Performing blackness, forming whiteness: Linguistic minstrelsy in Hollywood film[1]

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The ideological and indexical aspects of linguistic representation have been extensively examined in contemporary sociolinguistics both through investigations of language crossing in everyday interaction and through analyses of mediatized linguistic performances. Less well understood are the indexical meanings achieved when language crossing itself becomes the focus of linguistic representation. One prominent instance of this phenomenon is the use of African American English by European American actors in Hollywood films as part of what is argued to be a complex language-based form of blackface minstrelsy. As mock language, linguistic minstrelsy in such films involves sociolinguistic processes of deauthentication, maximizing of intertextual gaps, and indexical regimentation of the performed language, but unlike earlier forms of minstrelsy these performances are typically problematized within the films as transgressions of the ideology of racial essentialism. In the two films analyzed in detail in the article, linguistic minstrelsy is shown both to reproduce and to undermine the symbolic dominance of hegemonic white masculinity.

KEYWORDS: African American English, language crossing, masculinity, mock language, performance, race

> Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface's unconscious return.
>
> Eric Lott (1993: 5) *Love and Theft*

INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistic scholarship has become increasingly engaged with the question of how language comes to be racialized, or ideologically linked to categories of race, through processes of linguistic representation. Research on this topic has pursued two primary directions: language crossing in the everyday talk of social actors (e.g. Bucholtz 1999; Chun 2001; Cutler 1999; Rampton 1995; Sweetland 2002); and popular media performances of minority linguistic varieties by characters of color – who may or may not be played by actors of color (e.g. Chun 2004; Fought and Harper 2004; Harper 2006; Meek 2006). Although these practices differ in important ways, as forms of linguistic representation

they both involve the enregisterment of linguistic variables that can then be deployed as part of deliberate and reflexive identity performances. They can, thus, be said to involve higher-order indexicalities, or semiotic meanings, that derive from everyday patterns of social and stylistic variation (cf. Johnstone et al. 2006; Silverstein 2003).

This article considers a yet higher indexical order in the racialization of language: the linguistic representation of mediatized performances of language crossing. We examine this phenomenon in the context of Hollywood films, with a focus on European American actors' performances of African American English (AAE). Whereas everyday language crossing has multiple valences, ranging from social affiliation and interactional alignment to play and parody to mockery of other groups, in commodified and mediatized representations the indexicality of crossing is often far more restricted, though still quite complex. In the films discussed here, crossing participates in what can be considered a modern form of blackface minstrelsy, a highly controversial European American entertainment tradition involving the exaggerated performance of stereotypical blackness by white actors and singers. Building on previous scholarly examinations of blackface performances, we argue that white actors' performances of black language in Hollywood films often function as *linguistic minstrelsy*, a form of mock language that reinscribes stereotypes about African Americans and their language while participating in a longstanding and often controversial pattern of European American appropriation of black cultural forms. Unlike earlier minstrelsy, however, which generally did not problematize its own practices, these neo-minstrel performances are represented within Hollywood films as transgressions of the ideology of racial essentialism, an ideology that we argue is fundamentally conservative rather than progressive in its politics. Through this multilayered configuration of racism, cultural desire, and the policing of racial borders, linguistic minstrelsy contributes to the racial formation (Omi and Winant 1994) of a new hegemonic whiteness that incorporates elements of black culture while enforcing essentialized racial difference. At the same time, linguistic minstrelsy is not simply a straightforward reflection of racial dominance but a symptom of the instability of racial, gender, and class hegemonies in the current sociohistorical era. We demonstrate this point through a detailed analysis of two films that use linguistic minstrelsy to expose and then to shore up a newly-vulnerable white middle-class masculinity.

THE INDEXICALITIES OF MINSTRELSY

Blackface minstrelsy originated in the nineteenth century as a form of American musical theater performed largely for white working-class male audiences in urban areas of the northern United States. Minstrel shows featured white performers portraying comic southern black characters in skits and songs, their faces 'blacked up' with burnt cork. Up until the 1970s, scholars viewed minstrelsy as authentically representing 'black people's genius for contentment'

and 'supposedly simple southern ways' (Lhamon 1998: 5); since that time, however, the genre has come to be seen as far more closely tied to whiteness than blackness. Commentators have argued that minstrelsy at various times served diverse and often contradictory functions for European Americans. Some critics focus on the processes of social exclusion and inclusion enabled by minstrelsy, such as exploiting racism for political and economic ends (Roediger 1991; Saxton 1990) and facilitating the transformation of European immigrants into Americans (Rogin 1996). Meanwhile, other scholars point to more complex effects of minstrelsy, including its role both in producing a distinctively American form of popular entertainment (Mahar 1999) and in expressing an ambivalent and anxious desire for blackness (Lott 1993). Still others view minstrelsy as having progressive political potential, operating as a carnivalesque challenge to upper-class power (Cockrell 1997), and even – notwithstanding its overtly racist elements – forging liberatory cross-racial alliances between blacks and working-class whites (Lhamon 1998). It seems likely that blackface performance played all of these roles at different points in its history.

The minstrelesque film performances discussed in the present study are likewise complex and contradictory. It is no accident that the neo-minstrelsy films in our data set were produced almost entirely in the 1990s and early 2000s, the period during which the African American urban youth culture of hip hop entered the national consciousness and was embraced by middle-class European American youth (and indeed by youth of all races, ethnicities, and class backgrounds). In the vast majority of these films, the minstrelesque character is a white male hip hop fan, or 'wigger' – a derogatory term formed as a blend of the racial insult *white nigger* – whose race and class privilege renders him ludicrously inauthentic as a participant in hip hop. Bucholtz (2011a) argues that the wigger figure came to be deployed in such films at this cultural moment as part of the racial containment of hip hop.

In this article we first examine the more general phenomenon of linguistic minstrelsy film through consideration of a larger data set of Hollywood films and then examine in depth the representational politics of another minstrelesque figure, the middle-class European American male baby boomer in crisis – or the 'uptight honky', in the words of one such character.[2] In the narratives of the films, both of these stock characters lay claim to valorized stereotypes of young working-class African American men's style, including coolness, physical toughness, and sexual self-confidence, qualities in which they are otherwise deficient. Thus, as with traditional minstrelsy, neo-minstrelsy frequently involves ideologies of masculinity and class as well as race.

