary language and in doing so ruptures strict ideational usage of who should or should not address the Other as *nigga*.

This rupture of use within the context of the black/white dichotomy enables a "constitutive ambivalence" in which race and racism cannot solely rest on the premise that utterances such as *nigga* only and always (re)invigorate oppressive regimes of power (Butler, 1993). Instead, the (re)production of racist terms can potentially allow for reversal and displacement of its origins. Because race (and gender) is/are produced through a historical chain of performatives (Butler, 1993), the historical chain of terms, which produces race as a fixed, static entity, also contains the potential for disruption and opposition (Miron and Inda, 2000). The play between the racially marked (white) subject and the racially marked (black) subject is both violating and enabling; however, it is through their subjectivities that their play, while potentially injurious, is also a site for contestation and agency. Y. utters "nigga gimme my shit"

and in response J or I mimic "nigga gimme my shit," thus "the force of repetition becomes the very condition for an affirmative response to a potential violation." (Butler, 1993, p. 83-4).

Yet while their subjectivities allowed for openness, play and a looseness, my own racialized subjectivity as witness did not allow me to turn in the ways that J. and I. did. What was revealed to me were the ways in which my own psyche was formed through the internalization of social normative processes. My own psychic ambivalence became clearer (though still muddied and only available to me through the opacity of language) when I imagined Y. saying *nigger* as opposed to *nigga*. And it is this ambivalence that is "painful, dynamic and promising… vacillat[ing] between the already-there and the yet-to-come" (Butler, 1997a, p. 18). Psychically, I semantically looped Y's address of *nigga* back to *nigger*, thus removing the Signifyin(g) play that took place before my eyes. Instead, I placed the site of injury within Y. while J. and I. participated in the inauguration of past and futural possibilities. Instead *nigga* as a Signifyin(g) performative contradiction subjectified me causing dislocation, loss of context and ambivalence. This Signifyin(g) performance is, ironically, precisely what I have attempted to interrogate throughout the dissertation. Yet when I witness the reversal of *nigger*, one in which the racially white subject names racially black subjects as *nigga*, it is not their subjectivity that suffers disorientation and melancholia, but my own. Y's usage inaugurates a new, unforeseeable reality that contains within it the historical past, the in-the-moment present and the unknowable future, yet I am made vulnerable. I am triggered…

9.8 Instance #062019: What am I missying? The Missy[158] Moment

It is after a Summer workshop for full-time faculty of the English Department. I am one of the few left in the computer lab attempting to navigate the latest software that Administration

[158] Link to Missy Elliot, *Get Your Freak On* video

has decided to foist upon us for the Fall. My colleague-friends are leaving, the host of the workshop asks me to turn off the lights when I am done. It is at this point that everyone is asking "How's your Dissertation?" As they leave, one of them turns in the doorway and says, "You know, just the other day as I was driving, I was listening to that song… you know… the one by Missy Elliot?" I don't know… the one… by Missy Elliot, but I turn anyway. "Mmm hmm," I say, "which one?" I like Missy Elliot's music; when her songs blare through my car radio, I bop along and throw in the one or two random words I know. But I do not know her music, cannot recall a title, verse or line. "Oh… you know… the one where she goes…" and the humming starts. I smile although I don't really recognize it. "The one where she goes…" and she makes a high pitched sing-song noise. I vaguely recognize the sound, "Oh yeah…" I say, even though I don't know which song she is referring to. "Where she goes 'listen to me now, I'm lasting twenty rounds, and if you want me," there's the high-pitched sound again, "di- dididididididi- di dididididididi- di di.[159] "Yeah," I say, a bit more familiar. "I love that song. I love Missy Elliot anyway. But I realized as I was singing that I don't sing that word. You know? I skip over it completely. Even in my car I can't bring myself to say that word. Isn't that interesting?" "Oh, yeah that is interesting." They turn to leave, and I turn back to my computer, open up a new tab in *Youtube* and watch the video for *Get Your Freak On* while reading the lyrics online. I had no idea *nigga* was in the song.

Should I applaud my colleague for her admission? For her love of Missy? For her knowledge of the lyrics? Or for her allyship—for admitting to me that even in the privacy of her own car, where she can turn Missy up as loudly as her suburban New Jersey neighborhood will

[159] Hip hop heads and rap aficionados will recognize the tune I am attempting to mimic.

allow, where she can sing along without camera phones, witnesses, or a stadium-filled audience witnessing her debasement by Missy herself.[160] I didn't know what to do with her admission then; I don't know what to do with her admission now. Nor am I clear about her purpose for telling me. While we had often discussed my dissertation topic and research through the lens of classroom teaching and literature, we had not discussed an affinity for Missy Elliot or any other hip hop artist for that matter. So while I am aware that on its surface, her comment aligns with contemporary arguments that claim ownership of *nigga* by and in Black speech communities, especially hip hop, at its unfathomable and ambiguous depths her declaration explores at minimum issues of white guilt and the linguistic property of *nigga*. Paradoxically, her admission also highlights the performative power of *nigga* as a speech act which subjugates and subjectifies. Even in the sanctity of her car, she will not allow herself the small pleasure or the expansive guilt of singing along with one of her favorite artists. Does she fear that the passengers in the next car over will hear? Will they chastise her or call the language police to have her arrested? Her self-imposed censorship reveals her adherence to the commonsense theory that one's speaking voice places one as the site of injury (Butler, 1997a) even though it is unclear as to whom is being injured. Maybe she would injure herself.

[160] For an example of this, see BBC news article "Kendrick Lamar stops white fan using N-word on stage at concert" https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44209141, in which Lamar chose a young white female from the audience during his concert at the Hangout Festival in Alabama to sing the lyrics to his song *M.A.A.D. City*, of which *nigga* is a common utterance throughout. When the young lady sang *nigga*, Lamar stopped the show and proceeded to explain to the fan why she cannot say that particular word. He then turns to the audience, predominantly white, who is now booing her, and asks "Should we give her another chance?" In conversation about Lamar's actions, hip hop aficionado and lover of the lyrical intelligence of Lamar, R. tells me, "It's about the value of the word. Because of our (black peoples) experience, history, and culture we have an invested value in *nigga*. As a linguistic commodity, it is our right to place ownership on it. Lamar has earned the right to take a word that was once used to degrade him and use it however he sees fit. White people used the word *nigga* to devalue us. Now the word is ours and we have the right to value it how we please. We also say white people cannot use the word. If they choose to we can devalue their lives. The original devaluation was… we beat they asses. Now… we would get them fired, lose their families, their friends, their respect… what they once did with stripping our value from us, now we strip their value from them." (R. Personal Communication, 20032021). Meanwhile I just keep wondering why Lamar chose that particular audience member to sing that particular song.

