Abstract
This essay examines James Baldwin’s conception of what he calls “black English” and its link to historical and cultural identity. I link Baldwin’s defense of black English to his reflections on the sorrow songs and sound, which draws on long-standing accounts of musicality as the foundation of the African-American tradition. In order to demonstrate this relation to the tradition, the essay puts Baldwin’s remarks in relation to Frederick Douglass’s and W. E. B. Du Bois’s description of the sorrow songs. I also underscore how that relation to the African-American tradition marks an important set of tensions with mid-twentieth century black Atlantic theory (Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon), tensions which make sense of the Americanness of Baldwin’s work. Across the essay, I claim that Baldwin’s account of language has epistemological and ontological significance (and so is not just aesthetic or political), which gives an interesting and important twist to Martin Heidegger’s famous phrase that “language is the house of Being.”

Keywords: Baldwin; vernacular; language; sorrow songs; Fanon
Writers are obliged, at some point, to realize that they are involved in a language which they must change. And for a black writer in this country to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions on which the language operates are his enemy.


James Baldwin’s two essays from 1979 on what he calls black English bring two and a half decades of reflection on African-American history and memory to bear on the question of language, identity, and cultural meaning. Baldwin understands that the question of language is no small matter, and cannot in any way be reduced to style or mere aesthetics. Rather, on Baldwin’s account, language makes, remakes, and reproduces a world. So, when the legitimacy of African-American English is contested, an entire sense of knowing and being is at stake. Baldwin therefore takes on the question of language in urgent and provocative terms. What does it mean to speak? What is the relation of language to senses of home, belonging, dissent, and resistance? What does it mean to inhabit a language that has from the beginning been an instrument of the enemy, wielded in the service of oppression, but also transformed by and recalibrated for the oppressed? And what can be said when the speaking and inhabitation of a transformed English is contested on racialized terms?

Both of Baldwin’s essays from 1979 are angry, defensive, and, in many ways, improvised pieces of outrage and emphatic argumentation. And rightly so. “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” and “Black English: A Dishonest Argument” both speak against the racial hegemony at work in the disparaging of vernacular speech—and, as we shall see, vernacular cultural forms more widely. That wider sense of vernacular cultural form will prove crucial in the following reflections. The origins of black English, which Baldwin identifies as memory of and witness to the auction block, link vernacular speech to familiar and complex stories of African-American culture and identity: the spirituals, the central role of musicality, and forms of resistance and saying yes to life that animate the sounds of identity formation. If, as Baldwin puts it, the sound of the choir can tell the story of the auction block, and that story is borne further in and by vernacular speech, then wider questions of identity, place, and home intertwine with history and memory to form a sense of belonging even under conditions of radical persecution and terror.
In this moment, Baldwin is brought back, in the mode of critic, to many of the issues at play in (or even haunting) the colonial world in post–World War II anticolonial thought concerned with speech, writing, and racial authenticity. Like the well-known manifestos from Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and others in the postwar period, Baldwin's essays on African-American vernacular, written two and a half decades after the Bandung and Paris conferences in which the francophone manifestos were initially forged, read with the same sense of moral defense and uncompromising, if at times excessively demanding, love for Black people. Indeed, Baldwin's nonfiction always asks the most difficult questions about race and self, interrogating everything from rage to love, questioning the distinction between the two, and imagining in every instance how the history and memory of African-American life is to be theorized, defended, and moved to the center of cultural identity formation. Baldwin's work on language is certainly at the center of wide questions of race and self; he makes it clear, in incisive, enraged rhetoric, that the dismissal or denigration of African-American speech is nothing other than white racism concerned with severing Black people, for a second time, from historical and memorial roots. As with all roots and appeals to rootedness, self-knowledge is at stake. That occasion of rage, as with so many other occasions in Baldwin's nonfiction, is also a moment of deeper theoretical reflection on the nature of race, identity, memory, and history. And that reflection sets out some distance between him and other mid-century (and later) black Atlantic theorist, especially, as we shall see, around questions of home.

In a particularly existentialist register, typical of even his earliest nonfiction, Baldwin's work on language evokes something very much like Martin Heidegger's famous turn of phrase "language is the house of Being." This is of course not to say that Baldwin had anything like Heidegger's metaphysical or ontological ambition in theorizing the relation of language to Being. Rather, Baldwin's rhetorical intensity around the question of vernacular speech is located in a smaller and more localized, yet also just as enormous and transhistorical, problem: how is a sense of home, that sense of belonging and being in a place and culture, possible inside of a multi-century history of unrepresentable violence? How does language remember what we might otherwise forget? We are always inside that history, for Baldwin, even as the interior constraints of history are shown in his fiction and nonfiction to be partial and fractured (Baldwin's protagonists are never in full possession of themselves, and
his nonfiction if remarkable for its exploratory character). Constraints are fractured because vernacular speech and culture produce and reproduce, for African-Americans, a sense of home that is simultaneously inside and outside violence. How, then, might we conceive vernacular speech and vernacular cultural forms as speaking to, as, and from sites of not just resistance and survival, but also of world making and being that sustain life in—and then after—the wreckage of History? That is, how could we see in Baldwin’s work on language a theory of memory and history akin to what Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* famously named *counter-modernity*, an alternative story in which pain and pleasure, everydayness and sublimity, aggression and equanimity, and all of those vicissitudes of speaking life into being are *heard* and *felt* in so-called “black English”?

