

*Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. \*\*, No. \*\*, 2010  
doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00644.x

# Will They Ever Speak with Authority? Race, post-coloniality and the symbolic violence of language

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Submitted: 22 June 2009; Revised: 23 November 2009; Accepted: 24 November 2009

## Abstract

*Intersecting authority-language-and-symbolic power, this article tells the story of a group of continental Francophone African youth who find themselves in an urban French-language high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada. Through their narrative, one is confronted by the trauma of one's own language being declared an illegitimate child, hence becoming a 'deceptive fluency' in the 'eyes of power' thanks to race and post-coloniality. They are fully consciousness of this situation and their 'linguistic return', thus gazing back at the eyes of power and declaring themselves 'subjects' capable of love and desire. I briefly address questions of hospitality and language ownership and conclude by addressing the need to re-think the connection between race, power and language.*

Keywords: race, post-coloniality, language, authority, symbolic violence

[O]ne can *testify* only to the unbelievable. To what can, at any rate, only be believed; to what appeals only to belief and hence to the given word ... [here] when we ask others to take our word for it, we are already in the order of what is merely believable. (Derrida, 1996, p. 20)

Indeed the hardest thing, especially in post-coloniality, is to testify to the unbelievable, that which is symbolic in nature and which is felt but hard to 'talk' or 'speak' about. We are always almost there, but it eludes language. As soon as we 'speak' it, as we are dealing with emotionality, it slips away. But we must speak it. When we do, however, we are constantly told: 'That's just unbelievable!'. We are left therefore wondering: is this an exclamation, a questioning or a reminder? Yet, this article dares to ask: Having fully mastered the colonial language, can post-colonial subjects ever speak with authority? Put otherwise, at what point do we own the language we speak? By way of an answer, the article tells the story of a group of French-speaking refugee and immigrant continental African youth who are attending an urban Franco-Ontarian high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada. They arrive at French-language schools with a highly-valued variety of French, *le français Parisien* or Parisian French. As Monica Heller (2006) showed, the

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1 linguistic variety of French spoken in Ontario is both devalued and unauthorized in  
2 schools. However, Heller explains, most teachers in Franco-Ontarian schools speak this  
3 'devalued' variety of French. Hence, I am arguing, we enter a 'linguistic war', where the  
4 struggle is no longer about language *per se*, but about power.<sup>1</sup> And in the context of this  
5 article, it is about race and language ownership. Because of race and legal status, I will  
6 show, this highly symbolic capital that African youth bring with them to Franco-Ontarian  
7 schools seems to become an unauthorized norm, a liability, a burden rather than an event  
8 to celebrate. Continental African students are treated, classified and streamed in either  
9 lower grades or in general levels, where their chances for advanced or university studies  
10 are limited. 'It was *unbelievable* how they spoke', one teacher exclaimed, expressing what  
11 Ben Rampton (1995), within the British context, calls *deceptive fluency*. For those who  
12 believe in this notion of deceptive fluency in Britain, Rampton explains, even though they  
13 may sound British and are born in Britain, South Asians cannot be native speakers of  
14 English. Therefore, the notion goes, their fluency or British accent is deceptive.<sup>2</sup> For  
15 Jacques Derrida (1996), this is an exemplary moment of 'performative contradiction,' an  
16 antinomy if you like, one where he would have declared: 'Yes, I only have one language,  
17 yet it is not mine' (p. 2).

### 18 **Then, Who Owns Language?**

19 Strongly worded, but Derrida (1996) is worth quoting at length here; after all he is my  
20 referent in intersecting authority-language-and-symbolic power. For Derrida, language is  
21 and has always been in the plural, and any claim especially by 'the master' to its  
22 possession can only be that: a claim.<sup>3</sup> In fact, 'the master himself' [sic], Derrida declares,  
23 is no longer:

24 [C]ontrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master is nothing.  
25 Because the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls  
26 his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any  
27 relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or  
28 ontological, with it ... [And] because language is not his natural possession,  
29 he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a  
30 cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it  
31 in order to impose it as 'his own'. (p. 13)

32 As we shall see, one has to be very careful in using the language of coloniality within the  
33 Franco-Ontarian context where I conducted my research. The discourse of coloniality  
34 does not lend itself easily here and the situation is tenuous if not confusing at best.  
35 Without entering the debate on the term's orthography or definition,<sup>4</sup> I will use inter-  
36 changeably the two orthographies (postcolonial and post-colonial) more in the subaltern  
37 sense. When subalterns speak, said Spivak (1999), they are not heard. They are subaltern  
38 not because of total social immobility or for inherent reasons; they are subaltern because  
39 they are spoken for, they are authored and already talked about. Hence their silence is  
40 made possible if not expected. Spivak (1999) tells her own story as an Indian woman who  
41 is not heard (not even by other women) until recently: 'Here is a woman who tried to be  
42 decisive *in extremis*. She "spoke", but women did not, do not, "hear" her. Thus she can  
43 be defined as a "subaltern"—a person without lines of social mobility' (p. 28).

1 So picture this: It is Canada—an officially French-English bilingual country, and one  
2 of the most prominent countries worldwide in implementing bilingualism and multi-  
3 culturalism. The study's population is French-language speakers in Ontario, an  
4 English-language speaking province that is situated next to Québec. Québec is the only  
5 French-language speaking province besides New Brunswick, which is the only bilingual  
6 province in Canada.<sup>5</sup> As we know, the so-called *français canadien* or Canadian French is  
7 older than Canada itself as a nation, goes back to 15<sup>th</sup> century France, and has unique  
8 lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonetic characteristics (Heller, 2006, 1994;  
9 Mougeon & Beniak, 1989). Ontario has the highest French-language speaking popula-  
10 tion outside Québec (StatCan.gc.ca, 2008). They are known as *Franco-ontariens* or  
11 Franco-Ontarians, comprising anywhere between 4.3-to-5% of Ontario's population,  
12 and concentrated primarily in Eastern Ontario, especially Ottawa (the national capital).

