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Voicing the Other: Mock AAVE on Social Media

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VOICING THE OTHER: MOCK AAVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

by

HANNA L. SMOKOSKI

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Linguistics in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016
VOICING THE OTHER: MOCK AAVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA
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HANNA L. SMOKOSKI

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Linguistics satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Abstract

VOICING THE OTHER: MOCK AAVE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

by

Hanna L. Smokoski

Adviser: Professor Cecelia Cutler

This project looks at the use on social media sites of features of African American Vernacular English by nonspeakers of it. This outgroup use of AAVE does not require nor reflect any true proficiency with the variety, but instead is often used to exaggerate the social distance between the stylizers using it on social media and the marginalized people for whom AAVE is a genuine mode of communication. Through double indexicality, nonspeakers of AAVE use features of it to annex certain positive qualities associated with Black or hip hop culture—toughness, coolness, an anti-establishment stance—for themselves, while reproducing negative stereotypes of the people generally thought to speak AAVE. An intertextual analysis of the data, made up of crowd-sourced social media posts exhibiting Mock AAVE, is used to establish the social meaning of the Mock register.
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Voicing the Other: Mock AAVE on Social Media

1. Introduction

This study examines the use on social networking sites\(^1\) of ‘mock Ebonics’ or Mock African American Vernacular English\(^2\) as defined by Ronkin and Karn (1999): “outgroup misappropriation of the language variety, which [indexes] racist stereotypes by reducing African Americans to stock outgroup images” (368). Mock AAVE refers to utterances by non-native speakers of AAVE that stylize iconic features of this socially stigmatized variety in order to invoke a Black persona. Examples from my data include utterances such as, “I woke up like dis,” “Bitches be suckin’ at pool,” or “All day errday.” Use of features of AAVE by speakers of other varieties of English (e.g. European Americans, Asian Americans, Indian Americans, and others) is highly common and can be examined through a third-wave sociolinguistic perspective in which stylization can express a range of stances, such as affiliation with Black culture or superiority to and distance from it (Eckert 2012). However, this research will follow Jane Hill’s work on Mock Spanish by arguing that Mock AAVE, regardless of the speaker’s intention, reproduces and normalizes negative stereotypes of AAVE speakers, and therefore constitutes covert racism and is an important piece of the racist project. (‘The racist project’ refers to

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1 Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr.
2 Cf. Rickford (1999). AAVE refers to a set of grammatical and phonological features which may occur in the colloquial language of other groups of Americans, especially southerners and members of the working class. However, the features AAVE shares with other varieties usually occur with greater frequency and in a wider variety of grammatical contexts in AAVE. “Not every African American speaks AAVE, and no one uses the features [catalogued in the article] 100 percent of the time” (9). Many of the features are used most often by younger speakers in urban areas. Spears (1997) discusses “two basic types of African American English: standard and nonstandard, and each type comprises many varieties, which differ along the lines of region, age, and other factors. Linguists refer to the nonstandard kind as AAVE or Black Vernacular English.” (7). Spears also clarifies standard African American English as having none of the structural features that grammarians consider nonstandard but instead differing from standard American English in its speech contours, rhythm, and vocabulary. The nonstandard features seen as exemplary of AAVE are the subject of this article.
racializing practices through which symbolic and material resources are appropriated from ethnic minority groups for the purposes of Whites, cf. Hill 2011).

Like most language varieties, African American English exhibits inherent variability, encompassing a range from standard to vernacular (cf. Arthur Spears 2001), but stylizations most often make use of features associated with African American Vernacular English, filtered through hip hop and pop cultural representations of Blackness. Examining outgroup AAVE use reveals which features of the variety have become iconic of it in the minds of White, European American speakers of ‘standard’ or mainstream American English, and cataloguing the topics it is used to discuss reveals its intertextual meaning: an image of a stereotypical AAVE speaker. A speaker may stylize AAVE in order to express familiarity with Black culture or to invoke AAVE’s historic resistance to European American cultural norms and hegemony (Smitherman 2000). While a speaker’s intent may be to express his or her (perhaps fleeting) “opposition to authority and disidentification with middle class White culture” (Cutler 2008), the idea that the use of iconic features of AAVE can confer on a speaker the accumulated streetwise cultural caché of Black Americans is simplistic and possibly offensive. It reduces AAVE to the kind of ephemeral youth language picked up, put on, and tossed away by teenagers. In other cases, AAVE stylizations are intended to be humorous because of the comic mismatch between the speaker’s ethnic, educational, socioeconomic and cultural background and the perceived lack of education that would result in the kind of “lazy, error-riddled” speech they are temporarily using (AAVE is seen this way in popular linguistic ideologies and not, of course, by linguists). In these cases, analysis of the dual-script variety used in Santa Ana’s (2009) “Did you call in Mexican?” is very helpful, as is Agha’s (2005) ‘tropic uses of voice’ and Hill’s (1995, 1998, 2009) theory of ‘indirect indexicality.’
This research examines posts on Tumblr, tweets from Twitter, captions and comments from Instagram, and comments and posts from other blogging platforms, in which users stylize AAVE. Whether use of AAVE is authentic or some form of stylization will be determined through Agha’s method of individuating voices; posts which exhibit a ‘voice’ that is not continuous with other posts by the same user will be categorized as stylizations. First, I will determine which features have been enregistered and are commonly used to index a Black persona, as well as other possible indexical links and social meanings. ‘Enregisterment’ refers to a process whereby “distinct forms of speech become socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users” (Agha 2005:45); in other words, it is those features that speakers of other varieties of English see as iconic of Black speakers. Then, following Hill (1995), I will categorize instances of Mock AAVE according to the topics they are used to discuss, which will allow for an interpretation of the intertextual meaning created by its use.

Hill concludes her article “Mock Spanish: A Site for the Indexical Reproduction of Racism” with a call for research on similar language misappropriations: “American racism almost certainly includes other, similar strategic systems that might be identified by careful research. Especially, similar devices that function to pejorate and racialize African Americans and Asian Americans should be sought and analyzed” (1995: 189). I argue that a linguistic system of pejoration and racialization of African Americans is flourishing on the social media pages of young adults. This research will explore the space between the type of dialect stylization seen in Rampton (1995), which describes groups of ethnically diverse youth ‘crossing’ into one another’s usual varieties and creatively constructing a new urban code, and
the type of impersonal, and often overtly racist, broadcasted language discussed in “Mock Ebonics” (Ronkin and Karn 1999).

1.1 Situating African American English in History

African American English is at the center of American sociolinguistic research, much of which has focused on remedying its stigmatized status and the low rung it occupies in popular linguistic ideologies.

Morgan (1994) lists the questions the body of research has intended to address:

Is African American English a language or a dialect? Who speaks it? What are its linguistic origins? From which social, cultural, and political conditions did it emerge? What are its identifying features? In what context is information about it gathered? Why does it exist? What is its orthographic representation? And what is the role of African American activism in the scholarly representation of culture and language? (326).

Its deeply stigmatized status is undisputed: in the 1960s, Labov and his team of researchers were the first to state that the language use typical of African Americans did not represent impaired cognitive development. Morgan (1994) quotes his argument that “rather than reflecting deprivation and deviance, AAE grammatical and phonological features are related to AE [American English] in logical and systemic ways” (328). However, Morgan notes, Labov’s description “of vernacular or core black culture” constructs authentic African American membership and language as “male, adolescent, insular, and trifling” (328), which excludes women, children, and the elderly. This reveals an attitude about the language that remains strong among nonlinguists: an insistence on seeing AAVE as a collection of slang terms, a less-than-complete language, and a conflation of AAVE and inner-city Black culture so rigid that the mere presence of AAVE features in a speaker’s linguistic repertoire indicates to many listeners the
negative characteristics stereotypically associated with urban, socioeconomically marginalized adolescent Black males.

Vitriolic attitudes toward African American English were seen during the Ebonics controversy of 1996, the jumping-off point for Spears (2001), which refutes popular opinion by explaining:

No kind of African-American English is in any way deficient; all kinds serve the communicative needs of their speakers effectively. To characterize any kind of African-American English as nothing more than slang or street language is an insult to the many grandmothers, ministers, adolescents, and others who use it—on at least some occasions. (7).

He continues by writing that “African American Vernacular English is stigmatized because its speakers are stigmatized” (9)—there is nothing inherently deficient about AAVE as a linguistic system. Many white and middle-class speakers, even highly educated ones, make daily use of features that are not “standard” according to prescriptivist views, but the boundaries of the standard are then moved to accommodate them (9); the idea of what is standard language is far from objective and instead changes to reflect the constantly evolving speech of speakers deemed “standard.”

1.2 Outgroup Use of African American Vernacular English and Other Varieties

Many recent articles have discussed teenagers and young adults of other cultural and ethnic backgrounds adopting features of AAVE to do a range of semiotic ‘work.’ Rampton (2005) describes the turn in sociolinguistics away from assuming and cataloguing homogeneous speech from social/ethnic groups toward documenting the fragmented yet fluid ways people shape their identities through speech:

Instead of studying how African Caribbeans, Asians and Anglos use language, either together or on their own, we need to look at the role that language plays when humans
interact together in situations where (a) discourses of race and ethnicity have currency (impacting on the distribution of material and symbolic resources, circulating in local, national and global networks), where (b) they're potentially relevant to the participants (classifying and rating them differently), where (c) the participants may want or happen to activate these associations, but where (d) they might also have other things on their minds, or have come to an understanding that neutralizes the personal impact that these discourses can have (3).