Gates (1988/2014) acknowledges that Signifyin(g) extends beyond intertextual literary criticism into other artforms such as jazz, but he especially highlights sampling within hip hop[161] as a form of musical Signification. Hip hop's method of 'embedded signification' involves a complex interplay of quotation, reinvention, revision and innovation through the art of sampling[162] (Gates, 2014, p. xxxi - xxxii). However, Signification does not only occur at the compositional level. At the level of the utterance, i.e., the lyrical play or bars, the lyricist employs literary and poetic devices, from the conventional such as metaphor, simile and rhyme, to the irregular such as the verisimilitude of Eminem's *Stan* or Slick Rick's *Children's Story.* In the traditional rhyme[163] of Elliot's *Get Your Freak On, nigga* disrupts both the rhyming pattern and the meter. I point to this structural break in Elliot's pattern to show the operation of *nigga* semantically within the structure of the lyrics itself. Rhetorically and paradigmatically on the vertical y-axis *nigga* is a substitution for the second person you. As the speaker/narrator within the verses, Elliot begins with the third person naming of herself, Missy, in her first line and thereafter switches to the first-person I, "Missy be puttin' it down/I'm the hottest 'round." But in this rhetorical I-Thou exchange, you (in this case the receiver of the message) is hailed through the rhetorical trope of antonomasia, "And if you want me (*nigga*)/Then come on, get me now." Finally, *nigga*, as part of the entire speech event, tropes through "calling somebody out"[164]

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[161] See "Introduction: Hip Hop and the fate of Signifyin(g)" in the 25th Anniversary Edition of *The Signifyin(g) Monkey* (2014). This introduction is not located in the first edition of the text.

[162] Sampling is the art of lifting the beat and/or melody from a previously recorded song and reinventing it in a contemporary song. Gates (1988/2014) contends that through repetition and revision, the art of sampling creates a two-dimensional work that is simultaneously working in the past and present in which the contemporary song becomes part of the original while the sampled original becomes part of the new composition (p. xxxi)

[163] Structurally, the poetic meter in Elliot's verses alternates. In the first quatrain (stanza/verse) the meter of the first and third line is iambic hexameter, and the even lines are iambic pentameter. This, however switches as well in the following stanzas in which the odd lines are iambic pentameter and the even lines are iambic hexameter. It should be noted that I only registered the meter of the first verses in which *nigga* is included.

[164] Calling somebody out is a form of challenging someone. Elliot challenges her listeners to "see her," in other words she is inviting or open to a confrontation. Figuratively there are multiple interpretations for Elliot's challenge. As a form of Signifyin(g) her challenge could be ensconced within the discourses of pro-feminist

(Smitherman, 2000, p. 87). In this instance, *nigga* acts as part of the calling out process through Elliot's discursive act of "calling somebody outta they name"[165] (Smitherman, 2000, p. 87).

On the surface, my colleague-friend's self-censorship is a choice based on an internalization of contemporary social processes which situates the utterer as the site of injury. However, as subject she is installed in a language not her own, which simultaneously precedes and succeeds her. Her (non)turn (or refusal to turn) signifies her refusal of the discursive process of naming or hailing. Yet it is through this refusal that the subject acknowledges and submits to the 'condensed historicity' (Butler, 1997a) of *nigga*. By singing along, my colleague is both listener and participant; however, she cannot sing *nigga* due to "the ritual dimension of convention… the moment of utterance… informed by the prior and… future moments that are occluded by the moment itself… In some sense it is an inherited set of voices, an echo of others who speak…" (Butler, 1997a, p. 25). Elliot is Signifyin(g) through her rap of the utterance *nigga*, simultaneously addressing, hailing, and naming, yet this linguistic act cannot Signify upon the materially white, listening-participating subject who only receives (hears) *nigga* along the syntagmatic x-axis of SAE due to its semantic looping of *nigger*. The racialized (white) subject cannot be rhetorically hailed, named or addressed as *nigga* nor can the subject participate in the Signifyin(g) tropes of hailing, naming, calling out (outta one's name). My colleague's refusal (or reluctance) to sing *nigga* signifies her inability to participate in the master trope of Signification. Due to contemporary discourses of racialized language and racial ownership of

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sexualization in which *nigga* rhetorically hails a sexual partner (based on the heteronormative, homophobic parlance in rap music this can be assumed to be a Black male). Likewise she could be Signifyin(g) on her listener, i.e., Missy defines her lyrical skill as "lasting twenty rounds" and challenges any listener to best her. Finally, in a much more literal sense, twenty rounds could refer to a physical confrontation. While it has been argued that *nigga* typically refers to a black man (EE, Critical Conversation, 20032015), in these last two possibilities *nigga* is not gender-specific, nor is it ideationally referring to an African American individual, as evidenced from the racial diversity of both rap music and usage.

[165] Unlike calling out, calling somebody outta their name is a verbal insult.

nigga, this refusal exceeds a conscious self-censorship. Instead, the psychic reality of the materially marked white subject submits to the normative rejection of *nigga* by accepting Signification as belonging to the racially marked (black) subject within the discourse of rap music. *Nigga* as performative subjectivates the white listening subject who psychically submits to a self-imposed governmentality, normalized "as a *sign* of guilt and transgression, as the embodiment of prohibition" (Butler, 1997a, p.83) even in the absence of panoptical control.

Chapter 10: A Final (but not complete) Conclusion: A word about…

Words

Reclaiming that from which one has been disinherited is a good thing. Self-possession in the full sense of that expression is the companion to self-knowledge. Yet claiming for myself a heritage the weft of whose genesis is my own disinheritance is a profoundly troubling paradox.

