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*Sonja L. Lanehart and Ayesha M. Malik*

## Black Is, Black Isn't

### Perceptions of Language and Blackness

#### 1. Introduction

The human activity of language, the social construction of race, and the concept of identity are complicated. The ideologies surrounding language and race are even more complicated when they are examined along with identity. In this chapter, we parse each of these elements — language, race, and identity — among African American teenagers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a majority-Black city.<sup>1</sup> We do not aim to put words in the participants' mouths but instead to let participants explain their own attitudes and beliefs about language, race, and identity. In short, our goal is to let participants tell us their stories instead of us, the researchers, trying to “discover” them. In so doing as the basis of this ongoing research study, we explicate the complexity of language, race, and identity that inevitably leads us to even more complex and complicating views about racial identity and attitudes and beliefs about one's own language, and projections of those beliefs and attitudes onto others. After presenting the analysis of our data, we conclude with future directions for research on African American Language (AAL) and identity both generally and specifically with regard to this ongoing research project to gain a better understanding of the interplay of language, race, and identity of African Americans across generations.

## 2. Defining Out Loud: Language, Race, and Identity

### 2.1. AFRICAN AMERICAN LANGUAGE

Since this chapter deals with examining uses of language and identity in a community of African American teenagers in a majority-Black city, we start with how we define AAL. How AAL is discussed in the research is similar to the treatment of identity: we all seem to know what it is, so no one really takes the time to define it — we just know it when we see it. However, as we noted in our introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language* (Lanehart and Malik 2015), we can no longer assume that researchers mean the same thing when they use these terms and we have to be explicit about our use.

We use the term “African American Language” to refer to all variations of language use in African American communities, recognizing that there are many varieties within the umbrella term, including Gullah, African American Vernacular Language, and varieties reflecting differences in age/generation, sex and gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and class, region, education, religion, and other affiliations and identities that intersect with one’s race, ethnicity, and nationality. This use also serves to bypass some of the problematic implications of the term “English” within the sociocultural and historical contexts of African slave descendants in the United States and the contested relationship to the motherland. We see the use of the term “AAL” as more neutral and, therefore, less marked. Regardless of which term one uses — African American English, African American Language, African American Vernacular English, African American Vernacular Language, or even Spoken Soul or Black Street Speech — they all refer to a language variety that is systematic, heterogeneous, and complex. It is what we do: “The language, only the language. . . . It is the thing that Black people love so much — the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It’s a love, a passion. . . . The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language” (Toni Morrison, quoted in LeClair 1981:27). We study AAL because it is part of who we are and not just a career activity — it is personal. It provides a way to reclaim the richness of our language, culture, and heritage and to “do our language” ourselves — unapologetically.

### 2.2. RACE: ARE WE SO DIFFERENT?

Race does not exist biologically or anthropologically. Race is not in our DNA. Race and racism are social constructs that have histories, ideologies, and ontologies. Race is a way to establish hierarchy. It is that ephemeral thing

in Dr. Seuss's *The Sneetches*: it is whatever we want it to be that makes "us" better than "them."

Society says it is about skin color, land of origin, curses, and cultivation. It calls us red, white, black, brown, and yellow as though we are colors in a box of Crayola crayons, but it is not that. It is how we have constructed societies of haves and have-nots, those better than and those less than, those with the armies and navies and those more vulnerable. Along with race, we have ethnicity, nationality, religion, clan, heritage, and culture. We have constructed these hierarchies. But, as Toni Morrison (2014) said, we are all part of only one race: the human race.

In using these social constructs, we have to acknowledge not only whence they came but also that they can be used to categorize and organize peoples. While race — as problematic and flawed as it is — is used as a categorizing tool subsumed under human, ethnicity is a further subcategory like nationality. So, for example, someone can be racially categorized as Black and ethnically categorized as African American or nationally categorized as Dominican. We, for example, use "Black" to refer to peoples of African descent and "White" to refer to peoples of European descent, even though neither is categorical and both are fraught with nuance and gradation. We would also argue that the increased level of "mixing" and intermarriage has revealed how such categorizing is even more flawed and complicated.