Rampton (2005) serves as an excellent guide for the study of dialect stylization among diverse groups of friends, addressing the “striking gap between the way that youngsters in multi-ethnic peer groups were supposed to use their ethnic languages, and the language mixing and crossing” that characterized their everyday speech (5). It examines “the ways race and ethnicity are asserted, questioned, and contested” through outgroup use of Stylized Asian English, Panjabi, and Creole among a very diverse group of secondary school students (19). The text views the construction of a personal cultural identity as very much a do-it-yourself process; it (cautiously) lays the groundwork for interpreting the potential intended meanings of dialect stylization. Rampton identifies moments of liminality during which the social structure becomes subtly unstable as times when “crossing,” usually in the form of rote, ritualized phrases, can be used to navigate the situation with a bit of humor. He found that Creole brought up “connotations counterposed to the norms of polite mainstream society…concerns with excitement, risk, trouble, unusual appearance, sport, relations with the opposite sex” (213) and that its appropriate use was very dependent on the situation: “If a person crossed at times that were not liminal, they risked being seen as making a serious claim about being black” (217). For these adolescents, Creole is a sociolinguistic resource useful for highlighting a momentary anti-establishment stance, but one that they use cautiously as it is constrained by social norms.

In Reyes (1999), Southeast Asian teenagers growing up in Philadelphia use features of AAVE to construct an identity for themselves as the Other Asian, which they feel more
accurately reflects their experiences than mainstream American stereotypes of East Asians. Through double and even triple indexicality, these teens create a link between themselves and the language and culture of the African Americans with whom they share schools and neighborhoods. The author refers to their use of features of AAVE as appropriation, writing that though students borrowed slang out of admiration, saying that it made them “feel black,” they also “indirectly indexed African Americans negatively by reproducing the stereotype,” which serves to reinforce social hierarchies and racial ideologies (518).

Maira (1999) analyzes the contradictions in the Bhangra remix party scene of 1990s New York, which involves South Asian youth taking on elements of Black and Latino style. The author explores the possibility that participation in the Desi club scene by second generation Indian American high school and college students might be a way of managing the conflicting demands of immigrant families and mainstream American youth culture through multiplicity, a “symbolic mediation of multiple identities” (13). Maira discusses cultural theory such as Rose (1994) which “emphasizes a reading of hip hop as a gesture of resistance by youth who are marginalized by existing political and social structures”—a long-standing view of hip hop culture. However, adoption of stylistic features of Black culture is not dependent upon close interaction with Black youth: one informant remarks that even Indian American youth who did not grow up with Blacks and Latinos “often acquire ‘the style, the attitude, and the walk’ associated with these youth upon coming to college” (8). Neither does it tend to signal solidarity with other youth of color. Color-based anti-black attitudes may be brought from the Indian subcontinent and reinforced here in the United States’ Black/White binary system of race. Indeed, African Americans often serve as scapegoats for new immigrants (10). The complexity of Indian American youth affinity for Black youth culture is very clearly illustrated with this
quote: “Black style is viewed as the embodiment of a particular machismo, the object of racialized desire and, simultaneously, of racialized fear.” (14). Says one informant: “They think, ‘I’m kinda scared of them, but I want to look like them because they’re cool.” For many non-African American youth, iconic features of AAVE serve as a linguistic resource that allows them to invoke an urbanity, hypersexuality, and toughness counter-posed to mainstream White American values. Using AAVE as a linguistic resource helps them navigate racial hierarchies that may be unfamiliar or unwelcoming to them as (the children of) immigrants and members of minority groups that may carry less valuable cultural currency among teenagers and young adults.

White youth may use features characteristic of AAVE to represent “a rejection of hegemonic White forms of masculinity and a desire to project a more physical identity,” to “[express] varying degrees of otherness, distinctiveness and/or distance from a mainstream identity” or to “signal a rejection of racism, and a resistance towards racializing practices” according to Cutler (2008). Cutler (2002) analyzes the speech of people she calls White Hip Hoppers—European-American youth who identify with hip hop culture and participate in it to varying degrees—by comparing their use of variables associated with AAVE or HHSS (hip hop speech style) to the speech of hip hop artists such as Chuck D and Eminem and by surveying undergraduate students about their impressions of the White Hip Hoppers’ ethnicities. The study is revelatory in regard to the ‘social salience’ of certain variables: “Certain features might index a young, urban African American hip-hop identity more than others…this “social” salience may be stronger than perceptual salience in determining which features a speaker chooses to use in projecting his or her identity” (173). Cutler writes that the failure of WHHs to utilize invariant ‘be’ in projecting a hip-hop identity might be due to the fact that it is “so strongly identified as an
African Americanism that using it implies some claim of identity and, as a result, most WHHs feel uncomfortable using it” (167). The surveys conducted in undergraduate linguistics classes show an “iconic link” in the minds of the listeners between “qualities attributed to AAE and qualities often attributes of its speakers, i.e., that lax pronunciation reflects laziness; that aggressive speech reflects physical aggressiveness” (209).

Cutler (2008) also notes “how complicated identification with another group can be, particularly when it involves essentialized, reductionist conceptions of that group” (21). Affluent white youth may stylize AAVE to project a more streetwise identity than their ethnic and family backgrounds give them, but the association of Black identity with coolness and masculinity stems from “racist ideologies that link Black masculinity to ‘hyperphysicality, hypersexuality and physical strength’” (Cutler 2008).

Other researchers have explored the language practices and ideologies of White speakers with actual social bonds with African Americans. Fix (2010) examines White speakers’ portrayal of AAVE as an authentic reflection of their attitudes and upbringings by comparing media representations of White AAVE speakers to the language of real-life White women with ties to the Black community through friendship, family, or romantic relationships. Fix finds that though the TV personalities use many of the same AAVE features as the community speakers, they use a “qualitatively narrower set of features,” but often at such high rates as to indicate “a linguistic hyper-performance” (64). Other speakers of AAVE question their authenticity; some point out that when a White user of AAVE gets upset, she reverts to a speech style closer to standard American English, bringing to mind Labov’s well known argument that our linguistic style is least affected when we are passionate about the content of what we are saying. Fix writes that while neither TV character is directly parodying AAVE, they are using it for humorous effect,
and the fact that their familiarity with the variety has been filtered through media representations
and not augmented by close contact with African Americans is reflected in their language use
(64).

Kiesling (2001) examines how a group of fraternity men, nearly all of them White,
“reaffirm their hegemonic social position” (101), using features of AAVE in stance-taking and to
draw attention to their normally invisible position of power as White males. Kiesling writes that
any reference by the men to racial categorization makes their own Whiteness more visible.
Fraternity members also draw on the dichotomy between the “intellectual/rational/establishment
(White) and the physical/emotional/nonestablishment (Black)” (102) to align themselves with
one or the other depending on the interaction at hand. If they want to assert themselves as
authorities on an intellectual matter, they might mark an interlocutor as ‘other,’ endowing him
with qualities associated with Blackness/physical/emotional domination; conversely, when they
“take stances of overt confrontation, or boast of physical power, there is an increased use of
nonstandard language features … some clearly are “Mock” African American Vernacular
English” (103). Interestingly, some non-White members of the fraternity, for example an
Afghani-American, draw on the Black/White binary racial system to construct themselves as [-Black].

Black American youth culture is highly visible and the associated language variety is a
valuable linguistic resource for minority teenagers creating American identities and for White
young adult speakers as a foil against which they can reinforce their social dominance. African
immigrants new to Canadian high schools, too, look to Black America, the most recognizable
site of Black culture in the African Diaspora, and “choose an identification with Black diasporic
expressive cultures in their search for identity and identification” (Ibrahim 1998: 61). Though
there is choice involved, Ibrahim notes that, because of their Blackness, these immigrant teenagers have already been constructed as Black in the minds of other Canadians, and that “unfortunately, the historical memory and representation of blackness in North America…is mostly, if not all, negative” (281). Global Black populations share “a common experience of powerlessness somehow transcending history and experience in racial categories; in the antagonism between white and black…European and African” (Gilroy 1987: 158, qtd. in Ibrahim 1998: 62), and by using what Ibrahim calls a “black stylized English” heavily dependent on ritual expressions such as the titular ‘yo, whassup homeboy,’ these “continental African youths choose an identification with…resistance to inhuman conditions” (73). These African teenagers’ usage of features or ritualized phrases associated with African American language and culture, then, is interpreted entirely differently than Asian teenagers’ language use in Maira (1999) and Reyes (1999): as an expression of solidarity instead of appropriation. Ibrahim argues that these teenagers “desire to see themselves mirrored within the Canadian society,” (74) and so they use these hugely symbolic expressions iconic of Black culture to slide into an identity already recognized in the communities to which they have recently arrived.

Sweetland (2002) examines the speech of a young white woman whose linguistic repertoire includes many features associated with AAVE but lacks any of the “idiosyncratic interpretations of AAVE grammar” that often characterize stylizations of the variety (515). The language use of the woman in question, then, and her acceptance in the Black community, provide “a new perspective on speaker ‘authenticity’” (515). The subject of the case study grew up in a mostly-Black inner-ring suburb of Cincinnati and has many Black friends and a daughter whose father is Black. She fluently, if variably, incorporates syntactic features of AAVE in her speech, while stylizers tend to rely on AAVE lexical items, prosody, and phonology, and she is
frequently mistaken for a Black woman over the phone, all of which leads Sweetland to question the conclusion most sociolinguists have reached: that “blacks who mingle with whites go a long way towards acquiring the white norm, but whites who mingle with blacks make very little progress towards acquiring the black norm for these variables” (Ash and Myhill 1983, qtd. in Sweetland 2002: 519). She believes this common oversimplification of outgroup language use stems from “where and how sociolinguists look at the link between language and race” (519).

