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All about Dat Bass or Linguistic Blackface: White Pop Artists and African American English

Sovoya Davis

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All about Dat Bass or Linguistic Blackface: White Pop Artists and African American English

Abstract
This work explores America's love-hate relationship with African American English (AAE). As Linguist Geneva Smitherman points out, AAE is both stigmatized and superficially celebrated in the U.S. Focusing on White pop artist Meghan Trainor, I examine the role of AAE in her music and interviews and how her use of AAE relates to her image, the content of her songs, and how she is viewed. Even though some people benefit from its commodification, AAE and its native speakers continue to be discriminated against in most contexts. This work explores AAE's status in American society through Trainor's commodification of the language variety.

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ALL ABOUT DAT BASS OR LINGUISTIC BLACKFACE: WHITE POP ARTISTS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN ENGLISH 

By 

Sovoya Davis 

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the 

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Honors College 

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with Honors in English Language and Literature 

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Abstract

This work explores America’s love-hate relationship with African American English (AAE). As Linguist Geneva Smitherman points out, AAE is both stigmatized and superficially celebrated in the U.S. Focusing on White pop artist Meghan Trainor, I examine the role of AAE in her music and interviews and how her use of AAE relates to her image, the content of her songs, and how she is viewed. Even though some people benefit from its commodification, AAE and its native speakers continue to be discriminated against in most contexts. This work explores AAE’s status in American society through Trainor’s commodification of the language variety.

Introduction

Pop music is a genre enjoyed by a wide audience and participated in by a diverse set of singers. Although there are pop artists of every race, mainstream pop music seems to be a genre that is dominated by White musicians, or at least not as heavily associated with Black musicians as genres like Hip Hop or Rhythm and Blues. In 2016, the Billboard Hot 100 charts had a total of 39 out of 100 artists who were African American. Most of these artists were hip hop or R&B artists like Drake, Lil Wayne, Chris Brown, Future, Whiz Khalifa, and Desiigner. Most of the 61 other artists were White, with exceptions like the group Fifth Harmony, DJ Khaled, and Zayn.

African American English (AAE), an Africanized variety of English mostly spoken by Black people in the United States (Smitherman, 1977), has begun to crossover more heavily into mainstream American media and thus into mainstream American music. Some White artists who are not native speakers of AAE have been utilizing this language variety in their music and some, such as Iggy Azalea, have been heavily
criticized for it. On the other hand, some White pop artists have avoided as much criticisms for using AAE in their music, perhaps because their use of AAE is more subtle.

The United States has a very complicated relationship with AAE. On one hand, people use AAE in music, clothing, and advertisements to profit and market things as cool, and in other instances AAE is considered improper and unacceptable, and its native speakers stereotyped as unintelligent. Native speakers of AAE are often discriminated against. It is not uncommon for speakers of AAE to be denied employment or housing opportunities based on their speech.

Linguist Geneva Smitherman coined the term Linguistic Push Pull for America’s love-hate relationship with AAE. This concept has also been discussed by other linguists such as John Rickford. The double standards in American society for AAE explain the reason for the criticisms of White pop artists profiting from its use. The crossover of AAE into pop music is not new, but there is something to be said when musicians who are not native AAE speakers can benefit from its use while native AAE speakers are discriminated against for something that is a part of their cultural identity.

In this paper, we will explore the dynamics of White pop artists using AAE, specifically Meghan Trainor. We will look for themes and messages to see if White pop artists use AAE to present certain themes and messages in their music, using Trainor for insight. We will also see if Trainor has fully integrated AAE into her natural speech, as opposed to just using it in her music.

The primary focus of my analysis are ten tracks from pop artist Meghan Trainor’s album ‘Title’. Trainor provides a valuable case study because although AAE is not the predominant language variety of her music or the broader pop genre, Trainor uses AAE
in selective and potentially telling ways. While there is some criticism of Trainor’s language out there, she has escaped intense scrutiny about her use of AAE in comparison with artists like Iggy Azalea, which will be further discussed in this work. I will begin the investigation of Trainor’s language use with an overview of her life and her role in pop music. Turning to the analysis, I will examine Trainor’s use of AAE in her music, looking for commonly observed features of AAE. I will compare Trainor’s language in her music and her natural speech in interviews. In addition, I will explore the themes and tones of her songs and how they relate to Trainor’s usage of AAE to better understand the role of AAE in her music compared to her natural speech.

Previous research has examined White women who are not native speakers of AAE, but adopt AAE to use in their music. More specifically, Eberhardt and Freeman looked at White hip-hop artist Iggy Azalea and her use of AAE. Meghan Trainor provides an interesting point of contrast for this study because she is American, unlike Azalea who is Australian. She is a pop artist, unlike Azalea who is a hip-hop artist. Also, the two appear to use AAE at different rates. There has also not been any scholarly work done on Meghan Trainor’s speech even though her use of AAE is very noticeable. It should be noted that borrowing or appropriating AAE is not limited to Trainor and Azalea. For instance, White pop artist Katy Perry released a song titled “This is How We Do”, where she utilizes a lot of AAE lexicon and racialized imagery in her music and in the video, and there are certainly other examples, as well.
Background About Artist and Album

Background on Meghan Trainor and her album is provided to give an idea on factors that influenced the development of Trainor’s natural speech and her language use on her album. If there were any songwriters that were AAE speakers on the album or if Trainor was raised by AAE speakers, then this would give important insight on why Trainor makes use of AAE. Meghan Trainor was born in Massachusetts and raised on the island of Nantucket. In 2000 and 2010, Nantucket’s population of African Americans was less than 9%. Trainor came from a musical family and was creating music from an early age. She has a middle-class background, and her parents are both jewelers.

Aside from Trainor, the first songwriter mentioned on “Title” is Kevin Kadish. Kevin Kadish speaks with a very Standard American English (SAE) dialect. A video interview of Kadish reveals that there is nothing about his speech that even remotely mimics AAE. He helped write “All About That Bass”, “Dear Future Husband”, “Close Your Eyes”, “Walkashame”, “Title”, “What If” and “Lips are Movin”.

The next songwriter credited on the album was Christopher John Gelbuda. He helped write the song “3am”. This songwriter also speaks SAE. During his interview with a country music station, it was mentioned that he is from Ottawa, Illinois. During the opening of the interview, when Christopher Gelbuda starts out and says “good morning” it is reminiscent of Southern English, but his speech quickly reveals itself as an SAE dialect.