13 Franco-Ontarians are exceptionally savvy in using the apparatus of the State and in  
14 social and political mobilization. They pride themselves on this mobilization ability and  
15 refer to themselves as *francophones de souche* (old or 'original' French) to distinguish  
16 themselves from other francophones (e.g. Arabic speakers, Haitians or West Africans).  
17 Thanks to activism and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, which guarantees  
18 a prominent place for the French language as it does English in Canada, Ontario has  
19 12 French-language school boards (both public and Catholic), a number of community  
20 colleges and four universities that offer programs in French and the University of Ottawa  
21 as fully bilingual, attracting a sizeable number of Ontario's francophone population.

22 *Francophone de souche* is as much a linguistic, historical and cultural reference, as it is  
23 a racial one. It is a term commonly used for White Europeans who speak French and are  
24 part of the earlier settlers in Canada. They speak varieties of French that are similar to  
25 Québec French, but still quite distinct. Some of the distinct linguistic features of  
26 Franco-Ontarian French (FOF) include, among many others: 1) simplification (e.g.  
27 third-person plural that is cited as first-person singular: *ils veulent* [they want] turned into  
28 *ils veut* [they wants]); 2) the use of *sontaient*, a non-standard variant of *étaient* [were], the  
29 standard third person plural imperfect form of the verb *être* [to be]; 3) the common use  
30 of the possessive *à* in lieu of *de* (e.g. *la voiture à mon père* [my father's car]; the 'standard'  
31 use is: *la voiture de mon père*).<sup>6</sup> It is significantly important to note that these are mostly  
32 non-standard features which, as we shall see, create a very peculiar situation. On the one  
33 hand, internally, it creates a Franco-Ontarian linguistic community with its bond and  
34 intra-community recognition but, on the other, it becomes a simultaneous mechanism,  
35 a technology of exclusion.

36 To explain, those who speak standard French, oddly enough, would feel either  
37 excluded or highly valued. The 'lack,' as Édouard Glissant (1981) would have put it, is  
38 a better description for those who feel excluded. Postcolonial subjects, Glissant (1981)  
39 explains in *Le discours antillais*, are constantly identified and reminded by their lack of  
40 language possession. Here, language is locked in as a possession of a nation, a culture and  
41 a group of people. It *belongs* to 'them,' and identity (Franco-Ontarianness in this context)  
42 is no longer regarded as a being-of-the-entity [*l'être de l'étant*], a being-that-is-always-to-  
43 become (Derrida, 1996; Ibrahim, 2004, 2008), but as a *fait accompli*, an ontology whose  
44 essence and features are already known and non-changing. It may be a hyphen-identity  
45 in this context—Franco *and* Ontarian—but it is still purely 'French'.<sup>7</sup>

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1 This is precisely why the real or imagined Frenchness is highly valued symbolic capital  
2 (Bourdieu, 1991). But for it to function as such, Frenchness has to have the 'right  
3 ingredients' in linguistic, cultural and racial terms. French, it seems, is a convoluted term  
4 referring mostly to White Europeans *belonging* to or *citizens* of France. The rest, as  
5 Derrida (1996) put it, is the 'Francophones *belonging*, as we strangely say, to several  
6 nations, cultures, and states' (p. 10; original emphasis). They are hyphenated: Franco-  
7 Maghrebian, Franco-Antillais, Franco-Senegalese, etc.<sup>8</sup> Because of this hyphen, or  
8 maybe thanks to it, they go through moments of mourning, where they speak a  
9 language—masterfully indeed—which they are told is not theirs. The source of that work  
10 of mourning (Todd, 2003) is in the psychic tension where, in many post-colonial  
11 moments, French is the only language they speak or they master it more than their  
12 mother tongues. Derrida (1996, p. 1) again:

13 —Picture this, imagine someone who would cultivate the French language.  
14 What is called the French language.  
15 Someone whom the French language would cultivate.  
16 And who [as post-colonial subject] would be, moreover, a subject of French  
17 culture, as we say.  
18 Now suppose, for example, that one day this subject of French culture were to  
19 tell you in good French:  
20 'I only have one language; it is not mine.'

21 Such 'exclusions,' Derrida continues, come to leave their marks on colonial, but as well  
22 on post-colonial subjects, and their identity formation. They create a 'disorder of  
23 identity', and are best captured in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000). Here,  
24 despite her/his presumed superiority, the so-called possessor of language, the oppressor  
25 in Freire's language, enters the work of mourning as much as the oppressed. That is,  
26 oppression and exclusion affect to a large extent the oppressed as they do the oppressor.  
27 Derrida pushes us further by, on the one hand, framing the work of mourning around  
28 language and, on the other, questioning the essence of language possession:

29 But who exactly possesses it [language]? And whom does it possess? Is lan-  
30 guage in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession? Possessed or  
31 possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal property? What of  
32 this being-at-home [*être-chèz-soi*] in language toward which we never cease  
33 returning? (Derrida, 1996, p. 17)

#### 35 **Season of Migration to Canada**

36 In *Season of Migration to the North*, Tayyib Salih (1991) tells the story of Mustafa Sa'eed.  
37 Sa'eed is a post-colonial subject originally from the Sudan who finds himself in Britain.  
38 He goes through identity translation and re-configuration whereby he ends up in a  
39 Third-Space, a split-subject between two cultures, languages and ways of being  
40 (Ibrahim, 2008). This is the case with my research subjects. In 2007, I conducted a  
41 small-scale research study in an urban Franco-Ontarian high school in southwestern  
42 Ontario, Canada. This research was a follow up to an earlier study conducted between  
43 January and June 1996 (Ibrahim, in press).

1 Both in 1996 and 2007, the research is a critical ethnography<sup>9</sup> and looks at the lives  
2 of a group of continental Francophone African youth and the formation of their social  
3 identity. Besides their gendered and racialized experience, their youth and refugee  
4 status was vital in their, what I termed elsewhere, *moments of identification* (Ibrahim,  
5 2008): where and how they were interpolated in the mirror of their society (cf. Alth-  
6 usser, 1971; Bhabha, 1994). Put otherwise, once in North America, I showed, these  
7 youth were faced with a social imaginary in which they were already Blacks. This social  
8 imaginary was directly implicated in how and with whom they identified, which in turn  
9 influenced what they linguistically and culturally learned and how they learned it. What  
10 they learned, as I showed elsewhere (Ibrahim, 1999), is Black English as a Second  
11 Language (BESL), which they accessed in and through Black popular culture. They  
12 learned by taking up and repositing the Rap linguistic and musical genre and, in  
13 different ways, acquiring and rearticulating the Hip-Hop cultural identity (Ibrahim,  
14 1999, 2004, 2009).

