

I Did It For the Fam: Language and Race on a Reddit Hip-Hop Community

Once hip-hop culture is ubiquitous, it is also invisible. Once it's everywhere, it is nowhere. What once offered resistance to mainstream culture...is now an integral part of the sullen dominant.

-Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson, Drummer of the Roots

Questlove said it. Others before him have said it. Hip-Hop has been fully co-opted by the mainstream. Contrary to popular ideas of Hip-Hop as a racially exclusive culture, studies show that white people make up 80% of Hip-Hop listeners, a fact that easily illustrated by the number of white rappers, white concert goers and white members of the so-called "Hip-Hop Nation" today (Bialek). But no matter the statistics, no matter how pale the audience for the Jay-Z concert grows, things just aren't getting any less complicated for white people in Hip-Hop.

Due to common conceptions (or misconceptions) about the "ownership" of Hip-Hop and the idea of Hip-Hop as a racial music, whites making the foray into the culture are constantly aware of their own racial outsider ship and make a number of lifestyle choices including the decision to use, or not use, African-American English. Numerous studies have examined white Hip-Hoppers focusing on their language use, racial ideologies and their quest to really "get down" with the culture. Few, however, have taken the same approaches to online Hip-Hop communities by examining how white users negotiate their position in Hip-Hop using language, the problem often being that users don't identify themselves by race in these communities.

Fortunately, I found an ideal specimen for this type of socio-linguistic analysis. [r/HipHopHeads](#) (r/HHH), a subreddit (or interest-specific sub-community) of the social-networking and news website Reddit, has an ever-growing user-base of over 180,000 users and is the site of thousands of comments per day that utilize a range of linguistic styles from Standard English to African-American English. Furthermore, a large racial demographic survey has shown that the vast majority of the users are white. Over the past few months I have been monitoring this community, looking at what they do with language, and taking note of what they have to say about language, race and their desired membership in the culture of Hip-Hop. In the next few

pages, I hope to explain why these users speak the way they do, and how they justify their participation in Hip-Hop and their appropriation of African American English.

Previous Work:

Because of the relative novelty of my topic of study, there's very little prior work concerning online Hip-Hop communities and language use. However, to truly understand the dynamics of a white Hip-Hop community requires not only an understanding of the language being used, but also the social and racial contexts surrounding the use of African American English by non-African American individuals, as well as the participation of non-AA individuals in Hip-Hop culture.

Cutler's studies of white Hip-Hoppers — individuals that employed AAE in everyday speech — yielded some essential knowledge about what white participation in Hip-Hop actually entails. She notes that “blackness has been normalized” in Hip-Hop and though other races are involved and welcomes, the “black body and the black experience” are venerated as ideals (“Keepin it real” 212). For whites in Hip-Hop there is both the sense of outsider ship and a consciousness of this celebrated ideal of “blackness” that leads individual white Hip-Hoppers to adopt a variety of approaches to negotiate their place in the community. A number of her subjects disavow their whiteness, using AAE to align themselves further with black culture and black identity, while others chose to refrain from AAE use and employed standard English forms. Wimsatt wrote extensively about this phenomenon in “We Use Words like Mackadocious,” where he interviewed whites — individuals that employed AAE everyday — that he said “wanted to experience blackness, dramatic and direct” (Wimsatt). Overall, it seems that many white Hip-Hoppers feel that they can, through language use and musical tastes, take on a “more black” personal identity, one that will allow them access to African-American and Hip-Hop community space.

On the other hand, Cutler also suggests that whites are fascinated with the “forbidden narrative” (“Yorkville crossing,” 430) of Hip-Hop culture and use aspects of the culture to define themselves in opposition to mainstream notions of “correctness or appropriateness” (“Keepin it real,” 212). Many of Cutlers participants related negatively to “White America” and the

mainstream, and used AAE often from a sense of dissatisfaction with the mainstream status quo. This could relate to the continuous efforts of whites to distance themselves from generalizations about white culture and white tendencies, and their emphasis on difference from the norm (Thurlow, ch. 10). More likely, Hess claims, is that white Hip-Hoppers are propelled by Hip-Hop's commitment to "authenticity" — which often boils down to an independence from the "oppressive" mainstream White America — to present themselves as somehow different from the mainstream (374).

