First off, we got to start with some basics. This gon be a column bout the language aspect of English teaching. Since Black Idiom is the "dialect of my nurture," and since I believe in the legitimacy of ALL dialects of American English, uh gon run it down in the Black Thang. Course this ain gon be totally possible due to the limitations of print media, but uh gon be steady tryin. Therefore, just in case certain idioms present a problem—though context should clarify 'em all—but just in case, uh gon include some references at the end of this piece so that all the unhap will be up on the Black Idiom.

Another basic has to do with the title and the philosophy undergirding it. In *Black Scholes* (June, 1970), anthropologist Johnetta Cole ran down some exploratory thoughts on the constituents of Black American Culture. First, she noted that all cultures of oppression share certain commonalities. Then she rapped on how Black Culture shares many aspects with mainstream white culture. Finally, as the third dimension of Black culture, the Sistuh contended that there are features unique to Black Americans, possible residuals of our African heritage and sensibility. Prime among these unique components were "soul and style."

Now I've taken some liberties with Sistuh Johnetta's articulation of these concepts, but it ain nothin she'd disagree with. (I know the Sistuh and done rapped with her bout this.)

Soul is: a concerned perspective for the condition of man; a world view of a God-centered universe in which Goodness and Justice is gon prevail; what that old Mississipp, unfortunatly racist dude, Faulkner, called the verities of the human heart—pride, compassion, endurance, and so on, y'all know Faulkner's rhetoric. (Which he was unable to live up to—his Anglo-American ethnocentrism kept gittin in the way, that's how come you see such ambivalence toward Blacks in his work and thought.) Style is: the articulation and active expression of this Concern; TCB-in for righteous causes; doin it to death to achieve a humanistic social order. If you got soul, yo style oughta reflect it.

Teachin with soul 'n style means recognizing that we don't impart knowledge in a vacuum. However subtly, we bees conveyin viewpoints toward our disciplines and attitudes toward society. We oughta make sure those viewpoints and attitudes is ethicial, moral, and humane. If all this sound like preachin, it is—after all, my daddy is one, and maybe like he say, the world is standin in need of some preachin (and prayin) long bout now.

This ain no long way from *English teachin*, cause uh gon run down now some points bout inhumane language attitudes. Y'all follow me now cause it gon get deep.

Though most of the recent hulabaloo on dialects done focused on Black speech, a social dimension interacts with the racial factor, throwing standard vs. nonstandard English into a wider realm that affects whites also. What linguist Donald Lloyd called the "national mania for correctness" stems from a long-standing tradition of elitism in American life and language matters. Though Americans preach individualism and class mobility, they practice conformity and class stasis. Further, those folk on the lower rung of the socio-economic ladder, in their upwardly mobile, catch-up-with-the-Joneses efforts, become unwitting accomplices in their own linguistic and cultural demise.

Reflecting this class anxiety (neurosis?), schoolroom grammars are grounded in the "doctrine of correctness" which emerged during the eighteenth century and was coincident with the rise of the so-called primitive middle classes and the decline of the mythical refined Aristocracy (those same "high class" folk, mind you, whose greed both led to wars over land and property and initiated the slave trade). In determining educational policy for the middle class, the power elite decided that the kids should be instructed in their vernacular, the Anglo-Saxon tongue, since their "lowly" origins indicated that they could not possibly master Latin, which had been the lingo of instruction for the Elite.

Now in those days, English was considered quite disorderly and godawfully discordant with Latin rules. Moreover, the fresh-from-the-bottom middle class speakers of English wanted neither themselves nor they kids to reflect any kinship with
those they left behind. Therefore early English
grammarians sought to regularize and “purify”
English speech by superimposing upon it the
“prestigious” Latin grammatical model. Like the
good Bishop Robert Lowth, who conceptualized
his grammar in terms of giving what he called
“order and permanence to the unruly, barbarous
tongue of the Anglo-Saxons” (Short Introduction
to English Grammar, 1763).
The killin part bout the whole mess, though, is
they ain no correspondence between the two
languages! For instance, dig on the fact that in
Latin, you really can’t end sentences with
prepositions cause Latin prepositions are attached
to the verb, prefix-style, but in English, prepositions
are movable. Hence Latin devoro for English
swallow down—that is, in the sense of put up with.
(Y’all know my man Winston Churchill’s thang on
this, don’t you: “This ia the kind of nonsense
up with which I will not put.” Git it, Winston?)

Americans fought a war to sever they colonial
ties, but these British-based language attitudes
came right on across the water. Lowth’s American
counterparts are dudes like Lindley Murray
and Goold Brown.

In the twentieth century, the individual,
Latin-based norms were replaced by social
group and ethnicity-based norms. Structuralist
grammarians studied English in action and revealed
that “socially acceptable” and highly educated
types were making all sorts of departures from
Latin-based rules, like saying “it is me.” Consequently
the definition of “standard” English shifted to “the
type of English used by the socially acceptable
of most of our communities” (Charles Fries,
American English Grammar, 1940, in his
recommendation to public school teachers).
Instead of freeing speakers and writers from petty
and elitist linguistic amenities, the immediate
educational application of structuralist research was
towards linguistic and social conformity for the
children whose parents had immigrated to this
country in massive numbers around the turn of the
twentieth century. “No broken English in this class, Antonio,”
and so on like that.

Dig where uhm comin from: this new “standard”
didn’t make things no better for common folk, nor
for so-called “divergent” speakers. It wasn’t never
no meltin pot. As Don Lee has said, it melted,
and we blacks burned. In the process, so did a lot
of other beautiful, “divergent” languages and
cultures. Cause the immigrants’ kids became
ashamed of they mommas and daddies, who had
sweated and toiled to bring they families to this
country and then turned around and sweated some
more to send they kids to school only to find those
kids embarrassed about them and they speech.

Now teachers in general, but English teachers in
particular, got to take some of this weight, cause
they been steady intimidatin kids bout they
“incorrect English.” Yet this superimposition of a
polite usage norm has nothin to do with linguistic
versatility, variety of expression, and the “power
of the rap,” but everythin to do with the goal
of cultural and linguistic eradication by making
what one seventeenth century grammarian called
the “depraved language of common people” and by
extension, the common people themselves, conform
to the dominant (white, middle class) ethic of the
new Aristocracy.

Hey, why don’t y’all cool it, cause that sho ain
humane.

Sisterman, Geneva

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