As suggested above, linguistic minstrelsy in Hollywood films adds a further order of indexicality to the semiotics of traditional minstrelesque representations. In blackface minstrelsy, the target for the white performer is (a stereotypical version of) blackness, but in neo-minstrelsy, there are two targets: for the white character, the target of the performance is blackness, while for the white actor playing the white character, the target is whiteness unsuccessfully imitating

blackness. In other words, neo-minstrelsy involves a typifying performance of a typifying performance (Agha 2007). Furthermore, unlike in traditional minstrel shows, minstrelesque performances in Hollywood films are generally either temporary for the character who crosses or divergent from the language of other characters with whom the crossing character interacts. Such portrayals foreground the marked and inauthentic nature of white use of AAE. To be sure, all performances are fundamentally virtuosic artistic displays (Bauman 1977), but the basis for evaluating the performance is different in these two situations. In traditional minstrelsy, most white performers had a genuine aesthetic appreciation for the black performance genres that provided their source material, and they took pride in what they viewed (implausibly, from a twenty-first-century standpoint) as their accurate representation of black language and culture (Mahar 1999). By contrast, in neo-minstrelsy, white performers generally do not seek to represent either blackness or whiteness accurately, and the virtuosity lies in actors' skillful representation of utter ineptitude. Such cringe-inducing performances are deliberately designed to provoke the audience to reflect upon the oversimplified nature of these stylized representations of blackness (but not, crucially, of whiteness) and, thus, to view them as transgressive rather than transformative of the racial order. From this perspective, whereas blackface minstrelsy is parodic performance, neo-minstrelsy is a form of metaparodic or reflexive, 'high' performance (Coupland 2007).

As in blackface performances, the indexicalities of African American language and culture in linguistic minstrelsy films are ambivalent, encompassing essentialized racial difference and symbolic subordination as well as cross-racial cultural desirability. Thus, both forms of minstrelsy are racially performative in the sense that they do not simply reflect but actively construct both blackness and whiteness and thereby expose racial categories as socially contingent and, hence, changeable (cf. Nowatzki 2007). But even though such cross-racial representations accommodate a wide range of interpretations from viewers, these are also constrained by the inherent conservatism of the Hollywood film industry in its effort to appeal to a mass audience. Despite the fact that the films examined in this study portray potentially subversive acts of racial crossing through language and valorize African American language and culture as superior in some ways to hegemonic linguistic and cultural forms, they habitually use these representations to restabilize white middle-class masculinity, the dominance of which has grown more and more insecure in recent decades (cf. Pfeil 1995). Such films, in short, do not dismantle hierarchies of race, class, and gender, but they do reveal fissures in the foundations of these hierarchies.

As staged performance, minstrelsy centrally involves language, yet most scholars who engage with questions of blackface focus mainly on the content of songs and performances as well as their broader social and political context, considering linguistic aspects secondarily if at all (but see Holmberg and Schneider 1986; Mahar 1985). Meanwhile, the majority of research on white

appropriations of AAE considers literary rather than performance-based forms of cultural production (e.g. Fishkin 1993; North 1994). Film in particular merits greater attention as a vehicle for cross-racial appropriation than it has received heretofore because it affords a rich multimodal medium for semiotic display. Similar to traditional theatrical minstrelsy, which used dialect performance in addition to blackface and plantation-style clothing in order to perform exaggerated sketches of southern blacks, the indexicalities of white mediatized performances of AAE are produced not only through language but also through European American actors' entire embodied performances of (meta)stylized blackness, including clothing, gestures, facial expressions, and other semiotic resources stereotypically associated with African American culture. In avoiding – in most cases – the use of blackface makeup, such performances 'simulate "the culture" without seeming to cross the line of being offensive' (Green 2002: 204). In keeping with dominant mediatized representations of AAE, European American actors' use of the variety is typically limited to the non-fluent and often inaccurate use of a restricted set of stereotypical lexical, phonological, and grammatical features. The films position such language use by white speakers as inauthentic, but in so doing they also position linguistic difference as essentialized racial difference and, hence, reassert the normativity of white language and culture, even as African American elements are appropriated into whiteness.

Lopez (2009) has shown, however, that white performances of black language in film are not inevitably minstrelesque and may instead involve authenticated forms of language use as part of a non-racialized youth style, in which European American characters use an AAE-influenced variety that is similar to that of other characters with whom they interact (cf. Hewitt 1986; Rampton 1995; Sweetland 2002). These performances are typically not stylized and may not be strongly racialized as black. Likewise, such films do not use other semiotic features in the same way as do films with minstrelesque performances. For example, the two films examined in detail below employ minstrel devices such as hip hop clothing and African American nightclub settings in order to transform European American characters from 'uncool' to 'cool', whereas in non-minstrelesque cross-racial performances these devices are used to index youthfulness and celebrity (Lopez 2009). Hence, in film as in real life, crossing as marked, stylized performance is semiotically different from crossing as part of one's ordinary stylistic practice (Rampton 1995). Stylistic crossing is practiced by white speakers who affiliate with aspects of black youth culture and is, thus, typically a form of adequation or identity alignment (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), while stylized crossing is temporary rather than habitual and often foregrounds distinction, or disalignment with the performed identity (see also Bakhtin 1984 on unidirectional and varidirectional double-voiced discourse).

In the analysis below, we trace the semiotic process whereby linguistic representation becomes linguistic minstrelsy in Hollywood films. This process involves three elements: deauthentication, maximizing of intertextual gaps, and

indexical regimentation. First, the performance is deauthenticated, or exposed to the viewing audience as false, as a deliberate strategy that foregrounds the disalignment between performer and performed. In many instances of language crossing, including in linguistic minstrelsy films, deauthentication is in part an effect of status differences: following Coupland (2001), Chun (2009) notes that an outgroup member's use of a variety that is low in prestige may be semiotically framed as deauthenticated or as not the speaker's own 'genuine' voice and, hence, ideologically interpreted as mock language.

Second, the effect of deauthentication is reinforced when the performance noticeably and deliberately misses the linguistic target. All performances rely on the recognition of generic and stylistic conventions and, hence, on intertextual connections between a performance and its source. Consequently, by maximizing intertextual gaps between the two, a performer may produce a parody (Bauman 1996; Briggs and Bauman 1992). In linguistic minstrelsy films, the white characters' performance of black linguistic and cultural practices is recognizable as parody because of its substantial and salient differences from its source, while the white actors' performance of these white characters is, in turn, recognizable as metaparody.

Finally, minstrelesque performances are involved in a process of indexical regimentation (Bucholtz 2011a), whereby the rich potentialities of the indexical field (Eckert 2008) are ideologically reduced to a much more limited and stereotypical set of indexical meanings. These stereotypes – the characterological types of the wigger and the honky, as well as the hard, tough black thug that both of these typified characters strive to emulate – then become the most readily available resource for further indexical representation in later performances. Linguistic minstrelsy is therefore, to borrow Jane Hill's (2008) phrase, a key component of the 'everyday language of white racism' not only through its representation of blackness but also through its representation of whiteness.