Part of the story of Baldwin’s account of vernacular speech and how it speaks life into being draws on a key cluster of concepts in the African-American intellectual tradition: sound, memory, and the spirituals. I want to begin here by drawing on two signature moments from that tradition in Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois in order to deepen the historical sense of Baldwin’s claims. His claims do not come from nowhere. Baldwin’s thinking is innovative in that peculiar interval produced by his engaged repetition of the past that wants, in repetition, to say something new; one can recall here how the Biblical evocation of “the fire next time” becomes, across a critique of religion and religiosity, a way of linking the persistence of rage to a vision of love that is at once radically secular in its politics and preacherly spiritual in its prophecy and existential meaning. Repetition, interval, the new. A similar story is told in Baldwin’s theorizing vernacular speech and cultural forms. In that theorizing, Baldwin draws on the irreducibly conflicted relationship between whiteness as standard and black English as a counter-speech, but, as is typical of his unexpected reversals of thinking, such conflict leads Baldwin not to a sense of alienation, but instead to the “paradox: blacks, Indians, Chicanos, Asians, and that beleaguered handful of white people who understand their *history are the only people who know who they are.*” To understand African-American history is to understand the sound of tradition, something that begins in the past and, in its haunting of the present, animates the realities and possibilities of Black life. And so we begin with what must be repeated in order to return to an account of self-knowledge.
The Spirituals are really the most characteristic product of the race genius as yet in America. But the very elements which make them uniquely expressive of the Negro make them at the same time deeply representative of the soil that produced them. Thus, as unique spiritual products of American life, they become nationally as well as racially characteristic.

—Alain Locke, “The Negro Spirituals”

The function of the spirituals in the African-American intellectual tradition is familiar and has a long history of elaboration, with particularly important moments in the cultural history work of W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke. For both, the spirituals are the foundation of the tradition. Emerging from sites of mourning, resistance, and pleasure, the spirituals make thinking possible under conditions of impossibility, and so begin the African-American tradition from a rooted, complex space of being and becoming. And yet the spirituals are altogether enigmatic, complex, and, while the origin of tradition, elliptical in their own speaking to origins. The content of the spirituals is comprised of both lyric and sound; the distinction between those two forms of expression is thin, at best, and probably best expressed as inextricably bound and interdependent.

The spirituals also play an important role in Baldwin’s conception of language. Black English, for Baldwin, is a composite of history and being. Black English reckons with racial history in vernacular form—it is a sound with history and memory inside it—and is an expression of having-come-to-self-knowledge. His elaboration of the origins of black English in slavery and its aftermath—survival and protection—therefore shows the interconnection between history as cruelty and language as identity formation, but always without casting that language and identity formation as pathological. Rather, the insistence on the “sheer intelligence” of black English, a phrase he borrows in the black English essay from Toni Morrison, underscores the seriousness of vernacular expression both for the meaning of existence—the world-making force of language—and for cultural formation in the Americas generally, the United States in particular.

Let me take two examples to prepare the ground for understanding Baldwin’s appropriation of the spirituals in conceiving black English as a vernacular of world-making. Consider, for example, how the sound of slaves
singing impacted Frederick Douglass. Amidst the sharp rhetoric and horrifying stories of plantation violence in the opening two chapters, Douglass’s *Narrative* is interrupted by a strange and compelling pause in the second chapter. The second half of the second chapter interrupts his depiction of slave life with haunting descriptions of slave songs heard across a plantation field. The dramatic context of this interruption is remarkable; the entire tone of *Narrative* changes, just for a few pages, shifting from the righteous outrage of depictions of slave-owner violence to a sense of wonder and melancholy at the sound of slave songs sung in the field. Douglass recounts how slaves returning from work,

while on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—*if not in the word, in the sound*;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone.6

The chapter and a half before this and the following paragraphs through the remainder of the text are noteworthy for their adherence to linearity and clear lessons. Douglass’s sufferings at each point of the autobiography deepen the pain of slavery, each moment of witness gives depth to rage and despair. *Narrative* leaves no doubt that it is an abolitionist text concerned with communication of the particular violence of plantation life and articulation of the conditions of liberation through violent resistance. The confrontation with Covey, which shifts the arc of the story from suffering toward an emerging freedom, is followed by glimpses of light and increasingly open horizons, all of which culminate in Douglass’s freedom from both the literal bonds of slavery and the decimation of subjectivity made through its violence. The singing of the slaves, however, changes everything in terms of tone and orientation. Space and time break with linear models and the aesthetic sensibility of the song and singer is confounded and confounding. Douglass is moved by the song, especially the *sound*, but cannot, for once, make sense of what he sees and hears. This is a singular moment in the text. That is, for all the astonishment in Douglass’s prose about slavery’s violence, for all the clear moralism and outrage one expects
from an abolitionist text, the songs of the slaves open up, if only for one moment, a massively different horizon in Narrative. He instrumentalizes the songs in a brief remark, noting “I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.” But his instrumentalization is an interruption only of a longer pause in the swirl of pain, suffering, and hope the songs bring to word and sound.

