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NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES,
CROSSING BORDERS*The Language of Black Women's
Intercultural Encounters*

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To be able to use the range of one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a recurring struggle.

Barbara Christian (1985, p. 234)

To speak freely within a discourse different from the expectations for speaking in mainstream American institutions and public life is to speak with constraint, to have less voice, to have less chance in the marketplace of ideas.

Fern Johnson (2000, p. 248)

In the wake of the nationwide controversy which was precipitated by the decision of the school board in Oakland, California to adopt Ebonics readers and which erupted in the national press in 1996–97,¹ Marsha was asked to moderate an open forum on Black language and speaking styles. At first she refused, unequivocally. The level of misinformation, defensiveness, and outright language bashing in nearly every

discussion of Ebonics in the press—primarily by Black reporters—and in the streets, especially among the Black students and professional people whom she knew, told her that any attempt to shed the light of communication scholarship on the subject would be met with resistance, even by the members of the Black student group that was co-sponsoring the forum. But she relented, and the forum was held with approximately the results she had predicted. After the discussion, a Black woman student approached her with tears in her eyes. She acknowledged what Marsha had said about the roots of Ebonics in African languages, its use by the majority of Black Americans as an informal, in-group speaking style, and its relationship to the language of rap and hip-hop culture. Then she expressed the concern that had brought her to tears: “I just don’t want people to think *all* of us talk like that!” Marsha knew what the student meant when she said she didn’t want *people* to think all of *us* talk like *that*: the student was Black, female, middle class, and she had achieved what the Oakland students were struggling to achieve, including the proper voice for success in the American mainstream. And she wanted *White* people to hear and respect that voice, yet not judge her as an exceptional Black who was disconnected from her cultural group because she used it. At the same time, she did not want *Black* people to hear that voice and judge her as a sellout or race traitor.

The student’s tearful statement speaks volumes about the complex connections between speaking style, self-concept, and the enduring politics of race in the United States. Racial and gender politics are inextricably intertwined for an aspiring middle-class Black professional woman, whose gendered cultural role entails linguistic propriety (Houston (Stanback), 1985). Black men are allowed greater latitude than Black women in using Black English (i.e., Ebonics) without having their respectability questioned (Folb, 1980). As Rosina Lippi-Green (1997) explains, the Oakland controversy forced many college-educated Black people to confront the tension between Black and

dominant cultural language practices: “To make two statements: *I acknowledge that my home language is viable and adequate, and I acknowledge that my home language will never be accepted*, is to set up an unresolvable conflict” (p. 9).

The same point is made by Johnson (2000) when she notes that “in the context of mainstream, especially White, devaluation of African American linguistic and discourse forms, it is not surprising that African Americans themselves possess complex and often contradictory feelings and attitudes about their language” (pp. 157–158). The student’s tearful statement and the insights from Lippi-Green and Johnson also underscore the precariousness of doing scholarship on the language and communication of Black women in the United States; that is, the challenge of writing about our² talk without essentializing, pathologizing, romanticizing, or otherwise distorting our ways of speaking. Certainly, most U.S. Americans are well aware of the distorted views of Black women’s talk that pervade the culture. As sociolinguist Barbara Hill Hudson (2001) notes:

The speech of African American females is often imitated, parodied, or stereotyped. Generally these stereotypes allow for only a limited range of expressions, familiar to most who have seen or read material that contained images of strong mothers, chastising and advising; sassy young females, using popular slang; and no nonsense older women making salty comments on life. (p. 1)

As with most stereotypes, these images capture *some* of the truth about the communication of *some* Black women in *some* situations, but represent a limited view of the speaking repertoire of any individual, real-life Black woman.

The task that feminist sociolinguists and communication scholars have set for themselves over the past 30 years has been to illumine Black women’s speaking perceptions and practices without reproducing the

stereotypes. As we review their work on Black women's cross-cultural talk, we do so with the understanding that Black women communicators are not monolithic. Not only are Black women a heterogeneous social group, but every subset of Black women, as defined by socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, region, generation, profession, or any other demographic category, is a chorus of diverse and often divergent voices. Sometimes, or in some ways, we are linguistically indistinguishable from other groups of speakers (e.g., similarly situated Black men, other women of color, or White women), and sometimes and in other ways we are quite distinct from similarly situated groups. Yet, in spite of the diversity among Black women, and the similarities between us and other social groups, it is undeniable that the vast majority of us share a unique social history and present-day social situation in the United States. African provenance, U.S. enslavement, collaboration in the protracted struggle for civil rights and social justice, and persistent, simultaneous racial and sexual oppression are key elements of Black women's history and contemporary life (Collins, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Anyone who listens to the talk among Black women at any contemporary gathering, from a few friends at lunch to the vast crowds at the empowerment seminars at the *ESSENCE FEST* in New Orleans,³ cannot escape being struck by the common themes and outlooks underlying our individual experiences and the common communication practices characterizing our talk.