15 Here the research participants are a group of continental Francophone African youth  
16 who find themselves in a small French-language high school in southwestern Ontario,  
17 with a school population of approximately 400 students from various ethnic, racial,  
18 cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, which I will refer to as Marie-Victorin or  
19 MV [all names in this article are pseudonyms]. Besides French, English, Arabic, Somali,  
20 and Farsi were also spoken at the school. This group of continental Francophone African  
21 youth varied, first, in their length of stay in Canada (from 1–2 to 5–6 years); second, in  
22 their legal status (some were immigrants, but the majority were refugees) and, third, in  
23 their gender, class, age, linguistic, and national background. They came from places as  
24 diverse as Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaïre), Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal,  
25 Somalia, South Africa, and Togo. With no exception, all of the African students in MV  
26 were at least trilingual, speaking French, English and an African language, a mother  
27 tongue. Given their postcolonial educational history, significantly, most African youths in  
28 fact come to Franco-Ontarian schools already possessing the highly valued symbolic  
29 capital: *le français parisien* (Parisian French, also known as *français standard* or *français*  
30 *international*).

### 31 32 **Ethnography and Hospitality**

33 [I]s there anything worse, said Nietzsche, than to find oneself facing a German  
34 when one was expecting a Greek? (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 109)

35  
36 As a critical ethnographic research project, I spent over six months in 1996 and three  
37 months in 2007 engaged in the research: I attended classes, talked to students, and  
38 observed curricular and extracurricular activities two or three times per week. I audio-  
39 and-videotaped classes and natural conversations, visited their houses, played basketball  
40 (a game dominated by African students) and became the basketball team coach, and was  
41 invited for picnics. In short, I literally lived with the students, and because of previous  
42 involvement before 1996 in another project in the same school for almost two years, at  
43 the time of this research I was well acquainted with MV and its population, especially its  
44 African students, with whom I was able to develop a good communicative relationship.



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1 What is more, my background as a continental African myself also helped me to decipher  
2 their narratives and experiences. Clearly, we shared a *safe space* of comfort that allowed  
3 us to open up, speak and engage freely.<sup>10</sup>

4 Of this growing continental francophone African population in Franco-Ontarian  
5 schools (Ibrahim, in press), I ended up choosing ten boys and six girls for extensive  
6 ethnographic observation inside and outside the classroom and inside and outside the  
7 school and interviewed all sixteen. Of the ten boys, six were Somali speakers (from  
8 Somalia and Djibouti), one was Ethiopian, two were Senegalese, and one was from  
9 Togo. Their ages ranged from sixteen to twenty years. The six girls were all Somali  
10 speakers (also from Somalia and Djibouti), aged from fourteen to eighteen years.  
11 Interviews were conducted either in French or English and French interviews were  
12 translated into English. Here, language was a crucial part of this comfort zone, this safe  
13 space.

14 This space was built against the backdrop of, first, total absence of diversity in the  
15 teaching, personnel or administration staff except for one teacher of Haitian descent and,  
16 second, the traumatic psychic experience of exclusion, discrimination and symbolic  
17 violence that students have experienced (see Ibrahim, 2009). Before the 1990s, MV had  
18 not experienced such a mass of diversity, especially the continental African presence.  
19 Teachers therefore had no experiential knowledge on how to interact with African youth  
20 in either comfortable or informed ways. Intentionally or not, students made it clear that  
21 there was a serious race-relation problem in the school.<sup>11</sup> This problem is manifested in  
22 three different ways:

- 23 1) *The host as hostage*: Here, one is hosted, but conditionally. In Jacques Derrida's (2000)  
24 language there are two forms or formulae of/for hospitality: conditional and uncon-  
25 ditional (see Ibrahim, 2005 for full discussion). In the former, one is hosted, but  
26 under certain conditions, restrictions, choices and possibilities. Omer (M, 19, Ethio-  
27 pia),<sup>12</sup> who came to Canada by himself when he was 15 years old, exemplifies this  
28 situation. Omer was living in a shelter at the time of the interview, yet enthusiastically  
29 he was longing and planning to go to Laurentian University. Following an Althus-  
30 serian (1971) language, Omer conceives this conditional hospitality as interpellation:  
31 'Hello there! You are Black you can't do anything. Muslims, you can do nothing. This  
32 is what astonishing to me. It is already seen [what Blacks and Muslims can or cannot  
33 do]' (individual interview, French). As Gayatri Spivak explained above, here the  
34 subalterns are already 'talked' about, authored and hence their silence is either made  
35 or expected.
- 36 2) *Undemocratic decisions*: This is when students *feel* they are not consulted on matters  
37 related to their lives. These decisions, then, are perceived as discriminatory, insensi-  
38 tive, if not plain racist. For instance, because all school teachers and personnel are  
39 White and Christian (except for one Jewish teacher), when the school decided that  
40 the midday Muslim prayer was no longer permissible, the decision was read in  
41 multiple ways, including as racism. Aziza (F, 18, Somalia) described it thus:

42 So now there is this new rule. They met, the personnel of the school that is,  
43 they met. They agreed, like we were nothing at all. They said 'Oh, who cares!'  
44 you see. We have to just tell them not leave the class, because our class is more

1 important than their pray... So, there wasn't, I am sure, there wasn't even one  
2 teacher who objected to that. They all agreed. (group interview, French)

3 Although students continued their protest, they found themselves submitting to the  
4 school decision after a few days. Their protest, they explained to me afterwards, was  
5 an expressed desire to participate in the democratic process of decision making. To  
6 soften the situation, the school brought in a Moroccan teacher from James High  
7 School, the other French-language high school in the city, who explained to students  
8 that midday prayer did not have a specific hour but an extended period of time from  
9 12-noon to 3 p.m.

