

## Opinion

### Sidney Poitier and the Black Voice



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Sidney Poitier's passing has me thinking about the Black voice.

**And first, let's look at the idea of a Black voice.** Because Black people have been subjected to so much stereotyping and because there is a considerable overlap of white Southern speech with Black English, we must be wary of the idea that there is only one Black way of talking.

But amid this wariness it is relevant that linguists note aspects of speech that are much more typical of Black Americans than other people. To wit: Our sense that there is a such thing as “sounding Black” is not based on mere stereotype, but fact.

It’s largely a matter of the shadings of certain vowels and a certain way of shading the voice in general. People’s speaking styles diverge as they spend more time with one another than with others, and in ways no one is conscious of. This is true whether we’re talking about Central Europe, the Pacific islands or the Amazon, and is true in different regions and within different ethnic groups in the United States. It’s about who you feel comfortable with as much as who you encounter — most of us talk like the people we know.

“Why is there a Black way of talking?” isn’t where linguists would start. We’d start with “Why *wouldn’t* there be a Black way of talking?” Black English isn’t a distortion or diminution of mainstream American English; it’s one of many kinds of American English. Over the years, linguists have richly documented that it’s complicated, just like all speech, with its own grammar, pronunciation and cadence.

**So, let’s get back to Poitier, but by way of the 19th century.** After the end of American slavery, Black Americans faced, of course, many instances of violent repression and codified second-class citizenship. Among the barriers faced was that for a Black person who wanted to gain influence in broader circles, he or she had to, in many cases, learn to speak in an utterly unfamiliar way.

Booker T. Washington was born enslaved in 1856. He grew up speaking Black English, as nearly any enslaved person living on a plantation would have. Yet in recordings of him speaking, you wouldn’t necessarily know, if not apprised, that he was Black.

The educator, feminist and activist Mary McLeod Bethune was born in 1875, after slavery, and as a child worked in some of the same fields where her parents had been enslaved. Listening to recordings of her speaking, if you didn’t know better, you might think you were hearing someone who had been reared in the drawing room of a society matron of the era. Bethune had to master this way of speaking — what today we might call code switching — to be heard at all in her time.

The celebrated contralto Marian Anderson, perhaps best known for her 1939 performance at the Lincoln Memorial, is another example. To many people, she, too, sounded white when she spoke.

Generally speaking, Black public figures in the mid-20th century, including performers — with a notable exception among comedians such as Redd Foxx and Moms Mabley, whose comedy leaned into an embrace of Black English — could also get downright creative with how they sounded when they spoke, particularly when they wanted to reach white audiences. Listening to these figures today, one senses that one was to avoid sounding “too Black” even to the point of embracing an accent other than one they might have known early in life. The chanteuse Eartha Kitt was born in 1927 in segregated South Carolina. In her public persona — in songs, interviews and her memorable turn as Catwoman in the campy late 1960s “Batman” series — her signature became a vocal style splitting the difference between

Eleanor Roosevelt and Edith Piaf. Nina Simone was born in North Carolina in 1933. She sounded Black American vocal notes in much of her music, but when speaking publicly often adopted a hard-to-classify speaking style that sounded faintly Caribbean.

**Back to Poitier, then.** He's celebrated as a pioneer, and justly so, as the first Black winner of an Oscar for best actor and one of the first Black leading men in mainstream Hollywood films, among them "No Way Out," "The Defiant Ones," "A Raisin in the Sun," "Lilies of the Field" (for which he won that Oscar) and "In the Heat of the Night."

But in my callow youth, I must admit I never saw him as a trailblazer in the way that I was supposed to. The reason: I loved what he did, but I sensed him as a Caribbean man.

Poitier was Bahamian (he was born in Miami but spent his early years in the Bahamas) and always sounded it, especially in more passionate moments. Indeed, in 1967's "To Sir, With Love," he played a teacher of Guyanese descent working in a struggling multiracial working-class London school. As a kid, it never occurred to me that I was to process him in his roles as someone who had grown up on, say, Chicago's South Side. In "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," I saw him as, well, a young Caribbean gentleman coming to dinner.

And while the Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy characters in that film wouldn't have been at all thrilled about a Caribbean gent marrying their daughter, it seemed to me that they would have been even less enthusiastic if the suitor was a Black man from somewhere like Chicago's South Side — a point that would have been underscored if the part had been played by a different Black actor of the period, such as the lacrosse and football great Jim Brown, who was in dozens of movies after his N.F.L. career, or Billy Dee Williams, of "Lady Sings the Blues" and "The Empire Strikes Back" fame (though both were a few years younger than Poitier). A "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" with Williams, no matter how gracefully he would have played the lead role, almost certainly would never have been made in 1967.

Poitier was certainly a pioneer — but in the sense that he was transitional. In a mid-20th-century America that feared and scorned Blackness and especially Black maleness that came with a hint of sexuality, the first real Black matinee idol was almost inevitably going to be someone who didn't talk (or move) in modes more typically associated with American Black men. A more local, less global Black voice would have made (or have been assumed to have made) white audiences back then too uncomfortable for a big studio to have greenlighted Poitier's classic films. He was, quietly but decisively, *different*. He was from somewhere else, even if you only thought of that subconsciously — as we do to a major degree about language in all of its facets.

**But he was a bridge.** He was Black, after all, and his Caribbean cadences certainly weren't white-sounding. He helped pave the way not only for other Black actors, but also for acceptance of more varied Black speech. In the 1960s, the Black Power movement and the Black Is Beautiful movement — proud displays of Blackness in aesthetic mediums including clothing and hairstyles — became part of the Black mainstream and increasingly (if not widely) accepted by the broader

society. Language norms transformed alongside, and from then on, American Black English was more acceptable in the public sphere than ever before.

Black English sounded forth in the so-called Blaxploitation genre of the 1970s as well as on network TV shows with Black casts like “The Jeffersons” and “Sanford and Son,” starring Foxx. In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was an explosion in Black film where Black English was woven throughout the dialogue, from Spike Lee’s early work to John Singleton’s “Boyz N The Hood.” Rap started its gradual penetration into mainstream American music such that now there are any number of hip-hop tracks almost guaranteed to be played by DJs at even all-white wedding receptions.

And in ways that were rarely possible in earlier generations, Black political figures could marshal sounding Black to amplify their voices in public discourse. Jesse Jackson’s oratory calls to mind a traditional Black preacher — he is, after all, a minister — and that was an asset, not a hindrance, during the 1988 presidential race, in which he won a string of Democratic primaries and caucuses. At carefully chosen intervals, Barack Obama summoned Black English on the way to becoming the first Black president. In New York City today, Mayor Eric Adams speaks with a Black New York accent that is as familiar to New Yorkers as any of the city’s many accents.

A linguistic hallmark of our times is that Black people no longer must abandon Black English to be taken seriously as movers and shakers. It’s evidence that even if change happens slowly, it happens. Poitier, an artistic giant, has always struck me, linguistically, as one of the last reminders of a time when white America didn’t take Black American speech seriously.

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