◆ Chapter Focus

In this chapter, we explore two central questions suggested by scholarship on Black women's talk in encounters with members of other (non-Black) cultural or racial/ethnic groups: (a) *Does Black women's history of unequal social status—from enslavement through segregation—still permeate the communicative here and now of our intercultural*

encounters? (b) *What repertoire of communicative practices is employed by Black women in intercultural encounters?* The first question concerns the overarching speaking context or discourse environment for Black women's talk (van Dijk, 1987). We suggest that the micropolitics of interindividual interactions are often influenced by macropolitical definitions of Black women as a social group, the origins of which can sometimes be traced back hundreds of years. The second question concerns Black women's ways of negotiating the discourse environment through culturally learned communication practices, including their competence in shifting language codes and speaking styles.

THE COMPETING DISCOURSE ENVIRONMENTS OF BLACK WOMEN'S TALK

We examine the context of Black women's intercultural communication by addressing the question: Does Black women's history of unequal social status—from enslavement through segregation—still permeate the communicative here and now of our intercultural encounters? We suggest that there are two competing discourses about Black womanhood—one constructed and disseminated by the dominant, Euro-White culture, and an alternate one constructed and expressed by Black women themselves.

DOMINANT DISCOURSE

Consider the following entry from the diary of 17-year-old Charlotte Forten, a well-to-do, free Black woman who grew up among Philadelphia's Black elite when America practiced slavery:

Wednesday, September 12 (1855) . . .
I have met [white] girls in the school-room—they have been thoroughly kind and cordial to me—perhaps the next day [I] met them on the street—they feared

to recognize me; these I can but regard now with scorn and contempt. . . . Others give the most distant recognition possible—I, of course, acknowledge no such recognition. . . . These are but trifles, certainly, to the great public wrongs which we [Black people] . . . are obliged to endure. But to those who experience them . . . they reveal volumes of deceit and heartlessness, and early teach a lesson of suspicion and distrust. (Billington, 1953, p. 10)

Charlotte Forten was born to both freedom and wealth during a time when most African Americans were enslaved. She was given an education and encouraged by her Abolitionist family to be politically aware when most women were denied both schooling and political consciousness. Yet she was constantly reminded, through the ordinary intercultural encounters of her everyday life, that she belonged to a despised social group. The excerpt from her diary presents many of the exigencies that historically have defined Black women's intercultural encounters: the uncertainty and inconsistency of White interlocutors, the persistent small indignities that are psychologically "wearing and discouraging," the developing mindset of "suspicion and distrust" of intercultural contact. The excerpt also reveals Forten's communicative goals and strategies, such as maintaining her identity and self-esteem through her own silence, "scorn and contempt."

In the "trifles" of ordinary intercultural encounters, the ways her White schoolmates used talk and silence to construct their personal relationships with her, Forten saw connections to the "great public wrongs" of racism and chattel slavery that defined the political relationship of the majority of Black Americans to the U.S. social order of her time. Feminist sociolinguists and communication scholars also perceive the micropolitics of everyday talk to be connected to larger social power relationships (Coates, 1996; Crawford, 1995; Johnson, 2000). They suggest that the politics of

everyday talk are more than mere reflections of power differences among social groups: they are one means by which those differences are constituted—sustained, reinforced, re-created, and justified. They have demonstrated reciprocal relationships among ideology, communication, and social power by documenting the manner in which dominant social groups define their ways of speaking as prestigious, powerful, or correct, while demeaning and diminishing that of less powerful groups.

The excerpt from Forten's diary illumines elements of the discourse environment of Black women's intercultural encounters. Van Dijk (1987) defines discourse environment as including the speaking demands created by the material circumstances of a speaker's life; for example, the situational contexts in which she routinely speaks as determined by her education, work, leisure, and family roles, as well as the demands created by the ideological circumstances of her life; for example, the ways in which her social group is represented in the dominant public discourse of the society. In their discussions of the origins, transformation, and reproduction of the derogatory stereotypes that continue to dominate social definitions of Black women in the United States, Black feminist scholars (e.g., Collins, 2000, 2004; Giddings, 1984; hooks, 1984; James, 1999), similarly emphasize the central role of public discourse, including news media, magazines, educational materials, novels, comics, movies, advertising, political speeches, laws, regulations, and other institutional documentation. Because public discourse provides the overarching environment in which everyday conversations are embedded, long-standing definitions of a social group, reproduced in public discourse, may permeate the here and now of everyday intercultural conversations, without conversational participants being fully aware of them (Giles & Coupland, 1991).

Key to the discourse environment experienced by contemporary Black women speakers is an evolving set of derogatory stereotypes that expresses the interdependent ideologies