Kitwana (2005) discusses extensively hip hop’s being welcomed into the mainstream in the 1990s and eventually coming to occupy a central role in mainstream American youth culture. While in hip hop’s early days a White person’s embracing it was a political statement of affiliation with the oppressed, a transformation of the genre driven by White record label executives and a White suburban audience’s tastes was both the cause and effect of its growing popularity; hip hop that reached pop radio stations and platinum status tended to come mostly from the “gangsta” end of the spectrum. Kitwana references an unapologetic analysis in Yousman (2003) of White domination of the hip hop industry as a form of White supremacy: “Black kids selling Black images of Black criminality and inferiority and white kids buying them to reinforce their superiority” (103), just as White youth misappropriate AAVE to annex its social currency for themselves while simultaneously using it to reinforce their superiority.

1.3 Language Ideologies

Sclafani (2008) discusses language ideologies through an intertextual analysis of three New York Times articles published during the Oakland Ebonics controversy of 1996. The very fact that, twelve years after the controversy, there remained problematic literature that had not
yet been analyzed by linguists shows that the mainstream view of AAVE/Ebonics as a degraded form of the standard is very deeply ingrained in American society. A source as supposedly neutral as the New York Times expresses “covert racism,” by dehumanizing the language and representing its speakers as animalistic,” among other things. Sclafani also explains “the power struggle underlying the debate over Black English and the appropriation of the language by other Americans,” which is an excellent argument for the study of Mock AAVE as part of the racist project. One of the Times articles quotes a history professor as saying,

“There is a darker side to the sociology of this appropriation…that has to do with power and the ability to wield it. In a sense, Black English is elevated when it’s incorporated into the wider culture. But when it comes out of black people’s mouths it is associated with degradation and stupidity.”

The Times then editorializes that “perhaps that has always been part of the transition from separatism to integration.” It is true that Standard American English has often annexed AAVE lexical items and phrases, which undergo a ‘deracializing’ process through which they eventually lose the stigmatized status associated with being part of a nonstandard variety (cf. Hill 2009).

Hill (2009) discusses linguistic ideologies extensively. Common linguistic ideologies are critical in the reproduction of racism now that we have supposedly reached a “post-racial” era in the United States, because they render certain types of racist speech invisible, allowing it to continue to shape our reality unnoticed. She writes that linguistic ideologies are presented as being rooted in common sense, and that people acquire them because they “make their world more cohesive and comprehensible, but also…promote their access to important resources, both economic and symbolic, and promote their sense of privilege and well-being” (34). She begins with the Monoglot Standard. This ideology holds that whenever multiple variants exist, only one of them is considered to be correct, and that the language of the elite deserves its status as the most correct. The most harmful aspect of it, however, is the belief that speaking the prestigious
form will endow a speaker with social and economic benefits, and that failure to acquire the prestigious standard language “is a sign of moral failing, or of an absence of ambition” (36). Though according to Hill it is not true that perfect control of the standard is enough to confer prestige and the accompanying material benefits on a person of color, this view of language varieties can be used to blame the socially stigmatized for their circumstances. The covert racism of Mock Spanish (which I discuss in more detail below) is invisible or contradictory to the Monoglot Standard and other ideologies Hill discusses, such as personalist, referentialist, baptismal, and performative ideologies, which entail beliefs about the intentions of speakers, the singular, verifiable meanings of words, and the force of utterances. Several of these ideologies do, however, allow for recognition of more overt forms of racism.

1.4 Non-mainstream Literacies and Anti-languages

Olivo (2001) writes that “scholarly investigation of literacy practices among African Americans…has tended to focus on…academic contexts; it has seen the use of non-standard spellings as a problem to be overcome, rather than as something purposeful and worthy of celebration in its own right” (68). The article goes on to analyze the literature enclosed with rap CDs (written lyrics, acknowledgments) and finds that the “non-standard discursive practices constitute elements of ‘anti-language’” (cf. Halliday 1976). Written representation of phonological and syntactic features of AAVE and “spelling conventions that do not correspond to any structural difference between standard English and AAVE” emphasize local and alternative meanings in the face of rap music’s current mainstream domination. Interestingly, the non-standard spellings that reflect AAVE phonology “are not simply phonemic representations of speech, but selective representations of salient differences” (Olivo 2001: 73).
Olivo uses Bourdieu’s writings on linguistic hegemony to explain how, through the creation and maintenance of a single linguistic community, one variety (the ‘standard’) can be deemed “intrinsically ‘better’ by all speakers, regardless of their proficiency in speaking it” (Olivo 2001: 69). This measurement of the value of different language varieties and ensuing linguistic dominance of the one used by ‘mainstream’ speakers is only possible within a single linguistic community, which is reinforced largely by the existence of a standardized writing system and spelling conventions. So the hip hop nation’s recognition of its own unique orthographic norms is a political stance that “constitute[s] a challenge to linguistic hegemony” (2001: 69).

The discussion of hip hop as, at least originally, an ‘anti-society,’ and its lyrical performances as constituting an ‘anti-language’ is a bit complicated. It is asserted that “[r]apping in AAVE…communicates meanings that have limited circulation; it thus effectively directs messages toward a particular audience that shares these meanings” (2001: 72), and Halliday’s view that “the non-standard forms of an anti-language are derived, and receive meaning, from the standard language” (70) is reiterated. This view of the AAVE used in rap music contrasts starkly with the emphatic statement in Spears (1997): “African-American English is not a collection of slang terms, it is not used only by teenagers who spend much time in the streets, it is not a corruption of anything—it has its own history and did not spring historically from any one kind of English. It is a product of the historical blending of mostly English features but also some features of West African languages” (8).

Jaffe and Walton (2000) examined how nonstandard orthography triggers sociolinguistic judgments similar to those listeners make in response to nonstandard features in spoken language, writing that “participants transfer[red] their social evaluations of a group to the written
representation of linguistic features associated with that group” (563). The researchers instructed
subjects to read aloud the same text transcribed in different manners: with standard orthography,
with nonstandard orthography both representative of stereotypical Southern pronunciation and
not, and transcribed to reflect Southern phonetic differences as closely as possible. Several
subjects appeared to distance themselves from the stigmatized Southern pronunciation during the
reading. One participant revealed his negative stance toward Southern accents and speakers who
have them by “mak[ing] an effort to represent the speaker he imagined while at the same time
marking himself off as not affiliated with this accent … by exaggerating an accent on those
textual features that were most significantly marked for him as Southern and stigmatized … and
speaking with standard pronunciation at other moments in the reading” (576). Literature on the
use of nonstandard orthography in computer-mediated communication such as Shaw (2008)
confirms that it carries a variety of social meanings, and “affords the possibility of representing
one’s identity through ‘accent,’” either one’s own or perhaps “a ready-made persona, often based
on African American attributes via hip hop music” (44). Shaw describes modern communication
via text messages, email, and Internet chat rooms as “partially regulated zones” in which both
standard and nonstandard spellings are accepted and are “available as resources for genre
differentiation … and individual identity construction” (42). In computer-mediated
communication, “strategic use of nonstandard spellings” can “connote humour, rebellion, and
adolescence,” but, importantly, the practice “depends for its effect on both reader and writer
knowing the norm and knowing what rejecting it means” (42).

1.5 Hegemonic Humor
Santa Ana (2009) analyzes a series of jokes made by late-night TV host Jay Leno in the spring of 2006, in the days preceding and following huge May Day marches for immigrant rights. To do this, Santa Ana first explains that joke-telling, as ‘non-bona fide communication’ is not constrained by the same Gricean pragmatic principles that govern normal communicative practice. Speakers’ and listeners’ roles change; the speaker is no longer expected to efficiently communicate something true, and there is an increased focus on group identification and a decreased emphasis on critical thinking. Santa Ana relies mostly on a theory introduced by Raskin (1985): that a joke teller “sets up an imaginary scenario with two ‘scripts that often do not fit together in a typical narrative sequence; they are somehow conceptually incongruent’” (28). The incongruent scripts are resolved in a humorous way that allows listeners to laugh at the butt of the joke, who is often elite, powerful, or celebrated (e.g. a political figure or movie star), but who through the joke is diminished, making the listeners feel better about themselves. Some of Leno’s jokes function in this way, for example those that criticize then-president Bush’s proposed solutions to illegal immigration, but in many others the butt is the immigrants themselves. Humor theorists have argued that “when humans laugh at the butt of a joke, we aggressively assert superiority over someone who we deem to be our inferior” and that “effective jokes succeed in liberating an otherwise suppressed or ‘censored’ thought” (29). Jokes also function to test and reinforce social boundaries, exploiting and strengthening in-group commonalities such as attributes, values, and beliefs while “the out-group members are safely out of range. Challenging out-group members in face-to-face interaction is a much riskier enterprise” (29). Santa Ana interprets the success of Leno’s jokes as depending on their ability to let the audience distance themselves and dis-identify with the Mexican immigrants the jokes are targeting. He sees Leno’s construction of the immigrants as the butt of many of the jokes—a
reversal of the typical elite figure-as-butt—as “strong evidence that Leno’s viewers sustained significant cultural and political anxieties about them” (32). Leno neutralizes a perceived threat by invoking “trivializing stereotypes that his audience could easily dismiss” (34). Importantly, joke-telling and humor deactivate listeners’ critical thinking, making it “a qualitatively more powerful discursive practice than conversing or reporting” (40). Elements of hegemonic humor—the reduction of speakers of nonstandard varieties or of other languages to stereotypes, and subsequent dismissal of them as humorous and nonthreatening, for example—are visible in the use of ‘mock languages’ as well.

