## Essay Assignment #1
### Due as a *WORD* file

It's February 2017, and you've just read Douglass's 1854 speech "The claims of the Negro ethnically considered." This powerful speech, from the 19th century already, fits right in the agenda of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Indeed the goal of the speech is to undermine some of the racist claims that degrade the humanity of Africans and their descendants in the Americas. However this speech—as it was written one and a half centuries ago—inevitably shows certain scientific flaws, many of which are a reflection of common beliefs in the 19th century.

Your assignment is to write a *letter* to Douglass. Your letter will contain a *coherent argument* that will help improve his analyses of the "humanity of the Negro." This argument will have two main components:

You explain the ways in which your own *linguistic* autobiography, alongside your newly acquired insights about linguistics in our *Black Matters* class, critically bear on Douglass's own assumptions and arguments about the role of African languages in proving the "humanity of the Negro Race." In other words, use personal biographical data coupled with scholarly analyses in order to *evaluate* and, *where appropriate*, to *improve* some of the details in Douglass's speech, especially focusing on his assumptions, evidence and reasoning.

As you improve Douglass's language-related arguments, please do two things:
1. Clearly identify and explain one or more flaws. *Ground your discussion in specific references to Douglass's speech; include quotations and page numbers for all relevant passages.* NB: Since you are not linguists, please do not get bogged down in the empirical and analytical details of Douglass's arguments about *particular* languages. Instead *analyze and correct*, where appropriate, the *underlying assumptions and the logic* of Douglass's argument, *in light of **all** that you've learned, from class discussions and readings, about history, linguistics, etc.*
2. Do lay out your *linguistic* biography with *specific details*—especially personal and socio-economic factors—that you think may have shaped your language patterns and your and others' feelings and attitudes toward these patterns. Relevant biographical data may include: place of birth, where you grew up, what language(s) and language attitudes you've been exposed to. Please share any relevant events that, as you remember them, may have influenced on, or challenged or affirmed, your identity in some decisive or memorable fashion. Then explain how these aspects of your biography bear on Douglass's language-related arguments. NB: Again, since you're not linguists, it's perfectly OK to describe speech patterns in everyday language, without any linguistic technical terminology. The most important issue here is your *meta*-linguistic reflection about your language patterns, its acceptance (or *lack* of acceptance) by others, how these patterns may have shaped your identity, and so on, and how such biographical matters bear on Douglass's language-related arguments. If you think they don't, then you can simply use your linguistic biography to introduce yourself to Douglass.

**Throughout your letter, it's crucial that you make <u>explicit</u> reference to relevant passages in the class readings and that you cite these passages appropriately, with page numbers (see below).**

**Guidelines:**
1. Maximum length of essay as **WORD document**: **1,000 words—<u>this maximum length is non-negotiable</u>**.
2. Include your name, the course, the date and a title on the first page. Be sure to double-space, use a normal 12-point font and 1-1.25 inch margins.
3. Number your pages.
4. Please support any assertion with specific references to the readings, *and include page numbers and bibliography as necessary.*
5. Cite quotations correctly. Consult the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.* This is the industry standard. Parenthetical quotations are fine for a short paper like this.
6. Refer to the **General Writing Guidelines** handout as you work on your essay.

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