Karen Thornton was the next songwriter credited on the album, helping write the song “3am”. There were no interviews of her accessible on the Internet so I could not listen to her natural speech. The last two songwriters who helped write the song “3am”
were Ken Fagan and Todd Cary Lieberman. I was unable to locate any audio-recordings of Fagan. An interview of singer-songwriter Todd Carey Lieberman, better known as Todd Carey, shows that he also speaks SAE.\textsuperscript{16}

In the song "Like I’m Gonna Lose You", singer-songwriter Caitlyn Elizabeth Smith and Justin Michael Weaver are both credited with assisting with writing the song. In the interview I found of Caitlyn Elizabeth Smith, she speaks fairly standard English, but nothing reminiscent of AAE.\textsuperscript{17} I was unable to find an interview of Justin Michael Weaver to listen to his natural speech. James Morales, Julio David Rodriguez, and Matthew Morales were credited with assisting in writing the song "Bang Dem Sticks".\textsuperscript{18} These three are a group of New York-based music producers called "The ELEV3N".\textsuperscript{19} Songwriter James Morales speaks SAE in his interview.\textsuperscript{20} James Morales seems to be the spokesperson for the production group, because there were no interviews of Julio David Rodriguez, or his brother Matthew Morales.

Meghan Trainor's upbringing does not reflect one of your average AAE speaker's. She was not raised around a lot of African Americans and probably did not have a lot of exposure to the dialect during the developmental years of her speech. From what was observed in the interviews, the writers on the album do not seem to speak AAE either, although it is possible that some of the songwriters could also be native speakers of AAE. It is also possible that the writers on the album whose speech I did not have audio-recordings of could be speakers of AAE as well. I do not have evidence for either of these possibilities.
Methods

The ten tracks from Meghan Trainor's album "Title" were analyzed for linguistic features associated with AAE. I focused on six features throughout the ten tracks of the album. These features were multiple negation, the appearance of ain't, voiced "th" (eth/ð) occurring as [d], unstressed initial syllable deletion, copula absence, and demonstrative them. Some of these features occur in other varieties of English such as Southern White varieties of English (SWVE), except for copula absence, which is relatively restricted to AAE and some English-based creoles.21

Multiple negation is when more than one negative element shows up in a sentence.22 The negative elements that were focused on in this study were ain't, no, not, never, nothing, none, nowhere, nobody, and any word with a contracted negative (can't etc.). An example of this would be in the sentence "I ain't got no money".

The appearance of the word ain't was also focused on individually as a speech feature of its own. Ain't is a common negative element in AAE.23 The next feature that was measure was voiced th occurring as the [d] sound. Examples of voiced th, being realized as the phone [d] would be the words this, that, and there, being pronounced as "dis", "dat", and "dere". Unstressed initial syllable deletion occurs when an unstressed syllable at the beginning of a word is deleted.24 Examples of this feature would be the word because being realized as cause. In my research, I only focused on the words about, around, and ahead. The word because was not included in my data because it is commonly reduced in most varieties of American English.

Copula absence occurs when the words is and are are absent from a sentence where one would expect them in SAE.25 An example of copula absence would be the
sentence “he is here” being expressed as “he here”. The final feature that was measured throughout the songs was the occurrence of demonstrative *them*. The feature demonstrative *them* occurs when the determiner *those* that occurs before nouns is replaced with the word *them*. An example of this would be the sentence “Sally washed those clothes” being spoken as “Sally washed them clothes”.

I listened to each of the ten songs from Meghan Trainor’s album at least twelve times in total to search for features of AAE. After all occurrences of these features were found, I listened to the songs again to record all possible environments where these features could have occurred. Instances where it was unclear if the feature occurred or not were not counted in the data. This mainly happened with phonological features that were difficult to hear, like voiced *th* as [d]. Meghan Trainor’s song lyrics were taken from Google. They appeared directly in the search engine and no link was clicked to access them.

There were a lot of inaccuracies in the lyrics so I corrected them while listening to the album. For the songs that were accompanied by a music video, I watched those and looked for racial themes and messages.

I also transcribed about 12-minutes’ worth of interviews to analyze her natural speech. The first interview was an interview with Jimmy Kimmel, which was two minutes and fifty-two seconds long. I transcribed and analyzed the entirety of this interview. The second interview was a radio interview with Zach Sang. I transcribed and analyzed the first ten minutes of this interview. Both Zach Sang and Jimmy Kimmel are White men who speak SAE. I could not find videos of Trainor being interviewed by AAE speakers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Songs → Features</th>
<th>All About That Bass</th>
<th>Dear Future Husband</th>
<th>Close Your Eyes</th>
<th>3AM</th>
<th>Like I'm Gonna Lose You</th>
<th>Bang Dem Sticks</th>
<th>Walka-shame</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>What If</th>
<th>Lips Are Movin'</th>
<th>Total for Album/Most Used Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Negation</td>
<td>3/24 12.50%</td>
<td>0/6 0.00%</td>
<td>1/17 5.88%</td>
<td>0/25 0.00%</td>
<td>0/8 0.00%</td>
<td>3/10 30.00%</td>
<td>0/15 0.00%</td>
<td>1/19 5.26%</td>
<td>0/8 0.00%</td>
<td>0/9 0.00%</td>
<td>8/141 5.67% #6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ain't Appearance</td>
<td>2/24 8.33%</td>
<td>0/6 0.00%</td>
<td>1/17 5.88%</td>
<td>1/25 4.00%</td>
<td>0/8 0.00%</td>
<td>4/10 40.00%</td>
<td>1/15 6.67%</td>
<td>4/19 21.05%</td>
<td>1/8 12.50%</td>
<td>4/9 44.44%</td>
<td>18/141 12.77% #4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copula Absence</td>
<td>0/5 0.00%</td>
<td>0/7 0.00%</td>
<td>0/4 0.00%</td>
<td>0/4 0.00%</td>
<td>1/4 25.00%</td>
<td>0/2 0.00%</td>
<td>1/2 50.00%</td>
<td>0/2 0.00%</td>
<td>2/10 20.00%</td>
<td>4/43 9.30%</td>
<td>4/43 9.30% #5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrative them</td>
<td>1/1 100.00%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>23/23 100.00%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>1/1 100.00%</td>
<td>25/25 100.00% #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced th as [d]</td>
<td>50/56 89.29%</td>
<td>0/8 0.00%</td>
<td>0/23 0.00%</td>
<td>3/12 25.00%</td>
<td>1/2 50.00%</td>
<td>29/47 61.70%</td>
<td>0/30 0.00%</td>
<td>2/32 6.25%</td>
<td>0/5 0.00%</td>
<td>1/8 12.50%</td>
<td>86/223 38.57% #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstressed Initial Syllable Deletion</td>
<td>23/45 51.11%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>N/A 0.00%</td>
<td>3/4 75.00%</td>
<td>26/50 52.00% #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total for Song</td>
<td>79/155 50.97% #2</td>
<td>0/27 0.00%</td>
<td>2/61 3.28% #8</td>
<td>4/65 6.12% #5</td>
<td>1/22 4.55%</td>
<td>60/94 63.83%</td>
<td>1/62 1.61% #9</td>
<td>8/73 10.96%</td>
<td>1/23 4.35%</td>
<td>11/41 26.83% #3</td>
<td>167/623 26.80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Trainor's use of AAE features by song
Results