Before turning to our detailed analysis of two films that include language crossing by an 'uptight honky' character, we first discuss the general characteristics of our data set and the linguistic patterns found across linguistic minstrelsy films. We then turn to a consideration of how, in the two most commercially successful and culturally prominent films featuring a honky character, these structural resources are semiotically deployed as part of a racial project of whiteness.[3]

'I KNOW YOUR LINGO': THE STRUCTURE OF LINGUISTIC MINSTRELSY

The analysis draws from a data set of 59 films from 1976 to 2008, with the greatest number of such films appearing in 2005. Minstrelsy in early Hollywood films, such as Al Jolson's much-discussed blackface performance in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), is excluded from the corpus because these racial representations predate the Civil Rights Era and therefore warrant a separate treatment. The films in the data set come from multiple genres, including comedy, drama, action, and

horror, and contain at least one white character from a middle-class background who uses features associated with AAE.

Excluded from the present analysis are films in which a white working-class character in a predominantly black setting is portrayed as a cultural and linguistic insider and uses features associated with AAE and hip hop culture in ways that are neither problematized nor highlighted, as in *Coach Carter* (2005) and *Step Up* (2006). Also omitted are films in which European American actors who draw on AAE use a similar linguistic style offscreen at least sometimes; such films include *8 Mile* (2002) with Eminem and *The Underclassman* (2005) with Vishiss, both European American rappers from Detroit (for analysis of the latter film see Lopez 2009). Similarly, films in which AAE and African American youth culture are represented as part of a non-racialized youth style (e.g. the 1995 film *Kids*) are not included. Finally, white female characters' use of African American language and culture is not considered in the present analysis, in part because the difference in gender leads to rather different ideological configurations and in part because such representations are relatively rare, a fact which is itself suggestive of the ideological nexus of race and gender enacted in white uses of AAE in film.

Although the films in the data set range in date, genre, and quality, they demonstrate a remarkable consistency in their construction of Mock AAE. To be sure, individual performances show wide and unsystematic variation due to the actors' lack of fluency in AAE as well as the specific goals of each performance, but most, nevertheless, include many of the same phonological, grammatical, and lexical features. These elements are configured in different ways by each actor and deployed emblematically in order to project a white persona who adopts black language and culture, usually with comedic results from the perspective of the film. The discussion below highlights some of the most salient aspects of AAE represented in these performances, but given the range of features involved it is not a comprehensive description of Mock AAE in linguistic minstrelsy films.

Phonology

As shown in Table 1, at the phonological level, Mock AAE in Hollywood films predictably contains the most stereotypical features of the source variety, including deletion or vocalization of postvocalic (r) and, to a lesser extent, (l), fortition of the voiced interdental fricative in word-initial position, and monophthongal (ay).[4] However, these are generally not applied in the same range of environments as in AAE (e.g. (ay) is used monophthongally even in voiceless environments, which is less typical in AAE than in white Southern English). Meanwhile, other widespread but less salient features characteristic of AAE, such as glottalization of word-final (d), are rarely employed. Many phonological features of Mock AAE are general vernacular features, such as the alveolar variant of the (ing) variable (evident in several of the examples

Table 1: Phonological elements of Mock AAE used by white actors in Hollywood films

Phonological element	Example (*Hollywood film*)
Postvocalic (r) deletion or vocalization	Hey yo, ladies, open up the door <[doʊ]>, 'cause Loopz is here, your <[joʊ]> number <[nʌmbə]> one score <[skoʊ]>. (*Detour*, 2003)
Postvocalic (l) deletion or vocalization	How many fuckin times I told <[tʰoʊd]> you, man, it's the fuckin T-Dog, yo. (*Waiting . . .*, 2005)
Fortition of word-initial voiced interdental fricative	But I figure all the <[də]> bitches in the <[də]> class gonna be at this <[dɪs]> party, you know? (*Can't Hardly Wait*, 1998)
Monophthongal (ay)	Oo, I'm <[ãm]> scared now. (*Havoc*, 2005)
Consonant cluster simplification	You're just spending five dollars <[faj dɑləz]> for lettuce and seeds and shit. (*Go!*, 1999)
Lexically restricted phonological phenomena:	
• vowel nasalization with deletion of nasal	*man* [mã] (*Can't Hardly Wait*, 1998)
• vowel lowering next to nasal	*thing* [θæ̃ŋ] (*Bringing Down the House*, 2003)
• fortition of [z] preceding nasal	*business* [bɪdnɨs] (*Havoc*, 2005)
• stress shift	*police* ['polis] (*Malibu's Most Wanted*, 2003)
Phonological language games	This is my sizzle. For rizzle, my nizzle. (*Malibu's Most Wanted*, 2003)

in Tables 1 through 3) and consonant cluster simplification, although some common features that are shared with other varieties, such as the merger of /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ next to nasals and the merger of tense and lax vowels before /l/, are generally not represented. These segmental features are sometimes accompanied by idiosyncratic prosodic styling as well as special voice qualities, such as falsetto phonation and syllable-timed rather than stress-timed speech (Lopez 2010).

In addition, a number of phonological phenomena in the data are restricted to specific lexical items, such as the nasalized pronunciation of *man* as [mã] and the pronunciation of *thing* as [θæ̃ŋ]. (Processes that are relatively productive in AAE are generally not so in Mock AAE.) Finally, several of the films feature white speakers drawing on the 'izzle' language game from African American culture, which was brought to wider cultural awareness in the 1990s by rapper Snoop Dogg. Strikingly, only characters in comedies engage in this sort of linguistic play, and only the most buffoonish characters do so.

Table 2: Grammatical elements of Mock AAE used by white actors in Hollywood films

Grammatical element	Example (*Hollywood film*)
Regularization of singular/plural	(Rap) Now the women of the world is mistreated and abused, / but when we try to fix it, we tend to get confused. (*Bulworth*, 1998)
Regularization of third person singular verb form	Damn, my pussy hurt. (*Havoc*, 2005)
Regularization of past tense	Y'all growed up good. Y'all growed up real good. (*I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*, 1998)
Multiple negation	Hey, I won't tell nobody. (*The Young Unknowns*, 2000)
Zero copula	Why you trippin on me? (*Be Cool*, 2005)
Invariant *be*	People be gettin weird up in here. (*Pervert*, 2005)
ain't ('hasn't')	No, no, no, you don't understand. I'm here now, so if you ain't got the ducats on you, you gonna have to pay me in other ways. (*Pervert*, 2005)
Lexically specific grammatical forms:	
● *out* for *out of*	Why don't you pull your stinky dinky out my ass? (*Go!*, 1999)
● *gots* for *got*	No, actually, I gots to bounce. (*The Young Unknowns*, 2000)

Grammar

Like the phonological characteristics of Mock AAE, the grammatical characteristics of the stylized variety are drawn from widely circulating stereotypes of AAE structure, along with a number of more general vernacular forms. As Lea Harper (2006) has demonstrated, the grammar of Hollywood's version of AAE even as spoken by African American actors is much reduced compared to AAE as a complete linguistic variety. Harper's finding that mediatized representations of AAE rely more on general vernacular structures than on distinctive elements of AAE grammar confirms and extends early research in communication studies on representations of AAE in television situation comedies; this representational strategy has been characterized as motivated by the desire for characters to sound 'black but not too black' (Fine and Anderson 1980: 406, quoted in Harper 2006: 15). The strategy is somewhat

different with white characters that make use of AAE linguistic forms, for in most films they are represented as simultaneously more black (that is, more flamboyant in their use of black cultural and linguistic styles) and less black (that is, less authentic in their engagement with black culture) than African American characters. Yet structurally, the outcome often may not be much different from that for AAE as used by black Hollywood actors: the full grammatical range of the variety is restricted to the emblematic use of a few features – the selection of which varies widely from performance to performance – combined with a number of general vernacular grammatical features (Table 2).