of racism and sexism that are integral to dominant cultural definitions of Black women. Such longstanding, derogatory stereotypes as the super-strong, asexual “mammy” and the hypersexual, amoral Jezebel function as controlling images intended to limit and direct not only how others define and behave toward Black women but also how we define ourselves and participate in the social order (Collins 2000, 2004). Black feminist scholars trace the origins of racist and sexist stereotypes of Black women to the centuries of U.S. enslavement and cite their popularization in the minstrel shows, silent films, and other mass entertainment of the later 19th and early 20th centuries (Anderson, 1997). Collins (2004) also documents their transformation into more complex, class-related controlling images reproduced in the mass media and other public discourse of the ostensibly color-blind United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. She argues that contemporary working-class Black women are represented as loud, aggressive, oversexed so-called bitches or bad mothers. For example, the seemingly endless parade of unwed, working class “baby mamas” (i.e., never-married Black mothers) who become obstreperous on the *Maurry* and *Jerry Springer* television talk shows as they await the results of DNA tests on the men who allegedly fathered their children, reinscribe stereotypes of Black working-class women as sexually promiscuous in the ideology of the dominant culture. On the other hand, Collins argues that Black middle-class women are represented in contemporary public discourse as either asexual “modern mammies” (as exemplified by Oprah Winfrey), as proper, uptight “Black ladies” (such as Clair Huxtable of the 1980s situation comedy *The Cosby Show*), or as “educated bitches” (educationally credentialed Black women whom others define by their bodies rather than by their minds). Among the discourses that support the educated bitch image are those opposing affirmative action programs on the basis that those benefiting from the programs are, by definition,

unqualified and will lower the standards of business and academic organizations.

As factors that contextualize and can permeate contemporary intercultural communication encounters, culturally shared negative controlling images of Black women may automatically or unconsciously activate cognitive models that a speaker has developed over time for interpreting communication from or about Black women or trigger scripts for communicating with Black women that are part of the speaking repertoire of the speaker’s group (Giles & Coupland, 1991). In whatever way they invade the conversational here and now, these longstanding, evolving stereotypes significantly contribute to the creation of exigent discourse environments for Black women’s intercultural encounters.

In her studies of Black⁴ women in the United States and The Netherlands, sociolinguist Philomema Essed (1990, 1991) documented some of the ways that negative controlling images invade intercultural encounters. One of her research participants made the following observation about communication with customers in the bookstore where she worked:

If I’m standing next to one of my White coworkers, customers will say to me, “Where’s such and such a book?” . . . and they say to my White co-worker, “Well, have you read the book, and what do you think . . .?” To *me* it’s . . . service kind of things. To talk about the intellectual aspects of the books, the information—it’s as if I’m illiterate. (1990, p. 207)

Essed (1991) coined the term *underestimation* to describe Euro-White people’s frequently expressed presumptions of Black women’s incompetence (as exemplified by the bookstore customers), and *gendered racism* to describe the underlying intersections of racism and sexism that inform such presumptions (see pp. 48–51).

In their discussion of communication in Black women’s everyday encounters, Mark

Orbe, Darlene Drummond, and Sakile Camara (2002) offer an example of how underestimation is expressed by White students in academic settings. A Black woman student describes what happened when she prepared to challenge a comment made in class:

When I raised my hand, a couple of White girls behind me were like, "GET 'EM GIRL!" and I just turned around and looked . . . it was like they expected me to roll my head and snap my fingers and tell someone off . . . I'm trying to be intellectual and join in a conversation or discussion in class and they are like, "GET 'EM GIRL." I really wanted to turn around and say, "I'M NOT YOUR GIRL." (p. 131)

As Orbe, Drummond, and Camara point out, the White students attempted to express an inappropriate level of familiarity with the Black student by using *girl*, a word that has a very different meaning when used in ingroup conversations *among* Black women (Scott, 1995) than when *applied to* a Black woman by a member of an outgroup (e.g., a White person), particularly one who is not a close friend. The Black and White students are mere classmates, not close friends, who might choose to blur or even erase the usual boundaries between ingroup and outgroup speech. In addition, the comment by the White women ("Get 'em . . .") invokes the stereotype of Black women as super-tough and aggressive and has the effect of transforming a situation in which the Black woman sought to emphasize her intellect into one in which a stereotype of her physicality is foregrounded. Thus, the encounter also suggests something of the complexity of the oxymoronic controlling image of the educated bitch, the perception of Black women as educationally credentialed but not intellectually equal to Whites, as defined primarily by our embodiment as Black and female.

Like the slights the young Charlotte Forten experienced from her classmates, underestimation and other everyday gendered racist

behaviors seem trivial on their own, although they are nerve-racking and can engender wariness and suspicion in intercultural encounters. But as Essed (1991) explains, "Everyday [gendered] racism cannot be reduced to incidents or specific events. . . . It is the process of the system working through multiple relations and situations" (p. 51). In summary, one of the more disturbing findings in research on Black women's intercultural encounters is that our history of unequal social status invades the communicative here and now at unexpected moments. Despite our individual efforts to resist particular oppressive situations, lingering, longstanding, gendered racist stereotypes continue to contextualize our intercultural encounters. We now turn to an exploration of scholarship that reveals how Black women challenge and resist dominant cultural controlling images.