—Patricia J. Williams

Once upon a time there was a community of mortals, who lived below the Celestial City. But the mortals under the city did not call it the Celestial City, their name for it was (Im)Material. While this City was secured by gates with word-combination locks, underneath the city was a maze of tunnels created and constructed by the mortals, unbeknownst to the priests. These tunnels ran the length and width of the City and, also unbeknownst to the priests, enabled the mortals to enter the City in the dead of night, undetected, while the priests busied themselves with their own self-aggrandizing Word Combinations. The mortals watched and listened and witnessed as the priests created ascendingly intricate levels of Word Magic. They spied as the priests renamed themselves gods and engaged in games, riding their steeds around heaven, jumping word hurdles, playing polo with the moon and stars and making sport with their time in eternity. The mortals returned to their tunnels and in the recursive passage of reiteration they created word-combinations in their own image renaming these Wordplay. They fashioned intricate tales full of figuration. They conceived coded language mazes that led nowhere and everywhere;[166] *they built call and response echoes in their tunnels. They constructed language labyrinths that descended deep into the earth, and those that decoded exceedingly complex levels*

[166] Gates (1988/2014) highlights the theory of J.L. Dilliard who defines Signifyin(g) as a mode of communication by indirection (p. 77). In other words, through modes of figuration and linguistic circumnavigation, strategies of speaking and the messages conveyed are based on direction through indirection (p. 81).

of Rhetorical Substitution touched the very core of existence. It was at this level that the mortals attained (im)mortality. And due to the steady rain of thundering hooves above, they developed antiphonal sound structures with which they passed their time (not leisurely I might add, because they were always seeking) and which only they could hear or understand with their Third Ear.[167]

In time, some of the mortals ever seeking in their quest for knowledge, realized that more lay beyond the breadth and depth of their tunnels. Dedicated to the meaningfulness of Words, they tunneled out, passing beneath the gates of the city above. Through their travels they learned Discursive Practices and acquired knowledge about the Rhetorical Nature of Words.

It is in this way that they happened upon the same Deep Blue Sea as those of the priests. Rather than building boats and practiced in burrowing, they hollowed logs and fashioned canoes, following the uncharted course of the priests-turned-pilgrims' boats. They observed the priests from afar as they did so many times previously. And when they reached the place where the priests let down their plumblines, they floated, remaining adrift for they had reached the place of Floating Signifiers.

Beneath the city otherwise known as (Im)Material, the remaining mortals, tired of their suffering, tunneled further into the earth, away from the thunderous hooves above, while at the bottom of the Deep Blue Sea the drowning mortals upon realizing they would never reach the priests' taunting plumb lines reached for their own (the mortals) who, ever looking down, reached into the water to save them.

[167] Citing Hermese E. Robert's theory, Gates (1988/2014) identifies "'The Third Ear" as "an intraracial ear through which encoded vernacular language is deciphered" (p. 77). It is with the third ear that allegorical speech, critique of white speech and the politicized language games of black speech is understood.

I began my dissertation discussing Patricia J. Williams' (1991) allegory about the Power of Words from her text, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor*, in order to highlight the ways in which, as linguistic beings, we cannot step outside of language; we are made vulnerable by language (Butler, 1997a); we make it as much as it makes us. Williams (1991) distinguishes between the priests-turned-gods and the dying, drowning mortals in her critique of who controls and/or dictates language. As I indicate in my introduction, Williams' parable emphasizes the brutality of language and proof of this exists in the various linguistic (and as a consequence physical) forms of carnage we see in the media each day. However, while the violent force of language ensnares humanity, it is also through language that we seek and articulate agency. If language has the ability to subjugate, can it not also have the ability to liberate? With this in mind, I Signified on Williams' original work, imagining this allegory from the perspective of the mortal. For as Hegel tells us, there could be no priest (master) without the mortal (slave).

For me, this reiterated tale explores the 'vulnerability and unpredictability' of the mortals based on the conditions to/of/with which they are subjected. What were they doing while the priests busied themselves with their Word Games? Did the mortals simply sit in their subjugation, passively accepting their fate? Or did they turn, based on their condition, and construct their own world in response to the larger universe that subordinates them? By reading the mortals' agency through the lens of Butler (1997a, 1997b), Gates (1988/2014), Williams (1991) even Morrison (1993), my assumption is while they psychically accept their condition, they simultaneously express their rejection of their subordination through their own intricate Wordplay. Hence even in their dying, drowning state, they are able to create in their own image, (de)linked from the priests but also existing within the larger linguistic universe of the priests-

turned-gods Celestial City. By (re)citing this story and privileging the mortal, I (re)establish their agency through the linguistic play of Signifyin(g).

My Signifyin(g) revision of Williams' allegory is meant to show the ironic reversal that the master trope Signifyin(g) encapsulates. Through modes of sampling and mimesis, I trope (as in turn) Williams' work through both revision of the text and repetition of figuration within the text. Like Gates articulates, there is a double-voicedness in the master trope Signifyin(g). Through the art of sampling "riffing and quoting from the original text" and mimicry, my revision Signifies upon Williams' text; in addition, within the text itself, the disenfranchised mortals Signify upon the priests. The labyrinth of tunnels that stretch horizontally and vertically below the city allow the mortals to steal upwards into the Celestial yet (Im)Material world and travel below to touch the core of the earth. While the priests ride round and round along the syntagmatic plane, the mortals travel horizontally and vertically traversing the syntagmatic and paradigmatic planes; yet while the priests are self-absorbed in their own Word Games, the mortals are watchful, attentive to the priests' linguistic universe as well as their own. The mortals' ability to move between and through linguistic universes illustrates what Gates (1988/2014) defines as a parallel (yet negated) discursive, ontological, political universe. Within this parallel universe, the mortals are

> subjects who have been excluded from enfranchisement by existing conventions… [yet they] seize the language of enfranchisement… … exposing the contradictory character of previous conventional formulations… (Butler, 1997a, p. 89).

Butler defines this act as a 'performative contradiction;' an act with consequences, *ex-citable*[168] because its originary purpose has been wrested and ruptured. As author of this text

[168] While not previously noted, Butler's wordplay has in this moment become clear to me. While she hyphenates ex-citable, I think her figurative use would be clearer if she wrote (ex)citable, as in simultaneously citational and not citational.

(and admirer of Williams), I Signify in the way that it is described vis-à-vis hip hop, as sampling, "an 'embedded signification' since the process entails… revision through recontextualization)" (Gates, 2014, p. xxxi). Hence, in its double-voicedness, the mortals and I have wrested meaning.