Among the AAE grammatical structures found in these films are zero copula, multiple negation, and morphological regularization. More complex structures, such as the AAE aspect system and inversion phenomena involving questions and negation, are rare, with one notable exception: invariant *be*, as a highly salient but often misunderstood AAE grammatical form, is relatively frequent. However, it is not consistently used to reflect habitual aspect as in AAE; rather, it may function simply as a copula. In addition, some grammatical features are not specific to AAE, such as the use of *ain't* where standard English uses *hasn't*/*haven't*; the distinctively AAE use of *ain't* for standard English *didn't* occurs rarely, if at all. Finally, as with the phonological characteristics of Mock AAE in such films, some grammatical forms within the data set are lexically specific, such as the additional morphological marking on *gots* and the use of the simple preposition *out* rather than the complex preposition *out of*.

Several actors in the films in the data set rely less on phonological or grammatical characteristics of AAE than on lexical resources, particularly those from hip hop, in their performances of blackness. Table 3 lists some of the words and phrases that recur in the films; notably, these terms frequently focus on sex and violence and often co-occur with profanity, suggesting the sort of language ideologies held within the entertainment industry concerning hip hop culture. The numerous AAE terms that are not well known outside the speech community (such as *saddity*; see Green 2002) are not represented.

The most common lexical item associated with Mock AAE in the data set is *yo*, which occurs extremely frequently in nearly every film from the 1990s and later. Although the use of this and other slang terms by European American hip hop characters is usually portrayed as ridiculous in Hollywood films, white non-hip hop characters may use some older slang expressions of African American origin such as *on the D. L.* (i.e. *on the down low* 'secretly') or *You're the man* (an expression of admiration) without attracting criticism in the moral universe of such films. There is, thus, a fine line between slang of recent vintage that remains associated with blackness and slang that originates in African American culture but has become available to white speakers. Frequency of use is also a factor: many of the terms in Table 3 are not treated as problematic when used occasionally by white characters, but heavy cross-racial use is portrayed as making too strong a claim to linguistic ownership and hence as inappropriate. Finally, these films treat as taboo – and hence as a resource for

Table 3: Lexical items and phrases associated with Mock AAE in Hollywood films

Item/phrase	Gloss	Item/phrase	Gloss
-ass	intensifier	*ho*	'whore'
bitch	'woman'	*homey/homie*	'friend'
the bomb	positive descriptor	*honey*	positive/neutral term for a woman
bling-bling	'flashy, expensive jewelry'	*ice*	'kill'
buster	'uncool or inauthentic person'	*illin*	'acting crazy'
chickenheads	derogatory term for women	*nigga*	generic address or reference term
crew	'group of friends'	*off the hook*	positive descriptor
dog	affiliative address term	*pimp*	'man with multiple sexual partners'
dope	positive descriptor	*player*	'man with multiple sexual partners'
down	'cool/hip, approving (of)'	*punk*	'weak person'
ducats/duckets	'money'	*set*	'gang'
fool	generic address or reference term	*shorty*	positive term for a woman
front	'behave in an inauthentic way'	*smoke*	'kill'
G	affiliative address term	*son*	address term
gat	'gun'	*strapped*	'heavily armed'
hard	'physically powerful'	*wack*	negative descriptor
hit	'have sex with'	*yo*	greeting

humor – any white speaker's use of *nigga* as a neutral or affiliative term (which, crucially, almost always occurs in the non-rhotic form). A number of films include scenes in which naïve European American characters who attempt to use the term to align with black culture are strongly sanctioned by African American characters; such scenes are consistently played for laughs rather than as serious engagements with the racial politics of this extremely charged word.

As the foregoing overview of the structural components of Mock AAE indicates, this performance variety draws on a limited collection of linguistic resources that are particularly ideologically salient indexes of blackness and especially of hip hop culture, which in such films is strongly racialized as black, or at least as non-white. This indexicality is further strengthened by other aspects of the semiotic landscape of the films, such as Mock AAE users' physical self-presentation through clothing and body movement, as well as engagement in culturally recognized discursive practices.

In the remainder of this article, we examine the racial consequences of Mock AAE through an in-depth analysis of two high-profile Hollywood films: *Bulworth* (1998), starring Warren Beatty (who also directed and co-wrote the screenplay) and Halle Berry; and *Bringing Down the House* (2003), starring Steve Martin and Queen Latifah. Both films pair top-billing European American actors and African American actresses, and both share a common theme: a white upper-middle-class man undergoes a midlife crisis, which leads to his personal transformation through the aid of an attractive working-class black woman who acts as a sort of racial muse, inspiring him to experiment with blackness (see also Kitwana 2006). The films rely on exaggerated representations of both blackness and whiteness to generate humor, first by positioning the male protagonists as embodying extreme forms of whiteness and then by using hip hop, which is framed within the films as antithetical to whiteness, as the specific aspect of black language and culture that these characters appropriate. At the ideological level, then, the films essentialize blackness and whiteness as inevitably different and distant even as they represent white characters as reaping benefits from temporarily dabbling in blackness.

'DEIGN TO SPEAK ENGLISH': THE SEMIOTICS OF MOCK AAE

Both *Bulworth* and *Bringing Down the House* open by highlighting the European American male protagonist's remoteness from African American language and culture. Just as hierarchical social differences are semiotically established between the white and black characters based on class and education, so too are hierarchical differences established between standard English and AAE. Neither film includes black characters who primarily speak standard English, while white characters – with the crucial exception of the European American male characters who engage in crossing into Mock AAE – consistently speak the standard.