Figure 1 contains the number of instances a feature occurred divided by the possible number of times the feature could have appeared in the song and the percentage of occurrence. For multiple negation and the appearance of *ain’t*, they are both divided by the total number of negative elements that appeared in the song. The first song that was analyzed from the album “Title” was “All About That Bass”. This song was accompanied by a music video. “All About That Bass” is a body-positive anthem celebrating plus-sized women who do not fit into mainstream society’s standard of beauty. The video is bright and draws on a lot of pastel colors. The imagery is very preppy and the style of Trainor and the background dancers in the video has a golf-course pseudo-1960s vibe.

Some of the themes of the song are celebrating curves, self-esteem and encouragement, and sassiness. The sassiness aspect comes through in the ways in which Trainor talks about body types. Trainor makes references to thinner body types as “stick-figure Barbie dolls”. Trainor also utilizes curse words in referring to “them skinny bitches”. There is repeated mention of “booty”, or “bass” as Trainor refers to it. She mentions that she “is bringing booty back”, and in the song, says that her mother says men desire women with big butts. Trainor uses curse words again to get her point across using lines such as “I see the magazines working that Photoshop, we know that shit ain’t real, come on now, make it stop”.

The video includes dance styles rooted in African American culture like the Nae Nae and twerking. Although there are multiple people twerking in the video, there are separated clips of an African American woman in leggings twerking and getting her butt grabbed. This song makes ample use of AAE. “All About that Bass” contains every
feature that is focused on in this study except for copula absence. In this song, there are three instances of multiple negation out of 24 total instances of negation (12.50%), 50 instances of voiced *th* as [d] out the 56 times it could have appeared (89.29%), 23 appearances of unstressed initial syllable deletion out 45 possible environments (51.11%), and one instance of demonstrative *them* out of one possible occurrence (100.00%). As mentioned previously, there was no instance of copula absence, but there were five environments where it could have manifested.

The six main features explored in this paper are not the only features of AAE and other “non-standard” English varieties that I observed throughout the album. In “All About That Bass” there were two extra features that stood out in the song. The first is “double subject” also known as pleonastic pronoun, where Trainor states the subject of her sentence twice. The lyrics where Trainor used the double-subject construction were “Yeah my momma, she told me don’t worry about your size”. In Rickford and Rickford’s book *Spoken Soul*, they mention that this feature occurs more frequently in AAE than SAE.\(^3\)\(^9\) I also found many sources vilifying this grammatical construction, calling it incorrect and nonstandard. It is a frowned upon construction for SAE.\(^4\)\(^0\) The other feature in “All About That Bass” is using the word “got” instead of “have” to indicate stative possession.\(^4\) This shows up in the lyrics “Cause I got that boom boom that all the boys chase” and “if you got beauty beauty, just raise ‘em up”.

The next song that was analyzed was “Dear Future Husband”. This song was also accompanied by a music video. “Dear Future Husband” is a song about Trainor’s expectations that her future spouse should fulfill to have a successful relationship with her. This song rejects a lot of gender roles traditionally assigned to women in
relationships like staying at home and knowing how to cook. Just like “All About that Bass”, the music video is bright and draws on the mid 1900s which is a reoccurring theme throughout the album with imagery and sound. There are images of Trainor scrubbing floors, baking, and playing the role of the stereotypical homemaker. Just like the previous track, this song has a sassy feel to it.

Sassiness comes through in the demanding tone of the song. There are demands made in lyrics like “Take me on a date— I deserve a break, and don't forget the flowers every anniversary” and “You gotta treat me like a lady, even when I’m acting crazy”. Although there are elements of sassiness in the song, there is still a cutesy-playful vibe. Although “Dear Future Husband” contains some elements of AAE, it is one of the lower ranking songs on the album in terms of AAE feature use. None of the main six features appeared. There were six total instances of regular negation in the song, eight possible environments for voiced th as [d] to occur, seven possible environments for copula absence, and finally zero environments for demonstrative them.

There were three features other than the main six that were interesting. First, there was arguably a case of “habitual be” in Trainor’s lyrics. Habitual be is a very well established grammatical feature of AAE. It is well-known, but often misunderstood or used incorrectly by people who are not fluent in AAE. It also rarely shows up in White vernacular dialects of English. Habitual be is only used to describe events that are performed habitually (regularly). This feature shows up in the lyric “So don’t be thinking I’ll be home and baking apple pies”. It should be noted, though, that this is an ambiguous sentence and may not be an example of habitual be.
The second feature that I noticed in “Dear Future Husband” and throughout other songs in Trainor’s album was the dropping of the preposition \textit{of}. This appears in the song when Trainor says “my one and only all my life” instead of “my one and only all of my life”. This feature is not especially marked in such contexts, and can be found in many varieties of English. The final extra feature that I found in this song was the use of \textit{that} as an affective demonstrative. Affective demonstratives are said to “invite the audience onto a common ground of shared knowledge”\textsuperscript{41}. Trainor uses affective demonstrative \textit{that} in the phrases “You got that 9-to-5”, and “If you wanna get that special lovin”.

The third song that was analyzed was “Close Your Eyes”. “Close Your Eyes” was not released with a music video. This song hit on the reoccurring theme of body positivity, but this time without the sassy delivery of “All About That Bass”. “Close Your Eyes” is more of a slow ballad style song. Some themes that appear in this song are self-esteem, not conforming to other’s ideals of beauty, inner beauty, and individuality. These themes come through in lines like “Everybody wants to be cool, yes they do. I’m just like them, but I won’t be no fool”, “Cause I know I’m beautiful”, and “raise your voice and close your eyes ‘cause you’re beautiful”. This song is one of the slower-paced songs on the album.