10 What is problematic here, however, besides the undemocratic decision taken by the  
11 school, is the way in which this Moroccan teacher was brought into the school. This  
12 outside teacher was brought in to reinterpret the students' experience of this decision  
13 for them in a way that reinforced the White and non-Muslim teachers assessment of  
14 this decision. This is akin to the common occurrence with a White person who tells  
15 a Black person: 'My Black friend told me that I am not racist, so [although they may  
16 have made a racist comment] what you are telling me [that I am racist] is wrong'. This  
17 is what George Dei *et al.* (2000) call 'everyday racism', which is hard to talk about  
18 and deal with (as we shall see below).

- 19 3) *The minute and the trivial*: This is the third and final way of racialization where  
20 *non-appartenance*, non-belonging or rejection is seen as an accumulative memory of  
21 small details, but when put together they tend to leave students with a clear message  
22 that they are not trusted, wanted or that they are deviant. Listen to Aziza again where  
23 she explains that even their names become a burden. The teacher's repetition of how  
24 African students' names should be pronounced has become a marker that sets them  
25 apart:

26 I am going to give you an example. A female teacher always gives the absent  
27 sheet [*la feuille d'absence*], always to White students. Moreover, teachers are  
28 going to know the names when they know them, for a teacher always knows the  
29 names of all the students in class. He is going to know more the names of the  
30 White students than the names of African students. 'What's your name again?  
31 Bûralé? How do you want to me to pronounce that, Bûrralé, Boralé?' You see  
32 things like that. It's a bit, it gives, it gives you pain here [pointing to her chest].  
33 This is like, these things are small small, but they can be big, which can also  
34 be something catastrophic you see. And you, you have to live with this every-  
35 day, you see. (group interview, French)

36 Musa (M, 19, Djibouti) expands on Aziza's example. One day he was absent the first  
37 period. Because some African students live on their own, they confront adult life  
38 earlier: they pay their own bills, cook their own food, work odd jobs, etc. In many  
39 cases, in short, they need ears to listen to them or a helping hand. They aren't getting  
40 that at the school. Musa is worth quoting at length:

41 The other day, I was absent the first period. I came to school in the second  
42 period. And that day, I didn't even see her [the principal]. I came the following

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1 day and I told her ‘yesterday, I was absent.’ ‘All day? You were absent because  
2 you had problems.’ I had problems with *Hydro*, [city name] *Hydro*. I told her  
3 that I was going there; if not, they were going to cut off electricity ... She said  
4 ‘no no, that doesn’t concern me. That is your problem. If you have to solve  
5 that, you should do it during your holiday time.’ But holiday times, they are  
6 closed. Saturday and Sunday, *Hydro* is not open. So, I have to go, I told her, I  
7 have to miss a class in order to go there and solve my problems. She didn’t even  
8 listen, she said ‘you were absent all day.’ ‘But Madame, how do you want me  
9 to [solve it?], and I was only absent the first period.’ I didn’t even finish, she  
10 said ‘no no, you were absent all day for *Hydro*, to solve this *Hydro* problem.’ I  
11 told her ‘Madame, try to **listen**, try to **hear** me.’ And I told her that I was only  
12 absent the first period. ‘Ah,’ she said, ‘you were only absent the first period, I  
13 am sorry. Then, I give a paper to [the secretary] this time, but don’t be late.’  
14 But that is me, I told her straight: ‘That is your problem, you don’t try to listen  
15 to the African students. You only scream. That is your problem, and you have  
16 to change this character.’ I told her, straight up, I told her that. (group  
17 interview, French, emphasis added)

18 These examples are offered here as a demonstration for what Winant (2004) calls  
19 *racialization* or *racialized experiences*. They are insidious, convoluted, hard-to-pin-down,  
20 but psychically and painfully felt. As well, they are best captured as symbolic violence  
21 (Bourdieu, 1991).<sup>13</sup> The beauty (and I recognize the irony of the term) of symbolic  
22 violence in this case is that it works through slippage; that is, when the doers are  
23 confronted or called up to answer to their deeds, they can escape by saying: ‘We didn’t  
24 know; indeed we had the best intentions; we wanted to treat African students like any  
25 other students’ (see also Graham & Slee, 2008 and their notion of ‘benevolent humani-  
26 tarianism’). *Intentions matter only in their final effect*, as we know. That is, in socio-psychic  
27 terms, how one makes people feel matters as much if not more than one’s intentions.  
28 Intentional or not, African students in MV have built an experiential memory that is not  
29 so pleasant to remember, which is strongly expressed in language.  
30

31 **Race-in(g)-Language: *Le français parisien* Illegitimately Spoken**

32 In MV, it is clear that race (read Blackness in this case) is experienced in at least three  
33 different ways, as we saw above, and with variable degrees of emotional intensity. My  
34 contention in this section is that language is central to this experience. Given their  
35 postcolonial education, by and large, African students arrive at school fluent in, and  
36 armed with, the highly valuable symbolic capital: *le français parisien*. Interestingly  
37 enough, as is noted many times by Heller *et al.* (1999), the role and the mandate of the  
38 French-language schools in Ontario is to introduce students to this variety of French as  
39 well as to the variety spoken by middle-class Franco-Ontarians. However, when African  
40 students come to school with this capital, there is an astonishment and disbelief on the  
41 part of teachers and school counselors. Their language, it seems, is *deceptively fluent*: they  
42 cannot be so fluent and speak the language with such mastery! This skepticism stems  
43 from the fact that, as Bourdieu (1991) would have said, the ‘legitimate’ language is  
44 spoken by an ‘illegitimate’ speaker: a refugee who is imagined to be, at least in the



1 dominant media representations, a source of pity and not astonishment and envy. This  
2 mistrust of the linguistic capital that African students possess has led to a patronizing  
3 attitude that is easily open to a racialized, if not blunt racist reading. Without naming it  
4 as such, students were aware of both: the process of racialization and how it illegitimizes  
5 their speech. In my group interview with them, female students reflected on this situation  
6 thus:

7 Amani: The teacher could not stop thanking me every time I speak and tells me 'Here,  
8 your French, you can, it is different than the others. How that happens, where  
9 did you learn that? Are you sure that you are not in the wrong stream [this was  
10 a general level course]?'<sup>14</sup> You know, things like that. And then, she was really  
11 surprised you know. I told her 'No, I know what I have to know for my level,  
12 my my ...' [interrupted]

13 Aziza: And then she was very impressed when we said that we learn our French in our  
14 country. And then things like that, and then she said, 'really, in your country,  
15 there is really this system?'

