

# Ebon . i . city

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This exploration begins by suspending conscious notions of English and architecture, although it approaches what may appear to be a resolution of form, it is far from resolved. It is intended that others learn, expand and expound in dialogue with what is presented.<sup>1</sup>

Ebonics or Black Vernacular English, is a topic that has entered into much controversy and debate since a 1997 California public school board proposed to utilize Ebonics to help teach there largely African American students learn better English. The proposal met with great opposition from both members on the school board and the general American public. Many people objected to this approach mainly because they themselves don't understand the richness of the language. Most believe it to be a base vernacular language that has little to no value past that of street slang, but this assumption is far from the truth. Ebonics has been a site of cultural bonding, strength and resistance. It carries much African retention within its lexicon and syntax pattern and at its depths it carries the seeds of cultural mythos, forged from shared group life experience. Language is a cultural production that articulates the way a people conceptualize. Through its study one can interpolate a peoples understanding of their environment, their cosmology and a host of other abstract notions, such as time and space. With this understanding of language, this study articulates mechanisms, syntax patterns of Ebonics in order to translate them into architectonic form. Ebonics is a language, which inhabits and appropriates another language, English. This appropriation can be related to the manner African- American culture spatially and socially exists within the context of the United States, living in places that once belonged to other cultural groups. This is most clearly seen within our urban centers. Through this meditation on Ebonics, strategies may be reinterpreted and utilized in space formation.

... language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.

– *Mikhail Bakhtin*<sup>2</sup>

In this investigation, Ebonics is used as a vehicle to explore the development of space. A potential validation for this study is language's and architecture's common reliance on a rigorous structure to sustain their integrity. For language to be intelligible it must follow a logic that is related to an infinite number of intersecting and mutable systems. Architecture, by virtue of its components; solid material, space and human perception, must also negotiate the logic of many systems, thus through a study/ understanding of the formation of Ebonics, the nature of its variance from its host language Standard English and the understanding of some of its foundational principles. Each of the afore mentioned aspects of Ebonics is approached with the intent to translate them into architectonic form.

Black English or Ebonics, as it is commonly referred, according to William Labov, is a thriving, healthy form of language. It is a language that shows signs of "separate development", its own rules of grammar and lexicon, divergent from standard American English.<sup>3</sup> Ebonics, is not only a subset of the English language as is, American English or Australian English, but it is, also, a critique upon the host language from within and without the system. The manner of its usage interrogates, undermines and expands the institutionalized boundaries of English. Through the introduction of other cultural language syntax patterns and lexical fragments, the African- American culture transforms, and inhabits, the space of language as a cultural production, which is consumed and recycled from community to community and generation to generation. The mechanisms of this production can most closely be related to contemporary western philosophy's notions of deconstructivism.<sup>4</sup> But more specifically Ebonics is presented here as a living deconstructivism, one that is enacted through out a peoples approach to dealing within multiple spaces of reality simultaneously. Being in a state of constant flux between points of self reference, the African–American culture continually transforms the understanding of thought and perspective, negotiating the juxtaposition and break down of established terms, resistance to cultural erasure and mythos. Central to this discussion is the social position of this language as being debase and ill conceived. It is at once within the margins of the society in which it exists and also at its core. Ebonics becomes an unofficial standard of proficiency in which users, both listeners and speakers, must reference and align themselves. In this social model of the language we find the cross -referencing, between the margins and the center. At times, for the people with in the culture, the margins become the center.

Ebonics sits uncomfortably within English, obliquely skewing preconceived interpretations and meaning. Abstracting the idea of language into a simple system, Ebonics' relationship to Standard English can be represented as two lines that oscillate at different frequencies, that are very close to one another but slightly shifted. At times their intersection is smooth and at other times it is disruptive. This reduced model does over simplify the two language's complex relationship but it also displays the nature of the language's coexistence as interwoven, entangled and even knotted at times.