What are we to make of this moment? To be sure, unlike the first witness to slave master violence—the beating of his aunt, which initiates him into slave subjectivity—or the fight with Covey—the moment of psychic liberation—the songs of the slaves confound Douglass’s own vision of himself and the cruel institution of slavery. The slaves sing without didacticism; there is no lesson to be drawn from the words or the communicative action of collective singing. In fact, the slaves sing from and to a lesson-less place. Without a didactic moment, Douglass is left only with the impossible mixture of despair and hope, pathos and rapture, sadness and joy. Even the sound itself does not make sense; Douglass describes the music as disobedient to time and tune, although the strangeness of the sound does not inhibit or limit the power of sound. Indeed, the distortion of rules and the abdication of moral lesson and instruction can be said to imbue the songs with their own special power—a power that transcends the uncomplicated moral arc of Narrative. The transcendence of moral arc thereby opens up another dimension of slavery—a non-instrumentalizable dimension, to be sure—that is otherwise absent from Douglass’s account of the plantation. And, further, what this brings into view is how Narrative largely eschews the melancholy of slavery, the meaning of the sound of the slaves’ song, in favor of the outrage and wound of violence. What that violence leaves behind, the memory of pain and unredeemed suffering, does not appear in the text except in the slave songs overheard in the field. Douglass’s lack of clear vision and description when recounting the songs, his absorption in the strange spectacle of it all, is, in its own way, an authentic mode of describing the melancholic site. Melancholia can only interrupt a didactic narrative. And so the slave songs interrupt Douglass’s autobiography with the very theme of Narrative itself: the memory of slavery’s pain and suffering. Without lesson and without resolution, the songs stall Douglass’s dialectic and posit what is, for Narrative, the text’s outside and unassimilable enigma.
In the closing chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois echoes Douglass’s encounter with the peculiarity and intractability of memory in the sorrow songs. Like Douglass, Du Bois’s account of hearing memory-music, of his discerning the sorrow in the so-called sorrow songs, is animated by a kind of wonder. It is a wonder that draws the listener in, to be sure. That is the character of wonder-as-affect. But it is also a wonder that marks a difference between the memory carried by the song and the capacity of the listener to comprehend the meaning of that memory. In other words, it is a wonder begun in the trauma of slavery. Sorrow is unassimilable to the narrative of uplift that threads the various chapters of *Souls* together. And yet that wonder, that memory whose pain draws the reader and listener back from the looping story of freedom, is inseparable from the meaning of the place in which the sorrow songs were gestated, then born. Du Bois writes:

The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope.

Thus, Du Bois claims, and this is no small intervention in the question of home and place, that the *Americanness* of the sorrow songs comes from their embeddedness in a particular history and memory. The songs make place and home through the soul-life of the slave—a kind of founding ghost, perhaps, and certainly a kind of identity out of shared historical memory. They begin as the Americas begin: pain, suffering, exile without promise of return, and the endless trials of what Du Bois called the color-line, the veil, and double-consciousness. The sorrow songs are a gift, but not one that edifies or even makes sense. Indeed, part of Du Bois’s commentary on the songs in chapters 10 and 14 of *Souls* consists of a certain astonishment at the sound of the music, a sound we might identify with memory and its unfathomable character. Du Bois’s reflections on the sorrow songs always come back to this astonishment and wonder, and how sound makes memory’s ineffable character present in sound, even as the
sound of suffering’s memorial asks us (or induces the question in us): what do the songs mean? How has sound become so melancholy, yet crucial for the meaning of present and future? Begun in slavery, the melancholic sound is the sound of the other founding father, the “father” who passes along sadness and hope at one and the same time. In that sense, Du Bois argues, the slave experience is in the song. Du Bois writes: “What are these songs, and what do they mean? . . . I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world. . . . They are the music of unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.”

The temporality of this passage is key. All of the affects and conditions of subjectivity described in this and other passages on the sorrow songs trail off into the past. In that sense, the song is a clue. The song directs the listener to the trail of the past, draws the one who hears the message and memorial into the moment, but then withdraws into the sorrowful memory it bears. That memory is elliptical. We are never brought to the experience of slavery itself, but only the melancholy of its wake.

The crucial element of the sorrow song as memory song is sound. And it is sound that provokes Du Bois’s deepest anxiety about the future of memory. Sound, in Souls, is linked to authenticity in ways that are inseparable from the capacity of the song to carry memory of pain, suffering, longing, and hope; the sorrow songs are the slave’s message to the world, and that message is ever precarious. Du Bois will therefore constantly remind us of the threat of caricature, defilement, and imitation. If the songs lose the purity of sound, the songs lose the sanctity of memory. Authenticity is therefore not only a question of performance and the aesthetics of reception (though it is certainly that), but also, and perhaps firstly, a question of preservation of founding wounds and their strange gift of life to the future. Du Bois writes:

Since their day they have been imitated—sometimes well, by the singers of Hampton and Atlanta, sometimes ill, by straggling quartettes. Caricature has sought again to spoil the quaint beauty of the music, and has filled the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real. But the true Negro folk-song still lives in the hearts of those who have heard them truly sung and in the hearts of the Negro people.
Every iteration of the sorrow songs traffics in imitation, so the critical issue is how imitation is able to summon and evoke the ghostly past. That is, Du Bois’s question is how we can discern the haunted aesthetic of the Hampton and Atlanta University singers and, in that discernment, understand both the potential of authentic performance to call forth memory and the potential of caricature to pervert memory, identity, and the sanctity of both. Du Bois therefore marks an important distinction here between authenticity and mass-produced, mass-consumable musical expression. Caricature appeals to vulgar ears. But the authenticity of the sorrow songs is ensured in part by the performance, in the main by the listener: the Negro people. This is a key moment in Souls, for it tells the story of memory and history and sound without naïveté about the modern world. Mass production and mass consumption transform the aesthetic character of any given object—the mass of mass consumption requires the leveling of cultural production. Du Bois worries about the future of memory in this moment, and yet that concern is eased through an appeal to his notion of race and racial identity. The common spiritual striving of black people, which ranges in his early work from essentialist claims about blood to the promise of shared history and culture, ensures that the song will be heard and that the sound will carry somewhere. Transmission of pain and memory, then, has a future, even as caricature and vulgar ears remind us that every cultural production is exposed to mass production and its perversions.

What are we to make of Douglass’s and Du Bois’s encounter with the music of slavery? For both, it is a moment of profound disturbance. The songs in both Narrative and Souls interrupt stories of resistance and liberation with memory, trauma, and its ghosts. This disturbance then evokes a kind of devotion—for Douglass, the memory of the moment stands as a sacred space of pain that exceeds the abolitionist program of the text, and, for Du Bois, it situates black subjectivity in the strange, haunting interval between the painful past and the future of the color line. Douglass and Du Bois tell compassionate ghost stories: concerned about the ghost, worried that the ghost will wander rather than be summoned and loved, but also wary of any attempt to inscribe the ghost into logics of comprehension and description. The songs come to Douglass and Du Bois, and their appearance in the text is always marked by a kind of astonishment at the ineffability, yet affective communicability, of what is brought to presence in sound. In that sense, we can call the presence of the sorrow songs in both texts as moments of the sublime. The sublime has a specific history in Western philosophy, of course, and it is often used to mark
the limits of the intellect. G-d, nature, infinity, perhaps even the soul—these moments of the sublime underscore human finitude by noting, through the boldness of the examples, the limits of knowledge. The excess of pain and memory in the sorrow songs, however, does not dazzle or astonish in that same manner. Rather, the intensity of the slave experience, as Douglass and Du Bois both argue, astonishes with the unthinkable and unsayable of centuries of cruelty and suffering without pause. That is, rather than astonishing us with the power of what exceeds human finitude and thinking as a kind of exaltation, the sublimity of the sorrow song evacuates the world of meaning and redemption, leaving the sadness of memory of suffering in sound and word. And yet that evacuation is itself the condition of being and another kind of future. A strange double, yes, but such doubling is sustained by the sublime’s power to disrupt and reorient according to its own logic. Human finitude is marked, underscored, and moved to the center of the world in order to make another order possible or thinkable, even in its unthinkability. The irrevocable paradox of the sorrow songs—the sadness that is joyful, the hope that is impossible—makes the Americas possible. Memory of possibility is sound itself. Sublimity thereby marks the intensity of the founding of vernacularity, the unspeakable and unimaginable made into speech and form and thought. Language.

Let me shift now to Baldwin’s intervention. Baldwin’s conception of language draws precisely on this location of memory inside sound, writing Douglass’s and Du Bois’s accounts of sound into the medium of vernacular expression. In the short essay “Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption,” Baldwin evokes the spirit of Douglass, Du Bois, and Locke, adding important depth to his understanding of language. He recalls and claims the genealogy of black English, forged on the auction block, and then links language to musicality and music’s ability to transform the meaning of time. It is this temporal transformation that means everything. If time can mean something other than the transmission of abjection and pathology—something with which Frantz Fanon struggled mightily—then perhaps memory of the past, borne as it is by vernacular language and expressive culture, is a ghost that can be welcomed, rather than fled. A friend, rather than an enemy of the future. Baldwin writes in “Of the Sorrow Songs”:

It is out of this, and much more than this, that black American music springs. This music begins on the auction block.
Now, whoever is unable to face this—the auction block; whoever cannot see that that auction block is the demolition, by Europe, of all human standards: a demolition accomplished, furthermore, at that hour of the world’s history, in the name of ‘civilization’; whoever pretends that the slave mother does not weep, until this hour, for her slaughtered son, that the son does not weep for his slaughtered father; or whoever pretends that the white father did not, literally, and knowing what he was doing, hand, and burn, and castrate, his black son—whoever cannot face this can never pay the price for the ‘beat’ which is key to music, and the key to life.

Music is our witness, and our ally. The ‘beat’ is the confession which recognizes, changes, and conquers time.

Then, history becomes a garment we can wear, and share, and not a cloak in which to hide; and time becomes a friend.