16 Samira: 'Are there professors who speak French like that? But my God you have  
17 *l'accent français!*' But of course we have *l'accent français*, there were teachers  
18 that taught us, no? And then this: 'you are coming from Somalia oh, we never  
19 heard that in Somalia people speak French with ...' [interrupted]

20 Aziza: 'Really in Somalia you have this system?' You know, **they don't accept that**  
21 (group interview, French, bold added).

22 In my individual interview with Aziza, she expands on how teachers' disbelief is patron-  
23 izing and grossly disturbing, especially given its racial connotation:

24 Aziza: The first day when I wrote my [evaluation] test, of my French level, he [the  
25 counselor] was really surprised because I spoke an excellent French. The good  
26 and rich French; you know when you live in Africa? He was really surprised,  
27 you see. 'You have an excellent French,' you see! Because that is new you see,  
28 **an African who speaks a good French, much better than they do.** It is a  
29 bit [too much? unbelievable?] you see. And also there is a teacher who said to  
30 me 'where did you learn your French? Your French is good.' And then I said  
31 that I learned there where I came from, in Africa. And then she said, she could  
32 not believe you see. You see; she said that all the time. (individual interview,  
33 French, bold added).

34 In spite of their 'good,' 'rich,' and 'excellent' French, continental African students are  
35 disproportionately streamed in the general, non-college-bound level. This disproportion-  
36 ate number is noted by the students themselves. Using his ethnographic gaze, Musa (M,  
37 19, Djibouti) observed that, 'the majority of African students who are in Marie-Victorin  
38 take general level courses'. Although not all African students are in the general level, it  
39 is noteworthy that Musa introduced this observation to the discussion during my focus  
40 group interview with the boys without a question from me to this effect. Building on their  
41 memory of how schools functioned in Africa, African students were not fully aware of the

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1 difference between fundamental, general, and advanced level courses. In Africa, reflected  
2 the boys during my group interview with them, all students go to the same class to  
3 perform the same academic task:

4 A male voice: When you come, when you first arrive in the school, you don't  
5 know what general, advanced, fundamental courses mean. It is  
6 them [counselors and school administration] who give you your  
7 courses. You just want to go to school to study. They force you to  
8 take general courses [telephone rings]. You don't know what a  
9 general course means.

10 Musa: With general courses you can't go too far. (group interview, French)

11 On the other hand, not surprising but exceptionally disturbing, most African students are  
12 pushed towards sports. In their studies, Dei *et al.* (2000), James & Shadd (2001),  
13 Mensah (2002), Nelson & Nelson (2004), and Yon (2000) have all observed the same  
14 phenomenon in Canada. Thinking about their counselor, the boys continue:

15 Mukhi: But still, there is Monsieur Raymond [a counselor] who even if you took  
16 five physical education [courses], he is going to give a sixth.

17 A male voice: *Yah, I don't know why.*

18 Mukhi: I don't know why like, to make you waste time or something. (group  
19 interview, French)

20 The girls, on their part, seem to believe that it is the boys who are streamed more in the  
21 lower levels; but because of lack of statistical information, I can neither confirm nor  
22 overrule this observation. Nonetheless, I made the same ethnographic observation. Boys'  
23 presence in general level is substantially higher than the girls'; close to 90% boys as  
24 opposed to less than 10% girls. When asked why, the girls hypothesized that that has to  
25 do with the exclusivity the boys make between sports and academic performance. Always  
26 according to the girls, becoming a successful athlete for the boys is seen in opposition to  
27 doing well academically. When one is doing one's homework successfully, one is seen as  
28 a 'nerd', a term connected to what Ogbu and Fordham (1986) call 'acting white'. The  
29 girls have seen these boys 'back-home' where they were 'first class' students. Something  
30 has happened that caused them to see academics in opposition to athleticism.

31 Awad: I have noticed that at the school, especially there is a very very strong majority  
32 [of the African students] who are present in the general level.

33 Asma: That I know why. You know why?

34 Awad: Why?

35 Asma: The majority are the boys. The majority are the boys, they want *basketball*.  
36 *Dream Team*, I love the *basketball* [a girl talking], Yes, wait.

37 Ossi: Yah, what does that mean?

38 Awad: Yes, yes, what does that mean?

1 Asma: They really want, they really could, I know these boys. They are really good. I  
2 remember in my country, they were really intelligent students.

3 Aziza: First class.

4 Asma: Yes, they know, they know. They know their academics, they know how to do  
5 this, how to do that. The problem is that if I start doing my homework, and I  
6 am a boy, this means I am a nerd. (group interview, French)

7 The gendered answer was exceptionally interesting here. When I asked the boys the same  
8 questions of why they dichotomize academics and athleticism, on the one hand, and why  
9 they are disproportionately in general, non-university-bound level courses, there was an  
10 unanimous response around their racialized experience, school counseling, or being  
11 refugees and living on their own as the reasons for their streaming and sense of alienation.  
12 Mukhi (M, 18. Djibouti) sums thus: 'Si tu allais faire un sondage, ça vient souvent  
13 de l'orientation ou des personnels' ['If you conduct a survey, the reason stems either  
14 from counseling or school personnel']. Taking the role of the African elder, Musa (M, 19,  
15 Djibouti) expressed the African students' agony concerning living on their own, working  
16 through the immigration papers and dealing with their social workers: 'The African  
17 students, they have a lot of problems. Here, the Canadians don't have problems, they  
18 have their parents, there is that. We, we have problems. You, you are late, she [the  
19 principal] sends you home. You go home for three or four days. We, we can't afford that  
20 because there is the immigration that calls us: "you have to come to see me today". You  
21 have to sign your check, things like that. There is back and forth. So, you have to go to  
22 the immigration, you have to go to, your, how do you call it, social worker?' (group  
23 interview, French)

24 Expanding on Mukhi's notion of school personnel and their role on student streaming  
25 in the general level, Musa continued his contention and elderly role: 'But the majority of  
26 the African students who are at Marie-Victorin, every time I see them, they take general  
27 level courses. I don't know why. "Why are you taking a general level course?" [explaining  
28 how he talks to other younger students] "It's Madame Robert [the principal] who gave  
29 it to me". "But, *gee* Madame Robert, [let her] go to hell, and take an advanced level  
30 course", I said' (group interview, French). In my field notes dated 5 February, 1996, I  
31 wrote, 'Musa came up to me requesting if I can offer an English-language tutoring course  
32 because he thinks that African students have problems with English'. What is significant  
33 in all of this is the fact that, first, unselfishly Musa is looking after other younger African  
34 students and, second, Musa's hopes are high that students can do much better. He knows  
35 they can do much better.