Williams' text, centered as it is around contract law, explores the language of the sovereign authority who has constructed the Celestial City as a means to legalize practices which ultimately disenfranchise the mortal, such as the contractual boundaries of purchasing and selling human beings. My reversal is meant to portray (convey) the theory I have grappled with throughout the dissertation. We are both exploring the Power of Words and the (Un)Doing of Words (although a more concise articulation would be the Inconsistency, Ambiguity, Fleetingness… of Words). Yet, my 'embedded Signification' focuses on the mortal herself, one who may have even entered the Celestial city, but who cannot delink herself from her mortality. Through the lens of the mortal, I portray how the possibility of an utterance is made conceivable. Similar to Williams, my revision serves to interrogate the language of the sovereign authority; however, it also highlights how the disenfranchised use that same language for new, creative, imaginary, unknowable purposes.

I see myself in the mortal. Passing through this final stage of the Doctoral Program, the dissertation, passing through the Celestial City of the Ivy, I continue to question my own language practices. I refer to thesauri for verbose meaningful language, read pages of respected authors in order to wrap their words like a pilgrim's cloak around my shoulders. "She's graduating from *Columbia*!" my mother exclaims to her friends. Yet while I have managed to somehow enter and be accepted (I think) into the Celestial City, I still view it as (Im)Material. I am unable to delink myself from my mortality. I look down rather than up, dig my fingers into the soft earth with my mother at my side as we plant tomatoes, watermelon, collard greens, lilies,

irises, begonias; I appreciate the artistry of my mother's gardens. At times I feel as if I am on a Signifyin(g) loop, performing race, gender, intellect so that I may continue to participate in intricate Word Games, which I then pass on to other mortals who vie for priesthood status. But as I watch and listen to my students, their wordplay varies from the expectations placed upon them in the classroom, or more to the point, in their papers. "Niggas think that you can only get books with financial aid and shit," I overhear my student say as complaint while the student office worker sits on the phone in a casual-sounding conversation rather than assisting him. Or in class discussion about Sembene Ousmane's *Xala*, my male student mocks "This nigga be like, no technically it's *our* nigga. It's my turn!" as he takes on the personas of Adja Awa and Oumi N'doye, the first and second wives of El Hadji. It is with them in mind—their realities, subjectivities, histories, and power relations—that give me pause. If my student is articulating his reality and engaging with the text through his own linguistic practices, do I stop the conversation to correct or reprimand him? Do I let the conversation continue and hope no one is upset? Or do I note it as yet another example of Signifyin(g) performativity? And so my decision to chase the fleeting, trickster figure known as *nigga* is due to my own oscillating ideas about its use as both discursive act and speech act.

I have realized that my own subjectivities have shifted during this research and writing process. In 2014, (as per the requirements) I wrote an emic memo for my qualitative research class. I was conducting a small study about microaggressions among Black and Latinx male students and noticed their use of what I then called "the N word."

> **April, 2014, ITSF 5000 Participant Observation in Qualitative Research, Teachers College (excerpt from an Emic Memo):** A common reoccurring discussion has been centered on use of the N word. Discussion of the acceptability of the N word among

Black and Latino men has occurred both in the focus group as well as in individual interviews. Initially I had no expectations in terms of the use of this word within the group. *My bias* led me to believe that no one would use this word during focus groups as I deemed it "unacceptable" to be used as a term of friendship, endearment or otherwise by people of color. I also realize that I did not consider the use of this word as it related to microaggressions as I categorized it as overt racism when used against someone identifying as Black. Yet data analysis indicates that the ways this word is used and perceived varies among Black and Latino men dictating its significance.

My own subjective thoughts about *nigga* have radically transitioned. For one, I no longer write "the N word" for, as Killer Mike articulates, everyone knows what you are talking about, and I rarely if ever say "the N Word;" hence I pay particular attention to those moments when I opt for the more euphemistic phrase. (I wonder if this is the (im)mortal in me—the little girl of some 40 years ago now instituting my own forms of insurrectionary speech.) As well, my ideas about *acceptability, allowability,* and *sayability* have shifted. Pondering about the young men's usage throughout the years, I have come to complicate the argument through the lens of poststructural theory (quite difficult to do, I might add). The incompleteness of language itself complicates this endeavor, yet it is that same fleeting quality which reveals the arbitrariness of language, the unceasing shifting of subjectivies and thus the arbitrary nature of *nigga.* While *nigger* concretized into the most despised word in the English language, the evolution of its meaning from color to label to slur (Pryor, 2016) is evidence of the ways in which meanings in language can, over time, transform, even when looped semantically to a violent past. The question for me then becomes what changes instituted this shift? What discourses were/are at play that dictate use and meaning in a particular speech moment?

Much of this dissertation was a thought project. It was my attempt at articulating what Butler asks (1997a): What would it mean to restage the racist rituals of a word? My interrogation into the paradoxical nature of *nigger-nigga* began with Gates' (2014) theory of Signifyin(g), one possible form of restaging, as derived from tales of the Signifyin(g) Monkey. While Signifyin(g) within one's own speech community is often meant for the purpose of entertainment, humor or one-upmanship, when deployed in opposition to the dominant racial group, Signfiyin(g) potentially operates as insurrectionary speech and linguistic agency, allowing black peoples to "move freely between two discursive universes." (Gates, 1988/2014, p. 82). It is this movement, from *nigger* to *nigga*, in my own life as well as in the linguistic life of society and the life of language itself, that is one aspect of this dissertation.

"Well back in the jungle in the wood deep, the bad lion stepped on the Signifyin' Monkey feet," so begins Johnny Brooks' (1978) tale of the Signifyin' Monkey and the Lion.[169] As these tales go, it is the monkey who, using figurative language, outsmarts the lion and in doing so usurps his sovereignty as king of the jungle. The lion, interpreting the monkey's idioms at the literal level, is often belittled and/or physically marred by the elephant, who is brought into the monkey's language games unknowingly. As king of the jungle, the lion is sovereign while the monkey is positioned as his subject but also the subject-object of derision. The monkey, aware of his own physical skill level, uses wordplay to dupe the lion. In several of these tales the monkey, in his glee, falls from his tree and is pounced on by the lion. In some cases this is his folly; however in other stories, through wordplay, the monkey is able to free himself, unharmed. While many tales end in humor, irony, or sarcasm, the lesson is clear:

[169] Shot by Alan Lomax, Worth Long, and John Bishop, August 22, 1978: Johnny Brooks' rendition of The Signifyin(g) Monkey

Signifyin' Monkey, stay up in your tree

You are always lying and signifyin'

But you better not monkey with me (Brown, 1960)