### Strategies of the Spoken Word

Within the body of Black Vernacular English lies a trope, one that can be traced back to the motherland of Africa.<sup>5</sup> This trope of all tropes is the seed that has allowed African peoples to navigate the European languages and colonize them making them their own. This trope, whose name has been forgotten by many people in the African-American culture is the god Esu-Elegbara. Within Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s book *The Signifyin' Monkey*, he traces Esu-Elegbara's thematic and culturally foundational attributes in the Americas. This figure, Esu-Elegbara, is found to occur in such frequency in African diasporic culture, that he can be seen as a topos, a reoccurring theme. This topos can be traced most immediately to the Fon and Yoruba of Benin and Nigeria, language groups that form part of the Ebonics' lexicon and syntax patterns. Esu-Elegbara is eloquently described in the text as:

... the sole messenger of the gods, Iranse, he who interprets the will of the gods to man; he who carries the desires of man to the gods, Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane... Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation, the word (as a form of the verb to be) that links a subject with its predicate. He connects the grammar of divination with its rhetorical structures.<sup>6</sup>

Esu is a translator of word and text. Through him all knowledge must be sifted and interpreted. The *Signifyin' Monkey* introduces Esu as a means to critically study and discuss Literary Criticism. But in presenting this figure as a logos for literary criticism it also identifies Esu's primary position in language usage and language development as a foundational element.

As one looks at the devices and strategies used in Ebonics' formation, particularly the ones which distinguish it from Standard English we find that many of the attributes of Esu are employed to achieve Ebonics. A language grounded not only in standard, straight-forward communication, but also profundity, deception, resistance and culture building. Ebonics' very manner of usage utilizes such lexical tactics as word reversal, *bad* meaning good, and transposition. The taking of a word and us-

ing it in a different manner like the word *Cool*. This word in Standard English describes an atmospheric relative temperature condition. In Ebonics *Cool*, is the presence of a person or an object, it is a state of mind, it is the aura of awe and the aura of calmness that transforms the atmosphere. It is more associated with a psycho/spiritual way of being. Koolness brings "somethingness" to space and perception. Falling into the category of word reversal and transposition is found the use and development of Verbal nouns, such as; Rocking, Jooking and Nouns made from Verbs. Other devices utilized in the strategic formation of Ebonics include but are not entirely confined to the use of metaphor and simile; the use of the double descriptive; and the use of multiple negatives. Given the fact that this project will also discuss architecture in relation to Ebonics, it will only address the most prominent aspects of Ebonics' strategy.

The Double Descriptive or the Multiple Descriptive is an over articulation a redundancy that embellishes the object of the sentence. It often times is used to clarify the use of an object, as in sitting – chair and chop – axe, or offer another word that will inform the receiver/listener of the meaning of the full meaning Speedy-hurry. It can be seen as one of the strategic tools used to smooth communications between informal learners of the language. The final use of the double descriptive is that of emphasis as in Low down or Mo' Better.<sup>7</sup>

The Multiple Descriptive can be understood as a clearly defined multi-use object that defines the multiple use of a space. The Multiple Descriptive articulates function and reading/understanding of function. This understanding may entail simple but extremely specific details that express the use of the object. Ambiguity may occur at the intersection of these specific details. Ex., a sitting – wall, a watch – wall. This kind of multiple descriptive already exists within architecture in some form, a climbing wall, a watch tower. But these double descriptives usually stand as singular functional events. They do not lend themselves to multi-use or multi-interpretation.

Verb tense is the part of Standard English, which informs the user of time orientation.<sup>8</sup> Again it can be found that Ebonics differs from Standard English in the usage of fundamental verbs, such as; To be, To do, To go and ain't. Only two of these verb conjugations will be covered in this paper to establish a formal link between verb linkage and how it can transform subconscious thought of space and object relation.

### Ain't, ain't a word

In Zora Neal Hurston's article of "Characteristics of Negro Expression", 1934 she suggests that the African-American word Ain't is a softened and toned down version of the conjunction word Aren't (Are not).<sup>9</sup> In Juba to Jive A Dictionary of African-American Slang Ain't is defined: Ain't v. (1620's- Present) do not; does not; am not. "Ain't is a dialectal contraction of "not" in its various forms: am, is, has, have. Example: "I ain't coming" Or "This ain't right. You got to do it again."<sup>10</sup> Although I believe both of these sources to be correct in their definitions of

the word Ain't and its alleged origin and/or nature. Meditation and speculation upon this word has not been taken far enough. Its formation is not only a dialectal contraction of the word "not" but it is a word that takes on its own parameters of function and thus stakes out its own verbal territory within the evolution and transformation of the English language. It removes its self from the rules of Standard English (what ever that is) and begins to establish a new verb system of conjugations and relationships.