“Close Your Eyes” is another song on this album that does not make use much of AAE in relation to some of the other songs on the album. There is one instance of multiple negation out of 17 total instances of negation (5.88%), zero instances of unstressed initial syllable deletion out of zero possible instances for this feature, and one instance of \textit{ain’t} out of 17 total instances of negation (5.88%). There were zero occurrences of voiced \textit{th} as [d], copula absence, or demonstrative \textit{them}. Voiced \textit{th} as [d]
had 23 environments where it could have occurred. Copula absence had four environments where it could have occurred. Finally, demonstrative *them* had no possible environments where it could have occurred in the song. There were no other additional features of AAE in this song.

The next song on the album that I analyzed is titled “3am”. There was no music video for this song. This song is about drunk texting an ex-partner. Some themes in this song are loneliness, alcohol, break-ups, missing someone, and relationships. This song utilizes two of the six main features of AAE, and some other interesting and very marked features of the language variety which will be explored later on. There are zero instances of multiple negation out of 25 total instances of negation, three appearances of voiced *th* as [d] out of 12 possible instances (25.00%), zero instances of unstressed initial syllable deletion out of zero possible environments, zero instances of copula deletion out of three possible environments for this feature, zero instances of demonstrative *them* out of zero possible environments, and finally one appearance of *ain’t* out of 25 total instances of negation.

Several features connected to AAE that are not a part of the six main features I focused on appear in the song. The first feature I noticed was */r/* vocalization or */r/-lessness. This is when the consonant */r/* is either deleted or realized as a vowel. Sociolinguists have found that African Americans often use this feature at higher rates than White Americans do, and the more formal a conversation is, the less this feature will appear.4 This feature shows up when Trainor sings the lines “I might be looking for a late-night friend”, where the word *for* is pronounced as “fo”.
The next feature is consonant cluster reduction. Consonant cluster reduction occurs when two consonants that match in voicing are next to each other, usually the latter consonant gets deleted. CCR appears in a lot of varieties of English, but the rate and environments in which CCR appear can change depending on ethnicity and morphological environment. Two types of CCR appear in Trainor's song. The more traditional CCR appears in this song and in other songs on the album. It is not a particularly special phenomenon, but a more marked version of CCR that should be talked about appears in this song. The more marked form of CCR happens when you have a stop \([t,d,k,g,p, \text{or } b]\) followed by \([s]\) or \([z]\). Instead of the \([s]\) or \([z]\) getting deleted, the stop gets deleted. This feature shows up more often in Southern varieties of AAE than Northern varieties. In "3am" this feature occurs in the lyric, "I know it's complicated", where it's is pronounced without a \([t]\).

Absence of the preposition \(of\) also occurs, this time where SAE would call for a compound preposition. This time in the lyrics, "and baby I can't get you out my head" as opposed to a more standard "and baby I can't get you out of my head". An even more interesting feature that occurs in this same song lyric is how Trainor pronounces the word \(can't\). Trainor pronounces the vowel of this word with the vowel of the word \(cane\), so Trainor pronounces the word as "kaint". This feature is lexically specific for the word \(can't\) and is very common in both AAE and SWVE.

"Like I'm Gonna Lose You" is the fifth song analyzed from the album. This song features African American singer John Legend. John Legend's lyrics were not included while counting how many AAE features appeared in the song or while counting how many possible environments the AAE features could have appeared. This song did have a
"Like I’m Gonna Lose You" is a song about loving and appreciating the things and people one has around them before they are gone. Some themes of this song are love, fear, and loss.

The video for this song is dark unlike the other videos for this album. It contains imagery of Trainor in a candle-lit room gazing out of a window and into heavy rain. There are pictures of various relationships such as couples, parents and children, and an owner-pet relationship. “Like I’m Gonna Lose You” is another one of the slower songs from the album. It has a more modern look and feel than some of the other songs and music videos.

This song makes little use of the main AAE features I examined, only utilizing one out of the six. Although only one of the six main features are used, there is one very marked feature of AAE that shows up repeatedly throughout the song which will be discussed further in the paper. The main feature that appeared in this song was voiced th as [d]. Voiced th as [d] appeared one time out of the two times it could have possibly appeared (50.00%). Multiple negation, unstressed initial syllable deletion, ain’t, copula absence, and demonstrative them all did not appear. There were eight total instances of negation in “Like I’m Gonna Lose You”. There were four possible instances that copula absence could have appeared. Finally, there were zero possible instances where demonstrative them could have appeared in this song. There was one extra feature that was not the main six features of AAE that I focused on that appeared in this song.

An interesting and marked feature that showed up in this song is called Final Consonant Deletion (FCD). In AAE, consonants can be deleted when they are in syllable-final positions with some restrictions. This appears a lot when she pronounces the word
love as “luh” in the chorus of her song. This feature has shown up in African American artists’ music, like famous gospel singer Erica Campbell with her song titled “I luh God”, and African American artist Anderson .Paak with his song titled “Luh you”.

The next song analyzed for features of AAE is “Bang Dem Sticks”. This song uses every main feature of AAE focused on in this study except for unstressed initial syllable deletion. Two features of AAE are even used in the title of the song—namely, voiced th as [d] and demonstrative them. This song is not accompanied by a music video. “Bang Dem Sticks” is a song where Trainor shows her appreciation for drummers and the power that drums have in music. Going along with a lot of the other songs on the album, a feeling of general sassiness returns with this track. The sassiness comes through on this track through Trainor’s delivery of her lyrics. There is utilization of curse words like in the lyrics “Triple it, triple it, all that shit, he looking so good when he bang them sticks”, and “But wait a minute what the fuck is going on, you’re here to see M-Train because you love my songs”, where the F-word is blurred out in the audio. Meghan Trainor also raps in this song. The drums, tempo, and bass of the song also contribute to the sassy feel.

Some themes that appear in this track are drums, music appreciation, and the feeling one has when they listen to good music. These themes come through in lyrics such as “I got a thing for drummers, how the beat shakes up my heart”. There are also some lyrics that can be interpreted as sexual innuendo, which Trainor addresses in the song. These lyrics are “I love it when it’s loud, I love it when it’s big”, “He looking so good when he bang them sticks”, and “But there he go again with the double stroke, and I ain’t talking dirty I ain’t making no jokes”.


“Bang Dem Sticks” is another song on the album that uses AAE extensively. There is even a small rapping portion, and rap is very heavily associated with AAE. The rapping section is not the only section where the AAE appears, it is all over the track. All of the main features appeared in this song except for unstressed initial syllable deletion. Multiple negation appears three times out of the 10 overall instances of negation (30.00%). The word ain’t shows up four times out of the 10 overall instances of negation (40.00%). Voiced th as [d] appeared 29 times out of the 47 times it could have appeared (61.70%). Demonstrative them appears all 23 times out of its 23-possible environment (100.00%). Finally, copula absence appeared once this song out of four possible instances (25.00%).