### 2.3. IDENTITY: MAKE IT DO WHAT IT DO

We use Andrée Tabouret-Keller's (1997:323) explanation for how to think about identity: one's ability to get into focus with those with whom one wishes to identify is constrained. One can behave according to the behavioral patterns of groups one finds it desirable to identify with only to the extent that

- one can identify the groups (see Le Page 1986; Markus and Nurius 1986);
- one has both adequate access to the groups and ability to analyze their behavioral patterns (see Labov and Harris 1983; Ash and Myhill 1983);
- the motivation for joining the group is sufficiently powerful and is either reinforced or lessened by feedback from the group (see Le Page 1986; Markus and Nurius 1986); and
- one has the ability to modify one's behavior (see Ogbu 1999).

In our understanding of identity, there is a sense of community. At the same time, there is otherness. We choose to be part of groups, groups choose us, and groups say we are part of some other group and not theirs.

To better articulate the nuances of identity with respect to our language and our selves, we use Robert Le Page's concept of "acts of identity" (1986; for more detail, see Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985) and Hazel Markus's construct of "possible selves":

*People create their linguistic systems (and we all have more than one) so as to resemble those of the groups with which from time to time they wish to identify. Both the groups, and their linguistic attributes, exist solely in the mind of each individual. When we talk we project the universe as we see it on to others as on to a cinema screen in our own images, expressed in the language we consider appropriate at that moment, and we invite others by these acts to share our universe. This does not necessarily mean that we accommodate our behaviour to resemble that of our audience, though we may do so. Rather, we behave in the way that — unconsciously or consciously — we think appropriate to the group with which at that moment we wish to identify. (Le Page 1986:23, emphasis added)*

Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming and, thus, provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation: "*An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves thus have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained*" (Markus and Nurius 1986:954, emphasis added). Acts of identity and possible selves together represent our language identity and our language selves (Lanehart 1996, 1998; for more detail, see Lanehart 2002).

Identifying as African American means that we hold a certain socioculture and sociohistory that is uniquely ours. While this relates to double-consciousness (see DuBois 1903; Smitherman 1986), we can also think about this in sociopsychological terms (Lanehart 2015): we have ways of speaking and communicating that derive from our experiences. How that language manifests depends more on our degree of identification with particular aspects of our language selves and how we see ourselves in micro and macro ways than it does with the person we may be speaking to at a given moment. How we present ourselves linguistically stems from our identity, but that

identity is composed of our past, current, and future possible selves, as well as space (i.e., where we are and where we want to be) and place (i.e., who we are and who we want to be — or don't want to be, since our feared possible selves are as important as our hoped for possible selves). We act as we see fit, but it is based on a more holistic perspective of how we see ourselves, how we see the world around us, and how we perceive that world sees us.

The interrelation of these three constructs — AAL, race, and identity — is the foundation for this research project. We believe the impact of the voices from this research study deepens our understanding of these intertwined constructs and beliefs as evidenced, in this case, by a group of African American teenagers.

### 3. Talking with the People

#### 3.1. THE HOW OF IT

To access a more representative and complex view of language and identity, we used a phenomenological approach in our study. We attempted to balance females and males, as well as age cohorts, because too little research has been inclusive of African American communities, sex, and age/generation, and we felt it was important to represent a slice of the heterogeneous pie, so to speak, that makes up the African American community in the United States.

While we did not intentionally focus on AAL grammar, we did consider it when relevant to the research questions, just as we did for class, birthplace, education, age/generation, and salient identity. In other words, while this research investigates language and identity of African Americans, some participants' salient identity was their sexuality or their gender, as opposed to their race or ethnicity. This was most applicable for Ian (a pseudonym, as is the case with all names of participants), an eighteen-year-old senior in high school who identifies as a gay male. For him, his primary identity is being gay because the issues surrounding his sexuality were currently more profound in his life than issues surrounding his race or ethnicity — especially in a place where the vast majority of his peers were African American in a city that is majority Black. Thus, his secondary identity is being African American. As we know, one's salient identity is fluid and context-specific and impacts the language of the individual, which should be considered when researching communities. This knowledge alone suggests that the richness of African American communities is inclusive of more than just the impact or significance of their race or ethnicity. We are more than the sum of our parts.