◆ *Oppositional Discourse*

Although scholarship on Black women's language and communication was not conducted and published until the late 20th century, that is not an indication that Black women did not engage in strategic use of language prior to that time. Feminist communication scholarship on Black women's public rhetoric from the 18th century to the present reveals oppositional definitions of Black womanhood that consciously resist the controlling images promulgated by the dominant culture. In an examination of the narratives of enslaved Black women, Olga Davis (1999) notes:

The narrative genre afforded Black women, for the first time in American history, a chance to declare their presence by rhetorically stating, "I am here" . . . creating an oppositional discourse that identified black women as thinkers, creators, and namers of themselves. (p. 154)

Examined in the context of the times, Black women's language use in slave narratives is

understood as a “rhetorical act of survival and a discursive struggle for change” (O. Davis, 2002, p. 39). The struggle for change was a theme of Black women’s communication in the public sphere from the moment in 1832 when Maria Miller Stewart, a free Black woman in Boston and the first American woman to speak in public, questioned our confinement to servitude in the domestic sphere (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Scores of noted Black women orators, from abolitionists and feminist political activists such as Sojourner Truth and Fannie Barrier Williams to Ida B. Wells, Shirley Chisholm (Williamson-Ige, 1988), Fannie Lou Hamer (Hamlet, 1996), and Audre Lorde embraced public discourse not only as a means for collective resistance to politically oppressive systems, but also as a means to create and sustain affirming definitions of Black womanhood (White & Dobris, 2002).

Discourses resisting negative controlling images not only are found in Black women’s oratory, but also in fine and folk art and popular culture created and/or performed by Black women. Through plays, films, fiction, poetry, painting, sculpture, quilts, and music, Black women consistently have constructed alternative definitions of self and community. In the early 20th century, blues music was “a space for Black women of the poor and working class communities to locate their voice in the public sphere while illuminating the private sphere of love and sexuality as everyday experience” (O. Davis, 2002, p. 44).

Popular music continues to be a space in which the masses of Black women challenge negative controlling images (J. L. Davis, 2002). Some women hip-hop performers have challenged demeaning, hypersexual, patriarchal representations of women by their male counterparts (Watts, 2002); and more recently, rhythm and blues singer Fantasia, the first Black woman to win the “American Idol” competition on television, valorized the struggles of never-married, young, single mothers like herself in the song, “Baby Mama”:

I see ya payin’ ya bills,

I see ya workin’ ya job

I see ya goin’ to school

And girl I know it’s hard.

And even though ya fed up

With makin’ beds up,

Girl, keep ya head up.⁵

(Acklin, Dinkins, & Colapietro, 2004)

In the tradition of her abolitionist, civil rights, and blues foremothers, and in contrast to those of her contemporaries who choose to collude in their own oppression by appearances on the *Maury* and *Jerry Springer* shows, Fantasia offers public discourse that resists the “bitch” and “bad mother” stereotypes of working-class, never-married Black mothers.

As Black women entered the professorate, politics, and media in larger numbers in the latter half of the 20th century, our oppositional discourses became more audible in U.S. American culture, enhancing the discursive resources that ordinary Black women speakers could deploy in resisting, confronting, and challenging everyday gendered racism. The majority of the Black women respondents to Marsha’s open-ended questionnaire about perspectives on “talking like a black woman” (Houston, 2000a) expressed what she termed a “celebratory perspective.” From this perspective, respondents focused on the social and interpersonal functions of talk and emphasized the ways in which Black women communicate wisdom, fortitude, and care in everyday interactions.

In summary, we suggest that Black women negotiate intercultural encounters in the context of competing public discourses. There is an inescapable, dominant discourse that continues to reproduce negative controlling images of Black womanhood, but also there is our own, evolving tradition of oppositional discourse that valorizes Black women’s ways of being in the world. In the next section, we discuss scholarship on Black women’s

intercultural communication practices in the context of this discourse environment.

◆ *Black Women's Intercultural Communication Practices*

We explore the ways Black women cross the borders of intercultural encounters by addressing the question: *What repertoire of communicative practices is employed by Black women in intercultural encounters?* One hundred and forty years after Charlotte Forten wrote of her encounters in her journal, Karla Scott conducted research on the language use of young Black women at a predominantly White, Midwestern university (Scott, 1995, 2000). These young women, accustomed to such populations, talked of being very careful not to speak in their Black woman's voice, or rather the language of home, in classrooms and other settings where they were the minority. This was a strategy enacted to be perceived as intelligent and worthy of attendance at the prestigious university and not just mere tokens. But they also reported a use of their voice in instances when they needed to mark racial identity as distinct from their classmates. Such instances included refuting White classmates' misperceptions about the experiences of Blacks in America or in the Black community. The women discussed a shared response of "going into my Blackness" or changing to vernacular Black English in order to explain to White classmates how race can and does make a difference in one's experiences. In the context of this university, the young women felt such intercultural encounters were an opportunity to refute long held misconceptions of Blacks and challenge White classmates' thinking on race. They used language to mark their intelligence and academic credibility as on par with White classmates ("I'm just as worthy of being here as you.") and, when required, to mark identity as Black ("I am different from you and can speak about lived experiences of Blacks in this country.").

Though proficient at this form of cultural border crossing, the women still expressed frustration at the perceptions held by classmates and the constant need to prove themselves through language use. And like Charlotte Forten, the women found "these apparent trifles . . . most wearing and discouraging," teaching them in early young adulthood "a lesson of suspicion and distrust."

As the students in Karla's study demonstrate, Black women set their own goals for intercultural encounters and engage in language and communication practices designed for both impression management and positive identity maintenance. In this section, we discuss the following five language and communication practices: code- and style-switching, positive self-talk, evasion, culture specific framing, and strategic use of culture specific language features.