In *Bringing Down the House*, language ideology is key to establishing Martin's character Peter, a workaholic lawyer whose tightly-wound personality is signaled to viewers by his penchant for correcting others' English. The appearance of Queen Latifah's character Charlene, a wrongly convicted felon who seeks Peter's help to clear her name, wreaks havoc on his orderly if emotionally unsatisfying life. Charlene's speech is the target of Peter's disapproving metapragmatic commentary early in the film, as they dine together in an upscale restaurant:

Example 1: *Bringing Down the House*[5]

1	Charlene:	Oh, look at the legs on this wine. I'm telling you, this place is
2		bangin.
3	Peter:	Don't you just mean this is a nice place?
4	Charlene:	Why the word *bangin* make you so uptight?
5	Peter:	You know something? You're smart. If you'd just deign to speak
6		English, with what you learned on the Internet, and in prison,
7		you could be a paralegal tomorrow.

Further reinscribing the linguistic division between these characters, Peter's condemnation of Charlene's use of slang does little to alter her language: in her next turn, she uses an AAE structure (zero auxiliary in a wh-question; line 4) as she challenges his comment.[6]

In contrast to Martin's linguistically rigid character, Senator Bulworth as played by Beatty is far more open to learning about African American linguistic innovations. The premise of the film is that in the midst of his re-election campaign, Bulworth, fed up with the corruption and compromises of political life, hires an assassin to kill him in order to gain a life insurance payment for his daughter; after he has a change of heart he stays awake for several days in a row to avoid being killed. In this exhaustion-induced altered state of consciousness, Bulworth begins to behave erratically, taking up with a group of much younger African American women, including his love interest Nina (Berry), and telling his constituents the truth about Washington by performing painfully bad rap songs. Early in this process of personal transformation, he encounters Nina at a campaign event; in the following scene his distance from African American culture (as well as his general disorientation) is indexed linguistically through his awkward yet lustful response to her colloquial greeting.

Example 2: *Bulworth*[7]

1	Volunteer:	Nina. Nina!
2	Bulworth:	<spotting Nina sucking a lollipop> Oh ho ho! Whoa!
3	Nina:	Yo.
4	Bulworth:	<pointing at Nina> Yo— yo— yo to you.
5	Nina:	<W-shaped hand gesture> Later.
6	Bulworth:	I— I was hoping for <laughing> sooner.

Whereas Peter and Charlene in *Bringing Down the House* spar repeatedly over the value of AAE, Bulworth quickly becomes fascinated with black language, asking his African American companions for the meanings of unfamiliar (and occasionally obscene) slang terms and working them into his rap songs. Yet despite these differences, the films both construct a sharp linguistic, economic, and cultural contrast between blackness and whiteness.

However, at key narrative points in both films, the ideological association of blackness and non-standard English is at least temporarily decoupled. In each case, when the black female lead uses standard English, it is highly marked within the film's linguistic logic, and its markedness is further highlighted by the reaction of the white male character to whom the speech is directed. In Example 3 from *Bringing Down the House*, Peter challenges Charlene to change the way she speaks (meanwhile, a secondary character, Howie, played by Eugene Levy, expresses his sexual interest in Charlene in part due to her language use):

Example 3:   *Bringing Down the House*[8]

1	Peter:	I mean, you obviously have pockets of intelligence, so why do you
2		walk and talk and act the way you do?
3	Howie:	Because it's sexy.
4	Charlene:	It ain't acting! This is who I am! I mean, you think I can't talk like
5		you? <'white' voice quality> Oh, Peter! I absolutely love what
6		you've done with the place. It's so sterile, so, so bland, so wonderful!
7	Peter:	See, you can do it!
8	Charlene:	<ordinary voice quality> Oh, you like that, huh? Well, you can
9		kiss my natural black ass because I don't need your approval.

Here AAE is positioned as authentic language in contrast to standard English; as Charlene exclaims, 'This is who I am!' (line 4). She switches into stylized standard English in order to critique white middle-class language and culture (as suggested by the terms *sterile* and *bland*; line 6), yet Peter fails to recognize Charlene's performance as satire, instead expressing approval of her mastery of the standard. Thus, even as Charlene crosses the ideological divide between AAE and standard English, this scene reinforces an essentialized link between race and language. At the same time, it reverses the conventional language ideology that positions the standard over the vernacular, laying the groundwork for Peter's impending linguistic transformation.

A somewhat similar linguistic shift occurs in *Bulworth*. In Example 4, after Bulworth takes up with Nina, he rather patronizingly initiates a conversation with her regarding African American political leadership:

Example 4:   *Bulworth*

1	Bulworth:	Why do you think there're no more black leaders?
2	Nina:	Some people think it's because they all got killed, but I think it has
3		more to do with the decimation of the manufacturing base in the

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  4           urban centers.
  5  <Bulworth cocks head>
  6  Nina:    Senator, an optimistic, energized population throws up optimistic,
  7           energized leaders. And when you shift manufacturing to the Sun
  8           Belt in the Third World, you destroy the blue-collar core of the
  9           black activist population. Some people would say the problem is
 10           purely cultural. But the power of the media that's continually
 11           controlled by fewer and fewer people, add to that monopoly of the
 12           media a consumer culture that's based on self-gratification, and
 13           you're not likely to have a population that wants leadership that
 14           calls for self-sacrifice. But the fact is, I'm just a materialist at heart.
 15           If I look at the economic base, high domestic employment means
 16           jobs for African Americans. World War II meant lots of jobs for black
 17           folks. That is what energized the community for the civil rights move-
 18           ment in the fifties and the sixties. An energized, hopeful community
 19           will not only produce leaders, but more importantly it'll produce
 20           leaders they'll respond to. Now what do you think, Senator?
 21  <Bulworth takes a breath>
```

Once again, the black female character's switch into standard English elicits a surprised response from the white male character (lines 5, 21). In many ways, Nina's soliloquy encapsulates the progressive political perspective that the film seeks to advance; she is thus the mouthpiece for the views of the filmmaker, Beatty. Yet the scene contains more conservative ideological elements as well. As Harper points out, the abrupt shift in Nina's language from AAE grammatical, phonological, and lexical features in most of the film to formal-register standard English in this scene participates in a language ideology that 'standard English is the language of intellectual discourse' (2006: 72). Thus, where *Bringing Down the House* mocks standard English as 'uptight' and hence opposed to 'natural' blackness through Charlene's varidirectional double-voiced discourse (compare Rampton 2003 on the stylization of 'posh' language), *Bulworth* treats this variety as an available if unexpected register for politically engaged African Americans, as seen in Nina's unidirectional use.

Indeed, both films demonstrate an uneasy tension between competing language ideologies. In Examples 3 and 4 above, the linguistic assumptions of the white male characters are challenged by the black female characters' use of standard English. Such scenes promote a liberal ideology that African Americans can be speakers of standard English, but they also reinforce a discriminatory ideology that only standard English is tied to sophistication and complex reasoning.

The explicit and implicit valorization of standard English in the two films also has consequences for the representation of the speech of the white male characters: it maximizes the ideological contrast between the varieties and hence deauthenticates, for comedic effect, these characters' temporary and strategic appropriation of features of AAE. Unlike the African American female

characters, the European American male characters are unable to successfully bridge the linguistic divide between AAE and the standard. In both cases, the male characters cross into Mock AAE as part of a hip hop disguise, which includes dressing in street-style clothing. While this act is presumably intended by the characters to further authenticate their performances, it in fact serves to deauthenticate them: the humor of the plot device lies in the implausibility of middle-aged, upper-middle-class European American men's being able to pass both visually and linguistically as hip hop fans in groups of predominantly young, working-class African Americans. To cue the audience's interpretation of these performances as implausible, the films include both black and white characters' responses, ranging from amused to confused to appalled, though in some scenes the black characters especially (and improbably) seem to take the performances in stride. Through the extreme intertextual gap between the hip hop practices that serve as the source material and the white male protagonists' deauthenticated language and physical self-presentation, the minstrelesque performances in these films position the characters as not just white but hyperwhite.

In *Bringing Down the House*, Peter takes on a hip hop persona in order to enter a black nightclub to extract a confession from Charlene's thuggish ex-boyfriend, an African American man named Widow, who framed Charlene for the bank robbery for which she was convicted. The scene opens with Peter, having observed the activities outside of the club, offering money to two young black men for their hip hop-style clothes so that he can gain entry. This costume gives him the opportunity to step out of his usual identity as a repressed white male professional (as represented by his standard uniform of suit and tie) to someone who is, as he asserts later in the club scene, 'from the hood and mizunderstood' (as represented by the hip hop uniform he dons: jeans, throwback jersey, and beanie).

Example 5a: *Bringing Down the House*[9]