To start each interview, we collected demographic data (e.g., sex, age, and birthplace/hometown). We used two guiding research questions in the general interview protocol, after collecting the preliminary demographic data:

1. What terms of reference do you use for the varied groups of the African Diaspora living in the United States? Or, what terms do you use for people with African ancestry? (If the teenager did not understand the question, we asked, “What terms do you use to describe your race or ethnicity? What about for those from the Caribbean? What about those from Africa?”)
  - a. Which particular term(s) of self-reference do you prefer personally?
  - b. Are there any offensive terms or terms you avoid?
  - c. Does it matter who uses these terms? For example, does it matter if the person who uses a particular term, whether offensive or not, is Black or non-Black?
2. What does “sounding Black” mean to you? What about “sounding White?”
  - a. How do you view it when Black people say either?
  - b. How do you view it when non-Black people say either?

### 3.2. THE PARTICIPANTS

In this phase of the research project, we conducted interviews about the perceptions of AAL and identity among African American teenagers ( $n = 18$ ) who are in middle and high schools in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We used snowball sampling to gather participants. Table 10.1 summarizes the demographics of the teenage participants we focus on in this chapter.

All but two of the teenage participants were in high school, with most being seniors. They were all of lower socioeconomic status, including some who lived in government housing. All the participants were originally from various parts of Louisiana but currently lived in the greater Baton Rouge area. Some were siblings, some were living in foster care, some were children of single parents, and some were in two-parent households.

## 4. What We Found: The Data and Discussion

To make sense of the data, we categorized responses into four groups: terms of self-reference to address racial and ethnic identity, offensive or avoided terms as part of research question 1, “sounding Black” descriptions and

TABLE 10.1. Teenager participant demographic data ( $n = 18$ )

ID	Pseudonym	Age (years)	Sex	School <sup>a</sup>	Grade	Interview length
TF1	Audrey	13	F	WD MS	7th	7m 52s
TF2	Bella	15	F	BA HS	10th	9m 22s
TF3	Chloe	15	F	WL HS	10th	14m 26s
TF4	Doris	15	F	MK HS	9th	10m 29s
TF5	Emma	15	F	MK HS	10th	9m 33s
TF6	Fannie	16	F	STJA HS	11th	10m 50s
TF7	Grace	17	F	MK HS	12th	9m 26s
TF8	Hannah	18	F	T HS	12th	8m 32s
TF9	Irene	18	F	T HS	12th	8m 50s
TM1	Aaron	14	M	MK HS	9th	9m 28s
TM2	Brett	14	M	PRA MS	8th	7m 49s
TM3	Caleb	15	M	MK HS	9th	6m 5s
TM4	Dylan	16	M	BK HS	10th	14m 1s
TM5	Elton	16	M	MK HS	11th	7m 50s
TM6	Frank	16	M	T HS	12th	7m 49s
TM7	Gavin	17	M	PV HS	12th	8m 48s
TM8	Hank	17	M	T HS	12th	3m 42s
TM9	Ian	18	M	T HS	12th	13m 9s

<sup>a</sup>Abbreviations: HS, high school; MS, middle school

beliefs, and “sounding White” descriptions and beliefs to address views about language, race/ethnicity, and identity as part of research question 2 (see table 10.2). The first author conducted all interviews for this group.

#### 4.1. TERMS OF SELF-REFERENCE: FOR AND AGAINST

All but one teenage participant used the terms “African American” and/or “Black,” but they were not necessarily interchangeable (see table 10.2). For example, according to Irene, an eighteen-year-old high school senior,

“Black” . . . just means you are, in some way, close to your — you have Black genes in you. “African American,” when I think of “African Amer-



ican,” I just, for some reason, feel like I’m, because I’m, technically, we all from Africa, but it makes me feel like, like I go back to history and think all that stuff, like when we first became, technically, like, I don’t know, free or like when they placed us in America, we were “African Americans.” In my opinion, I’m an American, but I’m a Black person. That’s how I see myself. I know I’m not the color black, but it’s just like, I like that word better than hearin’ “African American” or ‘cause, I’m not “African,” but I’m not a “Black” person, like I have more Irish blood in me than anything . . . but I deem myself “Black.”

