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Appropriation vs. Authenticity:
The Use of Black Vernacular English by White Speakers

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H506: Honors Seminar

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**Appropriation vs. Authenticity:
The Use of Black Vernacular English by White Speakers**

Abstract

This research investigates the authenticity of white speakers of Black Vernacular English (BVE). The scope of the paper is limited to white speakers of BVE in America, including European immigrants. The paper explores how authenticity is determined, revealing a complex vetting process performed by Black, in-group speakers. Research indicates that many of the white BV users exhibit appropriate use, wherein the speaker employs a speech pattern from a community to which they do not belong. The paper supports that the root of white appropriation of BVE is the desire to project characteristics of “toughness” associated with stereotypes of Black masculinity. The research reveals that, in addition to their American counterparts, white immigrants to America appropriate BVE in a broader rejection of their affiliation with the white “majority.” This discourse is pertinent in the reassessment of the United States’ history of cultural appropriation.

Appropriation vs. Authenticity:

The Use of Black Vernacular English by White Speakers

Appropriation of Black culture is a widely debated topic as white people continue to borrow from the marginalized. Historically, white people tend to ‘colonize’ culture, including language (Hill, 2008, as cited by Tileaga, 2009). A famous example is Danielle Bregoli, a young white girl who went viral at the age of 13 when she appeared on Dr. Phil, using BVE with ferocity. She has since used the attention from the appearance to garner her now flourishing rap career as “Bhad Babie” (Penrose, 2017). Such instances produce conversations about who can use BVE, and how authentic use is determined. As society gradually addresses the crimes of Western civilization, a reassessment of any borrowed cultural practice is necessary to avoid future transgressions.

This paper analyzes the factors that determine the authenticity of white people using Black Vernacular English (BVE), also known as African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). The research performed is from a sociolinguistic perspective. ‘Linguistics,’ in general, refers to the study of the structure of language. Sociolinguistics involves the study of language concerning social factors, such as gender or class, bilingualism, or geography, including vernacular. The term “vernacular” refers to the colloquial, everyday speech of a community (Guy & Cutler, 2011).

This paper finds that white people who appropriate BVE do so to project their affiliations with Black masculinity (as opposed to white masculinity) (Bucholtz, 1999). In addition, white European Immigrants to America employ BVE to distance themselves from a racial hierarchy they reject (Cutler, 2008, 2010). Most white appropriators use BVE to assimilate with urban culture; they use BVE to project a more “streetwise, masculine” personality (Cutler, 1999, 2002, as cited by Cutler, 2008, p. 10). An authentic white speaker of Black English is rare. Research on authentic white speakers of BVE has demonstrated that individuals who grew up within the Black community rather than alongside it (Hatala, 1976; Sneller, 2014; Sweetland, 2002). This paper demonstrates how in-group members determine authenticity through a multi-faceted

process based on “interactional context for its meaning” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 601). As the research specifies, authenticity is determined based on a multitude of intersectional factors, including the individual’s race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and motivation of use (Kromidas, 2012)

Historically, BVE is spoken by Black Americans and has been discredited as a valid form of English by white society. This has adverse effects on speakers of BVE, who are viewed as less attractive and of lesser status than speakers with mainstream U.S. accents (Rodriguez, Castelan Cargile, & Rich, 2004). This widespread prejudice takes a toll on America’s justice system; studies of mock trials reveal that jurors find [BVE] speakers to be “less professional and less educated” than their Standard English-speaking equivalents (Kurinec & Weaver, 2019). Linguistic appropriation of BVE is harmful and leads to violations of justice, thus necessitating an investigation into the ways linguistic appropriation can harm a democratic society.

The features of BVE broadly include, but are not limited to: unstressed syllable deletion, consonant deletion, metathesis (ex: ask —> æks), and monophthongization, or the deletion of the sound formed by the combination of two vowels in a single syllable (Pollock, Bailey, Berni, Fletcher, Hinton, Johnson, Roberts, & Weaver, 1998). In addition to these phonological (relating to sound changes in speech) features, BVE, like any other dialect, has a system of grammar that differs from Standard English, the widely accepted form of English taught to children. Appropriators of the dialect often employ phonological features of BVE, but fail to use the proper grammar and thus are determined to be inauthentic (Cutler, 1999).