CODE- AND STYLE-SWITCHING

The college women in Karla's (1995) study, summarized at the outset of this section, reported being very careful not to speak in their "Black woman's voice" in order to establish their intellectual credibility and "going into [their] Blackness" or changing to a more Black English (BE) speaking style in order to explain to White classmates how race can and does make a difference in one's experiences. Their communication practices underscore the value Black women place on communicative flexibility. The language development of most Black children includes some degree of learning to switch between language codes and/or styles. Code-switching is defined as "the juxtaposition of passages of speech belonging to two grammatical systems" (Gumperz, 1982, p. 59). For many speakers socialized in Black communities, code-switching is the selective use of two related dialects, Black English (BE) and U.S. Standard English (USSE), depending on the topic, conversational participants, and/or situation (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977; Houston (Stanback), 1983). Style-switching,

also a common language practice in Black communities, is more general than code-switching, and may only include changes in prosody, paralinguistic, narrative structure and interaction strategies (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2002). Code- and style-switching are not mutually exclusive language practices; speakers may engage in one or both in a single utterance. The following example, from Marsha's corpus of conversations (Houston, 1980–86), is spoken by a Black professional woman, proficient in both BE and USSE, during a conversation among Black women friends about childhood memories:

And then my sister, my oldest sister, came out and beat the socks off that child, y'know. "You don't be hurtin' MY sister!" Because we'd fight among each other, but gi-ir-l, kill everybody if they START botherin' one of us.

The speaker switches from USSE to BE grammar in the second sentence, when she uses the verb *to be* in the perpetual tense (be hurtin') to express what she imagines were her older sister's thoughts. This tense, common in West African languages but not present in English, signifies events that always occur, or in this case, should never occur; the older sister asserts that no one should ever physically attack her sister. Note also the speaker's shift to a more dynamic, emphatic speaking style characterized by elongating vowels (gi-ir-l) and hyperemphasizing selected words (MY; START).

Scholars have pointed out that BE speech consists of a range of styles. Sociolinguist John Baugh (1983) reminds us that

all speakers, regardless of language, have their personal range of formal to informal styles of talking. The reason that this phenomenon is more complicated for black Americans has to do with the *breadth* [italics added] of speaking styles that are actively used. Speakers with different backgrounds will possess ranges of styles that reflect their personal

history and social aspirations. . . . Think of black American dialects as dynamic entities which, as does the chameleon, adapt to and blend with the immediate setting. (p. 4)

Marsha has argued that the typical Black woman may have a more complex communicative repertoire than the typical White woman due to our cultural tradition of participating in both the domestic and public spheres (Houston (Stanback), 1985). Developing communication competencies for the multicultural social order of the contemporary United States may have further complexified the repertoires of those Black women whose identities and parameters of contact still include working-class Black communities.

Both code- and style-switching function as cultural identity markers in Black speaking communities (Scott, 2002). The literature on these language practices offers compelling examples of how Black women negotiate intercultural encounters. For example, Linda Nelson (1990) describes her study of code-switching in Black women's narratives as motivated by "pleasure in listening to the meandering rhythms, the hyperbole and the novel metaphors of the casual kitchen table discourse of my women friends and family members" (p. 142). The narratives, generated during interviews with 30 Black women all over age 30 included women from diverse socioeconomic groups. Nelson noted that during the interviews speakers often began narratives in what could be identified as USSE but later switched to some level of BE depending on the speaker's perception of the relationship between the two women. Switching to a form of language used more in Black speech communities illustrates an aspect of identity for the speaker:

An identity that says I am speaking to you out of my experience and if it sounds rough, please don't judge me because it sounds rough. Try to look at me and judge me for what I have come

through. . . . I am a Black woman struggling for that identity, finding that identity, liking that identity and being proud of where it comes from. (p. 147)

Nelson (1990) further connects language and identity in a reference to one of the participants who points out “that in order to talk about Black cultural experience” she needs the language created out of that experience as opposed to the “power code.” Nelson concludes that switches from USSE to BE also indicate the narrator’s solidarity with the elicitor and that such switches should be interpreted as a “challenge to hegemony” (p. 152).

Michelle Foster (1995) also found in her study of Black women teachers who were fluent in both USSE and BE that linguistic forms and discourse features were used to invoke solidarity, power and community. Stylistic devices employed by women in the classroom included manipulation of grammatical structures, repetition, use of symbolism and figurative language, intonational contours, vowel elongation and changes in meter, tempo and cadence. The most common form of code-switching was the use of multiple negations to report the speech of others as found in the following example:

And do you know we have only one white teacher that will teach Black history? Only one, only one, she doesn’t mind teaching the Black History but the rest of them say “*I don’t know nothing about it!*” You see I don’t know enough about it to teach it. I leave that to Miss Ruthie. (pp. 342–343)

Like Nelson, Foster (1995) maintains that switches in language style index social identity and communicate a particular stance or point of view that is best expressed in Black English. Both studies reveal that the use of BE in certain contexts by women who also are competent speakers of USSE is an indication of language competency.