Chloe, a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore, was the one participant most adamant about not liking either “Black” or “African American”: “Africa is actually a place. That’s actually a continent. That’s actually what you can be. You can be African; I don’t understand how you can be black. How are you a color? Like how are you white? How are you black? And ‘African American,’ that just sounds like two words slapped together for no reason. Either you can be African or you can be American. Why do you have to be called ‘African American’? So, I prefer, you know, just ‘American’ or, you know, just ‘African.’” While Chloe holds this personal belief, she will use “African American” or “Black” when describing others racially because “most people don’t like to be called ‘African,’ just ‘African.’ So, when I’m referring to other people, I’ll just say ‘Black’ or ‘African American.’” At fifteen years old, Chloe had some of the most thoughtful responses to the questions, which we will attribute, in part, to her voracious reading and identity as a writer. She also had the longest interview, at nearly fourteen and a half minutes (five minutes longer than the average interview length for the girls and six minutes longer than the average for the boys).

Table 10.2 shows the terms the teenagers either avoided using themselves or found to be offensive. According to Audrey, a thirteen-year-old seventh grader, “Oh, you sayin’ like, like if they call people out of they name?” “Call[ing] people out of they name” was frequently used by the teenagers to refer to offensive name-calling. Most interesting were the teenagers, like Doris, a fifteen-year-old high school freshman, who believed not only that “Negro” was offensive but also that it is the word they associate with “the N-word”: “‘Nigga’ not offensive, but ‘Negro’ is because they used to say that . . . back in the day.” For some of these teenagers, “Negro” had the same sting that “nigger/nigga” has for previous generations. Most teenagers did not have the same sociocultural and historical contexts for the two terms as older generations, but a sense of history for teenagers is different from that of older

TABLE 10.2. Summarized responses by participants: preferred terms of self-reference, offensive or avoided terms, “sounding Black,” and “sounding White”

	Speech	Terms of self-reference				Offensive/avoided terms					“Sounding Black”				“Sounding White”			
		AfrAm	Black	Negro	Other	Nigger(s)	Nigga	N-word	Other	None	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Other	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Other
Audry	AAVL	•				•								•			•	
Bella	AAVL	•				•					•					•		
Chloe	Bidialect				•		•		•					•				•
Doris	AAVL	•	•	•		•	•				•					•		
Emma	AAVL	•	•	•		•	•							•				
Fannie	MAE/ SAAL	•	•	•		•					•					•		
Grace	AAVL	•	•				•				•					•		
Hannah	AAVL	•	•			•	•				•					•		
Irene	AAVL	•	•			•			•		•					•		
Aaron	AAVL	•					•		•		•					•		
Brett	AAVL		•				•				•					•		
Caleb	AAVL	•	•			•					•					•		
Dylan	AAVL	•	•				•						•					•
Ellis	AAVL	•	•					•			•					•		
Frank	AAVL	•	•					•			•					•		
Gavin	AAVL	•	•					•			•					•		
Hank	AAVL	•	•					•			•					•		
Ian	AAVL	•	•							•	•					•		
TOTALS		16	14	3	1	6	6	5	2	1	14	0	0	4	0	14	1	3

Abbreviations: AAVL, African American Vernacular Language; MAE, Mainstream American English; SAAL, Standard African American Language.

generations. While “back in the day” for teenagers can mean 1960–80, for older generations that reference point is much deeper. We often complain that Black youths do not understand history, but it may be more that their sense of history is just different. So, “Negro,” a common term used by both Blacks and non-Blacks up until the 1970s, is problematic for teenagers whose idea of history is rooted in a time of desegregation. So, when I (Lanehart) uncovered this difference in terminology in the midst of conducting the interviews, I had to be sure to ask all teenagers what they meant by the N-word since I could not assume we had a shared definition of terms. Thus, “N-word” is one of the terms included in table 10.2 since, in retrospect, I cannot be sure in those instances if they meant “Negro” or “nigger/nigga.”