Data over several decades indicates individuals appropriating BVE as identifiable through style-shifting from their native vernacular to an alternative or ‘crossing’ as coined by Rampton. (Rampton, 1995, as cited by Cutler, 1999). This implies that authentic speakers do not need to cross; they always speak their native vernacular. This paper employs this definition of appropriation. Conversely, this definition supports that an authentic, or genuine speaker of BVE

is a native speaker who grew up speaking BVE because they were raised in a community where it was spoken.

The appropriative user is thus able to switch between dialects when they find it advantageous, whereas native speakers do not use an alternative speaking style. The scope of the following research is limited to white BVE speakers, given the racially charged context of their usage. The paper examines sociolinguistic data about white BVE speakers from the last three decades. The aim is not to exhaustively review the literature, but to identify and assess the pertinent studies to determine potential paths for subsequent research.

This paper assesses the variation in white usage of BVE, and whether or not the usage is authentic or appropriative. In the context of this paper, appropriation refers to the borrowing of practice from a cultural group one is not a member of. Past studies on white speakers of BVE reveal that most white people do not naturally incorporate BVE into their language after exposure to Black communities (Cutler, 1999). In reality, most make a conscious effort to borrow parts of the dialect to portray an aspect of their identity — a practice made apparent in their purposeful dialect-crossing: “in terms of linguistic authenticity, we can surmise that style-shifting represents a degree of inauthenticity in that speakers are not representing themselves for what they are and are “playing up” their hip-hop status via stylistic convergence toward [BVE]” (Guy & Cutler, 2011, p. 158).

The primary research introduced concerns the authentication process for speakers of BVE. It concludes with the premise that the authentication process, performed by vetted authentic speakers, is highly contextual and depends on the subject’s intentions and socioeconomic background. Next, the paper introduces studies relating to the appropriation of BVE by white speakers. The research initially focuses on white American speakers before focusing on the use of BVE by white European immigrants to America. The subjects are determined to be appropriators of BVE based on the information provided on the authentication process discussed earlier in the paper. The paper demonstrates that while both white groups

appropriate BVE to project “toughness” or to fit in with hip-hop subculture, white immigrant groups tend to do so in a broader rejection of a white-supremacist racial hierarchy. Next, the paper introduces research on an authentic speaker of BVE who is white. The speaker is considered authentic based on their position *within* the Black community rather than just alongside it. The paper concludes with a call to action for reflection on the American language and how it is harmful to the nation’s historically oppressed communities.

Literature Review

A vast amount of interdisciplinary research is dedicated to the use of BVE by non-black people. The following research concerns the use of BVE by white groups to compare authentic use with the appropriation of Black dialect. Given the colonist history associated with most white-European cultures (France, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Germany), there is a strong concentration in the research about the appropriation of BVE by white people (Bucholtz, 1999; Cutler, 1999, 2002, 2003; Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015; Kromidas, 2012; Sneller, 2014). There are dozens of studies on the frequency of BVE use among Eastern-European immigrants, two of which are included in the literature review (Cutler, 2008, 2010). A considerable amount of the literature is devoted to the use of BVE by Latinx communities (Carter, 2013; Guy & Cutler, 2011; Slomanson & Newman, 2004). A much smaller fraction of research involves BVE use by Asian-Americans (Reyes, 2005). However, the use of BVE by Latinx communities and Asian-Americans will not be discussed in this paper. Given the large body of work surrounding the various groups known to ‘borrow’ dialect from Black English, the following research is confined to the topic of authenticating white use of the vernacular.