There are a lot of extra features related to AAE or other nonstandard varieties that appear in this song. The first feature that also appeared in other songs is the absence of the proposition of. It appears when Trainor says, “All that shit”, as opposed to “all of that shit”. Trainor also uses the less broadly observed CCR when she says, “I don’t think they’re ready, it’s okay”, pronouncing it’s as “i’s”.

Another feature that appeared in Trainor’s music was [i] (the vowel in the word thing) turning into [æ] (the vowel in the word hang) before the nasal [ŋ]. This appears when Trainor sings the lyrics “I got a thing for drummers”, where the word thing is pronounced as “thang”. The final extra feature that appeared in “Bang Dem Sticks” is the absence of third-person singular -s. This feature is considered a hallmark of AAE by sociolinguists and is heavily associated with this language variety. This feature appeared in the lyrics “when he bang them sticks”, where Trainor says “bang” instead of “bangs” which would not be present in SAE.
The seventh song analyzed from this album is titled “Walkashame”. This song is not accompanied by a music video. “Walkashame” has a 1960s feel and sound. It is reminiscent of “Mr. Sandman” by the Chordettes. There is still a hint of sassiness to the song. The sassiness comes through in Trainor's lyrics with lines such as “don't act like you haven't been there”, “they're probably jealous of my sexy hair”, and “neighbors stare, I smile and wave 'cause I just don't care”. There was also a rapping section in this song. More sass comes through in this section in lyrics like “if you're gonna do the walk do it like a boss”. “Walkashame” is about the walk home that one takes the morning after they participate with a one-night-stand with someone, or a “walk of shame”. Some themes of this song are alcohol, sex, shame, and judgment, although the word sex is not outright used.

These themes have been expressed through lyrics like “my daddy knows I'm a good girl, we all make mistakes in the drunk world”, and “well please don't judge it was mad late. I had a lot to drink, but I was only being safe”. “Walkashame” only makes use of one of the six main features focused on in this study. This is one of the songs of the lower end of the AAE usage scale.

Multiple negation did not occur in this song even though there were 15 total instances of negation. ain't appeared once out of the 15 total instances of negation (6.67%). Voiced th as [d] does not occur even though there are 30 environments where it could have. Unstressed initial syllable deletion does not occur and there were no environments for its occurrence. Copula absence also does not occur, there are two possible environments where copula absence could have occurred. Finally, there were zero environments where demonstrative them could have occurred. There was one extra
feature, which was CCR. This feature occurred in Trainor's line “don't act like you haven't been there”, where Trainor pronounces the word act as “ack”.

The eighth song that was analyzed from the album “Title” is called “Title”. This song is not accompanied by a music video. Just like the other songs on this album, “Title” contains the recurring theme of general sassiness. The sassiness comes through in the generally demanding tone of the song and the lyrics. An example of this would be in lyrics like “if he want these sweet like sugar Gucci lips, he gotta give it up”, “then consider this an invitation to kiss my ass goodbye”, “don't call me boo”, and “better give me that title”. “Title” is a song about the official title of having a relationship. Some themes of this song are relationships, break ups, titles, and relationship expectations. Some lyrics that express these themes are “if you want my love, he gotta do what he does”, and “Baby, don't call me your friend. If I hear that word again, you might never get a chance to see me naked in your bed”.

This song makes use of every main feature of AAE focused on in this study except for demonstrative them and unstressed initial syllable deletion. There is one appearance of multiple negation out of 19 total instances of negation (5.26%). As for ain't, it appears four times out of 19 total instances of negation (21.05%). Voiced th as [d] appears two times out of 32 possible environments for this feature (6.25%). Copula absence appears once out of the two possible times it could have (50.00%). There was no possible instance for demonstrative them to appear. Finally, unstressed initial syllable deletion could have appeared once but it did not.

There are a couple of extra features of AAE that appear in this song. The first one is another case of Trainor using the affective demonstrative construction. She does this in
the lyrics “if you want these sweet like sugar Gucci lips”, where these is acting as an affective demonstrative. The second feature, is a type of affrication, where Trainor pronounces the stop [d] as an affricate in the line, “I’m loving what you got, but I’m hating what you doing”. Trainor’s use of affrication is reminiscent of African American artist LL Cool J’s song “Doin’ it” featuring New York African American artist LeShaun. In this song LeShaun repeatedly uses affrication on the words “doing” and “daddy”. This same song lyric also demonstrates Trainor using “got” for stative possession. Trainor also does not mark the third-person singular -s on want in the lyric “if he want these sweet like sugar Gucci lips”, and she leaves out the auxiliary verb has in “he gotta do what he does”.

The second to last song analyzed from the album “Title” is called “What If”. There was no music video paired with this track. “What If” is a love song that, like other songs on the album, draws on the musical influence of the mid-1900s. This song does not draw on the sass that makes an appearance in most other songs of this album. Some themes of this song are crushes, relationships, and nervousness. These themes manifest themselves in lyrics like “What if I wanna kiss you tomorrow?”, and “Well, don’t be nervous, I’m so into you”.

Like some of the other slower songs on this album, “What If” only makes use of one of the six main features focused on in this study. There was an instance of the negative element ain’t. It appeared once out of the eight total instances of negation for this song (12.50%). Although there were eight total instances of negation in this song, multiple negation did not appear. Voiced th as [d] also did not appear, though there were five environments where this feature could have shown up. Copula absence also did not
make an appearance. There were two possible environments for copula absence. There were no instances or environments for unstressed initial syllable deletion. Finally, there were zero appearances or possible environments for demonstrative *them*.

The last song used as data for this study is called “Lips are Movin”. This song did have a music video. This song returns to the reoccurring theme of sassiness. This comes through in some of the more demanding lyrics of the song like, “boy, look at me in my face, tell me that you’re not just about this bass” and the general of the content of the song, which consists of Trainor calling someone a liar and discrediting everything they say. “Lips are Movin” is a song about a lying significant other trying to hide their actions with excuses. Some common themes in this song are infidelity, dishonesty, and deceit. These themes come through in lyrics like “If your lips are moving, then you’re lyin’, lyin’, lyin’, baby”, “But I smell her on your collar so goodbye”, and “I know you lie ‘cause your lips are movin, tell me do you think I’m dumb?”.