Much like the Signifyin(g) Monkey, *nigga* Signifies on *nigger* through the mortals' ability to restage language in his own image, usurping the sovereign epithet. Through rhetorical modes of speaking, the monkey (aka mortal aka *nigga*) taunts the lion (aka priest aka *nigger*) as a mode of disincorporation (Bhaba, 1992). I chose Signifyin(g) as part of my theoretical lens because, as Gates contends "'Signification' and 'signification' create a noisy disturbance in silence at the level of the signifier." (p. 51). In the dissertation I explore this 'noisy disturbance in silence,' those oxymoronic moments of which neither I, nor others, are prepared—at home, on campus, in the subway, in the classroom, on the Red Carpet, in the cafeteria, in the White House Correspondents' Dinner, within myself. Throughout the dissertation I have wondered at and been uncertain about these noisily silent, excitable, excessive moments. Each has multiply, incomplete effects of which I have only skimmed the surface. Each has conflicting, intersecting constitutive elements which, were it a repeatable moment, would render different effects. Although Gates admits that black vernacular exists within (and is counter to) a larger social and political context of white standard English, "…the use of language is itself enabled by first having been *called a name*… by which one is, quite without choice, situated within discourse." (Butler, 1993, p. 82). Gates' speaker-centered vernacular is in response to the language of the sovereign speaker; yet the "oppression" of which Butler's subject "has no choice" is due to discourse itself and the ways it constitutes and subsumes the subject. Theoretically I wed Signifyin(g) and performative contradiction as a fusion of the discursive act and the speech act. It is through this theory that I interrogate these two components—how we use language and how language uses us.

I find myself secretly defending *nigger* and *nigga* and then feel guilt after witnessing yet another hateful assault on someone of color. Is it possible to produce scholarship in which *nigga* is theorized as a speech act in the midst of Capitol Hill riots in which officers are called *nigger* and camera footage is released of Black males being maced or shot? What does it mean to justify a professor's reading of *nigger* in his Literature class or course on Hate Speech yet witness a man, hands in pockets, kneeling on another man's neck? How might I situate this research within current fields such as Raciolinguistics and #BLJ (Black Linguistic Justice)? It is through Butler's (1997a) theory of the ex-citability of speech that I analyze *nigger-nigga* as performative, as an utterance that enacts and constitutes the subject (the body is addressed and thus assigned a social existence). Yet it is through communally shared experience and the materiality of my own skin that questions the efficacy or futility of this endeavor at all. In this way, I feel like the priest-turned-god, going round and round in a neverending game of Wordplay, while the injurious nature of speech and conduct continues to mar the mortal.

> **May 2017, the office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs:** VPAA: "What's your topic?" After a brief pause, I answer, "I'm studying the word nigga." She stops looking at the file in front of her, raises her head, looks at me and at the Dean of Humanities, who is also in the meeting. I do not turn my head. "And what about it?" "Well, I'm curious about its usage among students. Students say it all the time, yet everyone suddenly gets nervous when they meet it in a text. So… I'm curious mostly about their language practices." "Really, I think anyone who uses that word is awful." "No," I say. "I think it's interesting."

Nigger-nigga lives and breathes in my skin. It has become my own personal trickster figure, ever elusive, taunting me each time it pops up in conversation, in the media, in yet

another Higher Education article about a professor who has been reprimanded, disciplined, dismissed (or not). Yet I still can offer no concrete "findings." What I can offer are musings, suggestions, ways of thinking based on my own shifting subjectivities and uncertainties. Butler (1997a) tells me that by keeping words unsaid and unsayable, there is the ironic possibility of locking them in place. And so I ask: If language (and its use) is the tool of our trade, how do we grapple with in-the-moment instances when language conducts itself as tool, weapon, armor? How can we—, What does it meant to— Restage? Undermine? Signify? What strategies can we employ to study, talk about, interrogate difficult knowledge and difficult language (which constructs knowledge) in difficult (and different) situations during difficult (and different) times? How should we approach impossible speech? And under what conditions is impossible speech no longer speech but conduct?

Nigga could not exist without *nigger*; and through this research I have developed a 'strange and passionate attachment of love' for these utterances.

Each time someone asks my dissertation topic I begin with the words: "Trigger Warning!" and ask if the listener knows what those words mean. Now, depending on my audience, and mood, and positionality and a host of other subjectivities and discourses circulating within that particular contextualized and contingent moment, I will provide a highly erudite theoretical presentation of the N-Word as a Signifiyin(g) performative and its impact in the classroom or I will simply say "I'm researching the word *nigga*." However, each time I am asked (most often by academics, students, educators, fellow doctoral students), I am keenly aware of my self-conscious need to over (or under) explain based on my concerns with offending the listener, being misunderstood, or most significantly, desperately attempting to justify my research. I realize that this floundering attempt at justification parallels *nigga*. In other words,

there is a continuum of justificatory practices that surround *nigga*. These range from legal explorations (Kennedy, 2003) to critical race theorizing of *nigger* as assaultive speech (Matsuda et al., 1993) to socio-cultural explanations of usage (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Asim, 2007; Spears, 1997) to historical, philosophical, anthropological, psychoanalytic or linguistic usage (Parks and Jones, 2008; Haslanger and Anderson; 2012; Anderson and Lepore, 2013; Andrews, 2014; Jones and Hall, 2015; Pryor, 2016; Jerry, 2018). What many essays, articles, blogs, posts, memes and texts share are the rationalizations of usage, appropriateness, inappropriateness, linguistic freedom vs. linguistic censorship, and ownership. And while this has often been a discussion based on the discourses of law and the First Amendment, entertainment and social freedoms, or language and race, *nigger-nigga* in education, and more to the point, as spoken, read, quoted, cited, discussed and/or analyzed in the classroom, has recently taken center stage in Academia. Is it the onus of African American professors to teach texts which include *nigga*? Should professors not of African descent be expected, in their acknowledgment of an inclusive curriculum, to simply ignore the N Word when it appears? If reading and discussing literature requires an examination of the language of the text, by bypassing *nigger-nigga* are professors (of any race) linguistically castrating the text, acting out a type of "willful [color]blindness" (Miller, 2005)?