Negotiating Authenticity

Ultimately, the construction of identity by utilizing linguistic appropriation is the focus of this paper. In a proposition of a new sociolinguistic framework, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) summarize the definition of identity adopted by the following analysis: identity should be regarded as a byproduct of dialectic and symbolic customs rather than as their sources,

especially when the speaker's language is incongruous with their traditional social cohort. Given this understanding, identity is a social and cultural psychological experience, as opposed to solely "internal" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Simply, identity is a social construct with a multitude of influences. Bucholtz and Hall's study proposes a multi-faceted understanding of identity construction. The first aspect of this multidimensional view of identity construction relates to an analysis of identity through sociocultural institutions.

Though the entirety of the framework is pertinent when broadly assessing sociolinguistics, the specific nature of this paper necessitates only two more of the components. The second facet is that "identity relations" manifest via various interconnected processes including "the use of linguistics structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups." (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 594). In the case of this paper's inquiry, the linguistic system — the framework of the language — of concern is Black Vernacular English (BVE), which is linked to the Black community.

Based on the working definitions of identity specified above, identity is a construct, a result of the interactions between the self, their society, and their culture. Because of the historical colonization of Black people and subsequently their culture, the authenticity of white BVE speakers is important to not only sociolinguists, but to anyone hoping to repair a highly globalized post-imperialist society. In the effort to rid America of anti-Black racism, appropriative use of BVE (as a component of socialization and culture) must be identified and gradually phased out of practice.

There is a distinct moral complexity to authenticating dialect use. In a 2012 article about language crossing in New York City, Kromidas (2012) investigates how children differentiate between affiliates and appropriators of BVE. The data collection included observation and interviews, giving insight into the contextual determinants of authenticity. One of Kromidas's interviews was with an 11-year old Black girl pseudonymously named Keisha. Keisha's authenticity to speak BVE is not mentioned by the author, but the dialogue implies that she was

born and raised in an urban, largely Black community that uses BVE. However, the following research concerns solely the authentication of white BVE speakers. Thus, this paper operates under the impression that Keisha is an authentic speaker of BVE given her race and socioeconomic background.

Kromidas asks the student to comment on a conflict about someone “acting ghetto” (which the student equates to “[acting] Black”), sparking a conversation about dialect authenticity. The girl explains to the author that “someone can look white but act Black” (Kromidas, 2012, p. 326). When Kromidas inquires about the legitimacy of such actions, the student asserts that some of the white students “fake” the dialect, while others are authentic speakers. The student identifies an example of an authentic white speaker of BVE to be someone who grew in in a Black neighborhood, within the community. Based on these ideas from her subject, Kromidas finds the authentication process to be somewhat of an intersectional assessment — the speaker’s ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and overall intention of use all come into play. Kromidas explains the process in her 2012 study:

Membership itself was constructed through processes of authentication that took account of more than daily performances of style but also included one’s stance, motivation, personal history and overall character assessment. One’s social relations, stance vis-a-vis racial politics and ability to navigate the terrain of race were three of the important character assessments that figured in authentication. Thus, [a white subject appropriating BVE] attempts to cross were scrutinized and rejected. Their motivations were seen as crude and instrumental, their social networks did not include many non-white kids and perhaps most importantly, they did not embody a counter-hegemonic ethos concerning the value of whiteness. Conversely, [non-white and Black subjects were] seen as authentic because their crossings apparently flowed from their investments and affiliations with forms of multiracial youth culture and their anti-racist sociability (p. 328).

The interaction with the student, who is an authentic speaker of BVE, is exemplary of situational authentication of vernacular use. The interview demonstrates how in-group users of BVE determine the validity of the individual attempting to use their dialect based on context including their race, class, and communities. For Keisha, an authentic speaker of BVE, a fellow authentic user is one who, like her, grew up within the Black community using BVE. As indicated by the study, validation of vernacular use is complex. Those trying to ‘prove’ their right to speak BVE are assessed as inauthentic by in-group speakers who identify this insecurity as an indication of appropriation (Cutler, 2003). Authentic users do not feel the need to prove themselves, and consistently use BVE accurately, which is identified by authentic users.