Ain't in relation to the verb to be.

To be

I am	You are
He is	We are
She is	They are

The negative of the verb "to be" is accomplished through the addition of "not" to the end of each of the conjugations of the verb.

I am not	You are not
He is not	We are not
She is not	They are not

If we analyze this verb relationship in Standard English as being a primary syntax pattern, we see a contrast between the English conjugation and the African American conjugation of the verb to be. In standard English a tripartite system of identification is established through the use of the pronouns, these pronouns take on verbs which support their referent relationship. First person ( I ), Second person (He/ She/ You), Third Person (They). "We", a combination of first and second person seems to take on the characteristics of third person action.

In African- American language the introduction of the word "ain't " is used as a negation of the verb "to be"

I ain't	You ain't
He ain't	We ain't
She ain't	They ain't

And as we reverse this process back into the positive form of the verb "to be" and see a common African-American usage of its conjugation we see a unification of each of the verb tenses.

I is	You is
He is	We is
She is	They is

I is the same as He is and She is the same as You is and We is the same as they is.

From studies of West African languages, evolves a possible theory as to the origins of the word *ain't*. In the Yoruban language the prefix *ai* is added to negate the meaning of

words,<sup>11</sup> *ain't* can be a double negation. It could be a way of showing and teaching on the spot a new person (a new enslaved African) the English language through the usage of their original Yoruban language. Thus to inform the listener that the word for negation is not by placing their own word for negation in front of it. Thus you get the word "ai + not = ain't" in a typical Yoruban fashion. Thus we get a redoubling of the word, reinforcing the cultural disposition for sound rhythm and repetition in language.<sup>12</sup>

The use of the verb "be" it self, is not discarded as it is in standard English. When I say discarded, I mean that "be " is not used in any of the conjugations of the verb compound "to be". "To be" is to invoke that something or someone exists. In the African- American use it takes on an added dimension. Time is a dimension in which the use of be now adds not only past present and future tense but the tense of habituality.<sup>13</sup> The habitual action now connotes the fact that an act has always happened and it infers that it will continue. The verb is enhanced in its ability to traverse the mental landscape of time. But the user, in relation to the context of the statement, understands the use of the word. Another verb addition to the Ebonics vocabulary is the word *bin*. The word *bin* allows the Ebonics user to articulate with the use of the verb, delineation between near past and distant past.<sup>14</sup>

#### Standard English

-  
Past  
Present  
Future  
-

#### Ebonics

Distant Past  
Past  
Present  
Future  
Habitually (Eternally)

Habitual *be* allows the speaker to articulate constancy, the eternal, the always, in a simple form. It speaks of habit or a groove in which a person or event commits on a regular basis. The path/habit is delineated in strong form, ever present. Where as the verb *bin* removes the strong impression of an event. It is something that is articulated but it is very important that its impression on the present is slight.

The verb *ain't* opens the Ebonics language to a universal verbal negative, an active word unlike the static word "no" in Standard English. It acts as an identifier of a negative statement or event. Architecturally speaking this can lend itself to the bracketing of negative space or the reverberation of negative space past its initial boundaries, the process of making statements/compositions negative.

Multiple Negation, or what it is more commonly referred to as the double negative, one of the most misunderstood aspects of Ebonics, is also a viable formal mechanism, which differs from Standard English considerably. In Standard English philosophy and logic dictate that a double negative will cancel itself.<sup>15</sup> Within Ebonics the negatives support and enhance the initial statement. The Ebonics rule of negation is that a negative

must be attached to all negatable elements within the same simple sentence. For a negative sentence to be Ebonically correct, all indefinant pronouns, all indefinant articles, all indefinant adverbials, and the verbal auxiliary must be made negative.<sup>16</sup>

*Nobody 'round here ain't never heard of him (at all).*

The only rule that must apply in this sentence form is that at least one negative must be able to negate the entire sentence. The other negatives may be embedded both in the main clause and in subordinate clauses.<sup>17</sup>

*Billy can't see no point in going nowhere no more.*

The other negatives are used as supporting elements in emphasizing the negative. This is a pattern of speaker multiplicity. It adds clarification in a very simple manner as to avoid confusion. The speaker articulates and stresses the fact that the statement is of a negative nature. It is a shortened form of breaking out the above sentence into three different sentences.<sup>18</sup>

## Relative Issues

The issue of contextualizing the statement also becomes more important in the usage of Ebonics as compared to Standard English. In some circles this may seem to be a deficiency, in the appropriation, but it also is in line with West African patterns of context specific understanding of statements.<sup>19</sup>

The use of the concordant Negative must somehow support a single idea. The Concordant or multiple negatives can not cancel its self at any point. It must always resolve the issue of the double negative. So we have the development of adjacent negatives as a strategy for dealing with this problem and we have the strategy of sub - setting the negatives into a structure or thought.