### 36 37 **Consequently: Making Linkages and Conclusions**

38 Consequently, anyone should be able to declare under oath: I have only one  
39 language and it is not mine; my 'own' language is, for me, a language that  
40 cannot be assimilated. My language, the only one I hear myself speak and  
41 agree to speak, is the language of the other. (Derrida, 1996, p. 25)

42 At this point, I am sure my 'gentle reader' (as W. E. Du Bois would have called you), may  
43 be wondering if the connection was made between race, language, postcoloniality and

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1 authority of speaking. I certainly hope so. I have to admit though, tersely and specula-  
2 tively, the paper is meant to be food for thought which sometimes is more provocative  
3 than a French three-course meal. My intent was to show how, given students' racialized  
4 bodily experience, students' speech was illegitimized despite its highly symbolic value.  
5 This is what I am referring to as 'symbolic violence'. This is closer to Foucault's (1979)  
6 notion of punishment, where the flesh is replaced with psychic experience. That is to say,  
7 one is left questioning not only one's speech and language but even one's subjectivity  
8 (not to say humanity). Derrida (1996) again—talking about himself as an Algerian-Jew  
9 who has nothing else but French to 'speak': 'In what language does one write memoirs  
10 when there has been no authorized [language]? How does one utter a worthwhile "I  
11 recall" when it is necessary to invent both one's language and one's "I"?' (p. 31).

12 African students, it seems, are left with the same question: Can we ever speak with  
13 authority? They are to invent both their language and their subjectivity. Here students  
14 were conscious of what is involved in this (re)invention, this *linguistic return*, where one  
15 spells one's own name and names oneself. It involves:

- 16 1) A full mastery of the rules of the game, what Bourdieu (1991) would call the 'market  
17 of exchange'. In any market, Bourdieu explains, there are currencies or capitals that  
18 are needed, there are rules on how to exchange these capitals, and he emphasized that  
19 the players along with the rules determine the value of capital. Hassan (M, 17,  
20 Djibouti) was fully aware of his role in the school as a 'market of exchange' and the  
21 capitals he possesses:

22 Hassan: So, there are all these structures and differences that you have to play with  
23 [*jouer avec*]. Such include the fact that you have to have the competency of  
24 playing with others, you have to know how to play with others. (individual  
25 interview, French)

26 Clearly, we do not all enter the game the same way, nor with the same capital. None-  
27 theless, 'gaming the system' or knowing how to play the game (i.e. system) is essential for  
28 Hassan.

- 29 2) Once aware of exclusion and discrimination, or knowing how the system works and  
30 how it excludes people, one is under the ethical responsibility to 'out' it, to talk about,  
31 and to turn it around to one's own benefit. To do so, however, one can work within  
32 the 'system,' from the inside. Hassan articulates it thus:

33 Hassan: To begin with, there are all these stereotypes about Black people. There is  
34 discrimination and all that, OK! The only way to combat discrimination is  
35 outing [or publicizing] discrimination. Why do we have all this [discrimina-  
36 tion]? We have to play their games to our own benefit. We don't have to do the  
37 impossible you know. (individual interview, French)

38 Since one is working with the system, the 'game' if you like, one does not look for  
39 alternative markets and identities—as did the boys when they chose basketball as  
40 opposed to volleyball and Hip-Hop as opposed to dominant identities. Instead, one  
41 chooses to affirm one's identity from within the particular *authorized, legitimized* and  
42 *dominant* market and identity. Yet, Hassan is mindful of the fact that, in the case of

1 Blackness, there are no guarantees even when one possesses the market's required  
2 credentials and capitals. That is why, he adds in the same interview, 'if you come in [for  
3 an interview] with a tie, or with a suit, with your PhD, they are *probably* going to accept  
4 you more than before'. By 'they,' one may argue, Hassan is referring to the power bloc,  
5 those who have a larger control of the market, and who set themselves as the norm, the  
6 yardstick against which all is measured. Given their benefit from the dominant structure,  
7 'they' have little incentive and lucrative investment in imagining others differently,  
8 especially Black people, and in decentering themselves. For to do so is to question one's  
9 own power and in some cases give all or some of it up.<sup>15</sup>

10 3) As educators, finally, and especially as anti-racism workers, we need to deconstruct  
11 the social structure of domination, discrimination and negation. Otherwise, some are  
12 damned to struggle all their lives and find themselves in the periphery of power with  
13 little or no resources and capitals. Thanks to these hegemonic structures, Black/  
14 African youth, by and large, find themselves putting in twice the effort to reach an  
15 average position (at least as defined by rules of the market). They carry the burden of  
16 'proving' themselves, which means in some cases, they have to dichotomize, on the  
17 one hand, the school and the schooling process and, on the other, their personal  
18 desires, history, language and culture:

19 Hassan: But, I can prove it, I can do whatever I want to, dress<sup>16</sup> however I want to, have  
20 whatever I want to, and be myself. You do what you have to do, you have 100%  
21 in your classes, and you are well-liked by everyone. It is really deceiving, it is  
22 really deceiving that despite all of these, we have to prove what we have to  
23 everyone, or who we are, and the others don't. (individual interview, French)

24 One way to do so, Hassan contends, is to 'flip the script' as Hip-Hoppers love to say. That  
25 is, in place of failure one emphasizes pedagogies of hope, possibility and success; and  
26 talks about the unsaid, the absent, and the silenced:

27 Hassan: And the only way to do it [prove ourselves to others?] is not to conform or buy  
28 into stereotypical data like: 'Oh 50% of African youth had failed, they can't do  
29 it.' What has to happen is to show them that 50% had passed, not only to show  
30 them the 50% that failed. But they only see the part that failed, they don't look  
31 for the part that passed. We have to show them the part that passed, that's what  
32 we have to do; and this is one of my objectives: to do more in this regard, to  
33 leave a dream ... (individual interview, French)

34 To materialize this dream Hassan is placing the onus squarely on himself. He is not  
35 *Waiting for Godot*, as Samuel Beckett would have put it, to do something about the social  
36 situation he sees around him. He is willing to 'sacrifice' and take up that burden and he  
37 knows the price he has to pay. As the old African saying goes: if the spirit is high, the body  
38 can only feel its height/weight. That is to say, the body does not have too many choices  
39 when there is a will, since we are guided by our will not our bodies.