Going along with the theme of several of the other music videos, “Lips are Movin” utilizes a lot of bright colors. The video features individuals preparing a set for a video shoot, carrying around props such as giant lips, and Trainor being made-up for the shooting of the video. There are plenty of background dancers including a pair of African American twins who are mainly featured in scenes dancing by themselves or with Trainor directly.

“Lips are Movin” makes ample use of AAE. Every main feature except for multiple negation appears in this song. *Ain’t* appears four times out of the nine total instances of negation (44.44%). Voiced *th* as [d] appears once out of the eight possible environments that it could have (12.50%). Unstressed initial syllable deletion shows up
three times out of the four environments that it could have appeared (75.00%). Copula absence makes an appearance twice out of ten possible environments (20.00%). Finally, there is one appearance of demonstrative *them* out of the one possible environment for its appearance (100.00%).

**Interviews**

After analyzing the album “Title”, I listened to two separate interviews of Meghan Trainor to compare her natural speech to the speech used in her songs. The first interview that was analyzed was about ten minutes and five seconds out of a fifty-one-minute interview. I chose to analyze the first consecutive ten minutes that played out of the interview. Trainor was being interviewed by a younger White man at a radio station. The interviewer spoke SAE. Listening to this interview, one does not get the feeling that Meghan Trainor is a native speaker of AAE. There were very few features that are heavily associated with AAE that appeared during the interview.

During the interview, there were a fair number of lexical items (words or phrases) that either originated or are associated with AAE. Most of these words are newer slang terms like *fam* which is short for family, *swag, dope*, and *killing it*. One older lexical item associated with AAE that appeared was the word *yo*. There were very few syntactic features that deviated from Standard American English, and the ones that did appear were not specifically tied to AAE. There was one instance of absence of the preposition *of* in the sentence, “you created all this”, though this is not especially marked.

As for phonological features, two of the main phonological features that were focused on in the album also showed up in Trainor’s speech. The first phonological feature was unstressed initial syllable deletion. This feature only showed up in the word
because being realized as “cause”. Pronouncing because as “cause” is not directly tied to African American English and is very common amongst Standard American English speakers, so such examples were not counted in the analysis of Trainor’s music. The second phonological feature that appeared in Trainor’s interview was voiced th as [d]. This feature only showed up once. Although this feature showed up once, there were multiple other environments where this feature could have appeared, but did not. For the most part Trainor’s speech just sounded generally colloquial.

During the interview, there was one instance of monophthongization that stood out. Monophthongization is when a diphthong, or two adjacent vowel qualities in the same syllable, is shortened to one vowel. Monophthongization of the diphthong /au/ occurs heavily in AAE and SWVE. In AAE monophthongization usually does not occur in environments where the consonant following the diphthong is voiceless. An exception to this would be in varieties of AAE that are spoken in Detroit, Michigan. Monophthongization that happens when two vowels are followed by a voiceless stop [k, t, and, p] happens frequently in SWVE.56

During Trainor’s interview, she pronounced the word right more closely to the word “rat” which would be an instance of this phonological process similar to that of White southern dialects. Another notable part of Trainor’s interview was when she quoted song lyrics from an album she is in the process of creating. The lyrics that Trainor quoted is “sometimes I forget how good I got it”. Like her songs from the album “Title”, these song lyrics sound more non-standard than much of her interview.

The second interview has a couple of more interesting features associated with AAE that did not show up in the previous interview, but for the most part the rest of the
interview was in an informal Standard American English and it is not hard to distinguish Trainor’s race while listening to her. Although it is not hard to distinguish her race while listening to her album either, there are more marked instances of AAE in her music as opposed to her natural speech. In the second interview Trainor was being interviewed Jimmy Kimmel, who is a middle-aged White man. The setting of the interview is on the set of the Jimmy Kimmel Show, which is live and filmed in front of an audience.

There were not many interesting lexical items that appeared during this interview. One thing that was particularly marked and associated with both AAE and Southern varieties of English is the way she referred to her mother. During this interview, Trainor called her mother *momma*. When Trainor referred to her mother as *momma* in this interview, she was referring to her mother in the third person, describing her mother as smart. This differs from the first interview that was analyzed where Trainor refers to her mother as *ma*, directly quoting an instance where she is talking to her mother.

A notable phonological feature that appeared in Trainor’s speech was vocalization of /r/. In Trainor’s interview, /r/ vocalization showed up in the word *brother*, resulting in this word being pronounces as “brotha”. This is the only word where this feature appears in the interview. Vocalization of /l/s and /rl/s are associated with both AAE and SWVE. Although this feature was not one of the main features of this study, it appears in Trainor’s album a couple of times. Trainor has utilized this feature in her album by pronouncing the word *for* as “fo” and *cool* similar to “coo”. Further along in the interview, there are instances where Trainor could have utilized /rl/ vocalization, specifically in the word *brother*, but the feature does not appear.
Unstressed initial syllable deletion appears again during this interview, just like it did in the last one. The word because is the only word that underwent this phonological process, being shortened to the word “cause”. Again, however, this commonly occurs in many dialects of American English. Another phonological process that appeared during this interview was CCR. CCR happens in Standard American English, but appears in Southern English and AAE at higher rates. In the interview, CCR appears on the word it’s. Instead of pronouncing the word as it’s, Trainor pronounced the word as “i’s”. This feature on this same word makes an appearance in her album as well.

The final AAE feature that appeared was one instance of multiple negation. This feature appeared in the sentence “No, I don’t write no checks”. Like some of the other features, multiple negation is not mutually exclusive with AAE and is shared with Southern English. Multiple negation, however is a common feature of AAE. Just like the first interview, the remainder of Trainor’s interview is standard. The whole interview is relatively informal, as reflected by the topics of conversation such as cats, her brothers dating lives, and her spending habits.

Discussion

As we can see from the album and interview analysis, Meghan Trainor makes ample use of AAE in her music, but not to the same extent in her natural speech. It is clear from her interviews that Trainor does not use AAE all the time, and it seems rather clear given her upbringing that she does not speak AAE natively. For the most part, everyone makes decisions about what kind of language they use depending on context, so it is not abnormal for someone to speak slightly differently in informal and formal
situations.\textsuperscript{57} With that being said, the number and variety of features Trainor uses in her music are very different from what shows up in her natural speech.