Appropriative Use

Linguistic appropriators have the potential to profit from their theft, which serves to further exploit the historically oppressed Black community. A modern example includes pop star Miley Cyrus, who went through what is widely regarded as her “black phase” around 2013. During this “phase,” Cyrus used BVE and released rap music, working to dismantle her image as a family-friendly pop star. As of 2021, Cyrus has abandoned the vernacular and her rapper image for 80’s-style rock (Zoladz, 2020).

Linguistic appropriation occurs when a dominant group engages in the “theft” of dialectical features of a targeted community (Hill, 1999, as cited by Kromidas, 2012), and is a practice long abused by dominant white communities around the globe. “White crossings are that much more likely to resemble the colonialist hunger to know the Other, a cannibalistic gesture typical of the worst kind of anthropology...” (Kromidas, 2012, p. 320).

However, not all nations are as highly racialized as the United States, where individuals grow up identifying with one of a few racial categories. European immigrants to the U.S., who previously had little conception of their ‘whiteness,’ are racially classified upon arrival. Despite identifying with the “Other,” — outside of the mainstream American culture — the white immigrants are characterized as simply white. Thus, current trends of white immigrant BVE

appropriation contradict the historical subordination of some European immigrants in America's past: Italians, Greeks, Poles, Hungarians, Slavs, and other European groups were defined as "dirty, less intelligent, criminal-prone," and "were placed in a racial pecking order below whites but above people of color" (Roediger, 2006, as cited by Starkey, 2017). Thus, for decades, some descendants of European immigrants strove to be seen as 'white.' Their modern counterparts, however, seem to reject the traditional racial hierarchy. This is shown through their linguistic appropriation of BVE (Cutler, 2010).

The following research juxtaposes white American speakers of BVE with European immigrant speakers to indicate their similarity in practice, but not in the nature of their use. (The research on European immigrants concerns immigrants to America only.) While both groups seek to convey a toxic notion of "toughness" they associate with Black masculinity, European immigrants employ the dialect in response to the culture shock of a highly racialized society as a component of their larger rejection of racial boundaries. White Americans who appropriate BVE likely do so to either affiliate or distance themselves from the Black community. Unlike the white American appropriators, white immigrants who cross into BVE may do so in a larger rejection of racial boundaries (Cutler, 2010).

The association of Black masculinity with violence stems from the West's historically racist ideologies (Bucholtz, 1999). These stereotypes exist to serve as a contrast to the dominant masculine identity, which belongs to white men.

...in its current form hegemonic masculinity — the gender ideology and practice associated with institutional power — contains tensions between dominance and violence...and technical expertise...with rational power replacing physical power as the source of domination. Physically based masculinities are thus becoming subordinated... (Connell, 1995, as cited by Bucholtz, 1999, p. 444).

Though actual Black masculinity is multidimensional, racist ideology frames Black men as hyperphysical — physically strong, physically violent, and hyper(hetero)sexual (Morgan, 1999,

as cited by Bucholtz, 1999). Due to the pervasiveness of these racist ideologies, the use of BVE can, “in certain marked contexts,” affiliate Blackness with a hyperphysical masculinity (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 445).

As white masculinity only exists relative to alternate forms of masculinity (as well as femininity, notes Bucholtz), “by crossing into [BVE] middle-class European American males may paradoxically be constructing themselves as (certain kinds of) white men” (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 445). This paper employs the definitions of Black and white masculinity discussed above: Black masculinity, positioned as subordinate to white masculinity, is associated with hyperphysicality. In contrast, white masculinity is seen as more controlled, or “rational.” Thus, white individuals crossing to BVE may be doing so to portray their white masculinity as more physical, intimidating, or violent. Unfortunately, this occurs at the expense of the Black community; their situational use of BVE perpetuates the stereotype of Black men as hyperphysical, and thus violent. This stereotype has a direct effect on the Black community when Black men are killed by police officers who see them as inherently threatening based on these same racial stereotypes.