Cutler also hints that many white Hip-Hoppers do not want to be "more black" or "less mainstream," but rather wish to take part in the "complex prestige" that is associated with blackness ("Yorkville", 434). Concerning this brand of white Hip-Hopper, Rodrigues writes that they don't want a black identity, but rather "characteristics of blackness associated with being cool," language being one of them (649). This is done both intentionally and unintentionally, through many means including, as Rodriguez shows, the employment of the ever-present colorblind ideology — the view that all races are essentially equal and should have equal access and rights to everything, including the use of racial language (645). The individuals Rodrigues interviews tend to deemphasize race entirely, shifting their narratives from participating in "Black culture" to participating in "Hip-Hop culture" (434). Similarly, in her study of a German Internet Hip-Hop Forum, Androutsopolous notes that the use of AAE on the forum is not so much a ploy at seeming black, but rather a day to day way for these users to "participate in Hip-Hop" or "live the culture." She claims that the use of specific lexical terms can mark certain utterances as contained within the Hip-Hop social framework and exhibit the "Hip-Hop style" of the user (291). A similar trend was present in Fagerstens study of Internet Hip-Hop communities, where the AAE usage was an "in-group marker" (27) and part of a "community of practice" (23). She claimed that the users employed AAE-influenced speech to demonstrate familiarity of "Hip-Hop" practices and linguistic expressions, supporting the notion of color-blindness in adoption of a Hip-Hop style (29).

On the whole, the literature has done well to show that whites use AAE-influenced forms for several reasons and employ wholly divergent narratives to justify this use. Individuals either employ AAE to align more with a "black" identity, to distance themselves from the

"mainstream," or to make themselves somehow "cooler" and participate in "Hip-Hop culture." However, these studies ignore the less-extreme cases, the individuals whose AAE use is limited to specific terms, which are widespread on r/HHH. There is also room in the literature for examinations of vernacular ethical codes of linguistic conduct — which people are allowed to say which words — which are quite frequently discussed on the site. There are also other questions that we must consider that are unique to r/HHH. How does internet anonymity impact race-based language ideologies, and what happens when internet anonymity is broken? What sort of dynamics exist between a sub community like r/HHH and a larger, meta-community like Reddit?

Subject Background:

Before delving into these questions, it's necessary to lay a little groundwork about Reddit and the subreddit I am examining. When we speak about "mainstream Reddit" or "Reddit as a whole," we are talking about a vaguely defined group of users that populate the default subreddits — the 23 most popular subreddits that new users are automatically subscribed to. Regarding the culture of language use, Reddit has an official policy on language that seems to have birthed a more extreme unofficial policy. The official policy is called the "Reddiquette," a set of rules that are designed to facilitate "intelligent discourse" through a standard system of communication. In general, users abide by these rules and comment in grammatically correct Standard English. However, when, in any area of mainstream Reddit, users stray too far from Standard English or make even minor grammatical mistakes, users will either correct them, verbally ridicule them in response comments, or downvote the comment heavily. Because, perhaps, of the conception of Reddit as a place to "learn" and "discuss" (Brown, 2012), the culture of mainstream is perhaps best described as an intellectualist hive-mind, where there is an emphasis on standardization and correctness, but also wide agreement on numerous issues including race, gender and politics.

As we'll soon discuss, r/HHH is starkly different from Reddit in language use, but in user demographics, it is most likely quite similar. According to a demographic survey by the moderators of the subreddit, the average user of the subreddit is a "college aged white male" —

70% are white, 6% are Black, and 18% are of another race — a statistic which the moderators claims "falls in line with the majority of the Reddit user base." The survey also asked "how are you giving back to the culture," to which 94% answered that they were merely a "fan," not a rapper, writer, or producer.

Methodology:

To approach the topic race and language use on the site, a topic that requires an understanding of not only the empirical linguistic features but also the social contexts, language ideologies and racial stances involved, I have adopted a multi-faceted approach to my data-collection, one that I hope will provide me with enough information in a number of different modalities. To begin, I scanned certain threads in the 2013 "best threads of the year" list to get an idea of what the standard or ideal community interaction is like on the subreddit. Then, I arranged a "stake-out" of sorts, a defined period of time in which I would observe the subreddit, record comments that had any kind of use of AAE or Hip-Hop slang — or mere deviations from the average Reddit language — and analyze them in terms of linguistic features and context. Over the course of 1 week, I read through the comment sections of the top 10-15 posts of the day and collected any comment that met this criteria, amounting to around 105 comments. From there, I decided to expand my data collection to include data collected from certain posts from prior to my 1 week observation. These included discussion posts on relevant topics such as race and language use on Reddit and r/HipHopHeads, as well as certain posts that served as interesting case studies of AAE use by non-AA individuals, and the reactions of the users of r/HHH to their use. This approach draws from Fagersten's corpus based approach to studying linguistic phenomenon on the Internet, but also leaves open the possibility for analyzing more general features of user speech and stance. This approach draws from Fagersten's corpus based approach to studying linguistic phenomenon on the Internet, but also leaves open the possibility for analyzing more general features of user speech and stance.