1.6 ‘Mock’ Languages

Hill (1995) analyzes the use of a degraded form of Spanish (“Mock Spanish”) in movies, greeting cards, billboards, and comic strips and determines that it is racist due to its ‘indirect indexicality’ of racist stereotypes of Latino, and particularly Mexican, cultures. Mock Spanish refers to Spanish phrases (often hyperanglicized) used colloquially by monolingual English speakers to portray themselves as easy-going, cultured, and perhaps to index a local Southwestern identity—for example, “Hasta la vista, baby,” “Let’s go get a cerveza,” or “No problema.” Ritual phrases from the Mock Spanish repertoire decidedly do not adhere to rules of Spanish grammar or phonology. Hill argues that Mock Spanish is “ineluctably racist because it can only be understood by speakers insofar as they have access to its indirect indexical force, of relentless derision of the Spanish language, culture, and people,” and that it is “effective precisely because of its relative deniability, because people are not aware of “being racist” even in a mild way” (279-81). Not only does Mock Spanish serve to degrade the Spanish language and its speakers, Hill argues that, in a world in which racism is purportedly no longer tolerated in
mainstream society, Mock Spanish is an important site for the reproduction, dissemination, and normalization of negative stereotypes of people of color.

Ronkin and Karn (1999), following Hill (1995), describe a similar phenomenon occurring with AAVE which they call Mock Ebonics. Their analysis, which defines Mock Ebonics as “a system of graphemic-phonetic, grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic strategies for representing an outgroup's belief in the imperfection and inferiority of Ebonics and its users” (360) is highly relevant to the discussion of what I’m calling “Mock AAVE” in this paper. The examples of Mock Ebonics examined by Ronkin and Karn appear to lack the direct indexicality conferring on their users any positive qualities such as cosmopolitanism or understanding of and affiliation with hip hop music or streetwise Black culture, but they clearly illustrate the productivity of certain iconic features of AAVE. Though the uses of Mock AAVE analyzed in this study are less overtly racist and, on the surface, may be intended to signal familiarity with and appreciation of African American culture, their humorous subtext could not be interpreted without the interlocutor’s having access to stereotypes of Black people as lazy, uneducated, and likely criminals (cf. Hill 1995).

2. Data collection

Hill argues that misappropriation of another group’s speech style is particularly insidious when it is done by educated people behind a facade of worldliness and cultural appreciation. Surely high school students stylize dialects on social media very often, but we perhaps don’t need to hold them to such high standards of cultural awareness. Discovering, for example, that high school students use language varieties insensitively in regard to their sociopolitical origins
would not be highly revelatory. For that reason, this study focuses on the speech of undergraduate and graduate students and other people who have college degrees.

As many of the studies mentioned here attest, whether or not a person is a speaker of AAVE is not determined by his or her ethnicity—in fact several of the social media profiles preliminarily mined for data were those of White young adults whose dominant variety, it appears from their tweets and comments, is AAVE. These profiles were eliminated from the data (following Agha’s ‘individuation of voices’) as their use of features of AAVE could not be considered stylization.

The Internet provides exciting new opportunities to collect and analyze socially-situated ‘speech,’ offering presumably more natural and unselfconscious data than researcher-prompted speech. Data was collected from Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter. Per Wikipedia.com, Tumblr, launched in 2007, is a microblogging platform and social networking service owned by Yahoo! Inc. Instagram is an online photo-sharing, video-sharing, and social networking service that enables its users to take pictures and videos, apply digital filters (which change lighting and colors, often lending a ‘retro’ look) to them, and share them on a variety of social networking services, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr. Users are also able to record and share short videos lasting up to 15 seconds. Instagram was launched in October 2010 and rapidly gained popularity, with over 100 million active users as of April 2012. Twitter is an online social networking and microblogging service that enables users to send and read short 140-character text messages, called “tweets.” Registered users can read and post tweets, but unregistered users can only read them. Users access Twitter through the website interface, SMS, or mobile device app. It was launched in July 2006, reaching 500 million registered users worldwide by 2012, who posted 340 million tweets per day. It is now one of the ten most-visited websites, and has been
described as “the SMS [text message] of the Internet.” Profiles on each of these sites are by default public, unless a user specifically sets his or her account to ‘private.’

Data collection was informal, crowd-sourced, and took place over the course of a year, from the spring of 2014 to the spring of 2015. It focused exclusively on spontaneously produced written communication in its social setting; linguists and nonlinguists captured instances of Mock AAVE use by taking ‘screenshots’ of them as they appeared on social media and sending them to me. Having nonlinguists involved in data collection was helpful in making sure that AAVE stylizations were perceptible to people not specifically educated on features associated with the variety. I then redacted names and usernames, titled the images with the presumed utterance of Mock AAVE, and saved them in a digital file.

3. Data Analysis

A total of 134 social media posts (tweets, captions, comments) containing stylizations of AAVE were analyzed to determine which features of the variety (cf. Rickford 1999) they contained and categorized accordingly. Media posts were analyzed for the following phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical patterns, cf. Rickford (1999e):

Table 1 Distinctive Phonological Features of AAVE

1. Reduction of word-final consonant clusters.
2. Deletion of word-final single post-vocalic consonant (especially nasals).
3. Devoicing of word-final post-vocalic voiced stops.
5a. Realization of /θ/ as [t] or [f].
5b. Realization of /ð/ as [d] or [v].
6. Realization of *thr* sequences as *th*, especially before *[u]* or *[o]*.

7. Deletion or vocalization of post-vocalic */l/.*

8. Deletion or vocalization of post-vocalic */ɹ/.*

9. Deletion of initial */d/ and */g/* in certain environments.

10. Deletion of unstressed initial and medial syllables.

11. Metathesis or transposition of adjacent consonants, as in the shibboleth */ask/*/→ [aks].

Table 2 shows the phonological features associated with AAVE found in the data.

**Table 2 Stylization of Phonological Features of AAVE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Instances</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Instances</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonstandard orthography</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>werk porty</td>
<td>ing→ang</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>thang ‘thing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>baby makin daze</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fruhnt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricative stopping</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>dis ‘this’</td>
<td>Final consonant deletion/final consonant cluster reduction</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>goo goo ‘good good’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dat ‘that’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>laz ‘last’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>wit ‘with’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>shoo ‘shoot’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dem ‘them’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘r’-less-ness</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>gangsta</td>
<td>Those→&gt;them</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>them shoes!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>twitta</td>
<td></td>
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<td>lawd</td>
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<td>twitta</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>lawd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elision</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>erday ‘everyday’</td>
<td>Final devoicing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>paddlebort; lort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>gon ‘going to’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hur ‘hair’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>recanize ‘recognize’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>cur ‘care’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grammatical features of AAVE were stylized less frequently. See Table 3.
Table 3 *Stylization of Morphosyntactic Features of AAVE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Instances</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zero copula</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>He doing that ombre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninflected copula</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Bitches be greasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual ‘be’</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Baby b bumpin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonstandard past tense inflection</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Done got</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uninflected third person singular</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Bitch don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Interpretation

Stylization on social networking sites may appear difficult to analyze because of the lack of aural input—phonetic differences are sometimes difficult, though far from impossible, to express in text, and metapragmatic cues are limited to the users’ profile pictures, digital interactions with other users, and, sometimes, a mini-autobiography in the ‘about’ or ‘information’ section of the profile. Stylization is rampant, though, as blog posts, Instagram captions, and tweets are often just as performative as they are cathartic and seemingly unselfconscious. Since my research examines popular linguistic ideologies, I use crowd-sourced reference websites such as urbandictionary.com and rap.genius.com, which allows users to annotate hip hop lyrics, in my interpretation. Because anyone with an Internet connection can
contribute to and edit these pages, they provide a consensus on the meanings and connotations of terms and phrases used in the data.

What makes the language use in this study very different from the way Rampton’s subjects ‘cross’ into one another’s language varieties is the lack of face-to-face interpersonal interaction between the monolingual speakers of Standard English and the speakers of the variety whose features they are borrowing. This research does not concern subtle influences of AAVE on other varieties of English, which are ubiquitous: Hill (2011) writes that “AAE is the most important source for new slang (and eventually, unmarked colloquial usage) in White AE.” (169). It does not address now-unmarked colloquial usage like, for example, “Back in the day,” which according to Cutler (2002) “is a formulaic expression that usually references past events…relevant to hip hop” (194), but which is now almost fully deracialized. Understanding stylization requires shared cultural knowledge of the salient features of other varieties and the people who typically speak them, and since stylizers of AAVE may be familiar with it only as it is represented in the media, their knowledge of the variety may be limited and their image of its speakers may rely heavily on stereotypes. Dialect stylization can be understood as moments of ‘intentional inauthenticity,’ when a speaker fleetingly voices an ‘other.’ This research focuses on those phrases and features associated on some conscious level of the speaker’s mind with Black culture and identity (this is admittedly a moving target). Both linguists and nonlinguists are able to make sense of stylizations of AAVE because

Meaning and identities are made in these … performances against a backdrop of norms and expectations held by speakers about what Whiteness and Blackness and other racialized categories are or should be, how White and Black people do, or should, act and talk. Such models are shared widely in a culture, and are therefore resources which can be used in interaction for identity performances, as a single linguistic feature might index an entire lifestyle by indexing a certain cultural model (Kiesling 2001: 104).
Hill (1999) is hugely helpful in theorizing stylization and situating this language phenomenon in the global power dynamics which play an indispensable role in its creation of meaning. In modeling how interlocutors make sense of stylizations, researchers cannot rely on “classical pragmatic or semiotic analysis,” since ‘voicing the other’ challenges fundamental ideas of speakerhood, blurring boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other.’ In fact, crossing into other varieties may at times be the matrix code.