Musicality is critical for both functions of vernacular. In turning to the particularity of the spirituals for theorizing musicality, sound, and culture, Baldwin marks his approach to language as distinctively African-American—gaining that small bit of distance from visions of African diasporic unity and generalized racial identity. That is, as we will see later, the conquest of time, which makes time a friend, speaks to the particularly African-American ghost as it is carried by the sound and form of speaking and expression. While one could argue that this relation to a ghost in sound is characteristic of orality in multiple traditions across the black Americas, Baldwin’s claim is not concerned with a shared morphology or “aural syntax,” as it were, but instead with how the specifically African-American experience of the auction block, folded into the black church and the spirituals, founds an expressive medium that marks this place with this memory and this culture. With that specificity, Baldwin is able to articulate a kind of counter-nationalism—a sense of home, really—that works against the pan-African current of the time in black Atlantic theory, as well as, more locally for Baldwin, against the cultural nationalism of the Nation of Islam and related movements. Fanon’s claim that to speak a language means inhabiting a whole world then comes back to Baldwin, but retooled with an affirmation of—rather than distance from—vernacular cultural forms. This affirmation, which makes for an intense defense and elaboration of black English in all its aspects, sees the truth in Fanon’s claim that language has a history and that such history determines how identity is made
(or unmade) in acts of expression (personal, interpersonal, and cultural), and yet, because Baldwin does not see abjection in the history carried by vernacular forms, Fanon’s insight is able to work as a productive account of black culture, and so not just critique and testimony to alienation. The spirituals are history and memory in sound and word. That specific history and memory make a certain language. And that language makes a certain sense of home, not only “no matter or despite the brutality and pain,” but also because “sheer intelligence” emerges from brutality and pain. This is the ghost in language that, for Baldwin, makes saying yes to life possible.

**Vernacular Sounds**

In “Letter on Humanism,” a letter written to French theorist Jean Beaufret in response to the claim that his book *Being and Time* did not contain an ethics, Heidegger famously remarks that “language is the house of Being.” This is a signature moment in Heidegger’s work, one that (roughly) shifts his work from the relationship between subjectivity and ontology to the more searching, and certainly more peculiar, question of the intertwining of language, truth, and Being. This is without a doubt a very mid-century European problem. But Heidegger also underscores something very important that travels well across national and racial geographies: language and what it means to be are inextricably linked.

For Heidegger, the question of language and Being begins a long story about the special relationship between German and ancient Greek, the special character of the Greek language and its ability to reveal certain things about the world, the special capacity of German to reactivate so much of that specialness of ancient Greek, and so also a long story about the special depth of German nationalism. A philosophical nationalism, of course, but nationalism nonetheless. So much specialness. If we de-specify Heidegger’s remark for a moment—bracketing the particularities of his own work on language and Being—then we can catch sight of a crucial insight that also lies at the heart of the black Atlantic with a decisive colonial twist: being is inconceivable outside how speaking, writing, and expression manifest. The question of how is pointed and crucial, for in the question of the capacity of language to be tweaked, transformed, or wholly overturned lies the question of the possibility of liberation. The effect of colonialism, for the colonizer, is to simultaneously maintain the link between language
and home and de-link—in the production of alienation at the level of the psyche, of knowing and being—colonized subjects from language, and therefore from any sense of home.

This is of course the question that drove so much of the Négritude movement and its obsessive rewriting of the French language in Césaire’s and Senghor’s poetry. Rewriting as the question of being and language—this is the existential moment for Négritude poets. The meaning of existence and liberation from the alienating effects of colonization is a cultural project, turning on a transformation of the colonizer’s language. Making French black liberates black colonial subjects. Fanon underscores this same claim in his own particular existentialist context when, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, he makes two key remarks on language. First, in the opening passage of the book:

To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization.13

And then, further in the opening chapter:

To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture. The Antillean who wants to be white will succeed, since he will have adopted the cultural tool of language.14

Language, Fanon here claims, carries culture and civilization—a world—in word and syntax. The world carried is anti-Black. The house of Being in Heidegger becomes, in the black Atlantic context, the house of the colonization of the human, of being, and therefore of Being. To speak is to be inscribed in a language whose history and roots set the terms of alienation or home. Anti-Black racism, for Fanon and others in mid-century black Atlantic theory, makes the very act of speaking a moment of subjugation and absolute loss. For all of the difference between them, the early Fanon and Négritude thinkers share this fundamental claim about language and alienation from the very possibility of being: roots are set in what cannot be home for the colonized, and, in turn, makes a home for the colonizer in the language of subjugating. Everyone is implicated in the act of speaking the language of subjugation.

For all of his attempts to differentiate himself and African-American cultural life from mid-century diasporic thought, especially in *Princes
Baldwin nonetheless makes a similar sort of claim when he begins a defense of black English. He writes in “If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What It Is?” that

language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.16

This passage recalls Fanon’s long reflection on the problem of diction in Black Skin, White Masks, a reflection that circles around the terrifying claim that the destiny of the black person is to be white, confronting the impossibility of the actualization of blackness in standard French. Fanon never quite responds to this dilemma in terms of language; pidgin and creole, the two vernacular moments in the Caribbean context, are derided as racialized performances for white people. Black Skin, White Masks opens with qualified praise for Césaire’s Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, but never quite affirms or articulates an approach to language as liberation strategy, instead leaving his work on language in the between-space of pessimistic diagnosis and the optimism of a new humanism.