40 Hassan: I am sacrificing enormous amount of time. I have been in a chain of commit-  
41 tees for example, so there are always prices to pay. He who wants something,  
42 he is going to pay prices. You want something, you have to pay for it. You may



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1 have to prove something, your strength or whatever. Personally, I know I  
2 sacrificed: I missed evenings and there is my mother, anxious [*debordée*]. ‘You  
3 come really late at night. Why do you stay after school, occupied with so much  
4 work?’ she says, you see! (individual interview, French)

5 Hassan’s spirit of sacrifice, personal responsibility, and vision are vital in the struggle  
6 against exclusion and discrimination. However, the institutional and systematic nature of  
7 racialization, discrimination and exclusion motivate us to think not only how discrimi-  
8 nation takes place, but also, significantly, how it tends to reproduce privilege, especially  
9 White privilege (Graham & Slee, 2008). As Peggy McIntosh (1998) argues, for the  
10 longest time we tend to think about discrimination and racism and their effects on the  
11 victim. We need, she contends, to think about discrimination and racism as technologies  
12 of power that end up reproducing privileges, ways of thinking, being and speaking. To  
13 conclude, Hassan’s mother is absolutely right in asking, ‘Why do you personally, my son,  
14 sacrifice so much?’ What both Hassan and his mother need to ask as well is: ‘Why do we  
15 as African and Black people have to prove who we are and what we have to anyone?’ In  
16 an Obama-era, this latter question seems more than ever urgent since the silenced are yet  
17 to speak, and to speak with authority. They love but their love is yet to be heard as a  
18 creative margin for a radical pedagogy of hope, love and desire.

19  
20 **Notes**

- 21 1. To clarify, there are two varieties of French that are talked about here: *français de France* and  
22 *français canadien*. I refer to the former as ‘*français parisien*’ (Parisian French) and the latter as  
23 ‘*français de souche*’ (original or old French; a term used both in Quebec and Ontario to refer  
24 to ‘original’ French settlers and their language). In the Franco-Ontarian context, the Parisian  
25 French is highly valued whereas *français de souche*, the variety spoken by most Franco-Ontarian  
26 schoolteachers, is both marginalized and discouraged. For further discussion, see the section  
27 in this article titled: ‘Then, Who Owns Language?’ For now, however, one may argue that we  
28 are dealing with ‘racialized class conflict’ where classism and racism are expressed through  
29 linguisticism, that is, in the variety spoken and valued. Interestingly enough, Franco-Ontarian  
30 teachers speak *français de souche*, which they in turn devalued. This is a phenomenon of  
31 cognitive dissidence, if not a schizophonic moment; one where one devalues what one speaks.  
32 However, when continental African youth arrived to the school with their *français international*  
33 (which I am provocatively calling *français parisien*), as we shall see, they are told: ‘That’s just  
34 unbelievable!’
- 35 2. Linda Graham and Roger Slee (2008) show a similar process taking place in Australia, where  
36 White Australians do not seem to fall under the umbrella of *deceptive fluency*; only the Other,  
37 it seems, are placed outside what they call ‘ghostly center’ (p. 284). In his book, *White by Law*,  
38 Ian Haney-Lopez (2006) addresses a similar notion which he calls ‘rule of common knowl-  
39 edge’. Emerging in the 1930s–50s in the United States, the *rule of common knowledge* was used  
40 to preclude people of Asian descent from immigrating to the US, who were forced to argue  
41 in the courts that they were either ‘White’ or ‘of African descent’. All the cases heard took the  
42 former tack, Haney-Lopez explains, partly because it was during Jim Crow segregation. In  
43 attempting to argue that Asians were White (a color, not a geographic or biological origin),  
44 those who called skilled anthropologists to testify on their behalf lost their bid to immigrate  
45 because the courts applied what was called the rule of common knowledge, in stating that,  
46 even if you are scientifically White, we all know that you are not what common knowledge  
47 tells us is White, so for that reason you can not come into the country. Clearly, the so-called  
48 truth of Western science is subverted in the service of racist perception. To finish, I owe much