The discussion of enregisterment and the individuation of voices in Agha (2005) provides a guide as to how to determine whether an utterance (or a tweet) is an instance of stylization. An examination of many social media profiles reveals “contrastive patterns of register use [which] index distinct speaking personae” (38). See, for example, an Instagram user’s Mock AAVE in the caption of image (1):

The Instagram user who posted this picture captions it in three distinct voices (cf. Agha 2005). The first sentence, “One year with the guy who never fails to make me laugh,” which we’ll call text zone 1, exhibits an interesting mix of colloquial and Standard American English which is probably typical of Internet posts—note the omission of sentence-initial person deictics and present-tense copula, e.g. [It’s been] one year with the guy who never fails to make me laugh. However, “never fails to make me laugh” creates a more formal tone than would, “always makes me laugh.” In text zone 2, the writer moves into Mock AAVE, using AAVE lexical items, spelling norms, and zero copula. The deictics change to address the youth in the pictures directly: “Shoo it’s lyke u da thuggest white boi I kno.” The orthographic norms are notably different as well, making use of colloquial norms instead of academic ones, for instance “u” instead of “you.” “Kno” follows hip hop spelling patterns discussed in (Olivo 2001) by omitting a not phonetically realized and thus seemingly useless “w.” This text zone also seems more intent on representing spoken language than in meeting the standards of written language—“Shoo” comes from the interjection “shoot,” a variant of “shit” (which is seen frequently in Mock AAVE) and orthographically expresses an AAVE tendency toward final debuccalization/deletion. After the second sentence the writer returns to SAE in what we can refer to as text zone 3: “Thankful for the memories we’ve made. Love you.” We again see use of standard spelling norms and omission of sentence-initial deictics and present-tense copula, e.g. I’m, I, but the deictics align with text zone 2 in their direct address of the young man in the photo.

A speaker’s ability to stylize a dialect for humorous (or other) effect depends upon the intended audience—on “the metapragmatic ability of language users to discriminate forms across register boundaries and assign pragmatic values to variant forms” (Agha 2005: 46). While the different realizations of a final voiced stop in AAVE and SAE are salient to a phonologist, and
syntacticians study dialectics in great depth, linguistic resources are only useful to a typical speaker stylizing AAVE if they are iconic of a Black persona in the minds of the listeners.

Just as decontextualization makes it impossible to determine whether a caption or a comment exhibits stylization of a variety, it also prevents the reader from determining its subtextual indexicality. The indirect indexicality of a stylization of AAVE is the level of meaning which assigns negative characteristics to and reproduces negative stereotypes of genuine speakers of the variety—and is the level of meaning which produces the humorous effect. Agha (2005) argues that context is indispensable in interpreting voicing; the meaning of a token can change considerably depending on where and when it is spoken, and by whom. What gives Mock AAVE its sociolinguistic import is that “effects of register token use are not always consistent with the stereotype values associated with the register’s form types” (47)—a token of a word is spoken by someone not typically associated with usage of the word, so that the usage is unexpected, jarring, and must be sorted out. The second meaning necessary for an utterance to be jocular stems from a tropic use of voice, as defined by Agha: “we perceive a [register’s] usage as tropic when co-occurring signs have noncongruent indexical effects” (48). Agha illustrates a tropic use of voice with an exchange in Lakhota, a language which utilizes registers of speaker gender, wherein a man greets a child with a token from the female register. Because the speaker of the token (a man) doesn’t match the stereotype indexed by the type (a woman), the listener is forced to reconcile the incongruity by interpreting the man’s usage of the female register as a way of indexing feminine qualities—“maternal, affective” (48).

We can now return to the Instagram picture and caption in image (1) to illustrate Agha’s individuation and analyze them according to their expected or tropic use of voice. Romantic relationships among adolescents in high school, college, and early adulthood have undergone
great changes in recent years, tending toward what has been termed a “hook-up culture,” in which casual sexual relationships are the norm, and away from traditional dating. The Instagram user begins with concise language grounded in the norms of written SAE in text zone 1, moves into a stylization of AAVE in text zone 2, relying on hip hop spelling norms, omitting copular ‘be,’ and addressing the young man in the picture directly, and then returns to SAE but maintains second person singular address of the person in the photo in text zone 3. Widespread media representations of black teenage pregnancy and single motherhood, and the much-discussed low rate of marriage among African Americans compared with other ethnic groups (though the rate is dropping for all of them) reflect the dichotomy of stances discussed in Kiesling 2001—“the intellectual/rational/establishment (White) and the physical/emotional/nonestablishment (Black)” (105). Perhaps this young woman seeks to downplay her celebration of her long-term relationship by indexing, through stylization, the casual attitude toward romantic relationships stereotypically associated with young Black women. Her stylization, “Shooo it’s lyke u da thuggest white boi I kno,” also serves, by commenting on the typically invisible race of her boyfriend (cf. Kiesling 2001) and temporarily voicing a (presumably) Black ‘other,’ to distance herself from him. (De)constructing their relationship in this way allows her to make no more serious a claim about the young man in the photo than that she thinks he is cool in a casual, non-intimate way—and she accomplishes this by exploiting the subconscious link in readers’ minds between AAVE and negative stereotypes of young Black women.

The most-used feature in this corpus of Mock AAVE was nonstandard orthography—82 posts out of 134 make use of nonstandard orthography, and in many posts the nonstandard spelling is not limited to just one word. Many of the nonstandard spellings in the data reflect widely-used representations of AAVE phonetics: 41 posts made use of fricative fortification
(most commonly, the voiced interdental fricative /ð/ was written as ‘d’ instead of the ‘th’ that would reflect SAE phonology) and 17 posts contained one or more instances of ‘r’-lessness.

Image (2) references a carnival ride (“Dat Gravitron doe”) using fortified interdental fricatives iconic of AAVE in the widely-used frame, “That _____, though.” This Mock AAVE construction consists solely of a noun phrase, and therefore is heavily dependent on extralinguistic cues for interpretation. Here, a commenter accurately interprets the social media post as a reference to Oktoberfest. In image (3), a social media user captions her photo with “Dat weave tho” and a heart emoji³, which provides a clue as to the meaning of this construction for those unfamiliar with it: here the stylizer is expressing satisfaction with her hair style. This very simple formulaic expression, used to signal awe and approval or to indicate that the subject of it has left a strong impression, will be discussed further below.

Image 2. (Facebook, 2014).  

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³ Emoji are smiley faces and ideograms of common objects used in text messages and on social media.
(4) is captioned “gangsta,” a lexical item strongly associated with Black urbanity and hip hop music, nearly always spelled in Mock AAVE to reflect the r-less variant:

![Image](image4.png)

Image 4. (Facebook, 2014).

Among the data are two instances of phrase-final devoicing. Image (5) is likely a play on lyrics to “Drunk in Love,” a Beyoncé song released in December 2013, which features the refrain “surfboard,” pronounced with a final pre-glottalized devoiced stop, [ˈsɜːfboərt]. A Google search leads to memes and clothing emblazoned with various spellings of the word (surfboard/surfboart/surfbort) and an article calling it “perhaps the most widely hashtagged moment from the [album]” (Idolator.com). Image (6) shows recurring Tyler Perry character Madea and what, according to Google, appears to be her catchphrase: a final-devoiced “Praise da lort.”
Images (7) and (8) use hip hop spelling norms not grounded in phonetic differences between AAVE and SAE. In image (7), a man poses goofily next to his partner, who’s in a hospital bed, saying he’s drunk a lot of iced coffee and is feeling the effects of the caffeine—“Your boy”—here he uses a phrase associated with hip hop nation language to refer to himself—“str8 wired.” The caption also exhibits zero copula. In image (8), a tote bag being sold to support a children’s literacy program is described as “fresh2death.” ‘Fresh’ is a synonym for ‘cool’ that with origins in 1980s hip hop (urbandictionary.com).
Previous research on out-group use of AAVE such as Jacobs-Huey (1997), Bucholtz (1997), and Cutler (1998, 2002) find no examples of their subjects fluently making use of the AAVE tense and aspect system, nor of unmarked possessives, zero copula, or unmarked third person singular inflection. Twenty posts in my data used zero copula; see examples below, “He ∅ doing that ombre” and “They ∅ just so good” plus an instance of “dem __________, doe” from a commenter:
Sixteen posts use an uninflected copula. Below, a prominent Jewish fashion blogger who calls herself “The Man Repeller” references an esoteric Belgian designer, Dries van Noten, saying that her grandma’s Rosh Hashanah decorations resemble its clothing, and using the Hebrew phrase that means ‘Happy New Year’ (shana tova). The tongue-in-cheek implication is that her high-fashion-influenced grandmother, though participating in holiday decorating like other uncool mothers and grandmothers, is cooler than most.
The following instance of invariant ‘be’ could be categorized as ‘trash-talking,’ a popular activity in hip hop music, and also uses ‘bitch,’ a common Mock AAVE lexical item and exhibits the ‘out the’ construction, nonstandard but common in AAVE:

That users of Mock AAVE, in contrast to the White Hip Hoppers in Cutler (2002) and subjects of similar studies who make semiserious claims of affiliation with Black culture, are not reluctant to use invariant ‘be’ reinforces the interpretation of the mock register as jocular and
pejorative. Instead of using features that subtly index Blackness, stylizers make bold and frequent use of the feature perhaps most socially salient and indicative of a laid-back, cool, inner-city toughness counterposed to the meek politeness of the mainstream middle class. There is a booming genre of Internet memes comprised of a picture and a caption that reveals an unpleasant truth about it which use the ‘be like’ construction. See the following:

These memes, through use of lexical items associated with AAVE and the iconic invariant ‘be,’ voice a bold Black speaker who sees through people’s unconvincing social media posturing and ‘tells it like it is.’
Only three posts use zero third person singular inflection. See example (17), “It fall,” which also includes AAVE lexical items ‘basic bitch’ (according to Urbandictionary.com, “a bum-ass woman who think she the shit but really ain't”) and ‘turn up’ (“getting loose, being wild … acting crazy due to consumption of large amounts of alcohol, marijuana, molly, or other drugs”):

![Image 17. (Instagram, 2014).](image)

Uses of Mock AAVE were also categorized according to the topic they were used to discuss, following Hill, who used this tactic to show that Mock Spanish could only be used to discuss things that were at best lighthearted and at worst vulgar. The most common subject found in the data was ‘boasting,’ with 29 posts devoted to it. Only one post refers explicitly to money, a ubiquitous topic in mainstream hip hop (another uses it as an adjective, meaning something like
‘cool’), while three posts make reference to music or music production and five discuss sports, arenas in which Black professionals have achieved great success and even come to dominate the market.