White, American Speakers

The majority of the research on the white appropriation of Black vernacular supports that the speakers intend to identify with either Black youth culture or its features, such as hip-hop. As this paper has established, appropriators of BVE may cross to appear physically tougher and more intimidating. Consequently, the white speakers crossing to BVE perpetuate harmful stereotypes about Black men. Being white, they aren’t inhibited by the racially classified society; they use the Black language without having to deal with the obstacles of a Black experience in such a society. However, each case is complex must be viewed in the context of the individual’s ongoing identity negotiation. Despite this caveat, all of the examples of white linguistic appropriation (of BVE) discussed in this paper occur at the expense of Black men.

In a 1999 study widely cited by sociolinguists reporting on dialect appropriation, C. A. Cutler observes and interviews an upper-middle-class teenager who consistently uses BVE. As a

young teenager, the subject “Mike” began to strongly identify with hip-hop culture and displayed his affiliation with attire, (baggy jeans, a backward baseball cap, etc.) by listening to rap, joining a gang, and ‘crossing’ into BVE (Rampton, 1995, as cited by Cutler, 1999). The sole subject’s chosen vernacular has a learning curve; in a quote from Mike at age 13, he initially makes a statement in Standard English before catching his mistake and repeating it using BVE: “I gotta ask, I mean aks [æks] my mom.” (Cutler, 1999, p. 429). This instance is demonstrative of an inauthentic speaker — again, having to consciously switch between vernaculars implies that one of them is not a native tongue (Cutler, 1999).

A common theme in cases of BVE appropriation is the user’s intent to convey a ruggedness often associated with the dialect: “...the history of black oppression has led to lower class forms of black language being associated with toughness and survival...” (Cutler, 1999, p. 435). Mike’s respect for hip-hop indicates his desire to be seen as authentic within its culture, therefore, attempting to demonstrate his resiliency by using the associated dialect. Young white men like Mike believe that they have the right to their appropriation, ignorant of the sociopolitical forces forming the culture. They borrow heavily from a culture without understanding its social boundaries, and, as the subject Mike demonstrates, are angry when met with resistance.

Mike’s initial experimentation communicated his identification with Black Americans. Only a couple of years later, Mike begins to harbor animosity towards his Black peers for excluding him, presumably because of his race. He expresses anger at the identification of his privilege, namely being referred to as “white boy” from a private school and exclamations of “Black pride.” According to the author, these sentiments pushed Mike “in opposition to the black community” (Cutler, 1999, pp. 435-436).

Regardless of their awareness, the use of a borrowed language is weaponized in white people’s hands; despite the noblest intentions, such as wanting to fit into local hip-hop culture, crossing into BVE contributes to the marginalization of native speakers. Especially when

consciously in opposition to the Black community, white people's limited understanding of racial conflict contributes to their spreading of harmful stereotypes. For example, Mike projecting his "toughness" is indicative of his close-minded evaluation of Black masculinity as aggressive. This angle is further explored in Mary Bucholtz's 1999 article titled: "You da man: Narrating the racial other in the production of white masculinity."

Bucholtz argues that the common appropriation of BVE by white men reinforces the racial hierarchy that initially enabled the oppression. She refers to the appropriated dialect as CRAAVE (cross-racial AAVE), specifying that it excludes white use of BVE without its appropriation. The term is useful for identifying appropriative BVE use, which, because it is inauthentic and incorrect, is not technically BVE (AAVE). Bucholtz's observations of a white BVE speaker reveals the frequent use of terms meant to emasculate, such as *punk-ass white bitch* (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 448). The insult, directed towards a white male, is an example of how white masculinity is portrayed as nonaggressive *in contrast* to Black masculinity.

The article focuses on the dialogue of the sole subject, pseudonymized as "Brand One," who deploys BVE to rhetorically project his identity. His narrative illustrates a conflict between himself and a Black peer who antagonized him. Throughout the storytelling, Brand One positions black masculinity as violent not because of the story's nature, but in his descriptions of acquiring Black friends to defend him. He describes one of them to be tall, but is unable to explain why "people are intimidated of him" outside of his being a tall Black man. (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 448).