From this study's investigation, multiple negation appears to be connected to the verb ain't, they support one another in the function of articulating and re-articulating the negative, creating an echo or fractal effect throughout a statement. Spatially this fractal effect can be seen as infinite splinters of negative space introduced into a solid or multiple negations of a system, continually breaking its pattern at critical interactions. This would establish an interweaving of positive and negative, that would render both separate but related and dependant on one another.

There are many more aspects of Ebonics that begin the process of deconstructing and Re-constructing English, such as softened consonants at the end of words and the transposition of particular consonants at the beginning of words. Both of these variants have a profound effect on the interpretation and rein-

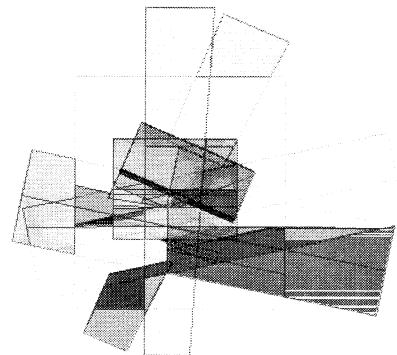
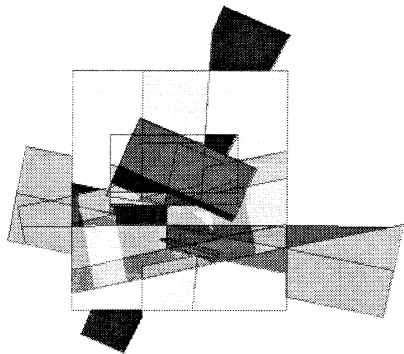
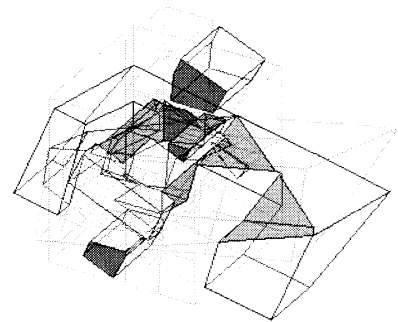
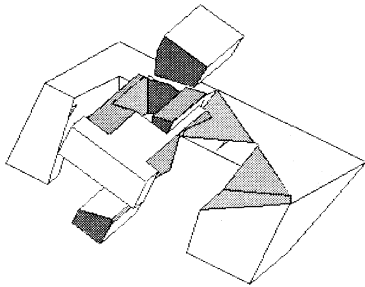
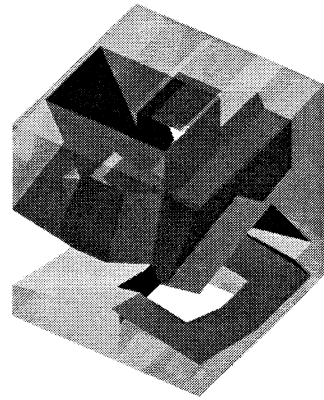
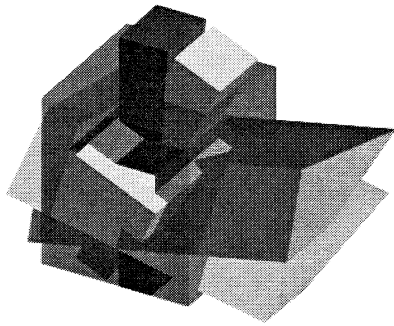
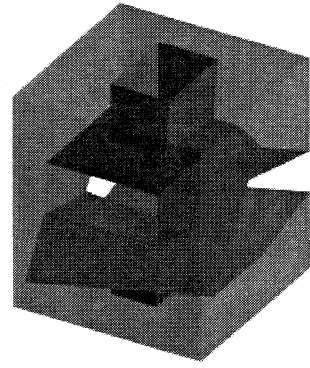
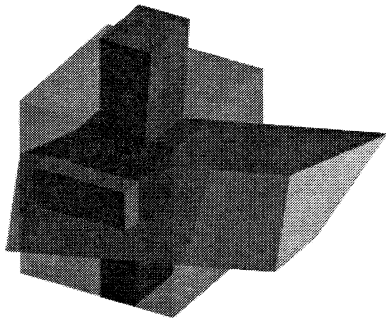
terpretation of meanings. Allowing Ebonics the ability to slip in and out of relationship with other languages as well as its host language easily. As stated before it is not within the scope of this paper that all of these components be addressed, but they are present in the *work en process* presented at the end of this meditation. Ebonics offers an extremely powerful analogue for the development of African American space. It mirrors the social interaction of the African - American culture's experience and offers possible strategies for the development of spatial strategies that may already exist within the culture, at some level, but it definitely offers strategies that can be further developed.