Table 4 *Topics Discussed Using Mock AAVE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Instances</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boasting</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>Finna get that #streetstyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>laz nite #broadcity S2 filming, n i can’t help but pop dat top off for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>rewrites…ma TTs swangin helps me think!! sry [redacted]…but i knowww she luvvit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>das a booty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>blond hur, don’t cur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dat weave doe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childbirth/parenting</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>baby b bumpin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>vaccinate ya kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>girl done got her baby mama game on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partying</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>trippin on that nip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>REHAB NIGGAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>we be hungry and thuaursty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>bitch you my partner in crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ma gurlzzzzz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>#boothang</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of the instances of Mock AAVE collected here are used to comment on physical appearance, which aligns with Kiesling’s statements on the intellectual/physical dichotomy: in the minds of many non-Black young people, AAVE is better suited to discussions of physicality than is SAE. The reverse is also implied, i.e. that AAVE is never suitable for abstract or intellectual discussions. In photograph (18), a commenter jokingly voices a Black male to ‘hit on’ the young woman in the picture:
‘Shit’ is a lexical item that appears often in the data, as is ‘girl.’ Using the (outdated) AAVE/hip hop expression ‘fine’ instead of the unmarked ‘cute’, ‘pretty’, or even ‘hot’, invokes a certain image, as do the elided “lemmie” (‘let me’) and the lack of post-vocalic ‘r’ in “holla.” According to urbandictionary.com, “holla” means “for a man to express interest in a particularly impressive female specimen.” Another commenter, perhaps primed by the first one, says, mock-threateningly and using the ‘r’-less variant, “you better watch yoself :) haha.” This tactic closely resembles former Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright’s Mock Spanish assertion that, in ordering that a spy plane piloted by two Cuban exiles be shot down, Fidel Castro had shown “not cojones, but cowardice” Hill (1998: 683). By using the Spanish word, Albright effectively outsourced the vulgar anatomical reference to a speaker more likely to say it—a Spanish speaker. Here, the commenter outsources his virtual catcall to a speaker of AAVE, indexing the stereotype of Black men as aggressive and hypersexualized, people who in the
minds of many speakers would be much more likely to make such a bold and overtly sexual comment than a young white man attending a charity ball (“#drinkingmargsforthechildren”). In a sense, the commenter’s intentional inauthenticity in communicating his overture in Mock AAVE protects him from having to take responsibility for any consequences that may arise from it. The utterance seems to have been interpreted as benign (after all, the warning that the commenter “better watch” himself is followed by a smiley face), but that may be the case only because the speaker is white and is speaking Mock AAVE: the exchange brings to mind the tragedy of Emmet Till, a Black fourteen-year-old who was brutally beaten and killed sixty years ago after being accused of flirting with a white woman. Certainly the frequent usage of Mock AAVE to comment upon physical appearance reinforces the stereotypes of Black hyperphysicality and hypersexuality.

In a reversal of the history professor’s statement in the New York Times following the 1996 Ebonics controversy (that AAVE is elevated when used in mainstream culture and associated with ‘degradation and stupidity’ when used by Black speakers), sometimes phrases or constructions used to discuss somber realities or genuine hopes in the Black community are misappropriated and used lightheartedly by speakers of SAE. This constitutes semantic derogation of the kind discussed in Hill, in which polite or neutral Spanish phrases are appropriated into the Mock Spanish lexicon where they become linked with sneakiness, vulgarity, or evil. “Ridin’ Dirty” is the title of a 1996 album by the Underground Kingz, but the phrase was later brought into the lexicon of many young speakers of mainstream American English by a 2006 song “Ridin’” by Chamillionaire, which, according to Wikipedia.org, concerns “racial profiling and police brutality, as well as the stereotyping of African-Americans driving a vehicle with drugs or other contraband.” An Instagram search of the hashtag #ridindirty
turns up, as of this writing, 182,392 photos. When Instagram users in examples (19), (20), and (21) juxtapose use of quaint modes of transportation (tandem bicycles and turn-of-the-century carriages) or expensive limousines (one vehicle in which consuming alcohol is not a violation of the law) with the risks associated with “ridin’ dirty” as a person of color, their intention appears to be to produce humor through the incongruity of the language. The activities documented in the following photographs are well within the law and the people taking part in them have no reason to fear police intrusion.

In the photograph below, a very successful fashion blogger captions a picture of herself wearing a black outfit “all black errthang.”
Because ‘thing’ is realized as ‘thang’ (cf. Rickford 1999), ‘every’ is elided to ‘err,’ and because this has become a commonly used phrase, it is understood as Mock AAVE. It is a semantic derogation of the title of a 2011 song by Lupe Fiasco, in which the hip hop artist imagines a world in which Blacks “ain’t never left” Africa, so there was no slavery, no racism, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., lived into old age, W.E.B. DuBois wrote the constitution, and there was no need for a “conscious” subgenre of hip hop. The song title uses standard orthography: “All Black Everything,” and the mocking adaptations of it do not. As Hinrichs and White-Sustaita’s (2011) analysis of nonstandard orthography in Jamaican blog and email writing argues, computer-mediated communication is a space in which “the orthographic rules of the standard are recognized, but transgressions (as well as errors) are allowable…and they can be used creatively and for additional meaning” in multidimensional ways depending on place of residence, gender, language environment, and other variables (49). Hinrichs and White-Sustaita state that codeswitching writers who consider the two language varieties in question “markedly different systems” will be likelier to use nonstandard spellings for Jamaican Creole words “in an effort to create…symbolic [distance] between the codes” (56). The stylizers who created the data analyzed here also make use of nonstandard orthography to create symbolic distance between two systems which overlap significantly. See two variations below:
Again we see elision and realization of ‘thing’ as ‘thang.’ Image (24) is purely jocular and nearly nonsensical: a sign in beautiful calligraphy saying “All nog errthing,” next to several bottles of dairy-free eggnog. Usage of this phrase and variations of it to discuss fashion and jewelry contributes to an intertextual reinforcement of Black culture as being overly focused on showy material goods and constitutes an erasure of the serious discussion that takes place among the Black community about the institutional racism it faces.

The same method of interpretation can be applied to this Instagram picture and caption:

The extra-linguistic context is made up not of speaker, interlocutor, and physical environment but of the user’s profile picture, his previous and following posts to Instagram, and the photograph which the caption accompanies. The text, “Da block is hot,” draws on stereotypical images of African Americans with its assumed source in rap music and orthographic representation of the fortified interdental fricative common in AAVE, “da.” The photograph of an immaculate Manhattan block and the profile picture of a well-dressed young white man are incongruent with the identity indexed by the caption. The subject matter does not align with the way in which it is being discussed, and the conflicting scripts are reconciled by the reader deciding that the speaker (or commenter) is using such ‘inferior’ speech ironically.

Decontextualized, “Da block is hot” could be taken literally in reference to temperature, interpreted to mean ‘popular’ as in, for example, ‘a hot new club,’ or, in the hip hop parlance from which it springs (“Tha Block is Hot” is the title of 1999 song by artist Li’l Wayne), to mean that “the police are on the block.” Again, the mocking usage takes the orthography further from the standard than does the title of the song that made the phrase popular. The song lyrics voice
residents of the poor, mostly Black New Orleans neighborhood Holly Grove as they sell drugs, resort to violence to protect their block and its residents, and exhort one another to hurry up and finish whatever illegal activity they’re engaged in because “tha block is hot” according to the annotations at rap.genius.com. In light of the recent deaths of unarmed Black men, women, and children at the hands of non-Black policemen (and the subsequent failure to indict many of the officers on any charges), residents of low-income, mostly Black neighborhoods might very well find it reasonable to warn one another that police are nearby regardless of the legality of what they’re doing at the moment. Instagram users would likely not see the presence of police on a block in a well-kept neighborhood like the one in the photo as something ominous enough to be stated. Here, as in Santa Ana (2009), the hegemonic joke does not “create new social divisions, but work[s] to restore … belief that the status quo is natural and appropriate” (38). This parody draws attention to the perceived inequality of the styles of speech—the speaker’s norm, Standard English, and the stylized dialect, AAVE—and to the gulf between the neighborhoods of the privileged and wealthy and the neighborhoods of the poor, powerless, and marginalized stereotypically associated with AAVE. It also highlights incongruities that have been very visible recently. Those privileged enough to be residents of the beautiful Manhattan block in question probably have nothing to worry about if they see police nearby, and therefore no reason to warn each other with Lil’ Wayne’s phrase.

In the following instance in image (26), a commenter uses Mock AAVE to congratulate her friend (who had no children) on her engagement by ‘humorously’ indexing a Black child excited about his or her parents’ impending (and apparently delayed) marriage: “MOM N DAD FINALLY TYIN DA KNOT SO I DON’T HAVE TO LIVE OUTTA WEDLOCK.” The AAVE features in this utterance are mostly orthographic representations of phonetic differences—
nonstandard orthography (‘n’ for ‘and’), /ŋ/ realized as [n], neither of which is unique to AAVE, an interdental fricative realized as a stop (‘da’ instead of ‘the’), and elision (‘outta’). There are no lexical items that index AAVE, but the zero copula is a highly salient marker of AAVE and the use of all capital letters is usually associated with insistence, anger, or excitement. Here, not followed by an exclamation point, the capital letters do not bring to mind a very positive strong emotion but instead create a tone of impoliteness and even aggression, possibly activating the connection between aggressive speech and perceived propensity for physical aggression discussed in Cutler (2002).