Findings and Analysis:

As I have suggested, many users in r/HHH use some form of AAE-influenced language, albeit in vastly different ways, and it is the purpose of this study to figure out why. But to discover, in general, why users do this means taking into account the motivations and mindsets of numerous users, many of which are highly divergent. Thus, in the following sections I will proceed on a topic by topic basis, analyzing specific aspects of the data, such as degree and type of AAE use. In the conclusion I will make general summarizing statements about r/HHH as a whole and large scale interpretations of these trends.

General Patterns of Use:

On any given post on r/HHH, you can be sure to find at least one instance of non-standard language use, whether that is AAE, slang usage, or mere misspelling and punctuation. However, the distribution of standard and non-standard language is much harder to determine. On certain types of posts, there will be a much higher level of AAE user. For instance, on news or media posts that are either exciting, either highly positive or highly negative for the community, there tends to be more comments written in all capitals or using aggressive urban phonology-approximation and more use of AAE-specific terms. On discussion posts, there is often little non-standard language. Though I will talk more later about the breakdown among the distinct types of AAE-influenced speech, it would be difficult for me to give accurate assessment on the frequency of non-standard language versus standard language on r/HHH. Suffice it to say that not all of the users are speaking this way all of the time; rather they are code-switching between their native dialect and a non-native one, often multiple times within a single comment, depending on the specific post, the context, and the purpose of the comment. It's also important to note that none of the comments that I analyzed had been downvoted significantly — on the contrary, many had been voted to the top — proving that the strict standard language ideology present on mainstream Reddit isn't as prevalent on r/HHH.

Grammatical and Phonetic Use of AAE:

A large number of the comments that I collected utilized what I am calling either Grammatical or Phonetic approximations of AAE. These are comments that make a clear effort

to "sound Black," or at least sound like African-American English though it's difficult to determine, as we'll discuss later, if the users are intending it to be interpreted this way or if the users index any "blackness" to the words they are writing.

Grammatical use of AAE includes the approximations of the syntactical structures and grammatical transformations that AAE is recognizable for including the habitual "be," copula deletion, and negation. For example, the comment "I BE THIEVIN ERRYDAY BITCH" emphasizes that the user is habitually or continually "thievin" through addition of the "be." Examples of copula deletion can be found in the exclamations "MODS ASLEEP YO" and "Shit slaps." Phonetic approximation of AAE often occurs in combination with grammatical approximation and involves non-standard spellings of specific words to simulate the way that the words are spoken in AAE. Commonly used are the words or "muhfuckah" or "fucka" for "motherfucker," "Bruh" for "Bro" and "Brother," "tho" and "doe" for "though," "cuh" shortened from "cousin," and many more.

One poignant observation from the data was that many of the comments employing these forms were found on posts that dealt with the more urban, hardcore, or "gangsta" end of the Hip-Hop cultural spectrum, for example a post about the arrest of a "Gangsta" rapper, or a song by Waka Flocka Flame, a prominent maker of "street rap." The conception of an association between AAE phonology and the inner-city has already been noted by Morgan, who wrote that Hip-Hop's popularity has resulted in a widespread awareness of "the importance of phonology...in representing urban space" (Morgan, 188). It's also important to note that the "street rappers" in question are not typically thought of as "mainstream," at least compared to artists like Kanye West and Jay-Z, and are usually conceived of as tied more to the "streets," if not that they are actually popular there. Thus, it would stand to reason that these users — thinking that this is the music popular among many African-Americans — intentionally mark their speech as "urban" or "Black" to align themselves more with the rest of the perceived listening community. It's also equally likely that the users see it as a stylistic choice; the music they listen to and admire contains this kind of language, and thus they feel that putting it to use in real life is a way of performing this specific Hip-Hop style.