I ask these questions not because I am attempting to ascertain whether or not it is acceptable for a racially marked "white" professor to utter *nigga* as compared to a racially marked "black" professor. First, I ask these questions because I grapple with my own shifting subjectivities and relationships with *nigga* (both in and outside of the classroom). I ask these questions because I am not sure as to whether or not *nigger-nigga* should, could, or can be discussed in a classroom space. I ask these questions because recent coverage of *nigger-nigga*

being addressed in the classroom has uncovered several instances in which its use has caused discomfort, confusion, tension, ambiguity and dissension so that the professor becomes the "site of speech" disciplined by the State (academic institution) based on the query of its citizens (students). I acknowledge that these instances vary and are partial representations of the subjectivities of both students and professors, yet these same conflicting subjectivities, histories and discourses impact use in the first place.

The notion of how the utterance *nigger-nigga* within particular moments is constitutive of and constituting became the crux of this dissertation. My interest in use, and configurations of use, lay in moving away from (as much as possible given my own humanist orientations) the speaker as sovereign utterer and the site of speech. Instead, how might the speaking-subject be a belated metalepsis (Butler, 1997a)—as the example of Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones and Kelis Rogers (See Nigger artifact 1957/2018)? How for example, might one who was previously called a *nigger* (re)cite the epithet but through a restaging process construct it differently (as in Nigga Instances #09042015 and #12022016)? To be clear, this shift in my positioning of the speaker was not meant to dismiss instances in which *nigger-nigga* is used as epithet or deemed unsayable. Instead, my intention was to analyze *nigger-nigga* as a speech act, as a type of performative in language with its own effects simultaneously dependent on and independent of the speaker and listener, as discussed in G.'s experience in Critical Conversation #17032014. By moving away from the utterer as the site of the infraction, I hoped to move away from (not denigrate) the commonsense argument of what racial group can (should) or cannot (should not) say *nigger-nigga*. By presenting analysis of *nigger-nigga* in use through speech act theory and discourse analysis, my intention is to shift the conversation about licit and illicit speech onto the very utterance itself. The performativity of Signifyin(g) as a contradiction tells me that not only

can a community of speakers wrest language and restage it in new alterable ways, but that words themselves can and will morph. *Nigga* is my evidence of this.

> **February 2020, JoLLE Conference at University of Georgia**: I have just finished my presentation titled "Trigger Warning! N**ger as Text/N**ga as Speech: Contradiction(s) and the Canon." An attendee and black male graduate student at University of Georgia (UGA) and I go for coffee. As we are walking he says, "I'm going to be honest with you. When I walked into your presentation I believed under no circumstances should a white professor say *nigga*." "Not ever?" "Never. If it was in the text they should skip it, say the N word, something, but they should never say the word. But after listening to your presentation, I have to admit, my thinking has changed."

What *nigga, nigger, niggah, nigguh, nizzle, nicca, neezy* "means" at any given moment is framed by the discursive relations within which it is located as well as the norms that then become solidified around particularized meanings; however, these meanings are open to constant rereading, reinterpretation and reSignification. Due to its rhetorical nature, its meaning(s) at any given time are multiply inflected, constitutive of the subjects, the relationship between subjects, and the power relations embedded within the webwork of bodies-subjects-institutions and institutionalized discourses. As such, *nigga* is not constituted fully by the speaking subject but by the social realities that language itself constitutes (Butler, 1997a; Foucault, 2010; Weedon, 1997). Just as the raced or racial subject is socially constructed in great part, but not wholly, based on a range of discursive practices**,** so too is *nigga*, the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). The power vested in *nigga* continues to uphold illusory qualities of language as a concrete artifact that concretizes experience, identity and most significantly, agency as static conditions under normalized realities. I wonder if the

Grad Student's perspective would remain consistent if this occurred in one of his graduate classes at UGA. While I realize my own ambivalence, uncertainty and doubt, I don't know if I want to place these reservations on others. Rather than change his perspective… I just wanted to have the conversation.

As a thought project, I realize that I do not follow the traditional arc of Qualitative research writing. I admit with chagrin (not really) that there are no final conclusions or findings, no generalizable outcomes that can be applied with loose precision to further studies. I think here of a conversation with Dr. Ernest Morrell who indicated that he too felt that there was much to be interrogated through the lens of poststructural theory, and yet, many scholars of color align with critical theories or postcolonial theory as there is an end point, an action or action research component, the potential for generalizable outcomes that can be used in further research for the benefit of the marginalized community. In contrast, poststructural theory is contested as vacuous, ambiguous, empty of identity categories and boundaries. As I have indicated elsewhere, my poststructural orientations are not meant to remove or redact the significance of critical theories; instead, my orientations are meant to further complicate an already complicated discussion. While there are countless entry points for discussions about race, for me, the entry point is language.

Unlike a traditional literature review, in Part I of the dissertation I focused on the theoretical framework through which I hoped to analyze *nigga*. While I realized, much later mind you, that my Literature Review could (and quite possibly should) focus on current research and scholarship about *nigga*, I did not take this course of action. This then is a gap in the dissertation and had I the opportunity (and time and/or inclination) to return to this, I would include more scholarship about *nigga* (see Appendix A for a list of readings). Although I focus

(primarily) on two seminal texts, Randall Kennedy's *nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* and Jabari Asim's *The N Word: Who can say it, Who shouldn't and Why*, I have since unearthed articles in literacy studies, English, Anthropology and Linguistics which grapple with "the N Word." These articles I believe should be included in Part I.

Part II is my attempt, albeit incomplete, at further analysis of the ways in which *nigga* is deployed, especially on a college campus. I weave instances, events and artifacts throughout the dissertation rather than placing these in the traditional data collection chapter due to my narrativizing of my data. Partly due to my ontological underpinnings and partly due to my background in (and love of) fictional texts, narrating my data points "made the most sense," felt the most "authentic." Simply inserting instances or conversations in the traditional Chapter 4 felt inherently "false," less like communication and more like reporting communication. As I indicated in my introduction, my intention was to interrogate speech acts as these are presented. And while there is an impossibility in presenting conversation "as it occurred" due to my own biased subjectivities, due to my own fallible memory, due to the opacity of language, my turn towards narrative provided an opportunity to simultaneously present and analyze my data as examples of the theory I was grappling with. I continue with this format in Part II in which I endeavor (with great difficulty mind you) to investigate *nigger-nigga* in use in the English classroom and on the college campus. Again, in hindsight, I would have liked to develop my analysis of my classroom observations and will, in some future moment, spend more time with these observations; multiple factors constrained this. However, in one final "attempt" at traditional qualitative writing, I will present the research questions from my Introduction and briefly speak to these.