Amid other comments expressing kind wishes, anticipation of the wedding, and compliments on the pictured engagement ring, the stylizer uses Mock AAVE to reproduce a persistent and highly negative stereotype of Black family life as inferior to that of mainstream White culture. The image invoked is the enduring specter of ‘the welfare queen’ and her
children, first brought into American consciousness (though not with this specific term) by Ronald Reagan during a presidential campaign. Insistence on the existence of widespread welfare fraud, which the welfare queen supposedly commits, is often used as an argument for scaling back public assistance. Reproduction of this stereotype has a very real effect on struggling single mothers, excluding them from resources they and their families desperately need.

Another frequent topic was ‘encouragement.’

Image 27. (Facebook, 2014).

Image 28. (Facebook, 2014).

In image (27), a woman posts that she has just bought a new car, and a commenter expresses her approval by writing, “Guuuuurl. You an adult now.” The nonstandard variant of ‘girl,’ which here orthographically represents expressive lengthening, and zero copula index Blackness and again use the voice of this stereotypical Black speaker to express appreciation of material goods,
and adds the idea that public knowledge that you possess certain material goods is what confers status, in this case adulthood. Silverstein’s (2003) discussion of levels of indexical meaning argues that the lexical items a speaker chooses reveal as much about the speaker as they do about the items in the world they refer to, and here simple insertion of the word ‘girl’ is enough to prompt multiple levels of interpretation on the part of the interlocutor. Fix (2010) observes that two white female TV personalities who supposedly ‘talk Black’ use ‘girl’ as a discourse marker far more frequently than do white women with close ties in Black communities whose usage of features of AAVE is analyzed in the study, so it appears that ‘girl’ is stereotypically associated with Black women’s language. Editors of urbandictionary.com are divided on the connotations of ‘gurl.’ Many entries relate ‘gurl’ to transgendered people—“a ‘gurl’ is a girl who’s not genetically female.” Perhaps this has something to do with problematic ideas about Black femininity. Most other entries define ‘gurl’ as “a stupid person’s way of writing or saying ‘girl.’” Again we see a conflation between intellectual deficiency and the use of lexical items and phonological patterns associated with AAVE.

The next image (28) was posted on the occasion of a woman’s birthday. Instead of the routine “Happy Birthday, X!” comment, the stylizer voices a speaker of AAVE to express approval by saying, “Go on wit yo bad self,” which, since ‘bad’ here means something like ‘cool,’ is an instance of “flipping the script” (Olivo 2001), and to encourage the birthday girl to ‘GIT DAT AGE,’ meaning “get that age,” something she couldn’t not do even if she tried. Aging requires no effort whatsoever. The usage implies that speakers of AAVE enthusiastically encourage one another to complete, and then congratulate one another for completing, easy accomplishments. This recalls Spears (2001), which asserts that “African-American language and culture—attaching to a subordinated people—are often considered simple to understand and
master, unlike some other languages and cultures” (2). Ronkin and Karn (1999) echo this sentiment, writing that Mock Ebonics users see the variety as easy but worthless to master.

Another possibility is that the utterance as a whole—“Go on wit yo bad self, gurl. GIT DAT AGE”—relates to a positive stereotype of black women encouraging each other. The common phrase “Get it, girl!” is used to express approval and encouragement of a woman who boldly and shamelessly focuses on her own needs (urbandictionary.com). A google search returns a result that calls the phrase “a celebration of female badassery;” stylizers who use the phrase or variations of it may be indexing images of powerful Black womanhood to claim for themselves similar qualities.

Two more stylizations from the previously mentioned fashion blogger, who calls herself “The Man Repeller” boast about expensive accessories using zero copula (“She back”) and invariant ‘be’ and zero third person inflection (“Sneaker heads be like, ‘aw he got the velcros’”):

The blogger also plays on the lyrics to the critically acclaimed, famously narcissistic rapper/producer Kanye West’s song “I am a God” in which he growls a series of demands, beginning with “I am a God/Hurry up with my damn massage/Hurry up with my damn ménage/Get the Porsche out the damn garage” and ending with “In a French-ass restaurant/Hurry up with my damn croissants” (genius.com). Genius.com contributors comment that West sounds “a bit jaded and disinterested with these luxuries.” See image (31):
In the fashion blogger’s caption, she contrasts use of an uninflected copula and the well-known West lyric (name-checking him for readers who are familiar with his egotistical persona but might not recognize his work) with hyper-correct SAE reminiscent of a dictionary entry and a borrowed French phrase: ‘St. Barths be like, “Kanye, I *did* hurry up with your ‘damn’ croissantS (pl). In fact, I brought you not one but two pain au chocolats and a grape, too.”’ While West has variously rapped about the importance of religion in the Black community, public reactions to his engaging in interracial relationships, and the way conspicuous consumption is encouraged among African Americans who are subsequently mocked for it4, the blogger re-purposes his lyrics only to lend a certain coolness to her own conspicuous consumption. Like West’s simultaneously dismissive and angry request for service “in a French-ass restaurant,” the blogger unconvincingly downplays her emotional investment in luxuries like pastries in St. Barths. She has positioned herself as an irreverent fashion outsider and misappropriates hip hop

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4 “What you want, a Bentley? A fur coat? A diamond chain? All you blacks want all the same things.” (Lyrics from New Slaves, Yeezus, 2013.)
lyrics and features of AAVE to maintain her young, hip, un-stuffy ‘brand,’ and to distract from the role generational wealth, systematically denied to the Black speakers she is voicing, plays in her possession of the luxury items in question.

4.1 Productivity

Addressing an argument against her interpretation of Mock Spanish, Hill (1995) responds to the existence of mocking variations on phrases from German, French, Russian, and Yiddish by writing, “It seems to me obvious, however, that these other “mock” usages are today scattered and relatively unproductive, in stark comparison with Mock Spanish” (19). The productivity Hill points out about Mock Spanish is equally true of Mock AAVE. There are plentiful examples of both recycled hip hop lyrics and pop-cultural phrases such as “da block is hot,” “pimpin’ ain’t easy,” and “baby mama,” but also many new creations relying on iconic features of AAVE such as interdental fricatives realized as stops, overuse of “that” or “dat,” /r/-lessness, and invariant “be.”

Image (32) (posted on Columbus Day) uses an ‘r’-less hashtag that can be parsed as “Columbus better recognize!”—a phrase Urbandictionary.com explains as “a hip, urban rendering of ‘you had better recognize’; what you say when you want someone to acknowledge your authority.” The poster writes that his children “just discovered donuts.”
4.2 Constructing a [-Black] Identity

Internet-based communities of practice inherently lack geographical grounding, and may (and often do) include ‘speakers’ with roots in a variety of places, or who are currently living in or visiting far-flung locales, and may never even have met one another. But people also engage in daily interaction with real-life friends and acquaintances on social networking sites, replicating on the Internet social dynamics which exist in the real world. The following three examples come from group of English/Spanish bilingual second-generation Mexican residents of Tucson, current students and recent graduates of the University of Arizona, who stylize AAVE
on Facebook and Instagram⁵. See their usage of “though,” written to express a fortified interdental fricative:

![Image 33. (Facebook, 2014).](image-url)

⁵ I am indebted to Lauren Spradlin for alerting me to this social group and their Mock AAVE use.
Images 34 (top: Facebook, 2014) and 35 (below: Facebook, 2014).
Urbandictionary.com, whose slant is clear from its hypercorrect, nerdy description, “A veritable cornucopia of streetwise lingo, posted and defined by its readers,” says that “doe” is “an idiot's way of saying “though,” usually at the end of a sentence. (e.g. That hair doe. Those lips doe.”) Urbandictionary’s examples illustrate its unique connotation but don’t make it explicit: it is typically used to express a kind of amazement or to show that the speaker is impressed by what he or she sees.

Though according to the 2010 American Census Bureau Tucson is nearly half Hispanic at 41.6%, Southern Arizona’s Hispanic population is by no means homogeneous. Work such as Mendoza-Denton (2008) highlights the way binaries such as North/South and English/Spanish are reproduced through fractal recursivity—not only are people of Mexican origin framed in opposition to middle class White America, those divisions are reproduced within the Mexican community itself. By stylizing AAVE (the speech associated with a largely absent ‘other,’ as Tucson’s black population is only 5%), these speakers may be distancing themselves from a racialized identity and effectively aligning themselves with Whiteness. In doing so, they demonstrate their agility in English and simultaneously distinguish themselves from newer, still Spanish-dominant immigrants. Stylizing a stigmatized variety confers on them social prestige.

Kiesling (2001) analyzes the use of Mock AAVE as part of a hegemonic discourse used by mostly White fraternity men as a way to make salient their socially privileged status as White males. A few non-White fraternity members, such as an Afghani man, use features of AAVE to ‘mark the other,’ reinforcing the Black/White binary and therefore “actively constructing the speaker’s race as White” (111). By using features of AAVE iconic of hip hop culture to reproduce the racial binary at the center of the American discussion of race, second generation Tucson Latinos can create an identity for themselves as [-Black]. While this division may not be
the most salient one in Tucson, it is often reflected in the media and in popular music and is a readily available resource to these bilingual young adults.

Hill (1995) theorizes that hyperanglicization “expresses iconically the extreme social distance of the speaker, and of Mock Spanish itself, from actual Spanish and any possible negative contamination that a speaker might acquire by being erroneously heard as a real speaker of Spanish” (15). Here, it seems that stylizers of AAVE, instead of phonetically bringing the variety closer to the SAE they usually speak, exaggerate the iconic features of AAVE beyond what authentic speakers of it would do—for example, stylizers used nonstandard orthography in their semantic derogation of the song titles “All Black Everything” and “Tha Block is Hot,” whereas the artists used it not at all or to a lesser extent. Users of Mock AAVE exploit the vastly different positions of the two varieties in the linguistic hierarchy by stylizing those features most visibly linked in the minds of listeners to Blackness, which draws listeners’ attention to their socially hegemonic position as [-Black].