Most teenagers made a distinction between “nigger” (rhotic, or *r*-full pronunciation) and “nigga” (nonrhotic, or *r*-less pronunciation), with the former being more offensive generally than the latter regardless of who said it. According to Fannie, a sixteen-year-old high school sophomore:

Not “nigga,” but like “nigger,” like, with the *-er*. The *-a*, I’m okay with. Like, I don’t know why, but the *-er* is a problem. Yeah. If it’s someone who’s White and a friend of mine, it’s just that if we’ve reached that, like, level of friendship to where we feel comfortable, like, you call me a “nigga,” I’ll, like, call you, like, a “cracker,” if you’re White and, then, it’s like, if I know we’re friends and we’re just like joking around, then, that’s fine, but, if I don’t know you and that’s the first thing you say to me, then. . . . Yeah, it’s like “nigg-*a*” is, like, more of a friend type thing that like people in, like, my family would say, like, it’s not a bad word. It’s not a word you should be using all the time, but it’s not a bad word and it’s like, you can say it, but “nigg-*er*,” I feel like that, like, goes back to the old times and it’s like the *-er*, it’s symbolizing, like, “you’re beneath me,” and the *-a*, it’s kinda just like, “you’re chill.”

Those who would say “nigger” and not “nigga” were likely to be perceived as suspect because it marked them as part of an out-group, since in-group (i.e., young, hip, cool; not marked by race) members would know that the word is the nonrhotic “nigga.” To be marked as out-group in this case meant that your intentions were not as clear, so there may be ill-intent instead of familiarity. For some, like Hannah, an eighteen-year-old high school senior, there are more clear-cut rules: “If you’re like using the ‘N-word’ or something, yeah, I find it offensive, ’cause then you’re calling me outta my character. I mean, like, if we’re bein’ funny wit [*sic*] it, then it’s kinda okay, but if you just sayin’ it intentionally, then no, don’t, don’t use it. [But for someone

who is White], that's a no. Don't do that. Don't do that. Just don't call anyone out their names."

Although most teenagers said they believe "nigga" can be used in an offensive way (i.e., in the way they believed "nigger" to be offensive), most of them use it and do not take offense at its use, such as Irene: "I don't avoid it. I use it, pretty much — that, that's the most word I use. Like, I use that word a lot. It doesn't matter what race they are, as long as I, as long as I know they're not trying to, like, offend me. I know, like, a certain way they say it. It's [i.e., 'nigger' versus 'nigga'] like two different words to me." The distinction for these teenagers on whether it is offensive is context and intent. Most of them saw no problem with non-Blacks using the term. Teenagers noted how ubiquitous the term is in music and elsewhere. For them, it is as innocuous as saying "Hello." We would argue that "nigga" is not a simple case of reclamation or reappropriation as some would argue (see Kennedy 2002; Allan 2015; Archer 2015; Curzan 2016), but a wholly different word from "nigger." Again, this refers to the sense of history for teenagers as opposed to older generations. Unlike the reclamation of "queer" or "bitch," "nigga" is a separate word. It is not interchangeable for these teenagers with "nigger," and it does not mean the same thing. Further, "nigga" as a separate, different word from "nigger" might also explain the view of "Negro" being offensive if it is connected to "nigger" and not "nigga."

Included in terms to avoid was "African American" by Chloe, as expected given her colorblind, or race-neutral, perspective, and "Black" or "Black boy" by Aaron, a fourteen-year-old high school freshman. Ian was the only teenager who said no racial or ethnic terms were offensive to him, nor were there any terms he avoided: "[I don't find the N-word offensive because] people can say that, whether they're Black or White and it is, it is not offensive. People use it all the time. [It's] not [offensive] to me 'cause of the times that we live in now. It's more common 'cause like kids our age, they use that to they friends. They have White friends and White friends use the word now, so, I mean, if they like it, I love it."

Ian's sexuality as a gay man is more salient to him than his race or ethnicity. For him, he suffered more verbal abuse for being gay and out than being African American. While the research literature has shown that there is a generational gap regarding terms of self-reference with younger generations preferring "African American" and older generations preferring "Black" or "Black American" (Baugh 1991; Smitherman 1991), it may be that millennials are making a shift yet again.

#### 4.2. “SOUNDING BLACK” VERSUS “SOUNDING WHITE”

In an attempt to get a better understanding about assumptions regarding AAL and identity, we asked the teenagers what “sounding Black” meant to them. Inevitably, they struggled with defining Blackness without Whiteness. However, predictably, Black speech was seen as negative and White speech was seen as normal or positive. So, when I asked the teenagers what “sounding Black” meant, they at some point defined it as not “sounding White.”