```
 1   Peter:      <in car, addressing two young men passing by in hip hop-style
 2               clothing; ordinary, nasalized voice quality> Excuse me. Homeboys.
 3   <cut to Peter, sauntering up to nightclub entrance in the hip hop clothing
 4   previously worn by one of the young men>
 5   Peter:      <to black bouncer; falsetto> Say yo, you got a bathroom <[bæfrũm]>
 6               in there? <cut to interior of club> Say yo, what's the dealio? <to black
 7               female clubgoer> Umm, who's your <[joʊ]> daddy? Back that booty
 8               up and put it on a glass. Anybody else dig what I'm sayin?
             <29 seconds omitted>
 9   Black woman:   Can you swerve <'dance, party'>, snowman?
10   Peter:            Do I got *honky* spraypainted on my forehead? Of course I can.
```

Martin's multimodal performance draws on a variety of linguistic and embodied features to enact a minstrelesque form of blackness. Linguistically, his performance includes highly stereotypical AAE phonology (line 5: [f] for [θ]

in syllable-final position; line 7: postvocalic (r) deletion), non-standard grammar (line 10), and outmoded slang terms of African American origin such as *booty* (line 7), *dig* (line 8), and *honky* (line 10), in contrast to the more recent slang term *swerve* used by his black interlocutor (line 9), although he demonstrates his understanding of this term in his reply to her. In addition, he switches from his character's ordinary nasalized (and hence 'white'; Rahman 2007) voice quality to falsetto phonation, which is stylistically used more frequently among black than white men (cf. Rickford 1977; Podesva 2011). Finally, Martin alters his style of walking, adopting what Kenneth Johnson (1975: 302) calls a 'pimp strut'. Many of these stylized features predate the hip hop era by several decades and do not have the same semiotic currency today. Because these linguistic practices are easily recognizable even by white audience members as unfashionable, Martin's performance is metaparodic, mocking his character's inability to successful appropriate the speech of young African American men. In this way, these forms are re-enregistered as inherently inauthentic 'wigger speech' or 'honky-trying-to-talk-black speech' rather than as authentic 'black speech'. Thus, despite Peter's denial in line 10 that he is a 'honky', his absurdly inauthentic performance semiotically positions him as remote from black culture and hence hyperwhite (cf. Bucholtz 2011b).

Indeed, the juxtaposition between Peter's performance of blackness and his 'real' whiteness is brought into relief once he confronts Widow and shifts back to standard English:

Example 5b: *Bringing Down the House*[10]

1	Widow:	Damn, boy, you lookin all kind of stupid.
2	Peter:	<falsetto> Really? 'Cause I got this outfit from your <[joʊ]> mama.
3	Widow:	Yo, Eminem, cut the wigger shit. I don't think you know how much
4		trouble you in.
5	Peter:	<falsetto> Fine. Fine. <normal pitch> Fine. I'm here to talk business,
6		private business.

As indicated by Widow's use of the term *wigger* and his allusion to white rapper Eminem (line 3), Peter's performance of blackness is ludicrously inauthentic.[11] Yet within the film narrative, this scene represents a stage in the character's self-transformation, as he experiences newfound freedom by adopting a temporary black-influenced identity and imitating the same African American speech style he condemned earlier in the film.

A shift into blackness is also central to the transformation of Beatty's character Bulworth. During a visit to a Los Angeles nightclub with Nina and her friends, Bulworth is introduced to urban black life and participates in stereotypical aspects of African American culture such as dancing and eating barbecued ribs in order to align himself with the black community. Encountering hip hop culture, he hits upon rap as the ideal means of telling uncomfortable truths about political corruption and social inequality, and via his freestyle rap performances

throughout the film, he is able to 'tell it like it is' for the first time in his career. The examples in 6 are part of Bulworth's extended rap response to a white interviewer's question: 'Senator, why this new campaign style? Why this new manner of dress and speech? Your ethnic manner of speech, your clothes. The use of obscenity'.

Example 6a: *Bulworth*

1   Bulworth: <rapping> We got millions of brothers <[bɹʌðəz]> in prison /
2   I mean the walls are really rockin /
3   But you can bet your ass they'd all be out if they could afford Johnnie
4   Cochran.

Example 6b: *Bulworth*

1   Bulworth: <rapping> I mean those boys over there on the monitor /
2   They want a government smaller and weak /
3   But they be speaking for the richest twenty percent when they
4   pretendin they defendin the meek.

As with Martin's use of Mock AAE, Beatty's minstrelesque performance involves a range of linguistic and other semiotic features ideologically associated with blackness. At the linguistic level these include phonological forms such as postvocalic (r) deletion (Example 6a, line 1) and the use of alveolar [ɪn] for velar [ɪŋ] (Example 6b, line 4); grammatical features including invariant *be* (Example 6b, line 3) and zero copula (Example 6b, line 4); and lexis such as the ingroup term *brothers* (Example 6a, line 1) and the mildly profane term *ass* (Example 6a, line 3). With regard to physical stylistic display, by the time Bulworth delivers his final speech at the end of the film, he has totally appropriated African American street culture not only in his language but also in his style of dress (a beanie, sunglasses, an oversized jacket, and baggy shorts), and his gestures.

Given Beatty's intent as a filmmaker to make a serious political point, however, Bulworth's appropriation of blackness goes well beyond Peter's parody of African American language and culture presented in *Bringing Down the House*. Through his rap-based political commentary, Bulworth gains support for his campaign, especially from his black constituents. The artistic form that he adopts not only has its roots in African American culture, but it is also widely recognized as a political tool that challenges injustice and gives voice to the African American community (e.g. Alim 2006; Rose 1994). Hence, by appropriating African American cultural practices and political ideas, Bulworth is positioned within the film as a new 'black leader', a transformation that was foreshadowed in his earlier conversation with Nina (to underscore this link, at the end of the film, he is assassinated).