Like many other artists have done, Trainor stylistically used AAE to add flavor to her music. AAE has historically been used by African Americans to express the cultural identities and individual personae of African Americans that would not come across the same if expressed in Standard American English.\textsuperscript{58} Some racialized themes tend to appear where there are high uses of AAE as I will discuss further below, but the distribution of AAE cannot be straightforwardly linked to a single factor the entire album. For instance, Trainor’s use of AAE throughout the album is complex and it does not seem as though there is one clear purpose as to why she uses it. For instance, there is no consistent correlation between racialized stereotypes and AAE use in her music.

As mentioned previously, “All About That Bass” was #2 when it came to songs on the album that used the most AAE. Having a big butt is heavily racialized and associated with Black women’s bodies. This notion goes far back through history with the story of Saartjie Baartman or “Hottentot Venus”, an African woman who was put on display in human zoos by Europeans.\textsuperscript{59} There are famous images of Baartman’s large backside, and, after her death, French naturalist George Cuvier wrote a report focusing specifically on her rear end.\textsuperscript{60} Black women’s bodies are hyper-sexualized on one end while also being considered undesirable and lewd.\textsuperscript{61} The imagery of the African American woman in leggings getting her butt played with by a skinny White woman also reinforces the hypersexualized Black woman stereotype that is already highly fetishized in mainstream American media.\textsuperscript{62}
Four of the songs on the album contain sections where Trainor is rapping. AAE has been labeled as the "language of the hip-hop" nation, and as we all know hip-hop, which entails rap, originated in African American communities. The songs that contained rapping were "Bang Dem Sticks", "Lips are Movin", "Title", and "Walkashame". These songs respectively ranked #1, #3, #4, and #9 in respect of most AAE used in the album to the least amount. "Walkashame" was an outlier, the other three songs were in the top four with most AAE use on the album. In regards to the main six features, the only instance of AAE in "Walkashame" showed up in the rapping portion.

The art form of rapping comes out of hip-hop which was pioneered by African Americans, so one can see why features of AAE showed up in songs that utilized rapping on the album.

On the other hand, the song "Dear Future Husband" has the least amount of AAE use among the main features for the entire album. The reoccurring theme of sassiness that appears throughout the album is very apparent in this song. Trainor makes very clear demands on what she will and won't tolerate in this song, and the way in which she expresses this is assertive. This comes through in lyrics like "you gotta know how to treat me like a lady", "after every fight, just apologize", "And know we'll never see your family more than mine", "even if I was wrong, you know I'm never wrong", and "Here's a few things you'll need to know if you want to be my one and only all my life". The occurrence of sassiness in this song combined with no use of AAE is evidence against the theory that Trainor always associates sassiness with AAE.
Commentary on Trainor's Use of AAE

Trainor has been criticized for her use of AAE in her music, though not to the same extent as artists like Iggy Azalea. The most notable criticism of Trainor is in the MTV article "Stolen Language: The Strange Case of Meghan Trainor's Blaccent". The author of this article, Carvel Wallace, comments on the phonological features of AAE Trainor uses. The author mentions her using the feature voiced th as [d], although the author overgeneralizes the rule making a slightly inaccurate observation. The author makes observations of her being a non-native speaker of AAE, saying "She doesn't sound like a black person when she sings; she sounds like a white person trying to talk black".

The author also references her natural speech claiming that Trainor's use of AAE noticeably goes down from her music to her natural speech, which is an observation that I have supported quantitatively in this research. The natural speech that the MTV article examined was an interview Trainor did on the Ellen DeGeneres show. The article then goes on to look at comments under Meghan Trainor's song "NO", and makes the claim that nobody comments on the way she uses AAE in her music. Finally, the article compares Trainor to other White artists who developed what is referred to as a "Blaccent" in the article, in their music.

The second article critiquing Trainor for appropriating AAE is from the website Jezebel, and is titled "Why Meghan Trainor's Cultural Appropriation Lives in Her Voice". Like the previous article, there are incorrect or misleading linguistic observations about Trainor's use of AAE. The writer, Kara Brown, mentions Trainor's dropping of "g's" in words ending with "-ing", but this feature is very common in Standard American English and other dialects, although it shows up very frequently in
AAE. The mistake of restricting this feature to AAE only was probably made because that feature is considered informal, and AAE is often reduced to the label of just nonstandard speech or slang. This article goes on to reiterate what the previous article was saying, consistently quoting the other article, and making its own comparisons of White artists who utilize AAE in their music or are said to sound more “soulful”.

Another article that makes commentary about Trainor’s use of AAE is titled “It’s All About That Race”, which is a play on Trainor’s song “All About That Bass”.

This post was written on a website called *Technician*, and like the title suggests it is focused on Trainor’s song “All About That Bass”. Once again, the observation of Trainor using AAE when it is not her native language is mentioned. There is also more comparison to Trainor and other White music artists who frequently utilize either AAE or elements of African American culture for profit. The article is short and focuses more on the racial themes that show up in “All About That Bass”, than her actual use of AAE. Like I have mentioned before, the article mentions the sexualization of Black women’s bodies in the video and accuses Trainor of using the African American dancers in her video as props.

Articles that are specifically about Trainor’s AAE use or appropriation of African American culture are not the only place where comments on Meghan Trainor and her language use can be found. A review of Trainor’s album “Title” from *Billboard* refers to Trainor’s use of the phonological feature voiced th as [d] as “dubious racial mimicry”, saying that her using this in her speech “seems strange for a Nantucket-born girl”. This same album review mentions Trainor’s use of a “fake Patois” in her song “No Good for You” which is a bonus track available on the deluxe version of her album. There is also notable commentary about her speech from people in the comment section of an
interview she did on Jimmy Kimmel Live." The top-rated comment of the video mentions that the way she speaks is "cute". One notable reply to this comment says, "if you're a wigga", in which the term wigga is a combination of the words White and Nigga. Another comment states that Trainor's accent is interesting and she sounds Southern although she is not from the south. A couple of the replies say that she just sounds like a person from Boston, Massachusetts. Another commenter calls her accent fake. The same user who made the wigga comment also labeled her accent as "wigga-wannabe". One particularly potent reply to this comment was "it's totally affected; she often talks and sings like a black person for no reason. 40 years ago that would have been unacceptable racist mockery; today walking like a ghetto hoodrat is apparently fashionable. personally I find it disgusting". These comments could all be found on the first page of comments in the YouTube comment section (marked as "1 year", "11 months", or "10 months" old from April of 2017) when I last accessed the video.

Comparing Meghan Trainor to Iggy Azalea.

