

Representations of Blackness by White Women: Linguistic Practice in the Community versus The Media

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This paper compares the linguistic practices of urban white women from Ohio who have life-long affiliations and alignments with African Americans (Hatala 1976, Ash and Myhill 1986, Sweetland 2002) to popular media depictions of "white women who act black". Metalinguistic commentary from community members suggests that the practices of the "real-life" speakers are assumed to match the sociolinguistic practices of current popular media depictions of white women who use linguistic forms that index blackness. Focusing on Buckwild from the reality show "Flavor of Love" (2006) and Rita from the 2003 sitcom "Whoopi", such media characters are found to use a stylized subset of perceived African American English (AAE) features. Their performances have generally been labeled inauthentic, as evidenced through reality show commentary, Internet board postings, and my interview data.

I show that Buckwild and Rita make use of a limited set of salient AAE features (Rickford 1999), specifically: copula absence, "finna", /ai/ monophthongization, consonant cluster reduction, /r/-lessness, /l/ vocalization, and AAE prosody, but in ways that sometimes exceed African American speakers quantitatively (i.e. categorical copula absence) or only within specific lexical environments, creating an iconic white female embodiment of blackness suggestive of minstrel. In contrast, the women in my study, while they may also be described by their peers as "embodying blackness" through linguistic appropriation of AAE, tend to use a qualitatively wider array of AAE features with variable frequency. Differentiated use of AAE features may indicate speakers' larger awareness of the practices associated with the cultural stereotype within the media with whom they are aligned (Cutler 2001). Moreover, such overt linguistic performances of blackness are actively resisted by a subset of speakers, as evidenced in their reflexive discourse on what it means to be a white woman with close African American social ties and cultural alignment.

References

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