This impasse is no small matter given the role of language as, in a black Atlantic sense, the house of the being. Baldwin’s advance on Fanon, and I do think it is a profoundly important one, is to see in the evolution of vernacular(s) a resistance to alienation and the construction of a medium in which the oppressed can see and know themselves. If language is how we inhabit a world, then what would it mean for vernacular expression to be a whole world unto itself? And, therefore, to perhaps be a home? Baldwin writes:

People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances or in order to not be submerged by a situation that they cannot articulate. (And if they cannot articulate it, they are submerged.)17

Without language, being is submersion. In this case, submersion drowns being in the wave of anti-black racism, where whiteness occupies black being from the inside and outside—the effect of standardized word, syntax, and diction documented in Fanon’s early work. But language evolves,
Baldwin notes, in order to resist this submersion. Black vernacular—the pidgin and creole Fanon so casually derides—*articulates*. Articulates survival, yes, but it also articulates what comes after survival: the formation of identity and culture. What does this evolution look like? A long passage from “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me What It Is?” is worth quoting in full:

Black English is the creation of the black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes. Neither could speak the other’s language. If two black people, at that bitter hour of the world’s history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun of his master, Congo Square, and the Bible—or, in other words, and under those conditions, the slave began the formation of the black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that black English began to be formed. This was not, merely, as in the European example, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language: *A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of language are dictated by what the language must convey.*

This passage raises a number of questions, including the relationship between sound, memory, and the spirituals—something that, as we have already seen, links Baldwin’s work on language to the foundations of the African-American intellectual tradition. Let me postpone that matter for a moment and first pose the existential question Baldwin raises here. Being itself is made possible in the moment of brutal necessity, a necessity that is and is made possible by the refusal of nothingness and the abyss of submersion. The moment of brutal necessity is terrifying and repeated for two and a half centuries, so the question of vernacular raises the very real problem of the relationship between painful origin and the culture that is made out of that origin. For Fanon, the painful origin is too much, a ghost that drags down the present with the terrifying past; survival, for him, meant producing relationships to language—pidgin and creole, then folded over into cultural forms like blues, jazz, and spirituals—that degraded black people. But Baldwin, borrowing Toni Morrison’s turn of phrase, instead calls vernacular language a whole world (and not a “dialect,” which would
subordinate black English to white English), one marked by “this sheer intelligence.” An *intelligence*—that is, a way of thinking, expressing, and making a world. Or making a series of worlds, diverse from the beginning, in the world of black English and the various histories and memories of which it is composed. To inhabit the word, syntax, and sound of *this* English is to be more than Fanon’s alienated subject.

The cultural question raised by the Négritude movement takes on an interesting twist here. Whereas for Césaire and Senghor it was a world-to-come, and thus a question of the future as such, for Baldwin it is a question of simply theorizing what is already there, not as the remainder, but as the fully realized production of history and memory. That is, Baldwin takes the vernacular example on its own terms, neither projecting it into a distant future nor framing it with the abjection of black diasporic history. This is absolutely crucial, for it pushes back against so much of black Atlantic theory in the middle of the twentieth century that turned on an interpretation of the past as abject and which, in turn, rendered the cultural inheritance of that past abject as well. Fanon’s remark that blues and jazz were produce for the pleasure of the white gaze (“offered up for the admiration of the oppressors”19), and so not out of a sense of resistance and survival, neatly embodies this abjection of history. Baldwin’s turn to the vernacular as such, his encounter with and appreciation of black English on its own terms as expressive of a sense of *home*, outside the hegemony of white America’s sense of belonging, locates the crucial concept of creation in the past and documents its presence in the present. Pace Négritude, then, the colonizing language—the language of the enemy—does not stand in need of change because it has already been changed. In that having-been-changed, there is a sense of a house of blackness, so to speak, as knowing and being. A whole world, not *to someday inhabit*, but one that is *already inhabited*. So, in “Black English: A Dishonest Argument,” Baldwin writes plainly:

The black American *has* no antecedent. *We*, in this country, *on* this continent, in the most despairing terms, created an identity which had never been seen before in the history of the world. We created that music.20

Music, language, identity. Or, in a word: being. Being, perhaps, as direct description, but a description that requires a certain eye and ear. The sort
of description that attends to the doubled structure of a vernacular born of survival, resistance, and pleasure. This turn to creation, evoking the need to break out of, while also being ensnared in, the assumptions of an enemy’s language, marks Baldwin’s departure from dominant cultural nationalist currents of mid-century black Atlantic theory, and it also recalls the opening lines of one of his early essays collected in Notes of a Native Son. “It is only in his music,” Baldwin notes in “Many Thousands Gone,” “that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story,” but he qualifies this with the subordinate clause “which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it.” Baldwin’s defense of black English moves beyond the aesthetic in this moment. It is a matter of being, knowing, and home. Epistemology and ontology.