If we were to extend this discussion of Ebonics to other cultural productions such as music, dance, writing and art we would find that many attributes and principles of Ebonics are echoed in these other arts. The use and infusion of African elements, the adherence to repetition and rhythmic flow are just the most well known and most primary attributes shared between these cultural productions.

## Conclusion

This paper only points towards a direction for future studies. It does require the continued development of the African- American culture's processes and productions and not the complete discarding of things thought to be base and primitive that are actually areas of vast potential energy. Within the four hundred years of Africans in the Americas, most things African were considered to be of ill conception, but time after time, those things African in origin become standard and forgotten to be African.

The following, are images of studies based in this discussion of Ebonics and Architecture, they utilize a basic cube form as a starting point. The cube is used as an analogue to some notion of Eurocentric conceptions of space, the pure cartesian form or space. The other forms, non- cartesian in nature, interrogate the cube which holds them and deforms its purity. This creates a series of small interlocked spaces within the cube. In the second part of the study the cube and the other forms interrogate and analyze one another, developing a series fragmented parts, which are tenuously connected at best, but definitely relative to one another. Both parts of the study utilize notions of multiple negatives (three or more, upon a positive) and also the ideal of multiple descriptive. The double descriptive is achieved through the intersecting of multiple negative spaces within a solid or space. The Multiple descriptive is achieved through the description of an object twice within the same space or thought, without the use of a conjunction, but through juxtaposition and immediacy.



## NOTES

- 1 This discussion does not pre- suppose that Ebonics is an isolated and unique event within the context of other vernacular forms of English spoken around the world. But it does accept, at its core that African influences on the language have made a profound cultural influence on the direction and development of Ebonics as well as a host of other American vernaculars, especially southern dialects.
- 2 Gates, Jr. Henry Louis, *Signifying Monkey*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988), pg. i
- 3 Gates, Jr. Henry Louis, *Signifying Monkey*, pg. 1
- 4 Deconstructivism- is understood in this paper as a system and method of textual analysis, which undermines preconceived notions of meaning, using the text against and with its self.
- 5 Gates, Jr. Henry Louis, *Signifying Monkey*, pg. 6
- 6 Gates, Jr. Henry Louis, *Signifying Monkey*, pg. 7-8
- 7 Hurston, Zora Neal, "Characteristics of Negro Expression (1934)" in *Within The Circle*, pg. 81
- 8 This correlation is made through the use of Einstein's theory of relativity.
- 9 Hurston, Zora Neal, "Characteristics of Negro Expression (1934)" *Within The Circle*, pg. 80
- 10 Juba to Jive A Dictionary of African- American Slang, pg. 5
- 11 Pulleyblank, Douglas, "Yoruba" *The Worlds Major Languages*, pg. 980
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Asante, Molefi Kete, "African Elements in African- American English"
- 14 Ibid
- 15 Martin, Stefan and Wolfram, " The sentence In African- American Vernacular English", pg.17
- 16 Martin, Stefan and Wolfram, " The sentence In African- American Vernacular English", pg. 18
- 17 Ibid
- 18 Martin, Stefan and Wolfram, " The sentence In African- American Vernacular English", pg. 19
- 19 Martin, Stefan and Wolfram, " The sentence In African- American Vernacular English", pg. 20

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