Definitions and descriptions for “sounding or talking Black” and “sounding or talking White” can be delineated into three groups: linguistic descriptions, personal attributes, or colorblind (see table 10.3). Typical of the descriptions for “sounding or talking Black” is Hank, a seventeen-year-old high school senior: “Like, you talk kinda ignorant. You talk like you ain’t got no home training, basically. Like, when you’re out in public and you just see someone shoutin’ out loud. And you don’t know how to pronounce words properly.” Four-fifths of the teenagers believed that when someone says you “sound Black,” it is meant in a negative way. In contrast, the vast majority of descriptions for “sounding or talking White” by the teenagers were positive, and the personal attributes were glowing for the most part. So, of course, Hank described “sounding or talking White” as “like you can talk properly and you know how to act out in public.” Only one teenager (Frank, a sixteen-year-old high school senior) thought that if someone says you “sound White” they mean it in a negative way. In other words, with the exception of Frank and the colorblind participants (i.e., Emma, Grace, and Gavin), more than three quarters of the teenagers viewed “sounding or talking White” as something positive. Compare that to four-fifths of the teenagers who viewed “sounding or talking Black” as something negative. And these descriptions are not only about the language but also about the people/speakers themselves, so it seems that linguistic discrimination is a proxy for racial and ethnic discrimination in the social realities of the teenagers:

Oh, I hate that! Ooh, I hate that. When people say you “sound Black” or you don’t “sound Black,” that means you don’t sound . . . Mm, okay, so, Black people are supposed to sound really, I guess, unedu . . . like. [indistinguishable sounds] It makes me mad. You’re supposed to sound “uneducated,” you know, using slangs all the time, you know, but it’s just, like, when you talk “proper” or whatnot, you not talkin’, you don’t sound Black. What does that mean? It means I sound educated? Thank you. [laughs] It’s like, how do I “sound Black”? The term, it’s just like, really . . . it’s off-putting. Is there a reason I need to sound like I come

from, like, a bad background? Is that gonna define me? So, do I have to sound like that just because I am Black or I am whatever y'all wanna call me? It's like, what is this term? (Chloe)

This positive perspective toward “sounding or talking White” is in contrast to previous literature, most notably Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu’s research on “acting White” (Fordham 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986), in which students viewed performing Whiteness as negative and performing Blackness as positive. According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), high-achieving Black students were negatively labeled as “acting White” by their lower-achieving Black student peers. “Acting White” was being used negatively though the referents were high achievers. Of course, the corollary of “acting White” as high-achieving presumed “acting Black” to be low achieving. For the students Fordham and Ogbu (1986) studied, a strong Black identity meant a negative schooling outcome and weak Black identity meant a positive schooling outcome, but with reverse attitudes toward those students by other Black students. For our teenage participants, Whiteness had positive traits and is viewed positively. Blackness had high covert prestige but low social or educational status.

These teenagers were able to make astute observations about language and race that spoke to deeper societal issues and attitudes, as well as disconcerting implications about language and identity: “Most of Black charrun [i.e., children] ain’t really get taught well, and mostly White charrun got more of their learnin’, as they got, as they grew up. But me, as for me and myself, I was, I was taught . . . the same. Like, I-I-I was taught my alphabets and I-I was taught that when I was little. But, most Black kids ain’t get that” (Caleb, a fifteen-year-old high school freshman). Caleb associates “talking Black” with deficient schooling, illiteracy, and a lack of in-home education by parents.

#### 4.3. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Finally, in addition to the overwhelmingly positive attitudes and beliefs about “sounding or talking White,” the majority of the teenagers believed they “sounded White” and explicitly did not “sound Black,” despite evidence to the contrary. With the exception of Chloe, who was bidialectal (we only noted her use of consonant cluster simplification, creaky voice, and suck teeth), and Fannie, who said she was bidialectal but who displayed no vernacular grammar in her interview, all the other teenagers used stigmatized and salient vernacular grammar during their interviews, such as zero copula,

TABLE 10.3. Descriptions of “sounding Black” and “sounding White”