The young Black women who participated in one-on-one and group interviews for Karla’s work on Black women’s language (Scott, 1995, 2000, 2002) described “talking like a Black woman” and the specific contexts of language use in predominantly White environments. Their responses indicate that in one world, the world shared with other Black women, identified by participants as “my girls,” “talking like a Black woman” means employing many of the stylistic and grammatical features of BE to mark solidarity with others who not only share an identity but also understand the experiences of that identity. Similarly, Karla’s study of the use of “girl” and “look” reveals that lexical choice not only marks identity but also solidarity and an ideological stance on identity (Scott, 2000).

Karla also found that young Black women’s language use in identity negotiation was often a response to stereotype threat (Scott, 2004). Black women participants between the ages of 18 and 28 all spoke with familiarity about the derogatory stereotypes of Black women that they believe accompany them on the campuses of predominantly White universities, including underestimation and the Jezebel myth. The participants described both verbal and nonverbal strategies for resisting and dispelling the stereotypes, including code-switching to a form of USSE during classes, paying careful attention to dressing in a way that was not sexually suggestive or provocative, and constantly monitoring nonverbal behaviors, such as neck movements or eye rolling, associated with the stereotype of the “angry Black woman.” One participant also explained, “Sometimes I will leave my paper out in the open to say, ‘Yeah, I got the only A in the class.’” For these young Black women, such strategies are just as important as studying to ensure academic success. Their descriptions suggest that competence in code- and style-switching is viewed as a necessary skill for the success of the post-Civil Rights, post-women’s movement generation.

Although many Black women are proficient at code- or style-switching, they interpret

such practices as *strategic language performances* intended to establish credibility, to manage impressions, to create a degree of solidarity with White interlocutors who are unable or unwilling to accommodate to them, or to accomplish other interaction goals. None of the Black women participants in our own studies and in those we reviewed regarded shifting to a prestige language code or more mainstream communication style as an identity altering act or as an indication that they had assimilated to; that is, uncritically accepted, the values, beliefs, and social practices of the dominant Euro-White culture of their university, neighborhood, or workplace.

◆ *Specific Strategies for Intercultural Communication Encounters*

In addition to code- and style-switching, feminist scholars have explored a variety of other communicative practices through which Black women endeavor to negotiate intercultural communication encounters. We briefly discuss four of these specific strategies below: positive self-talk; evasion; culture-specific framing; and strategic use of culture-specific language features and interaction styles.

Positive Self-Talk. As the narrative at the outset of this section indicates, Karla's work demonstrates the sort of self-reflexive, positive self-talk that enables Black women to maintain affirming self-definitions in exigent discourse environments. In the following excerpt from Marsha's corpus of conversations (Houston, 1980–86), a Black middle-class, professional woman uses positive self-talk to resist her White coworkers' construction of her as an atypical Black person:

I was kinda puzzled for a long time until I sat down and said, "Now what IS THIS, y'know, why am I feelin' strange like this?" . . . And it's almost like they look at you like, "Wow, you're human,

too" . . . like they were awed or somethin' . . . that I could talk or think. And the same for other black people . . . It was like they were surprised we knew what we were talkin' about. . . . It was really weird.

By analyzing her White coworkers' behavior toward her and other Black colleagues, and characterizing that behavior as really weird, the speaker resists those who would "Whiten" her identity by labeling her an exceptional or atypical Black woman because she is a competent employee.

Evasion. Brenda Allen (1998) offers a clear case of evasion as a resistance strategy. Allen explores the challenges of being a member of two historically oppressed groups (Blacks and women) and working in the predominantly White world of the academy. Using feminist standpoint theory, Allen interrogates her standpoint as a Black woman and the only Black person in her academic department in order to understand Black women's socialization to the academy and other complex organizations. She identifies the stereotypical roles Black women are expected to fulfill in organizations, such as beneficiary, token, mammy, and matriarch. Allen suggests that these roles are a function of White coworkers' inexperience in interacting with Black women. She explains that part of the challenge in being perceived and used as a token is that, "People seem to expect that I can or should provide insight as a representative of women, people of color, Black people, or Black women . . . I sometimes feel more like a symbol or representative than an individual" (p. 580). One way that Allen negotiates the stereotypic roles ascribed to her is by evading or refusing to perform them. When a Black student on her campus was accused of rape, she felt that she was asked to choose between her identity as a woman and a Black person. Allen reports that she "sidestepped the situation by not doing anything" (p. 580). Marsha found that some respondents to her study of Black

women's speaking perspectives (2000a) also used evasion as a way of resolving conflicts between their identities as individual Black women and social definitions of Black women's talk to which they did not subscribe. She suggests that while evasion may appear to be a denial of one's Black womanhood, it can more usefully be understood as a strategy for resisting racist stereotypes.

Culture-Specific Framing. In her analysis of Black women executives in predominantly White organizations, Patricia Parker (2003) reveals how participants used culture specific frames to define their communicative practices. One of Parker's interviewees explains:

First of all, I think you have to always remember that you were Black, you're Black, and you're going to always be Black. . . . Why is that important? It is because . . . you are always mindful of being true to what your sincere beliefs are. You don't sway to fit the mold. (p. 14)

Similarly, Patricia Hill (2003) explains that some roles Black women choose to perform in intercultural contexts are versions of those we choose to perform in Black cultural contexts. For example, the participants in her study of Black women's communication in a culturally diverse neighborhood often discursively assumed the role of other mothers, or fictive kin who nurture other people's children, by speaking out about situations affecting the entire community.