Importantly, Brand One positions Black masculinity in contrast to white masculinity, which contributes to prejudiced views of Black men as hyper-violent (unlike white men). Bucholtz's study displays the way white men can abuse BVE for their identity formation. In Brand One's eyes, affiliation with Black youths signals virility and aggression, and he expresses this while using the community's dialect to relay his affiliation with Black youths. Brand One tells a brief story about a Black man rummaging through his backpack and his Black friend

coming to his defense. In this narrative, Brand One positions Black men within the hyperphysical stereotype. He harnesses a violent impression of Black men, whether they are friends or foes. By using BVE, Brand One not only colonizes the dialect, but employs it while reinforcing the stereotypes of Black men that contribute to their oppression.

Though the participants in Cutler's and Bucholtz's studies may oppress their Black peers unknowingly, not all white appropriation of BVE is innocuous. In her 2014 study of a community in South Philadelphia, Betsy Sneller reveals that white residents who had "antagonistic contact" (p. 169) and negative prejudices towards their Black neighbors showed the highest rate of /TH/-fronting (a linguistic feature present in BVE and absent from Philadelphian English).

Despite the commonality of speakers adopting a linguistic style to positively affiliate with a group, Sneller argues that the results of her study show that the local white appropriation of BVE is used to validate "street smarts" rather than to signal affiliation with the local Black community. For the /TH/-fronting (appropriative) subjects, 'street' culture consists of buying and selling drugs, stealing, and selling bikes, and the subsequent "turf-relates conflicts" with competing neighborhood gangs (Sneller, 2014). Speakers were less concerned with "approval from their AAVE speaking neighbors," (p. 177) and more interested in conveying their position within local street culture. Sneller (2014) characterizes "street activities" as the site of repeated antagonistic contact with authentic BVE speakers who are otherwise highly segregated from the white community. In this case, the appropriation of BVE by white speakers is not meant to commodify the dialect, but to benefit from its aforementioned "tough" associations (Cutler, 1999).

Consequently, both Mike from Cutler's study and the participants in Sneller's study employ BVE to their benefit, but to the detriment of the Black community the dialect belongs to. This is a performative act to signal their affiliation with local hip-hop culture and to distance

themselves from traditional white masculinity. In this pursuit, however, they position Black masculinity as violent, a harmful and untrue stereotype of the Black community.

White Immigrant Speakers

The popularity of rap and hip-hop gives people around the world the means to interact with BVE, an essential foundation to the genre. The rebellious nature of hip-hop attracts appropriators who feel misplaced in their predetermined racial or ethnic category. White European immigrants to the United States often experience an incongruity with their classification as White and are known to opt for BVE as an alternative dialect. This phenomenon is vetted thoroughly by Cutler in her following interviews with white immigrant users of BVE, which reveal their complex relationships with being identified as “white,” and therefore a part of the dominant ‘majority’ in America. Cutler explains their appropriation as a means to an end that is fitting into popular American culture. These actions are components of a larger rejection of the American, white-centered racial hierarchy (Cutler, 2010).

In her 2008 article on racial affiliation among European immigrants, Cutler argues that the said appropriators are attracted to the dialect change because it allows them to express their identity on their terms, as the Other, rather than as a member of the ethnic “majority.” Cutler’s data points to hip-hop culture (and the dialect associated with it) as an alternate passage of assimilation into American culture.

In her 2010 study on the same subject, Cutler notes that these individuals do not interact with Black communities in a way that would result in an unconscious, authentic adoption of BVE features, since they did not grow up in largely Black, urban communities (Cutler, 2010). In turn, the linguistic appropriation functions “as a form of symbolic resistance to the processes of racialization” (Cutler, 2008. p. 10). This is exhibited by one of her subjects, who is white, when he refers to himself as “Blackinese,” what he calls “white with a little bit of black” (Cutler, 2010, p. 253). The study suggests that stereotypes of Black masculinity as hyperphysical (Bucholtz, 1999) contribute to the white immigrants’ rejection of “hegemonic White forms of masculinity”

in favor of a “more physical identity” (Cutler, 2008, p. 10). Thus, white immigrants to the U.S. who cross into BVE still perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Black masculinity.