On the other hand, there are numerous cases of grammatical and phonological AAE for what seems to be humorous purposes. For instance, one thread found users engaging in a "translation contest" on the lyrics of rapper Chief Keef, including comments such as "Translate this part, HOPPUHH OUHHT DAT RARRRIE WIHDA LOUIE BAHHG." Another example was a thread entitled "____ make music for niggas who _____," with responses such as "Chief Keef make music for niggas that hold the pencils with they whole hand." In addition to these examples — where the language, or the ones who speak it, seems to be the butt of the joke — there are numerous others where the users are making a joke about a separate topic, using the grammatical or phonological AAE-influenced style to do so. This type of joke-making seems to be popular and accepted within the subreddit, even considering that the users often identify themselves as "less racist" than the rest of Reddit. There are two distinct possibilities here. Either the users are mocking AAE and Black culture as a distinct "other," or that they feel the participation in a Hip-Hop community gives them resources to justify joking about the culture and making humorous references to the culture as if were their own. These are two ideas that we will talk more about in the conclusion.

Lexical Use of AAE:

The remainder of the AAE-utilizing users typically confine their AAE use to vocabulary that has special meaning within Hip-Hop or Black culture. Outside of these specific words or phrases, these users make minimal use of the grammatical or phonological features of AAE and typically use Standard English. Several users in the corpus said that a certain song "slaps," "bangs" or "goes hard," all of which mean that the song has a beat that is quite powerful or hits hard. Users use terms like "dope," "fly," "trill", and "hot" as particular designations of quality for a song, and "whack" or "corny" to mean bad or weird.

One possible explanation for this type of usage is that users find it difficult to accurately convey their feelings about a specific song using standard english vocabulary. Chelsey's study proved that white individuals can acquire AAE-vocabulary through Hip-Hop listening and other media, and thus there is a distinct possibility that these users are genuinely using these words to convey meanings specific to these words, and not for any superficial way to perform identity,

and thus are not consciously indexing any "blackness" to the word (Chelsea, 2). For example, when one user asked what a rapper's most "ignant" songs were, from the context it is evident that he is not using AAE for superficial purposes and does not mean "ignorant," or lacking knowledge. Rather, the user says "ignant" to denote a specific musical and lyrical quality common to much Party rap.

The use of these words and phrases may also stem from a wish to demonstrate ones knowledge of Hip-Hop culture and Black culture and, like the use of grammatical and phonological AAE, either align oneself with the community that the user perceives Hip-Hop to have or perform some kind of "black" or "Hip-Hop" identity. For example, one user left a comment on a song that read "oooh kill em," in reference to a popular Vine video of a black child dancing to a Hip-Hop song. Another user used the phrase "ain't nobody got time for that," a reference to a viral Youtube video of a black woman speaking to a news crew. An interesting common factor of both these references is that they were largely Internet phenomena and not strictly products of black or Hip-Hop culture. An example of a separate type of this occurrence is a user stating that a song made him "want to move bricks and murk niggas," meaning sell cocaine and kill people, and another user responding to this comment saying "exactly...shit just makes you picture yourself doing a drive by." These references to gang activity, as well as the previous popular culture references, reveals the users personal conceptions of how the music they listen to relates to real life as they attempt to demonstrate their familiarity with cultural and social items related to Black culture.

Tied up in both of these possibilities are ideas related to colorblindness and viewing Hip-Hop as a style. For these users, the use of these AAE-specific terms doesn't seem at all out of the ordinary. If they use the terms genuinely, they are using them as if they don't have any ties to race and that anyone has equal claim in using them. If they use them to perform a "Hip-Hop" identity, they are using the terms to take on an identity or a style that they conceive of as "colorless" or accessible to all. There are certainly instances of individuals making entirely self-conscious uses of AAE, but — as we will see in the following section — the ideology that certain AAE-originated terms are now in in a multicultural usage domain is quite prevalent on the subreddit.

Use of the Word “Nigga” and the Ethics of Race-Based Language Use:

As you could probably tell, for what amounts to a large group of white kids, the use of the word “nigga” is quite high on r/HHH. While social convention typically dictates that non-black people refrain from using any of the so-called “n-words,” Rahman says that African-Americans often use the form “nigga” for “intra-group self-reference” to highlight “the identity of a speaker as participating in the culture of survival” (143). Because of this positive repurposing of the n-word by Black individuals, especially prominent rappers, this positive use of the word “nigga” has been given widespread exposure in the mainstream United States and the world. Thus, looking at the use of this word on the subreddit is interesting because it gives us a look at how white users use the word when their racial identity is hidden and how they justify this use.