Culture-Specific Language Practices. Mary Bucholtz (1996) uses Collins's (2000) conception of Black feminist epistemology to illumine the culture-specific linguistic practices used by two Black women to subvert the institutional relationship between themselves and the moderator of a radio program in which they participated and to build political alliances with other panelists. She argues that the women used "questions and assessments, deixis, vernacular features, and

backchanneling to effectively restructure the speech situation, offering an alternative to the dominant institutional conventions" (p. 284). In the following example, EH, a Black woman community organizer, first raises a question that conforms to the norms of the panel format, but her subsequent questions challenge these norms and force answers from the moderator [LF] that "require him to authorize a restructuring of the discussion, one in which every participant can select any other to speak" (pp. 276–277):

- EH: Can I [ask a question?]
 LF: [Yeah.] Mmh?
 EH: Do we have to be so dry in [here?]
 LF: [Nuh.](.) Please.
 EH: Can we talk across the-
 LF: =Jump in.
 EH: =I mean can we be real?
 LF: =Yes. (h::)
 EH: =Its gettin' on my nerves. Okay.
 Th(h)ank y(h)ou.

In summary, the literature on Black women's intercultural communication reveals a variety of language and communication practices through which Black women negotiate intercultural encounters. We accommodate to other cultural conversation partners through code- or style-switching, and/or they may use positive self-talk, evasion, culture-specific framing and Black language and interaction styles to resist, demystify or gain a measure of control over intercultural encounters.

◆ *Conclusion: Directions for Research*

As we wrote this chapter, we were struck by our greater confidence in describing the overarching discourse environment in which

Black women speak than in delineating the communication practices with which Black women negotiate that environment. We suggest that this is because there remains a paucity of communication scholarship on our cross-cultural talk. In addition, most intercultural communication research involving Black women (or men) analyzes encounters with White people. We could discover no studies of communication between Black women and other people of color. In light of the increasing social diversity of U.S. culture, we hope that scholars will begin to study Black women communicators with greater cultural inclusiveness, frequency, and depth.

As we encourage more communication research on Black women, we also caution that increasing the number of studies of less powerful social groups does not necessarily provide the sort of emancipatory scholarship that feminist scholars desire. As Houston and Davis (2002) note, "Studies that uncritically apply masculinist or Whitecentric concepts and methods to Black women's communicative lives may actually have the effect of deepening gendered racism and other oppressive communication practices" (p. 3). Thus, we encourage more research that, like the studies discussed in this chapter, employs feminist methodology and Black feminist theories. Feminist methodology centers gender politics and gender relationships in the exploration of women's lived experiences, primarily through qualitative and interpretive methods that capture lived experiences, such as interviewing, narrative analysis, critical discourse analysis, ethnography, and autoethnography (Carter & Spitzack, 1989; Fonow & Cook, 1991). Black feminist theories take account of the material and ideological contexts of Black women's lived experiences, honor their interpretations of those experiences, and facilitate scholarship that is emancipatory for the masses of Black women (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; James, 1999). For example, Black feminist sociolinguistic and communication scholarship resists essentializing Black women's talk by illuminating the variety

of language and communication choices, styles, and strategies that inform our everyday interaction. Marsha has termed this approach to communication scholarship on Black women "community-cognizant" for its attention to both Black women scholars and the masses of other Black women as "voices of authority" on their own communicative lives (Houston, 2000b, p. 684).

With this approach to scholarship in mind, we suggest two directions for future research on Black women's intercultural communication: (a) studies of how womanhood is performed by particular demographic groups of Black women in particular intercultural contexts and (b) studies of the material, social, and psychological costs and consequences of Black women's language and communication choices in intercultural encounters.

A performative approach to studying gender, language and communication presumes that gender identities and relationships are constructed, reinforced, and transformed by the verbal and nonverbal choices speakers make in particular situational contexts (Coates, 1996; Wodak, 1997). For example, we found not a single study of how Black lesbians negotiate border crossings between what they perceive as their home community (in-group) and the other cultural contexts of their communicative lives. Mary McCullough's (1996) work suggests that an interracial or multicultural lesbian cohort can feel more like home to a Black lesbian than a group of straight Black women friends, but we know nothing of the language practices that distinguish the performance of Black womanhood in either situation (see also Clarke, 2002).