What, then, is the key to discerning the seriousness of the story of “the Negro in America” outside the sentimentality that distorts and makes African-American music and language digestible, common? That is, what is the sheer intelligence of vernacular? Baldwin’s claim here is simple: the link between memory, history, and language. The capacity of language to carry the past inside of its meaning in and as sound, negotiated in part by its link to the documentation of pain in the spirituals we find in Douglass, Du Bois, Locke, and others, folds intelligence into description, doubling the resonance of black English as at once sentimental and revolutionary. Baldwin writes:

The language forged by black people in this country, on this continent, as the choir just told you [my emphasis], got us from one place to another. We described the auction block. We described what it meant to be there. We survived what it meant to be torn from your mother, your father, your brother, your sister. We described it. We survived being described as mules, as having been put on earth only for the convenience of white people. We survived having nothing belonging to us, not your mother, not your father, not your daughter, not your son. And we created the only language in this country.22

The only language in this country. With that note, Baldwin roots the story of language in its orphaned moment, a moment in which the choir can tell—speaking with sheer intelligence—because sound functions as the element and embodiment of the transmission of memory, the moment of description that means everything for the present and future of language. History and memory here bear on the word, making the bass and treble
and tremolo of utterance, and thus give the word shape. So, when Baldwin writes that “language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity” and that “the rules of language are dictated by what the language must convey,” brutality and conveyance hinge on this moment of an orphaned birth. Sound as life itself.23

It is crucial to underscore, however, that Baldwin’s orphan narrative is no melancholic or abject story. He resists the apocalyptic and nostalgic tendencies of mid-century black Atlantic thought with a simple appeal to the vernacular of home. This phrase is important. In his appeal to vernacular, Baldwin sees black English’s deep roots and how sound as site of memory of resistance and cultural formation builds history into speaking; there is no need for what Césaire calls “the end of the world” in Notebook or for Fanon’s declaration that he is not a prisoner of history in the conclusion to Black Skin, White Masks. History is already enough for beginning again, in Baldwin’s view, precisely because the history of violence is already also a story of survival, resistance, pleasure, and world-making. Vernacular houses being. And that being cannot be reduced to alienation and abjection. Baldwin of course has plenty of outrage; his famous claim that every black man has a Bigger Thomas inside of him is plenty clear on that front. But, at the same time, Baldwin will always insist on a sense of home, both as a right and as its own sort of fact of blackness. In that insistence, Baldwin locates the question of language and being in a precarious, yet rooted sense of place and belonging as the vernacular of home, as home’s vernacular, and how being is sustained by speech itself. As the choir just told you, in the only language of this country. This quirky conception of language and being is what Marisa Parham describes in Haunting and Displacement as

living with a painful absence, with a phantom limb. Yet even if one might not be able to control one’s environment, cannot alone end racial violence, or steel against the news of other people’s deaths, there are indeed ways we seize tiny bits of control, make small spaces of balanced relation find some distance so that we might live with, as Karla Holloway puts it, “grace, hope, and resilience.”24

Grace, hope, and resilience give content to that much too broad and even quasi-abject term “survival.” To have passed on (evoking Holloway’s work) means both that death is at the center of cultural formation and that cultural formation is not pathologically linked to death and its attendant
sufferings. Rather, the *grace* of passing on manifests in the sheer intelligence of what comes out of testimony to the auction block. Testimony seizes control precisely when the loss of control is staged as the market and traffic in Black bodies. Neither melancholic nor mournful, Baldwin’s vision of black English as what is passed on in the mode of grace, hope, and resilience is that which has sustained and sustains life. Defense of vernacularity is therefore at once a memory project (honoring what has come before) and laying claim to the roots African-Americans, even in the swirl of persecution and marginalization, have and insist upon in *this place*. A sense of belonging. A sense of speaking. A vernacular of home.

Perhaps ironically, or maybe just appropriately, Baldwin situates his encounter with this sense of language in the experience of exile. Reflecting on his time as a writer abroad, Baldwin steps away from the standard tropes of exile (alienation, loneliness, comparison, etc.) and recalls instead *hearing* black English for the first time from another space. In “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer,” he writes:

In order to deal with that reality [the reality of language as an enemy], I left the United States and went to France, where I was unable to speak to anybody because I spoke no French. I dropped into a silence in which I heard, for the first time, the beat of the language of the people who had produced me. *For the first time, I was able to hear that music.*

Exile clears the space for Baldwin to hear. And while in this essay Baldwin reproduces one of the standard tropes of race and exile—that one understands place from a distance, by way of contrast in feeling and senses of non-belonging—it is also important to note how intimately he links sound, music, language, and identity formation. The speechlessness of arriving in France without French language skills, along with the perspective on place afforded the exilic writer, opens Baldwin’s ears to the world-making force of vernacular language and culture. It is a question of production. Language, that house of being, produces a people. In producing a people and a way of being in sound and speech, vernacular makes a sense of home.