4.3 The Racist Project

Hill argues “that to find that an action or utterance is ‘racist’, one does not have to demonstrate that the racism is consciously intended. Racism is judged, instead, by its effects: “of successful discrimination and exclusion of members of the racialized group from goods and resources enjoyed by members of the racializing group” (18). The view Hill counters here, that for an utterance to be racist the speaker must have intended for it to be so, comes from a popular linguistic ideology, the personalist ideology, which holds that the meaning of an utterance is determined by the speaker’s intentions. This commonly-held belief is what makes it possible to explain away the publicly-expressed racist views of politicians and media figures as “racist
—they can deny having had any offensive intentions and blame interpretations that cast their remarks as racist on people’s oversensitivity.

Meaning is determined differently in Black speech communities. Morgan (1991) traces African American communicative practices through the communicative restraints of slavery and back to Africa, where in many societies “the role of the audience in determining intentionality and speaker responsibility in discourse is so important that figurative language and spokesmen are used to protect the speaker from an unintended interpretation” (424). In the African American speech community in the U.S. and the Caribbean, weight is placed on listener interpretation rather than on speaker intention, so much so that speakers follow these maxims: “1. You should know the consequences of your statements even if you don’t. 2. You are responsible for all your statements and actions whether you know it or not” (428). Morgan recounts a dispute between two little girls whose mothers hold them accountable for their speech according to these maxims. Many of the communicative practices discussed, such as “pointed indirectness” and “baited indirectness” continue to serve the counterlanguage functions required of slaves’ speech, for example that the listener be aware that a different criteria for interpretation is being invoked, and “are often ‘hidden’ from speakers of non-African American cultures” (429). The focus is on speaker responsibility for any and all potential interpretations instead of the speaker’s singular intention when making an utterance, and in fact Morgan features an anecdote in which a woman’s friends appear to hold her accountable for what they understood to be racist remarks made by another of her close friends (432). These different communicative norms might cause Black listeners or readers to interpret use of Mock AAVE very differently: people who stylize AAVE are responsible for all its indexical meanings, including the reproduction and normalization of negative stereotypes that make it covertly racist.
According to Hill’s analysis, the negative implications about Black speakers in the use of Mock AAVE are “invisible to referentialist, personalist, and performative ideologies” (154), which construe AAVE lexical and grammatical items as harmlessly referential to their SAE correspondents. But if we examine their indexicality, we see projections of non-referential meanings such as stance toward the culture whose speech is being stylized for humorous effect. Through semantic derogation and hyperuse of nonstandard orthography and syntactical features, stylizers index negative stereotypes of speakers of AAVE, erase Black intellectualism and distance themselves from Blackness. Hill writes that this type of colloquial voicing of an ethnic ‘other’ is part of a “collective project” in which negative stereotypes are naturalized and normalized.

5. Questions for further research

This study suggests several intriguing paths for further research. First, what exactly is the nature of the link between romantic relationships, pregnancy, and childbirth and the average SAE speaker’s image of Blackness? Terms of endearment with roots in AAVE (boo, boo thang, shawty, and most recently ‘bae’) routinely make their way into SAE, retaining varying degrees of markedness or obvious association with AAVE. The Mock AAVE terms ‘baby mama’ and ‘baby daddy,’ which poke fun simultaneously at Black speech styles and Black family structures, have become ubiquitous. How stable are the romantic relationships of people who use Mock AAVE to discuss them? Do they use Mock AAVE to directly address their partners, or only in third-person discussion of them? More difficult to unearth: do they use Mock AAVE to talk about their relationships, or only to post about them online? In heterosexual relationships, who is more likely to use Mock AAVE terms of endearment, the male or female partner, and what does
that say about their possible indexical meanings? What are the parenting styles of people who use Mock AAVE to discuss pregnancy, childbirth, or their children, and what are their attitudes toward Black family life? Interviews of social media stylizers, and in some cases even careful analysis of social media profiles alone, could provide answers to some of these questions.

Several corporate marketing campaigns conducted via social media and featuring what appears to be Mock AAVE have come to my attention. This is fertile ground for future research: Which companies use it? What are the demographics of their customer base? How successful were the campaigns, and did they receive any negative feedback? Do these companies use the same features as citizen stylizers to index a Black, urban identity?

Kiesling writes in his analysis of fraternity men’s use of AAVE that while many stylizers would categorically deny having any racist intentions in using the variety, their introduction of features of AAVE serves to reinforce their position of social hegemony. In this study, in order to keep the focus on intertextual analysis and co-constructed meaning of Mock AAVE on social media, stylizers were not interviewed in regard to their intention in using Mock AAVE, but a study that contrasted speaker intention with outgroup reader interpretation could be revelatory.

The data collected for this study implies that Mock AAVE can only cover a narrow range of topics and express a narrow range of attitudes. Most of the data avoided making reference to serious issues faced by the Black community: extremely high rates of incarceration, poverty, and police brutality. Perhaps, like the teenagers who ‘cross’ into one another’s varieties in Rampton (2005), using Mock AAVE to talk about these issues would be seen as making a more serious, and therefore possibly more offensive, claim about Black identity. In more homogeneous and private online communities, such as the Ferguson, Missouri, police department, a Department of

Justice investigation discovered that ingroup members sent overtly racist e-mails that made use of Mock AAVE to voice, for example, a man celebrating the fact that he is making his last child support payment. Protected online communities could be searched for similar, powerfully harmful uses of Mock AAVE. A study could be conducted in which participants rated utterances using Mock AAVE on a Likert scale according to how offensive or benign they appeared, to discover whether there is a correlation between the topic discussed and how offensive Mock AAVE usage is to readers or listeners.

Perhaps most difficult to answer is the question: Who are users of Mock AAVE? The enormous popularity of hip hop means that young adult speakers of SAE hear AAVE through the media even if they don’t interact with any speakers of it, but only a subset of them stylize it. What region do they live in, what is their level of education, did they go to diverse or homogeneous schools, public or private ones? Are they risk-takers, are they self-conscious, are they gregarious? Are there any qualities that unite stylizers, or any characteristics, experiences or tastes that make a person more likely to use Mock AAVE? Would the answers to these questions cause me to amend my characterization of Mock AAVE as an important part of the racist project?

6. Conclusion

This study set out to catalog features of AAVE that are used in an intentionally inauthentic manner by nonspeakers of the variety to add layers of social meaning to communications on the Internet, and to interpret possible intertextual meanings of Mock AAVE on social media. A key aspect of Mock AAVE, as of Mock Spanish, is that the “presuppositions
and entailments” required to make sense of these kinds of utterances “are not easily identified as the products of individual intentions” (Hill 2009: 42). Indeed, trying to interpret tropic uses of voice removed from the social situation in which they occur would likely be fruitless. Instead, Mock languages are “co-constructed in the communicative space shared by interlocutors, in the collaborative project that is required to “get” jokes” (42). As Hill writes, “Personalist linguistic ideology really has no way to handle the co-construction of meaning among speakers,” (42) which absolves users of racialized Mock registers of responsibility for participating in the racist project.

Hip hop and R&B dominate popular culture, and it is likely that many stylizers have some appreciation for these aspects of Black culture and the linguistic systems frequently associated with them. However, I have shown that in the data, lexical items and syntactical structures associated with AAVE are used productively to give social media posts “a new semantic flavor, ranging from jocularity to insult, or to enhance an already somewhat negative connotation” (Hill 1995: 12). Just as in Hill’s work, through double indexicality stylizers annex characteristics associated with speakers of AAVE which may reflect positively on them as White (or [-Black]) speakers—street smarts, toughness, coolness, casual attitudes toward romantic relationships—but are seen as negative characteristics in Black people, and are often used to exclude them from resources and opportunities. Several stylizers used Mock AAVE to boast about their romantic relationships on their social media profiles, taking advantage of stereotypes of Black people as having strictly casual sexual relationships to downplay the sentimentality of their own relationship posts. The misappropriation is clear here—in order to make themselves appear cool and carefree, young White people exploit aspects of relationship or family structures
which are pathologized when exhibited by their Black counterparts, perhaps even by the White stylizers themselves.

Through semantic derogation, phrases that carry weight in Black culture and/or hip hop music are reduced to language fit for no more lofty a purpose than boasting about expensive possessions. Using features of AAVE to show off possessions or accomplishments or to make overtly sexual comments about a person’s appearance allows the speaker to accomplish these unsophisticated or even vulgar communicative tasks without taking responsibility for them, effectively outsourcing these types of utterances to Black speakers. That linguistic features iconically linked with Black people seem (to stylizers) uniquely well-suited to these communicative tasks reveals a negative intertextual image of Blackness that stylizers are both exploiting as a linguistic resource and cultivating with each Mock AAVE utterance. Using repurposed hip hop lyrics or features of AAVE to discuss luxury items or other possessions suggests that stylizers acquired them and enjoy them as would the speakers they are voicing, taking pleasure in material goods that have been, directly or indirectly, denied to them and which they have acquired against the odds. It distracts from a system that disproportionately rewards White people academically, professionally, and monetarily, allowing the stylizers easier access to the possessions they are posting about on social media. Through fractal recursivity, stylizers also activate the Black/White binary system to position themselves as White or [-Black]. When nonspeakers of AAVE stylize this stigmatized variety of speech, they distance themselves from it (often using orthography further from the standard than that seen in authentic uses of AAVE on social media to emphasize this social distance) and highlight their preferable position in the social and economic hierarchy vis-a-vis African Americans. When the body of data is analyzed,
a clearer picture emerges, regardless of stylizer intention: Mock AAVE is often used on social media to index stereotypes that have done real harm to authentic speakers of AAVE.

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