- 1 of this text and the notion of the rule of common knowledge to one of the reviewers of this  
2 article.
- 3 3. In reality, 'language' is and has always been plural. For Derrida (1996), the French language,  
4 for example, always had (and still has) multiple speakers, accents and daily expressions.  
5 However, it was standardized as it was written, thus attempting to eliminate its multiplicity.  
6 This standardization, Derrida argues, is part of a colonial project, where even people within  
7 France who spoke a variety of French were brought into the project of the Republic, which is  
8 assumed to have one language, one accent and one voice.
- 9 4. See Mishra, 2005 for a comprehensive recent discussion of the term 'post-colonial'.
- 10 5. Quebec, as some might know, is a monolingual French-only province; and New Brunswick is  
11 the only bilingual French-English province. The rest of Canada is English-language speaking.  
12 This may be confusing to some since Canada is a bilingual country. Here, when Canada  
13 declares itself a bilingual country, this is usually in reference to the languages used by the  
14 federal government in its formal functioning. It does not mean that every province or every  
15 Canadian is bilingual. On its part, however, the federal government spends a substantial  
16 amount of money to make Canadians bilingual or at least functional in both official languages.  
17 For the purpose of this paper, two things are noteworthy: 1) more French speakers become  
18 bilingual (which puts them at a greater advantage when it comes to federal government jobs)  
19 and 2) for Franco-Ontarians, given the omnipresence of English in Ontario, this endangers the  
20 French language because by the second or third generation they become English-dominant  
21 speakers. That is, they tend to speak and be more functional in English than French and  
22 therefore their French-language schooling is marginalised if not put off in favor of the English  
23 language.
- 24 6. The detailed analysis and discussion of these features by Mougeon and Beniak (1991) has  
25 been my reference in this area.
- 26 7. For Franco-Ontarians, the French language (not to say France itself) is still their highly prized  
27 symbolic capital. Even though they may speak it little and in many cases, not at all, that  
28 identity (along with its language) is by and large *the* claimed identity. Put simply, though  
29 Franco-Ontarians are largely 'hyphenated' and fluent in French and English, they will still claim  
30 French as their determining identity and language.
- 31 8. When it comes to Franco-Ontarians, notions of coloniality, postcoloniality and oppression are  
32 exceptionally complicated. Franco-Ontarians are a French-speaking minority in Ontario. They  
33 struggle as much as any minority does, and historically has been prevented from teaching their  
34 language or opening French-language schools (Heller, 2006). Yet, presently they have  
35 unearned privileges that others have to struggle either for or against: Whiteness, language,  
36 (institutionalized) power, school and social institutions, and above all the protection of the  
37 state. Because of these privileges, the population of my research (continental francophone  
38 Africans) finds itself a minority within a minority. Put simply, Franco-Ontarians do feel that  
39 their language variety is not as valued as *le français parisien* or *français de France*, but they ally  
40 themselves with this privileged symbolic capital by naming themselves: *Français de souche*  
41 [original or old French], hence creating complex situation where the oppressed or dispos-  
42 sessed can be an oppressor or a possessor, where the very notion of oppression and exclusion  
43 is no longer a unidimensional idea.
- 44 9. For Simon and Dippo (1986, p. 195), *critical ethnographic research* is a set of activities situated  
45 within a project that seeks and works its way towards social transformation. This project is  
46 political as well as pedagogical, and who the researcher is and what his or her racial, gender,  
47 and class embodiments are necessarily govern the research questions and findings. The  
48 project, then, according to Simon and Dippo, is 'an activity determined both by real and  
49 present conditions, *and* certain conditions still to come which it is trying to bring into being'  
50 (p. 196). The assumption underpinning my project was based on the assertion that Canadian  
51 society is 'inequitably structured and dominated by a hegemonic culture that suppresses a  
52 consideration and understanding of why things are the way they are and what must be done  
53 for things to be otherwise' (p. 196).

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- 1 10. Sandra Harding (1987) showed that the claim to objectivity in research has taxed both the  
2 research process as well as the research outcome. She thus called for a subjective notion of  
3 research, where the researcher and the questions she asks are always subjective; that is, they  
4 mean something to the researcher. We end up reading the data we collect through a specific  
5 lens. This researcher therefore has always declared himself an organic part of his research.  
6 Though there was quite a considerable overlap between the mid-1990s and 2007 findings, for  
7 the sake of clarity, the focus for this paper will be on the 1990s findings.
- 8 11. To deal with issues of race and racism is to enter the chilling space of discomfort. Not to affect  
9 the student-teacher relationship, I decided not to speak with the teachers. But, elsewhere  
10 (Ibrahim, in press) I juxtaposed student narratives by talking to the only Black teacher at the  
11 school, who ended up leaving the school after a short time there. He expanded and confirmed  
12 student stories of racialization and exclusion. He had plenty of stories himself. It is worth  
13 noting here that, when I am referring to teachers' 'experiential knowledge' (or the lack  
14 thereof), I am invoking both the need for further multicultural sensitivity, especially within  
15 teacher education programs, and real life experience. Based on my teaching experience in  
16 French-language teacher education programs, I believe real life experience would be my  
17 choice in creating a higher level of multi/cultural/lingual awareness.
- 18 12. Each student pseudonym is followed by their gender, age and country of origin. I will also  
19 indicate whether the interview is individual or group or in French or English.
- 20 13. Violence is, by definition, violent, no matter the shape or form. In Bourdieu's (1991) language,  
21 however, 'symbolic violence' is no less violence or violent. It is 'symbolic' only in that it works  
22 at the psychic and intangible level. It is conceived in relation (not in opposition) to material  
23 and bodily violence. The two forms of violence, for Bourdieu, are complementary, go hand in  
24 hand, and can/do converge one into the other. (See also his notion of 'symbolic' and 'material'  
25 capital.)
- 26 14. In Ontario, there are two streams: general and academic. The former leads students either to  
27 vocation schools or community colleges, whereas the latter leads to university studies. Despite  
28 their language mastery, most African students find themselves in general level, as we shall see,  
29 which itself becomes part of their experience with the process of racialization.
- 30 15. Using Derrida's notion of 'play', Graham and Slee (2008) offer an interesting analysis on how  
31 the center/margin work. One of their main arguments is that, 'there *is no* centre but instead  
32 an *absence* of centre for which infinite substitutions are made, for there is no natural essence,  
33 origin or "invariable presence" ... , supporting a legitimate claim to centre' (p. 284). We  
34 thus end up creating, what Graham and Slee call, discursive 'ghostly centers'; ones where  
35 there is a 'substitution of sign, substituting presence (i.e. singularity/normality/whiteness/  
36 ablebodiedness and so on) for absence (multiplicity/diversity)' (p. 284). Here, the authors add,  
37 'privilege and position at centre is dependent upon the subjection and marginalisation of the  
38 Other,' and the 'maintenance of positions of power through discursive dividing practices as  
39 rhetorical strategies ... that (re)secure domination and privilege results in the reinstatement  
40 of the politic of the powerful' (p. 284). I am also mindful that Hassan may have left a sense of  
41 the classic 'internalized racism', which goes something like this: If I can just be good enough,  
42 you will see I am like you, so embrace me! Hassan was too self-conscious and troubled this  
43 notion elsewhere (see Ibrahim, 2009).
- 44 16. Most of the time, Hassan had on elegant yet baggy clothes, bordering on Hip-Hop and  
45 dominant/ 'regular' clothes. Hassan was one of the most popular and elegant students at the  
46 school. He was the student Council President for two years and one of the most articulate  
47 students at the school. He was invited many times to school board meetings to address African  
48 youth concerns.

49  
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