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English 310-Structure of English

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Exam Three: Take Home

Postscript to the Video: *Black on White*

The “Man of Words” tradition of Africa dominates one of the main themes of the video titled *Black on White*. However, this documentary also served as a study on how Black English Vernacular--or Ebonics--has affected the language of the white community. Seen in today’s modern black vernacular and lifestyle, the African “Man of Words” tradition still prevails in the black culture. Possibly because of this tradition mainly focusing on the men in black society, the documentary does not mention much about the speech of African American women.

The African “Man of Words” tradition is the concept of a male leader of an African tribe that delivers speeches and powerful, inspirational words to his people. Many people come from around the area--some traveling for miles--to hear the leader’s wise words. During the speech, some natives may chant or clap when they agree with the expressions of the leader. In fact, one beauty of the “Man of Words” custom shines through when different people react to the speaker in their own preferred and diverse manners. The speaker may give a speech on a regular basis in an informal way as well as for a special occasion.

Question whether or not a continuation of this tradition exists in modern-day society. Many people believe that this practice of the “Man of Words” tradition holds up in today’s world. The more dominant figures in the media as well as in society have been males. This is not necessarily a black versus white issue, but a male versus female issue. Men are more predominantly seen in the media in examples, such as dominant movie roles, music, television, and other areas of the arts and politics. In the area of movies, this film itself does not specifically

mention the speech of African American women; it simply talks about men specifically or the overall race of African Americans. The African American women in this film do not get singled out like the African American men do. For example, each United States president to date has been a male not a female. This may suggest that the “Man of Words” tradition does in fact still exist and that a “Woman of Words” concept would be harder for America to accept. I believe that a gender bias certainly occurs in the media and on a broader scale: society as a whole.

Looking at a white versus black situation, one can compare white vernacular with black vernacular and describe how the once two separate languages meshed. The present-day language of most Caucasian Americans actually has a lot of influence from Black English Vernacular. When African Americans came to the United States, much of their language was forced to adjust in order to communicate. Not all blacks spoke the same languages or dialects because slaves were brought to America from all areas of Africa. Eventually this transformed that language of the whites as well. Blacks were, in a sense, forced to learn a form of English. However, they did not learn Standard English; they “invented” their own version and interpretation of that language, which mixed their native language with the language of the Southern whites. Over time, languages, such as Plantation Creole and Gullah began to take hold of the tongues of the African Americans. The language of the whites began to influence the formation of these dialects, but overall, it was the language of the blacks that heavily influenced the language of the whites. The whites borrowed much of the blacks’ words and the blacks borrowed much of the whites’ words. To this day, we owe much of our current language patterns, especially slang and jargon, to the African Americans.

Not only did whites borrow some language patterns from blacks, but they also borrowed parts of their entertainment. One prominent example, jazz music, certainly originated from the

African Americans, not the whites. In fact, most well-known jazz musicians are blacks, as described in the film. The whites of the southern regions where this phenomenon began also embraced this style of music, contributing to the expansion of this musical style. Today, one may hear jazz music playing all around the United States by a rather eclectic mix of people.

Jazz music was only the start of the music trends that were created by African Americans. Rap and Hip-Hip music also started from this ethnic group. The origin of the rap sensation began in vastly urban areas, highly populated with members of the black community. As seen on the video, the rappers could create an on-the-spot setting and rap in an improvisation manner. Most raps began as something to do in front of an audience, using the improvisation method to impress listeners. Early forms were most often a poem or a song. After this version of rap, the trend converted into a more complex song with back-up singers, eventually to become present-day rap with a full back-up ensemble. Rap evolved over time and now proves popular to white singers and enthusiasts as well as blacks, but one must remember to attribute this style of music to the African Americans.

From men to women and blacks to whites, one cannot doubt that some gender biases as well as racial biases exist in today's culture. These biases can also be a partial result of the African "Man of Words" tradition. Much of what whites know, specifically pertaining to music (jazz and rap) and language, originally came from the African American culture. Whites owe much to the blacks for broadening their cultural, linguistic, and musical perspectives. No matter what gender or race a person may come from, he or she is still capable of accomplishing great things. In fact, according to one of Michael Jackson's hit songs, "It don't matter if you're black or white." After all, Michael Jackson himself came from the African American community. He influenced many whites and blacks alike to sing, truly living as a modern-day "Man of Words."