Users commonly use the n-word when quoting lyrics but often times the connections to the lyrics are strained or not evident from the context, such that it’s as if the user were using the word themselves. For instance, one user said that they “woke up feelin’ like dat nigga,” a reference to a song by rapper Mac Dre but extending the use of “nigga” beyond a mere quote to a full fledged usage of the word. Equally common are casual uses such as phrases like “my nigga ___” or “nigga please.” In fact, It would be quite accurate to say that “nigga” is used in about as many situations as it is probably used in real life by African-Americans, that is to say, white users of r/HHH are not obeying the “real life” social conventions surrounding the word. But why?

In discussions concerning the use of the word, many users take the stance that the word should not be regulated and that it is fair to use by all. They claim that “nigga isn't a word for blacks (and hispanics) only” or that “everyone says my nigga or my son in Brooklyn.” They state that the “intent of the word has changed” and justify their use through colorblindness-backed answers like “if a black person can use the word in a certain context, but I can't, than the only person perpetuating any sort of inequality is the person telling me I can't say the same thing as them.” They hold to the idea that “years and years of conditioning from listening to music dominated by Black culture” has taught them to say it and, in general, it seems that they hold to

the idea that Hip-Hop has transformed the n-word from a race-exclusive term of endearment to a word that you can use as long as you have the proper connections to Hip-Hop and Black culture, and you mean well.

Proof for this assertion can be seen when a self-identified black user posted a guide of sorts for white kids wanting to use the n-word. His guidelines were as follows:

“Hard R is never okay. Soft A can be used by white people if singing rap lyrics, at a concert, or with the approval of their close black friends. If your black friends give you a pass, this pass does not extend to other black people who don't know you. You gotta renew hood points with every new encounter. If you do have a nigga pass with your black friends, don't overdo it. It comes off like you're trying too hard.”

This post was both upvoted highly and supported in the comments, showing that the guidelines are generally agreeable to the community. The underlying assumption of these guidelines is that if an individual is “in” with African-Americans, through Hip-Hop or another means, they are given access to otherwise race-specific language and phrases. This doesn't, of course, account for all the uses of the word on r/HHH. There are users — like the user who commented “nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga, I'm white, what are you gonna do?” on the black users post — that are making use of the safety screen of internet anonymity to be able to say purposefully inflammatory things without possibility of repercussion. But in general, users try to use the n-word exactly how African-Americans would use it, to “be cool” about it, and act as if they are doing nothing wrong.

Related discussions of language and race yield similar conclusions and other interesting observations. In response to a post that asked why users on r/HHH speak differently from the rest of Reddit, responses typically proceeded along the line of reasoning simply stated by one user as “We're a specific collection of the redditors who listen to hip hop. We use hip hop slang.” Other users claimed that “listening to hiphop gives you certain phrases you use in real life” and that “if you listen to hiphop enough it does sorta become your culture whether or not you were raised by it.” Again, we see evidence of the colorblind ideology in play, as well as the idea that Hip-Hop and AAE use are “styles” or “lifestyles” that can be chosen regardless of race.

r/HipHopHeads and Mainstream Opposition:

We also see, in these language-use justifications, a very strong dialogue denigrating mainstream Reddit, and claiming that r/HHH is a much more linguistically accepting environment. Users will say that in mainstream Reddit “if you try to use slang or sound ‘urban’, then you get all the neckbeards riled up and angry because you aren’t typing in ‘proper’ grammar” and that r/HHH users use terms that “most of reddit doesn’t use because most of reddit does not listen to hip hop/is white.” Partially, this can be linked to the idea of “Hip-Hop culture” specificity of certain word meanings, that some words on r/HHH “mean something here when they don’t elsewhere.” However, I think that these feelings, as well much of the AAE use, stems from these user’s negative conception of mainstream Reddit — and to a larger extent mainstream America — and their wish to distance themselves from the mainstream.

To further this idea, the common notion among r/HHH users — that mainstream Reddit users are highly judgmental about language and r/HHH is not — manifests itself in the writing style of r/HHH users. Apart from AAE use, there is often a lack of grammar and punctuation, lack of, or extreme use of, capitalization, and very high use of profanity, none of which are ever corrected or mocked. This could be a purposeful way of performing a non-mainstream Reddit identity, or a product of the writing style of the individuals that populate the community. Regardless, the fact that people write this way without, as one user says, “gettin downvoted just for the sake of it” means that users are somehow conscious of how this defines the community in contrast with the mainstream of Reddit language culture.