As we have argued thus far, in both *Bringing Down the House* and *Bulworth* the lexical, grammatical, and phonological features of Mock AAE, along with black-influenced styles of dress and physical movement, are used by the white male

protagonists to gain confidence and the ability to speak forthrightly. At the same time, these forays into blackness are positioned as temporary and inauthentic, and both Martin's and Beatty's characters are clearly engaged in stylization via the maximizing of the intertextual gaps between hip hop culture and their own performances: they 'are being studiedly "artificial" or "putting on a voice" ', while their oversized, stereotypical clothing and exaggerated body movements are visually 'overdrawn, defining the generic principle of cartooning' (Coupland 2001: 346). These performances, moreover, are only interpretable by (largely white) audiences because they rely on and replicate racial stereotypes through the indexical regimentation of black linguistic and cultural forms, yielding a simplistic portrait of youthful masculine cockiness and toughness. In reducing the complexity of African American language and culture to a few ideologically salient elements and using these as resources for white self-discovery, both films, despite their generally liberal social messages, linguistically subordinate blackness to whiteness and maintain sharply defined racial boundaries, even as they acknowledge the utility of AAE for improving the personal well-being of middle-class white men.

'YOU MY NIGGA': THE REAUTHENTICATION OF WHITE MASCULINITY VIA MOCK AAE

While the linguistic minstrelsy displayed in *Bringing Down the House* and *Bulworth* elevates whiteness over blackness insofar as African American resources are used to serve European American characters' needs, the films also invert this hierarchical ranking to some extent, though in no less racially problematic ways. Reflecting the shifting racial and gender politics of the 1990s, both films use the trope of cross-racial appropriation to promote a cultural ideology of white masculinity as inadequate. One version of this ideology, often associated with wigger characters, positions white male language crossing into blackness as 'fronting', or presenting a false self, in order to claim a blacker and hence more masculine identity (Bucholtz 2011a). In the version of the ideology analyzed here, cross-racial appropriation by honky characters is a way of 'keeping it real' – or rather, of getting real in the first place. In these narratives, the white character's stylistic borrowing is redemptive: through the compensatory power of black masculinity, such characters get in touch with their true selves and, thus, gain authenticity.

Yet this apparently positive valorization of African American culture and identity draws on a widespread cultural ideology that black masculinity is hyperphysical and hypersexual (Chun 2001; hooks 1992) and white masculinity is physically and emotionally repressed (Pfeil 1995). The cultural value placed on authenticity, or keeping it real, in hip hop culture might seem to preclude the possibility of using Mock AAE to regain one's true self, but it is precisely the inauthenticity of this stylized variety that provides the warrant for its users

to become better (white) men: in flirting with black language and culture both literally and figuratively, the characters experience a temporary blackness that variously gives them insight into sex, dancing, social justice, and the importance of family. In these films, as one film critic puts it, 'malaise-ridden white characters are lifted out of their funks – and into Da Funk – by their contact with blackness' (Lehmann 2003: para. 6).

For example, in *Bulworth*, rap allows Beatty's character to assert his lust openly (even as he incongruously acknowledges global gender inequities); strikingly, this is also one of the few places in the film where Bulworth combines phonological, grammatical, and lexical features of Mock AAE (e.g. lines 1, 3, 7, 9, 12):

Example 7: *Bulworth*

1	Bulworth:	Now the women in the world, they mistreated and abused /
2		But when we try to fix it, we tend to get confused. /
3		I got respect for all the sisters <[sɪstəz]>,
4		they will tell you that's my style /
5		But there's one thing in politics that always make me smile. /
6		I like the pussy, the pussy. I like it really fine /
7		And when you be a senator, you get it all the time. /
8		The young ones, the old ones, I really like them all. /
9		And when you be in Washington, you hardly have to call. /
10		The women, they love power, and if you don't pull that rug out /
11		No matter what you say or do,
12		they give you nappy dugout <'vagina'>.

The connection between blackness and sexual self-assurance is also evident in the club scene of *Bringing Down the House*. As shown in Example 5a above, Martin's character Peter uses numerous lexical features of Mock AAE (line 7: *booty*; *who's your daddy?*) that index hypersexuality as he makes sexual advances toward a black female club-goer.

A similar indexical link between gender, sexuality, and Mock AAE is found in a later scene in which Charlene begins to loosen Peter up, teaching him how to dance and even how to seduce his ex-wife Kate. In Example 8, Charlene and Peter are role-playing the seduction scene; however, viewers are supposed to understand their highly sexualized interaction as devoid of real desire. As Charlene coaches him, Peter becomes more sexually aggressive toward the imagined Kate; he also becomes linguistically more black.

Example 8: *Bringing Down the House*[12]

1	Charlene:	You ain't ready for that shit.
2		<flips Peter onto his back on the couch>
3		Come on, now! Be a beast!
4		<straddles Peter and begins moving rhythmically>
5	Peter:	Yee-haw!