“Sounding Black”	“Sounding White”
LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTIONS	
Positive	
	Softer (+ calm); certain diction, overemphasized/overenunciated; proper (+ English), correct (+ grammar, pronunciation)
Neutral	
Multidialectal; regional differences; southern drawl; differences in dialects, accents, vocabulary (+ words/diction), intonation (+ inflection/toner); voice quality (i.e., deeper, bass)	
Negative	
Bad/incorrect (+ grammar/pronunciation); not proper English; slang; fast, choppy rate of speech	Excessive use of “like”
PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES	
Positive	
	Smart/intelligent, educated, speak well, professional and composed in public, formal, middle or upper class
Neutral	
Country (e.g., colloquialisms)	Country, cowboy
Negative	
Hood, ghetto, ratchet, trifling, messy/gossipy, unprofessional, unruly in public, profane, ignorant, uneducated	
COLORBLIND PERSPECTIVE	
Does not exist as a racial demarcation	

zero third-person singular *-s*, zero possessive *-s*, zero plural *-s*, zero past-tense and past-participle *-ed*, *they* possessive, existential *it*, question inversion, negative concord, *gon*, invariant *be*, habitual *be*, fricative stopping, *l* vocalization, and deletion of unstressed syllables, in addition to quotative *like*, *r* deletion, monophthongization, creaky voice, and suck teeth. We were surprised by how much these teenagers suck teeth and use creaky voice. Some of the excerpts we have included show a variety of vernacular grammar. Also of note, every one of them who said “Baton Rouge” pronounced “Rouge” with the FOOT vowel, or /rudʒ/, instead of the GOOSE vowel, or /ruʒ/. Further investigation should shed light on whether this is a regional or vernacular pronunciation. Overall, we believe it would be inaccurate to describe most of the teenagers as either “sounding or talking White” or bidialectal, despite their self-reported beliefs.

Though all but one of these teenagers was an African American Vernacular Language or bidialectal speaker, the vast majority did not want to claim Blackness in their speech, even though they often claimed it as an identity. A few teenagers did find the concept of “sounding Black” as peculiar because, as Dylan, a sixteen-year-old high school sophomore, put it, “[If someone says I sound ‘Black’], well, at first, it sounds stupid because they see I am Black.” Fannie made a very similar remark.

Despite what we witnessed hearing in the interviews, we think Irene provides a good concluding statement that represents the aspects of this research and the complexity of the relationship between language and race and language and identity as she evokes Le Page and Tabouret-Keller’s *Acts of Identity* (1985) and brings us full circle:

“Sounding Black” would, most likely be people thinking you’re sounding, speaking like you’re stupid. . . . Speaking without a educated, like, voice. . . . And then, they look a certain way, like, “Oh, just because his pants saggin’ and he like this and he like this,” and like, exactly. People automatically think, from the way you talk or you chop up words or use slang, that you’re stupid, but you’re not and that’s what they usually define as “speaking Black.” But that’s not what it is. It’s just basically being relaxed ’cause when I’m relaxed, I don’t speak like this at all. I be like, [shouting and with forestressing] “Momma!” and I do all this other stuff I usually yell and scream. I don’t chop up my words when I’m playin’ with my brother. I’ll be like, “Aw, wassup, my nigga?” or somethin’ like that. But when I’m in a place where I know I need to be composed and act a certain way in order to, like, do things, I don’t speak like that. I speak like this.



## 5. Implications and Future Directions

There is a dearth of sociolinguist research on African American teenage girls in particular and teenagers in general as a cohort or peer group. While this means there are opportunities for additional discovery, the snapshot we give in this chapter shows there is also much need for redress, as evidenced by the key findings for this research. These teenagers' attitudes and beliefs about terms of self-reference skew toward "African American" instead of "Black" because the former is an identity rooted in a place and heritage while the latter is a Crayola crayon color — not who one can be. A subset of these teenagers claimed colorblindness (i.e., did not acknowledge the legitimacy of race as a social demarcation and therefore preferred not to see race) because language, race, and identity are not about the color of one's skin but the content of one's character. For them, all people are capable of behaving in ways that are not specific to one defined group but are accessible to all of humankind. While the teenagers' view of colorblindness stems from their desire for equality, critical race theorists view this perspective as a perpetuation of racism and White privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Denying that race exists does not make it go away, because "race is the child of racism, not the father" (Coates 2015:7).