The idea of a mainstream opposition also has other evidence in explicit discussions by users. There are entire posts discussing user behavior in some of the default subreddits, mainly focusing on their “misunderstandings” of Hip-Hop and “racist” language and behavior. One user said “do not go to [one of the default subreddits] if you want to discuss rap” because “there’s no understanding of [a certain rapper’s] body of work and contributions to the game.” Others claimed that “Reddit is pretty much filled with racist fuckboys.” Users also praised r/HHH for being devoid of “douchy neckbeards” — a negative stereotype of Reddit users — and its lack of “sir speak,” a type of overly proper form of language present on some of Reddit.

The same sentiments are also voiced in regards to mainstream America or specific symbolic representations of the mainstream that users pick on. An entire thread on r/HHH dealt with how ignorant users parents were concerning Hip-Hop, verbally disparaging them for calling rap “nigger music” or “black people’s music” and for their fondness for Macklemore, a white rapper that is “uncool” on r/HHH. One user — and yes, the user identified themselves as white — said that he had seen “too much casual whitefolk racism” and that he was “done.” The same user said that he was going pumpkin picking and that he would be “scared whenever a pair of toms shoes walks by.”

Overall, there is a very negative conception of “whiteness” present within r/HHH and users commonly try to distance themselves from any hard indicators of “whiteness.” They do admit, freely even, that they are racially white, but speak about the actions and styles that they feel define “white culture” as a perceived “other.” This lines up nicely with the literature concerning white individuals self-induced dissociation from white culture through Hip-Hip, and provides a very neat, supportable account for the AAE use on the subreddit. The users, if we follow this logic, are talking differently from Reddit because they want — for one reason or another — to be perceived as distinct from mainstream Reddit — a symbol of “whiteness” — and included in Hip-Hop culture — more closely aligned with “blackness.”

Race, Language Use and the Internet:

Finally, there seems to be a collective consciousness of the fact that r/HHH is an internet forum, albeit made up of white people, and thus people can say what they wish, regardless of race, and not be called out for it. This is evident in the commonly voiced, but clearly sarcastic, phrases “We’re all black here,” implying “We know we are all white. But it’s the Internet so who cares?” Other references to r/HHH’s whiteness speak more humorously and openly about the topic, saying that “most of us are in fact the white devil.” This trend is also evident in the racially self-conscious “translations” of AAE phrases into standard english “Wow. We are truly out here” — which humorously standardizes the common AAE phrase “We Outchyea” — and the formerly mentioned Chief Keef translation contest, where one user joked that the rapper’s videos should have “a translation into terms us white folk can relate to.” This all goes to dispel the notion

brought up by one user that r/HHH is just “a bunch of white kids pretending to be black,” and that r/HHH is very much aware of its general racial makeup.

This gets entirely more complicated when offline identity is brought into the picture, which happened in a few cases. One user — we’ll call him M — had been posting frequently on the subreddit using heavily AAE-influenced words and phrases — such as “Weird Al stay killin niggas careers” — when he posted a picture of himself, an early-teenage white male, to a daily discussion post. Users immediately ridiculed him, his looks, dress and online language use. They said that “he should be barred from using the n-word,” that “it feels so weird putting a face to comments” like his and that a user would “probably hate that kid in real life based off looks alone but here I think hes actually kinda funny.” It is clear that the main surprise was that M was white. But generally, users mocked aspects of M’s appearance that demonstrated “whiteness,” such as his “preppy” clothing or the appearance of “awkwardness.”

In contrast there was “J,” a user that secretly entered an exclusive concert and continued to post to r/HHH about it all night in a highly AAE-influenced style. He wrote comments such as “Just faced an l out back and walked back in. I let security hit it. He wit it” and “She's trippin. DONT SHE KNO Q A BLACK HIPPY FAM!?!,” both comments that are rife with AAE approximations and stylizations. The user also posted a picture of himself very early on, and though he was not the stereotypical embodiment of “whiteness” as M was, he was still unquestionably racially white. But even so, J was met with praise, congratulations, jealousy that he was at the concert and was dubbed r/HHH “royalty.”