- Initially I asked: What processes and/or systems exist that allow particular forms of use of *nigga* in particular contexts over others? Through a poststructural lens, this is fluctuating and indeterminate. Within the institutional space of the university campus, policy decisions and actions for and/or against the use of *nigger-nigga* is contradictory, varied and unclear. It is not my intention to offer findings or solutions to this; my intention is to merely present the multiply fragmented silent murmurings beneath the continuity of historicized racial discourse, which is impacted by academic discourse, institutional governance, and governmentality (Foucault, 1978) (by which subjects of the institution police themselves and one another). Ultimately the allowability of *nigga* is contingent upon a host of intersecting material and linguistic elements, one of which is the racial markings of the speaking subject, yet this is not the sole factor. In hindsight, if I were to (re)ask this question I would ask: In what ways can I complicate *use* based on the linguistic terms available to me, with particular attention to the College classroom and the College campus.

- In what ways have discourses governing erudite knowledge come to regulate local subjugated knowledges with respect to *nigga?* Normative and acceptable use of *nigga* in contemporary society has "typically" placed ownership within black American discursive communities, even when those same communities attempt to eradicate *nigga*. The contradictions are evident interracially but there are also intra-racial linguistic class distinctions. Discourses such as the politics of respectability regulate *nigga* within the black community. Yet it is this very discourse that is predicated upon an assimilation to psychic whiteness, which continues to govern erudite knowledge (even in its absence).

Hence the discourse of respectability within a black community of speakers is constrained and maintained through the institutionalization of hegemonic discourses of social conformity and cultural normalization, which are historically Eurocentric and Western. While *nigga* continues to be appropriate in particular public discourses such as comedy and rap music, within the formal classroom, *nigger-nigga* continues to be contentious. As an alteration to this question, I would ask: What makes some discourses allowable and others prohibitable with respect to *nigga?*

- If the classroom is the potential space for critical intellectualism, then in what ways—if any—is it possible for *nigger/nigga* to participate in this process? Like Butler (1997a) I can only hope for an unknowable future, one which I can only imagine. I would like to believe that discussions about racialized language can occur in the classroom, yet *nigger-nigga's* continued vitriolic past makes this particular utterance something of a conundrum. It is not simply the contradictory nature of *nigga* as utterance that disallows intellectual discussion and interrogation; it is also the intersecting and competing discourses which govern and indoctrinate beliefs about appropriateness and sayability. In hindsight I would change this question to: What does the classroom space look like when discussions about *nigga* arise?

In Butler's (1997a) words, "the changeable life of a term does not preclude the possibility of its use." (p. 162). If, in society, we are not creating new words but reiterating old words with new meanings, then to *what effect?* Rapper Talib Kweli Greene tells me that eradicating *nigga* will not end racism, and Butler tells me that stopping an epithet in the moment of its elocution

only serves as a policing function that does not probe the root of such language. If this is the case, then arguing for or against usage of *nigger-nigga* especially in the English classroom (a place where these conversations should be *allowed* to take place, I believe) does not necessarily eradicate its demonized or demonizing existence. Alternatively, I wonder how it might be possible to explore *nigger-nigga* in the ways that Butler (1997a) vis-à-vis Morrison defines language, "…partly as a system, partly as a living thing… but mostly as agency—an act with consequences… an extended doing, a performance with effects." (p. 6-7). If, as a society we dream of a day in which racism is eradicated, then is it possible to engage utterances such as *nigger-nigga* at the level of meaning itself (Gates, 1988/2014)? Is it possible to delink it from its denotative meaning or its illocutionary force without erasing the past? The indeterminacy of language tells me this is possible. If not, how and/or why is it possible for *nigga* to simultaneously Signify on a violent historical past and rhetorically Signify in the present? I present my interpretations of this in Nigga artifact 04302016 (p. 64) and Nigga Event #03242015 (p. 96). In both cases *nigga* is rhetorically invoked by the speaker, thus constituting himself and his listeners in multiple ways. In both cases, surrounding discourses dictate the appropriateness of the utterance. And whether ironic or parodic, its *use* is contingent upon (and constitutive of) particularized histories, subjectivities and power relations. Am I incorrect by allowing a pass when my students say *nigga* in the classroom? The scholarship of Koritha Mitchell (2018) would argue yes, under no circumstances should I allow this to take place. However, I think of the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates who indicates that what we have created are a politics of respectability (especially for black peoples) that constructs us as superhuman, i.e., (im)mortal, in our attempt to prove our worthiness, respect, and value in the face of racism. What I do think I

can improve upon are the spaces in which this utterance is discussed, in order to move the conversation forward.

Butler (1997a) asks,

> If a term becomes questionable, does that mean it cannot be used any longer, and that we can only use terms that we *already know how to master*?... Are we not paralyzed by a fear of the unknown future of words that keeps us from interrogating the terms that we need to live, and of taking the risk of living the terms that we keep in question? (p. 162-163).

I do not believe there is one concrete answer to this, but instead a spectrum of answers, none of them necessarily incorrect. What I have presented throughout this dissertation are a plethora of events, instances, and conversations; my goal was not to define under what circumstances someone said *nigga*. Instead, I intended to exhibit the ambiguity, inconsistency, contradictions and ironies with which *nigga* is uttered, controlled and managed. Rather than argue for or against use of *nigga* as appropriate or inappropriate or as the effect of a speaking subject's linear, rationalized, unified experience ("Oh, I actually say it now" a student once told me who in the past indicated he substituted *nigga* with the word *ninja*); I merely present my complicated interpretations of (im)possibility. In my quest to rid myself of my own paralysis, a paralysis that has haunted me for some forty-odd years, as (im)mortalized priest-turned-god I dove into the abyss of the Deep Blue Sea, in search of plumblines and floating signifiers and dying, drowning mortals focused on the goal of Superstanding (Williams, 1991).