In one of the better-known passages from *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison reflects on the meaning of Louis Armstrong’s music. With this short reflection, Ellison, a life-long fan (and defender) of Satch’s music, moves from an appreciation of Armstrong as a musician and the question of voice to a
larger question of how we are to locate the meaning of African-American life, its expression, and the remarkable world that emerges from—or perhaps as—a people of the margins. The reflection is at once epistemological—a question of how Armstrong’s music is an expression of a form of knowledge and way of knowing—and ontological—a description of being in an anti-black racist world—and cannot therefore be reduced to a sort of “art from the ashes” model of suffering and its expression. Ellison locates knowing and being in the aesthetic expression of the-between-as-falling-through, which is not some sort of interstitial or interval space in search of another place, but rather the breaks and cracks as such and in which African-American history and memory paradoxically sets roots, conceives space and place, and makes belonging and home. The breaks and cracks are intended, in an anti-black racist world, to be where a Black person falls in order to never be heard from again, to be rendered voiceless and therefore outside meaningful registers, and so, in the title of Ellison’s book, *invisible*. But Armstrong’s music makes sound from the cracks and as the invisible, an expression that knows and that is. Ellison writes:

There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I’d like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue”—all at the same time. . . . Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music. . . . Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music.26

The language of African-American life is in these breaks and cracks. Born from the experience of not just being Black and blue, but also asking why this should be, African-American expressive culture, in Ellison’s short remark, demands that it be understood in this peculiar, enigmatic non-space between spaces. Understood on its own terms, that is, and so not measured by and in comparison to the (putatively) seamless and open space of white culture.
I want to evoke Ellison here in order to return, by way of conclusion, to Baldwin’s remarks on the sorrow songs and sound. The relationship between Baldwin and Ellison, which always seems to involve that other great writer of the period, Richard Wright, is too much for this brief concluding remark, but it is worth saying that Ellison’s remark puts in concise terms what Baldwin articulates across a long series of essays on the language of vernacular culture. For Baldwin and Ellison, it is not enough to say that African-American language is a language worth valuing, or that it is pragmatically important in terms of pedagogy and cultural respect—the sorts of terms on which, say, the Ebonics “debate” of the early 1990s was premised. Those are altogether different questions. Baldwin, insofar as he moves away from straightforward political debate, deepens the account of language by seeing in vernacular speech the sound of memory and history, the knowing and being that comes from asking, in Armstrong’s famous song evoked by Ellison, “what did I do, to be so black and so blue?” Why has this come to pass?

What and why indeed.

The why of a language rooted in blackness and blueness captures so much in a single word. In asking why blackness makes a world blue, survival and resistance is built into the first word of vernacular language and cultural formation. To make that question into sound is to transform resistance into the possibility of pleasure, both in the sense of the pleasure of sound (what could be more beautiful and pleasing than the sound of the choir’s telling or Satch’s trumpet and vocal?) and the pleasure of outwitting the enemy in his own language (the doubling of speech and signification). Sound and language slip into nodes, as Ellison puts it, and look around. And what is looking around, settled in a node or break, if not marking place as home? I am here and I see myself; I see you, even though you tried to keep me underground and lost in the breaks. The complication and complexity here lies in conceiving home in a place so violently hostile, from the beginning, to the very idea of blackness. How can Baldwin posit the United States as home when the nation’s name names such terrifying space? What keeps him from the nostalgia for a civilizational past or messianic hope for a wholly new future—those signature gestures of Césaire and Fanon and their black Atlantic theory moment—in the face of such terror? The relation between language and being changes everything. If language is the house of being, and, as Baldwin argues, vernacular speech and culture welcomes and creates a people, then the terror of anti-black racism
reaches a certain limit. Racism’s reach is not total. Baldwin refuses to concede to the abjection of blackness in language; if there is resistance to language as another language altogether, then the scope of anti-black racism is limited by the cultural formation of Black people by Black people. Not by direct political struggle or conflict, but by the uncomplicated assertion and defense of difference. Language is how we inhabit the world; the defense of black English is a defense of a world and the right to inhabit it. It is, as Baldwin puts it, a matter of self-knowledge. To speak vernacular culture is to know both that you are and who you are. Language as knowledge and being. Language as a whole world.

NOTES


3. See Grant Farred’s article in the present volume.


6. Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010), 120.

7. Ibid., 120–21.


9. Ibid., 123.

10. Ibid., 122.


17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 651.
23. The relationship of sound to life, especially in this context of theorizing vernacular language, raises the question of how Baldwin’s work employs (or does not employ) his theory of language. I will say this much: Baldwin regularly appeals to turns of phrase, sayings, and tropes from blues, jazz, and folk life more generally. That said, he is not a vernacular stylist in any serious way, whether in his fiction or nonfiction. For me, this does not compromise his reflections any more than, say, Édouard Glissant’s defense of creolization and language is compromised by his writing in French. Rather, it opens up the wider question, one warranting extensive elaboration and exploration, of how vernacular forms function at the level of explicit practice and as subtle transformations of medium. The subtle transformations of the medium would show up in Baldwin’s often messianic voice, which calls upon many of the very forms of African-American preacherly practice that The Fire Next Time critiques, while simultaneously enacting. Or how a phrase from a Bessie Smith song might appear as a kind of proof or argument all unto itself at a key moment in an essay. In any case, the argument in defense of black English is to my mind best understood as clearing space for more radical experimentation and innovation; Baldwin, like most theorists clearing such space, is in this sense writing toward a time he does not yet inhabit.