In both the Jezebel and Technician articles, comparisons to Australian rapper Iggy Azalea were made. Iggy Azalea is very well-known for linguistic hyper performance of AAE in her music. Azalea has been heavily criticized for her use of AAE in her music, so much so that there is an entire scholarly linguistic article written about her titled, "First Things First, I'm the Realest: Linguistic Appropriation, White Privilege, and the Hip-Hop Persona of Iggy Azalea". In this work, Eberhardt and Freeman say that discourse concerning Azalea's music brings up Azalea's "sonic Blackness" or "southern US rap drawl". As we can tell from the scholarly article and criticisms of other celebrities towards Iggy Azalea, her criticisms of AAE appropriation far outweigh criticism of
Meghan Trainor. For instance, a long-standing feud between rappers Iggy Azalea and Azealia Banks flourished because of Iggy Azalea’s appropriation of AAE and in a broader sense African American culture. Azealia Banks has called rapper Iggy Azalea a “wannabe Black girl” and accused Iggy of belittling and degrading African American culture.

There is a lot to compare and contrast between Iggy Azalea and Meghan Trainor. On one hand you have two White women who are profiting from the appropriation of AAE in their music. On the other hand Iggy Azalea is a hip-hop artist, while Meghan Trainor is a pop artist. Iggy Azalea’s use of AAE, while not justified, is understandable in a way because she is a hip-hop artist and, as mentioned before, AAE has been dubbed the language of hip-hop. Pop music is a genre that is presently not heavily associated with African Americans like hip-hop is.

The artistic persona that Meghan Trainor is presenting is more family friendly than Iggy Azalea’s. Trainor is presented as down-to-earth. In Billboard’s review of her album, she is referred to as “adorably relatable and socially correct”. In another article, Trainor is called “adorable” as well as cool and edgy. Iggy Azalea presents a more aggressive and “hood” person in her performance, referring to herself as a “bad bitch” and “the realest”, talking about “slaying these hoes”, and referencing getting drunk and trashing hotel rooms.

The final comparison between Azalea and Trainor is the amount in which they use AAE in their music and natural speech. As noted before, Trainor does not use very much AAE in her natural speech. Some features have shown up in Trainor’s speech, but it is not indicative of her being a native AAE speaker. In opposition to this, the amount of
AAE Trainor uses in her music outweighs what we have seen in her natural speech in amount and variety of features.

As for Iggy Azalea, the amount of AAE that she uses in her music is extremely high, far higher than Trainor’s. For instance, Iggy Azalea’s amount of copula absence that she uses in her music is in the same range of African American rappers like Eve, Juvenile, and Trina, and as mentioned before copula absence is unique to AAE. In the Eberhardt and Freeman article, their analysis of Azalea’s use of copula absence revealed that Azalea utilized this feature 226 out of 304 times (74.34%). Trainor, on the other hand, only did so 4 out of 43 times (9.30%) on her album. Azalea’s AAE use in her music has been called a “mimicry of Blackness”, “linguistic hyper performance”, and the amount of copula absence that Azalea uses in her music has been referred to as a dramatic shift compared to her natural speech. As for Azalea’s natural speech, she speaks her native variety of Australian English. Azalea seems to have a mastery of AAE in her music, while Trainor does not. Meghan Trainor still sounds White, unlike Azalea who has been criticized for “sonic Blackness”.

Meghan Trainor and Iggy Azalea are both White women who use AAE in their music despite being non-native speakers, so why does Azalea receive harsher criticism than Trainor? It appears Trainor’s use of AAE is more acceptable to society than Azalea’s is. Trainor’s use of AAE in her music is not much different than Azalea’s and in some cases, can reach levels of “linguistic hyper performance” which can be seen in songs like “Bang Dem Sticks”, yet Trainor’s use of AAE in her music seems less blatant to someone who is not knowledgeable about the dialect. Her “adorable”, “relatable” persona, compared to Azalea’s “bad bitch” persona, may play a role, too.
Conclusion

From the evidence presented in the analysis of Meghan Trainor’s music and her natural speech, we can see that she uses AAE selectively and sometimes at very high rates. Trainor is joined by other White artists like Iggy Azalea who also commodify AAE in their music and profit from it. So, what is the problem with White artists using AAE in their music when this is not the language they speak on an everyday basis? For one, mimicry of an “accent” that has strong racial ties is racist. If Trainor were to mimic the ethnolect of someone who was Latinx or East Asian, Trainor would likely be labeled as racist, so why is this okay when it comes to AAE?

Also, artists like Trainor, Azalea, and others can profit off of the native dialect of most African Americans while this same group gets severely discriminated against for using it. Linguist Geneva Smitherman sums up the effects of linguistic discrimination perfectly in this quote:

The speech of Blacks, the poor, and other powerless groups is used as a weapon to deny them access to full participation in the society. Teachers harp on the “bad” English of their students; potential employees are denied jobs because they don’t talk “right”; future college graduates become force-outs because they write in “nonstandard” English. Yet what is “nonstandard” English is simply the language of “nonstandard” people.¹

Language is used as a tool of oppression, in this case against African American people. John Rickford and Sharese King also mention linguistic discrimination in their paper regarding the Trayvon Martin case, saying that there is evidence of linguistic discrimination in regards to AAE in medical situations, educational environments, housing, employment, the justice system, and other areas of life.²
The duality of AAE being consumed by the masses in music and through other media, while an environment still exists for native speakers of this variety to be severely punished for speaking AAE, is the essence of linguistic push-pull. AAE is not just edgy slang to be appropriated and packaged for consumption. It is a language that is an essential component of African American culture, and just like other aspects of African American culture it is consistently devalued and used as the basis for discrimination. The fact that it is acceptable and cool for non-native speakers to appropriate it for a profit while native speakers are suffering is disturbing. Exploring Trainor’s appropriation of AAE in her music has helped to explore the “pull” aspect of linguistic push-pull. It is my hope that this work will encourage the reader to think about the “push” aspect of push-pull and the devastating realities that this phenomenon has had on the lives of people who deviate from what is considered by society “acceptable” and “proper” speech.
1 Billboard, “Hot 100 Songs Year End Charts”, last updated 2016, accessed April 10, 2017
8 Eberhardt, and Freeman, “‘First things first, I'm the realest’”, 2015, accessed April 10, 2017.

Eberhardt, and Freeman, "‘First things first, I'm the realest’", accessed March 30, 2017, 319-320.


Eberhardt, and Freeman, "‘First things first, I'm the realest’", accessed March 30, 2017, 305-306.


The Ellen Show, "Meghan Trainor's Album Is #1" (video interview, January 14, 2015), accessed April 10, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pucEs0tdRrM.


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