```
 6   Charlene:  Start riding, huh?
 7   Peter:       <waving arm in the air> I take care of her <[hə]>, that's what I
 8               do. <smiling> You're <[joʊ]> mine, Kate. Ride my lightning rod!
 9   Charlene:  Whoo, boy, you got your own.
10               <holding up a pair of decorative balls> You found your balls!
```

Improbably, neither Peter nor Charlene focus on the immediate sexual situation between the two of them but rather on the shared goal of preparing Peter to seduce Kate in a forceful rather than wimpy way. As Peter enters into this fantasy, he uses non-rhotic pronunciation to express his newfound sexual power (lines 7–8); Charlene, in turn, leaves no doubt about what he has accomplished – nothing less than the recovery of his masculinity (line 10).

In the above example, Mock AAE is enlisted to enforce heterosexual gender norms. The success of this project is evident by the end of the film, when Peter and Kate reunite. Meanwhile, Charlene pairs up with Howie, Peter's colleague and friend, a European American character actor who often plays hyper-nerdy roles. In this film, however, he transcends his hyper-nerdiness through the use of hip hop slang and sexual innuendo:

Example 9: *Bringing Down the House*[13]

```
1   Howie:      I'd like to dip you in Cheez Whiz and spread you over a Ritz
2               cracker, if I'm not being too subtle.
3   Charlene:  <tongue click> Boy, you are some kind of freaky.
4   Howie:      Oh, you have no idea. You got me straight trippin, boo.
```

For both Peter and Howie, then, African American linguistic resources are tools for sexual conquest, although once Peter learns his lesson he returns to the white linguistic status quo. That is, through their deauthenticated use of Mock AAE, white characters ultimately may be reauthenticated (Coupland 2001) as 'real' men.

Yet once the European American protagonists of these films undergo their transformations, they are no longer entirely white. Both *Bringing Down the House* and *Bulworth* feature African American characters' testimonials to the white protagonists' authentic blackness. Thus, Charlene says affectionately to Peter at the end of *Bringing Down the House*, 'You ain't white', and Senator Bulworth is told by two different adoring young black women, 'You my nigga' – a term that, in this context, must be understood as highly racialized. Likewise, both female and male African American characters show their admiration of the European American male protagonist: in *Bulworth* black male characters express approval of Beatty's character, and both films posit the unlikely appeal of a variously old, odd, or nerdy white male character to a young, attractive black woman. In the end, these films feed a middle-class white male fantasy of gaining cultural cool through linguistic minstrelsy.

However, the situation is more complex than one of simple cross-racial appropriation and maintenance of the racial order. The indexicalities of race, gender, sexuality, and class constructed in the films expose the insecure position of present-day white hegemonic masculinity. It is only by incorporating the essentialized qualities of young black masculinity – toughness, sexual aggressiveness, rebelliousness – into their own identities that these characters become authentic white men. The logic of such narratives does not ultimately challenge the dominance of whiteness, but it suggests that the semiotic resources of blackness are necessary in order for whiteness to claim authenticity and thereby retain its authority.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that cross-racial representations of AAE in Hollywood films largely reproduce entrenched ideologies of language, race, and gender through the practice of linguistic minstrelsy, but these representations also indicate that such ideologies rest on increasingly unstable ground. On the one hand, the white performers in these films draw on often simplistic linguistic stereotypes in their racial crossing; on the other hand, the two films that we analyze in detail also include the voice of a black character who challenges at least some of these stereotypes, thus providing a space for the viewing audience to interrogate ideologically familiar indexical relations between language and race.

All of the films within our data set rely on the processes of deauthentication, the maximizing of intertextual gaps, and indexical regimentation to construct a highly distorted and oversimplified version of African American and European American language and culture as inherently different, distant, and oppositional. Although we have focused here on the performance of Mock AAE, the process we have described applies not only to linguistic minstrelsy but to other multilayered performances of mock language as well. What differentiates these films from most previously examined cases of linguistic performance is the dual perspective they offer, which allows them to mock the racially transgressive character, and not simply the character's linguistic and cultural target. It is this multiply reflexive positioning, albeit in the service of an essentialized racial division, that moves these performances into a higher order of indexicality that goes beyond parody to metaparody.

In our analysis we have shown how two linguistic minstrelsy films in particular, *Bulworth* and *Bringing Down the House*, portray their protagonists as hyper-white and hence maximize the linguistic and cultural divide between blackness and whiteness, as well as how they position AAE as inferior to standard English, even as the variety serves as the vehicle for standard English-speaking white male characters to achieve self-actualization. Through linguistic minstrelsy, these characters exercise white privilege by utilizing linguistic

features indexical of blackness without being affected by the stigma that usually accompanies the use of such language. Once they have no further need for their black-influenced personas, the white protagonists return to their standard language variety with a newfound racial and gender authentication conferred by their experience, while leaving hegemonic racial arrangements intact.

In the two films considered in depth here, humor is produced by foregrounding the extent to which the European American male protagonists are clearly out of place in African American environments; in order for the humor to succeed, the monolithic and stereotypical presentation of black characters and types, especially black men, is necessarily backgrounded. This modern-day minstrelsy may in fact be even more damaging than its earlier counterpart because racial stereotypes are hidden behind the parody of white male characters whose acts of crossing in turn function as parodies of black language and culture; the reflexive irony that has been said to characterize the postmodern era (Coupland 2007; Rampton 2006) allows filmmakers to disavow any racist interpretation of their work.

Despite the profound potential for cross-racial linguistic and cultural practices to disrupt the conventional organization of race in majority-white societies, as suggested by some of the previous sociolinguistic research on crossing as an everyday stylistic practice, the metaparodic minstrelesque performances in these films ultimately reassert rather than challenge familiar stereotypes. In particular, they reinscribe the deeply problematic dichotomy between rational middle-class whiteness and physical working-class blackness and, thus, reinforce essentialized boundaries between racialized and class-based groups. Such representations of AAE not only reduce the linguistic complexity of the variety and reproduce racial divisions but also perpetuate seemingly positive yet essentializing language ideologies of AAE as indexical of coolness, physicality, and authenticity – all in the service of buttressing an increasingly unstable white masculinity.

NOTES

1. Our thanks to Dick Bauman, Dave Britain, Allan Bell, and Andy Gibson for their insightful comments and suggestions. Any remaining weaknesses are our own responsibility.
2. *Honky* is a 1970s-era African American English derogatory slang term for a white person.
3. Kitwana (2006) analyzes some of the same films from a cultural studies perspective, without detailed attention to language. In addition, two previous sociolinguistic studies have discussed one of the films we analyze, *Bulworth*: Green (2002) examines how blackness is linguistically indexed in the film and Harper (2006) evaluates the accuracy of the film's representation of AAE. Neither examines the language crossing of the white protagonist.

4. Many of these features have also been found in the everyday AAE-influenced speech of European American hip hop fans (Bucholtz 2011b; Cutler 1999).

5. For a longer clip from the film that includes this example, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rxke_Yu6-Pc (accessed June 18, 2011).

6. Strikingly, Charlene's knowledge of terminology from the register of wine talk (Silverstein 2003) goes unremarked, although it may be designed to indicate to the audience that the character is more sophisticated than she may initially appear.

7. At the time this article went to press, online video clips of *Bulworth* were unavailable.

8. For a longer clip from the film that includes this example, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrPiiG7qe8k (accessed June 18, 2011).

9. For a longer clip from the film that includes this example, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTUQc7s5Bmg (accessed June 18, 2011).

10. For a longer clip from the film that includes this example, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sp6BoRY2Tog&NR=1 (accessed June 18, 2011).

11. Interestingly, Eminem is in fact well respected as a skilled rap artist and is generally not viewed as racially inauthentic.

12. For a longer clip from the film that includes this example, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sp6BoRY2Tog&NR=1 (accessed June 18, 2011).

13. For a longer clip from the film that includes this example, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rxke_Yu6-Pc (accessed June 18, 2011).

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