The rejection of white masculinity by white immigrants is in stark contrast to history. Immigrants to the United States have historically yearned for the privilege of a status shared by white Americans. However, now it is more common to see youth around the world resisting traditional racial categories by identifying “with groups other than the White mainstream.” (Cutler, 2008, p. 10). Cutler attributes this to a larger trend of youth around the world using language to “actively resists hegemonic racial categories” (Cutler, 2008, p.10).

In her sample of BVE-speaking European immigrant youth in New York City, Cutler features an individual who draws on “Spanishized” NYC English in addition to BVE. This finding indicates that white European immigrant appropriators of BVE are not necessarily trying to identify with a specific ethnic group. Rather, the speakers are employing the dialect to index attitudes associated with urban Black youth, such as toughness, street smarts, and masculinity (Cutler, 2008). She finds that immigrant youths who use “Black-stylized speech” may do so to “resists the constraints of being defined as a member of a particular racial or social category” (Cutler, 2008, p. 10). The author notes, however, that the meanings attached to mainstream culture vary between individuals.

Cutler explains that these individuals attempt to “de-racialize” Black urban youth culture in an effort to claim it as “a space for expressing coolness, or toughness” (Bucholtz, 1999; Perry, 2002, as cited by Cutler, 2008, p. 22). Presumably, these actions are taken as means for ‘fitting into’ a foreign culture for immigrants. She concludes that white individuals within hip-hop culture use features of BVE to signal many different meanings; not just to affiliate with Black, Latinx, or youth hip-hop culture, but also to negotiate or reject their position of whiteness within a racial hierarchy.

Thus, youth from various ethnic backgrounds in the United States adopt local or supralocal [covering multiple locales] features of AAVE to express their affiliation with

hip-hop culture. Using AAVE...styled speech does not necessarily reflect a strong attitudinal orientation toward young urban African Americans...but rather toward hip-hop culture, whose language of expression and cultural leaders are African American (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995, p. 470, as cited by Cutler, 2010, p. 251).

Specifically, white European immigrants hope to define themselves as tough and streetwise, similar to white American appropriators. The difference lies in the intention of the appropriation. Both categories of white appropriators employ BVE to appear tougher and to fit in with urban youth hip-hop culture. Research has established this is an implicit rejection of traditional American white masculinity (Bucholtz, 1999).

However, the appropriation of BVE by the white immigrants is less about the desire to fit in, or separate from Black youth culture (desires expressed in Cutler's 1999 study and Sneller's 2014 study), and more about indexing their belonging to a hip-hop subculture they believe is racially-neutral (Cutler, 2010). These individuals do not accept that racial politics control the lives of Black people, the major founders, and influencers of hip-hop. Therefore, the space cannot be racially neutral. The white immigrants' attempt to 'de-racialize' the subculture is indicative of their opposition to racial politics. In conclusion, white immigrants do not necessarily appropriate BVE to affiliate themselves with the racial Other, but may use BVE as a vehicle for authentication within the hip-hop space they want to de-racialize. Nevertheless, their use of BVE is inauthentic and harmful, as it perpetuates stereotypes of Black masculinity.

Authentic Use

Research indicates that whiteness is not necessarily a barrier to authentic BVE use. In her 2002 article "Unexpected But Authentic Use of an Ethnically-Marketed Dialect," Julie Sweetland analyzes a white person authentically using Black Vernacular English. Referred to in the study as Delilah, the white woman is a long-term resident of a Black neighborhood.