The differences between the case of J and the case of M is difficult to puzzle out. Why exactly were the two met with such unequal reactions? Part of it, as I mentioned, probably stems from the negative mindset not toward white people, but white culture. While M, a high-schooler at what looked to be a private school, embodied what most r/HHH users probably associate with “mainstream white culture” — which we’ve shown is viewed negatively — J, an adult who was attending a Hip-Hop concert, is probably a better example of someone who dealt with their whiteness in a way that was appropriate to Hip-Hop, that is, “being cool” about it. This also relates deeply to the ideas of Hip-Hop as a personal style or lifestyle. Users of r/HHH may see M as what they imagine to be a “typical Reddit user” and didn’t see evidence that he had any

connections with Hip-Hop culture or that he embodied the “Hip-Hop style.” On the other hand, J performed numerous acts associated with the “Hip-Hop lifestyle” — attending concerts, smoking marijuana, interacting with famous rappers — and therefore, while M was marked as an “other,” r/HHH collectively marked J as “one of them.” This, I think, generally explains the discrepancies in the two very similar situations.

Discussion and Conclusion:

Though there’s a lot to take into account here, there are clear trends in language use and stance with links to the literature about real-life white Hip-Hoppers. We’ve seen evidence of individuals attempts to align themselves further with “blackness” or black culture through language and cultural references. We’ve seen a strong opposition to the mainstream and individual’s attempts to distinguish themselves from the mainstream in one way or another. We’ve also seen the “Hip-Hop as lifestyle” ideology, and the use of AAE as a way to perform that style. It’s not at all surprising that we see these themes recurring with both real life and online white Hip-Hoppers. But, taken together, what do these things say about r/HHH’s use of African American English? How can we make sense of this weird community?

I would argue that much of this language use and behavior stems from a perception on r/HHH of a distinct “Hip-Hop identity” that users acquire through the consumption of Hip-Hop music and appreciation of Hip-Hop culture. Associated with this identity are a number of ideologies and styles that individuals tend to use to display this identity according to their own preferences. It’s also important to understand how race plays into this equation. As the literature on race and Hip-Hop suggests, “blackness” is an central ideal of the “Hip-Hop identity.” In the same way, “whiteness” represents the anti-thesis of the ideal “Hip-Hop identity” and encompasses all that Hip-Hop individuals define themselves in opposition to. But on r/HHH, a Hip-Hop community made up almost entirely by non-black individuals, individuals cannot make sense of this racial distinction. They wish to adopt this “Hip Hop identity” and take on the associated styles and behaviors, but cannot resolve the dialectic between “white” and “black” because their skin color does not permit them to.

Thus, white Hip-Hop individuals, on Reddit and otherwise, remove skin color from the equation, transforming “blackness” and “whiteness” into merely “styles,” “attitudes” and “behaviors” that are open to all. This color-removal provides r/HHH users with a cohesive narrative that justifies their use of African-American English under the premise that the words and phrases that the users use belong to Hip-Hop and are no longer in a race-restrictive domain. This also neatly explains r/HHH’s opposition to the mainstream; on r/HHH, Hip-Hop’s opposition to “white America” transforms into an opposition to an abstract, colorless, and uncool “mainstream,” a distinction that is less about race and more about style.

There’s also a reason that you don’t see white kids going around using as much AAE as on r/HHH. In an offline context, there are still social standards about what language can come out of certain people’s mouths — even, to a certain extent, with multicultural Hip-Hop communities. Though the white users of r/HHH probably don’t speak this way in real life, the existence of a support group of individuals just like them (i.e. white Hip-Hop fans) gives individuals a way to learn about the “Hip-Hop ideology” and the associated language, test the associated styles and ideologies and make decisions about what suits them best. Additionally, because nobody judges people based on skin color on the internet, the anonymity afforded by the text-only format brings to fruition this “colorless Hip-Hop community” that so many on r/HHH seems to wish for.

There is this idea that the “bad” way to be white and a fan Hip-Hop is to take on the so-called “wigger” identity — which involves very bold, very obvious attempts to “be black” — but there’s almost something more sinister about the way that r/HHH users get around race and Hip-Hop. There’s nothing bad about the intentions; r/HHH users sincerely love Hip-Hop. And because they like it, they want to make it a part of their identity, mark themselves with it, and make themselves a part of the culture. But in the process, r/HHH users steal without actually “stealing,” appropriate without feeling at fault, and push out of the frame the very people that birthed the culture as a way to survive. To watch r/HHH’s at work is to watch white America absorb yet another small, defenseless culture into itself, albeit on a smaller scale, and it’s concerning, frightening even, to see just how easily they are doing it.

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