Scholars have only begun to explore how Black women perform the gendered, cultural, self, and group images we valorize. Cherise Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2003) note that many Black women embrace "the myth that Black women are invulnerable and indefatigable, that they always persevere and endure against all odds without being negatively affected (p. 3)." They argue that there is "peer

pressure among Black women to keep the myth alive, to keep juggling [multiple roles and myriad tasks], to keep accommodating” (p. 3). Fantasia’s “Baby Mama,” illustrates the valorization of this myth in its second stanza: “ ‘Cuz we the backbone (of the hood)/I always knew that (that we could)/We can go anywhere, we can do anything/I know we can make it if we dream” (Acklin, Dinkins, & Colapietro, 2004). Respondents to Marsha’s study of Black women’s speaking perspectives also valorized this myth by including communicating “fortitude” among the perspectives they celebrate (Houston 2000a). Through what communicative practices is the myth of super strength and other positive constructions of Black womanhood (e.g., sisterhood, forthrightness, the “other mother” role) performed by Black women in intercultural situations? How do the performances differ across women of varying generations and social classes? How does the level of intimacy of the intercultural relationship influence the performance?

We must also ask about the material, social, and psychological costs and consequences of the communicative practices through which Black women choose to perform their gender identities. Jones and Shorter-Godden’s (2003) study offers compelling evidence that negotiating boundaries and crossing borders in the everyday contexts of contemporary Black women’s lives (e.g., work, romantic relationships, mothering, the church) places us at a higher risk for depression (see also Allen, 1998). Intercultural communication scholars might inquire into whether and/or how communicative choices figure into this risk. Is the psychological and emotional labor that Black women expend in negotiating encounters with members of the dominant culture greater than that expended by members of the dominant cultural group? If so, do Black women evidence depression and lowered self-esteem, as Jones and Shorter-Gooden contend, or is there evidence of feelings of empowerment and enhanced self-esteem as we develop superior competencies for

communicating in an increasingly diverse social order? Might there be evidence of both?

Scholars might situate their inquiries in predominantly White academic and professional contexts. Thanks to the Civil Rights and women’s movements, the current generations of Black women have greater access to such contexts. Yet they often confront the same derogatory, oppressive stereotypes as their foremothers (Hill, 2003; Parker, 2003). For example, although on the surface it may appear that access to a job or admission to a university is granted on the premise that one *does not* conform to the pejorative stereotypes of Black womanhood, all too often the expectation—albeit implicit—is that one *will* conform. Black women often realize this implicit expectation only after accepting a professional or academic opportunity. Does a decision to communicatively resist stereotypical images of Black womanhood threaten job security, good grades, social interaction, or professional growth? Does conforming assure them? For what reasons, under what circumstances, and through what language practices might a Black woman choose to resist or conform? Are certain strategies employed for the purpose of accommodating others in the name of success or submission? Or are they enacted as tactics of empowerment?

Intercultural communication scholars might also enlarge the scope of encounters considered intercultural by examining the increasing demographic diversity among Blacks in the United States. When a Black woman who grew up in a predominantly White speech community where she was socialized to speak USSE exclusively, enters a university in which the majority of Black students learned to code-switch between BE and USSE as they grew up in predominantly Black communities, she may face accusations of being a sellout by virtue of her language style and find herself isolated from her Black peers. To what extent do such experiences with linguistic prejudice challenge Black women’s gendered cultural identities and emotional well-being (see e.g., Miles, 1995)?

Scholarship that examines the costs and consequences of Black women's linguistic and communicative choices in specific contexts will deepen our understanding of how the politics of gender and race continue to permeate present day intercultural encounters, despite the progress engendered by the Civil Rights and women's movements. As we learn more about how Black women struggle to express our full range of identities, to speak freely across cultural borders in a discourse environment intent on limiting and constraining our voices, we also deepen knowledge of the role of gender in all human communication in the 21st century.

◆ Notes

1. In 1996, the school board in Oakland, California, concluded that the majority of their mostly Black working class students were not learning to read soon enough and well enough to keep them from failing. On the advice of reading and language arts specialists, the board mandated the adoption of a set of first readers for the primary grades designed to help students comprehend the differences between the language variety they already knew and spoke in their homes and neighborhoods, Black English, and the variety they had to learn to read in order to be successful in school, U.S. Standard English. The readers consisted primarily of stories written in Black English or what the authors called Ebonics. The story of the Oakland school board's decision to adopt Ebonics readers became national news in December 1996 and sparked a nationwide controversy about the value and validity of Black speaking styles. (For a collection of scholarship on the Oakland Ebonics controversy, see *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 27, #2, 1997).

2. As Black women who are feminist/womanist scholars, we have chosen to use first-person references to Black women in an effort to avoid objectifying ourselves and artificially separating us from the women about whom we write.

3. The *Essence* Music Festival (*ESSENCE FEST*) is an annual event sponsored by the Black women's magazine *Essence* and held in New

Orleans. A prominent feature of the event is a "Sister to Sister" empowerment seminar in which Black women celebrities and feature writers for the magazine offer brief motivational speeches on subjects related to contemporary Black women's lives to a mostly Black, mostly female audience.

4. *Essed's* participants in the Netherlands were Dutch citizens who were natives of the former Dutch colony of Surinam or their descendants living in the Netherlands.

5. We note the features of Black English grammar and lexicon in the title and in several lyrics. In the title, the possessive is unmarked (i.e., "baby mama" not "baby's mama") and the meaning of the two words has been expanded beyond the U.S. Standard English meaning ("a child's mother") to signify a never-married, single mother. Expansion of the meanings of ordinary English words is a common feature of Black English. ("Cuz": gloss = "because.")

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