Epilogue

March, 2021, A final rememory: My mother turned 85 on February 12, 2021. Nieces and nephews, great and great-great nieces and nephews, many of whom she (nor I) have seen in years (we're not a very tight-knit family) showed up virtually on Zoom to honor the matriarch of the family. She is the last living of her generation, the youngest of her siblings, the oldest of our tree. I watch her as she shuffles around the house, a bit stooped, much slower, but still engaged with the world. She zooms, texts, sends gifs and memes, has her own Bitmoji avatar, and makes monthly visits to Atlantic City (she is currently planning a cruise). She has participated in the election of the first POTUS of color and the first female Vice-POTUS of color; yet she recalls the first time she cast her vote for Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956.[170]

In January 2020 she moved in with us; now, she hears about the dissertation almost every day. "Mommm… I need to write." "How many more pages you got to go?" she asks. "Ummm…." I never have a concrete answer. I don't know how to explain it's not the number of pages, but the number of ideas (which sounds so simple when I type it on the page). "When I'm done, I'm done. I'll know it." "Okay," but the expression on her face tells me that my answer doesn't sound very promising. Once in passing she said, "Please finish before I die." (Great, more pressure). Now, when I ask my mother if she can remember that sunny day when we were running errands and two boys called us *nigger*, she chuckles and says she cannot. But her chuckle says she believes it to be possible. She asks, "what did I say?" I tell her she responded with "honky," and while previously she corrected me and said she doesn't think that's the word

[170] My mother registered as a Republican as per her mother's instruction. At the time, my grandmother had a job working on the polls and did not want to lose her position if my mother didn't register as such. According to my mother, my grandmother was able to get a job because politically, she aligned herself with the Republican Party, and racially she was fair-complexioned. As my mom puts it, "My (her) mom had nice speech and nice features, she brought voting records home and everything… for a Negro to do that? That was unheard of."

she would use now, she says, "that sounds about right."[171] The contradictions in her answers, along with our separate conflicting memories reflect the fragmentary nature of subjectivity and memory; it also reflects the incompleteness of language. Both answers are authentic, truthful, valid (if I am to use traditional Quantitative or even conventional, humanist Qualitative Inquiry jargon), yet in their contradiction, both are 'a site of disunity and conflict' as constructed through language (Weedon, 1997). My mother's shift in what she *might have said* reflects the opacity of language and the multiplicity of subjectivity even as we use language to construct our experiences, our lives, our memories. Her answers (and my memory—I can neither claim, nor desire to claim a whole, complete self) limn the actual and the imagined.

She asks, "What happened? What did I do?" I tell her that we were in the middle of the street and she let go of my hand. She responds, "Well I probably dropped it in case I had to fight. That would be the only reason I would have let your hand go. I needed to be prepared to fight." She chuckles. Her response unnerves me; I'd never considered that possibility. In my head, I'd constructed a *failed* narrative of my mother. Through the eyes of the eight-year-old, her behavior was a "sacrilegious betrayal." I characterized her release as the shock of one who is at a loss, much like the melancholia Butler (1997b) discusses vis-à-vis Freud. Yet, through the eyes of the 85-year-old woman, her behavior was necessitated by the potential need to fight—not a failure but a *realization*, an insurrection. She was preparing herself, single woman—with child in the middle of the street—to hold her own against two white men. Her anger, her shock, her indignation was not based on a psychic interiority of ungrievable loss, it was, instead, a mental constellation of revolt (Bhaba, 1992). My mother, unbeknownst to me, was prepared to physically dismantle their sovereign smugness. Had my mother literally fought these young

[171] In Chapter 1 of the dissertation my mother indicated that she would not have said this word.

men, what would have occurred? Would she have been knocked to the ground like Miss Sophia in *The Color Purple* while I gawked in amazement and fear? Had this gone to court, would the boys' speech be considered under the fighting words doctrine based on an "immediate breach of peace"? Quite possibly those two boys were lucky to keep walking. At the age of eight I'd witnessed my mother take on my father, and while I cried for the safety of my mom, it was my dad who took the physical beating. Quite possibly much like our competing subjectivities about why she let my hand go, "honky" or "cracker" or whatever utterance she dispelled that day is my own imagined situated moment. Quite possibly she said nothing at all.

I end with this final rememory to show the incompleteness of language, the multiplicity of subjectivity, the questionable nature of validity, authenticity, perhaps even qualitative research itself. On any given day this memory-story can morph, each iteration nuanced in its own way, slightly different from the previous, yet no less authentic. While I had constructed one set of possibilities, her suggestion constructs others. And there are more. What would those two boys say today? Would they remember? Would they deny ever having said such a thing? Would they apologize? Or would they fiercely defend their right to freedom of speech? This shift in perspective intersects the shifts in language itself.

Over the expanse of some forty odd years, *nigger-nigga* has evolved, each iteration/citation nuanced in its own way. While as qualitative researcher I could have used traditional methods of coding and categorization by classifying each utterance of *nigger-nigga*, for me, this method would not highlight subject position and the ways utterances such as *nigger-nigga* shift based on institutionalized discourses, context, situation, and the subjectivities of the speaker and listener. Presenting this new information from a childhood memory complements and contests the ambiguity, inconsistency, contradictions and ironies of *nigger-nigger*. Yet in my

own reflexive writing I define the circumstances by which my mother experienced *nigger*. Ironically, her final comment ruptures my own humanist inflected ways of remembering, thus demonstrating the incompleteness of linguistic beingness.

I still hold my mother's hand. It is more important to me now than forty years prior. As a child, handholding meant security, safety, protection, and these continue to exist; however, as an adult, it signifies connection and a lustful desire to never let go, to hold onto each previous moment that we have left. She no longer towers above me, so much so that, as a child, my outreached hand strained to reach her. Now I am the leader, the guide to our destinations. My hand engulfs hers; and while she will always be my mother, it is I who have taken on the parental role. Rather than worry about two white boys sauntering by spewing *nigger*, I worry about young men of color with pants sagged and scraggly hair sauntering by singing the likes of the Migos or Kendrick Lamar, *nigga* falling from their lips in rapid fire lyrics. Once again, the paradox of *usage* is revealed—I can accept my students saying *nigga* in the classroom, but I cannot accept a stranger walking by and rapping *nigga* in front of my mother. When we are crossing the street or taking a walk, I instinctively grab my mother's hand to steady her, to guide her, but most importantly to connect. Like the little girl of yester-year, I continue to crave those moments when our hands clasp. I treasure these because I don't know how many more I will have. Recently we attended a funeral. She was 84, my mother's friend; she lived in the house next door and her unfortunate passing was in a fire (possibly caused by her own hand). Afterwards my mother said, "That's the kind of funeral I want. No sadness, just a celebration of my life." I grab her hand, kiss it, kiss her cheek, smile and say, "Okay, mom. Anything for you."

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Appendix A: Further Reading

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