These teenagers' attitudes and beliefs about offensive terms and terms to avoid were not those of their elders. As discussed earlier, their acceptance for "nigga" and their rejection of "nigger" is one thing, but their surprising rejection of "Negro" and that they equate it with the "N-word" is something else. Likewise, their ability to attribute "nigger" and "Negro," but not "nigga," to racist intent and historical discrimination is what some would call a reclamation of identity and subversion of historical hate by changing the phonology (-a instead of -er) and semantics (friend instead of foe or racist). Beyoncé's "Formation" (2016) and its use of "Negro" in an oppositional but positive way lends further evidence to generational differences, as she was in her mid-thirties and we are talking about teenagers.

These teenagers performed AAL without acceptance of its existence or its value. While some of the teenagers equated "sounding or talking Black" with being who they are, the vast majority viewed it personally or referentially as negative (e.g., loud, hood, ghetto, ratchet), less than (e.g., stupid, uneducated, profane), lacking (e.g., incorrect, bad, not proper, trifling, unprofessional, slang) — in spite of using stigmatized, vernacular language associated with being southern (e.g., *pin-pen* merger, *cot-caught* merger, nonrhotic), African American (e.g., zero copula; zero -s for third-person singular, possessive, or

plural; habitual and invariant *be*; reduplicated *-ed*), and from Baton Rouge (e.g., pronunciation of “Rouge” with the FOOT vowel, or /rudʒ/, instead of the GOOSE vowel, or /ruʒ/). Their language is rooted in a place and a people despite their denial of such.

The ability to situate their language, race, and identity within a social and educational construct suggests they are cognizant of the mechanisms and implications of institutional and sociohistorical racism in their very southern and segregated communities. Even Fannie — who went to a private school, whose best friend was White, and whose speech did not contain stigmatized grammar — said she goes home to her African American family and speaks in the ways indicative of their history and culture.

Since it is clear that these teenagers are quite capable of deep reflection, maybe it is time to teach more truthful and critical views of history in general and American history in particular, instead of the “lies [our] teachers told [us]” (Loewen 2007) and tell us about history in order to make some feel better about themselves at the expense of others because the truth can be difficult to hear. History cannot continue to be colored with a self-denial brush, as some states now do with their historical accounts in public school textbooks.

Our next step in this research project is to expand it, and in addition to expanding the questions we are asking now, we intend to include sociophonetic analyses of the interview speech. We are interviewing more African American teenagers in Baton Rouge, since too little research is done with African Americans in Louisiana, especially the greater Baton Rouge area. We have also expanded this research to include Afro-Latin@ teenagers in San Antonio and surrounding majority-Hispanic areas. We are also including Afro-Latin@ teenagers in Baton Rouge and African heritage college students in San Antonio. We believe expanding the research in these ways will allow us to better understand the complexity of language and identity in Black communities.

Finally, we do not want to ignore the different time in which these African American teenagers are coming into adulthood. Even though there is growing racial and ethnic segregation in schools today compared with fifty years ago, we are also in an unprecedented time of information and global reach. While these teenagers are in segregated Louisiana, they also have access to the world through social media and the Internet. These teenagers are part of the native digital generation, even if they are poor or working class. Each of these teenagers has access to the world outside of the very segregated town most of them have known their whole lives (most of these teenagers had never been outside of Louisiana or flown in an airplane). The disconnect

between their psychological and spatial separation is nuanced and complex. We are at the intersections and the margins, a sort of liminal space, in language, race, and identity, with much to be done and discovered.

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## Note

1. See Lanehart and Malik (2015) for our distinctions between our use of "African American" and "Black." As for the distinction we make between "Black" and "black" through the use of capitalization, the former is referential to race, while the latter is in reference to the color itself. The same logic applies to "White" versus "white." "Negro" is capitalized because of its use, historically, as a term to describe race.

This chapter includes discussion of one part of a larger research project that investigates the perceptions of African American Language (AAL) and identity in different generations and different sociocultural contexts among varied groups of Black Americans living in San Antonio, Texas, a majority-Hispanic city, and in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a majority-Black city. We interviewed four groups of participants: African American faculty and staff employees in San Antonio ( $n = 17$ ), African American college students in San Antonio ( $n = 19$ ), African American teenagers in Baton Rouge ( $n = 18$ ) and in San Antonio ( $n = 16$ ), and Afro-Latin@ teenagers in San Antonio and surrounding majority Hispanic areas ( $n = 16$ ). This chapter focuses on only the teenager data from Baton Rouge.

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