Sweetland's study elaborates on a similar 1976 inquiry by Eileen Hatala. Both studies focus on a single individual. Hatala studied the speech of a 13-year old white girl who grew up in

a predominantly Black, working-class neighborhood in New Jersey (Cutler, 2003). Hatala played a tape of the subject's speech to 46 Black Americans, all of whom misconstrued the subject to be Black (based on her use of BVE). Thus, Hatala concluded that the subject must be an authentic speaker of BVE given her effective and phonologically, and grammatically correct use of BVE (Cutler, 2003).

Like Hatala's subject, Delilah's proximity to the Black community influenced her speech pattern: "...her family is decidedly working class, and this physically placed her in a neighborhood context where she could acquire [BVE] naturally...the symbolic importance of her localness and socioeconomic class is even more significant, as it distances her from "regular" whites who neither understand nor care about the conditions and culture of the under-resourced neighborhoods." (Sweetland, 2002, p. 528). Delilah's positioning authenticates her dialect use in stark juxtaposition to the overwhelming trend of white linguistic appropriators desiring an in-group status. Her testimony is therefore pertinent to the discussion in this paper.

Like the Philadelphian subjects in Sneller's research, Delilah acquired the dialect through contact with in-group speakers. However, Sneller's subjects had mostly negative interactions with local Black people because the experiences were limited to the street. Their heavily segregated neighborhood and schools prevented any other contact besides through street culture, which can be antagonistic, especially if gangs and drugs are involved.

In contrast to white appropriators of BVE examined in this paper, Delilah lived within the Black community, not just adjacent to it. Therefore, her interactions were much more numerous and varied in nature — they were not limited to hostile gang interactions like Sneller's subjects. Delilah's authenticity is determined through multiple facets, beginning with her long-time residence in a poor Black neighborhood and her socioeconomic equality with its residents. Delilah does not cross into BVE — it is her primary dialect. This is a major distinction between appropriators and authentic speakers. Sweetland (2002) concludes the study with emphasis on the significance of qualitative ethnographic information when assessing the authenticity of a

nonblack BVE speaker. Where the white speaker is from, where they reside, their ethnicity, and class all play a major role in the authentication of a white BVE speaker. Thus, the white BVE speaker's positioning in juxtaposition to their local Black community is a strong indicator of their authenticity. Authentic white speakers grew up in and live within the Black community, while appropriators tend to, at most, live separately alongside it.

Conclusion

In summation, the findings in this paper indicate a deep complexity to the authentication of non-black BVE speakers. The paper examines the authentication process for white BVE speakers, showing it to be complex and largely dependent on the socioeconomic origin of the speaker. Authentic speakers also do not switch into the vernacular when advantageous, a practice exhibited by appropriators. The research reveals that white appropriation of BVE is related to a projection of 'alternative' whiteness, one more virile and physically based. However, this occurs at the expense of Black men, as their crossing perpetuates stereotypes of Black masculinity as hyperphysical (Bucholtz, 1999). Other research specifically examines specifically white immigrant appropriators, revealing that at the core of their rejection of white masculinity is a larger opposition to America's pre-determined racial hierarchy. Their urge to de-racialize the hip-hop scene they feel they belong to is a part of this larger rejection.

However, scholarship also examines the authentic use of BVE by white speakers. These speakers are determined to be authentic based on both impressions from their local Black communities and their residence within them. BVE is their primary dialect, as it is for authentic Black speakers.

White BVE appropriators remain the focus of linguistic appropriation based on a globally-shared history of white supremacy. Consequently, much more research is done on the appropriation of Black Vernacular English by white people than any other racial cohort. However, there are instances of non-black and nonwhite appropriation of BVE, just as there are instances of a white person using BVE authentically. Scholarship in this area would benefit from

future research comparing the linguistic appropriation of BVE between racial cohorts since non-white appropriators of BVE contribute to in-group biases against Black people.

Limitations of this paper include the lack of statistics on the crossing of BVE by white immigrants. This information, for example, would help to understand the diverging attitudes of European immigrants towards whiteness. In addition, this paper was written with a time constraint of 13 weeks. This resulted in less time for in-depth research and synthesis. With an open-ended time frame, the research would result in an increasingly thorough analysis.

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