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# The Minstrel Legacy: African American English and the Historical Construction of "Black" Identities in Entertainment

## **Abstract**

Linguists have long been aware that the language scripted for "ethnic" roles in the media has been manipulated for a variety of purposes ranging from the construction of character "authenticity" to flagrant ridicule. This paper provides a brief overview of the history of African American roles in the entertainment industry from minstrel shows to present-day films. I am particularly interested in looking at the practice of distorting African American English as an historical artifact which is commonplace in the entertainment industry today. Dialogue which is clearly meant as an imitation of African American English still results in the construction of an ethnic stereotype that serves as a reflection of European American attitudes regarding African Americans. As a result, such depictions provide non-Black acculturated people with a perception of Blackness that is founded in inaccuracies and derision but has been portrayed as authentic, leaving Black life open to continual mimicry.

## **Keywords**

media, film, African American English, language and identity, language attitudes, minstrelsy, language prejudice

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Film and Media Studies | Linguistics

The Minstrel Legacy: African American English and the Historical Construction of  
“Black” Identities in Entertainment

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## Introduction

On December 25, 2012, director Quentin Tarantino released *Django, Unchained*, a controversial dark comedy where Jamie Foxx, in the title role, plays a freed slave who successfully (and brutally) exacts revenge on White slaveholders. Critics were quick to decry the film as inflammatory and racist, most frequently pointing out that the word *nigger* is used over 110 times, mostly by White actors. Historian Jelani Cobb called it called a feat of “racial ventriloquism” for the filmmaker (Cobb, 2013) suggesting that Tarantino cheaply reduced the Black holocaust of slavery to a “spaghetti western.” Defenders of the film (among them the prominent African American actors who starred in the film as well as rapper Nas and director Antoine Fuqua) argue that *Django* is actually empowering for African American audiences in general, and for young Black men in particular; they claim that the role is essentially a second coming of the Black cinematic heroes who triumphed during the Blaxploitation era. In an *LA Times* interview, Tarantino suggests that the movie could “become a rite of passage for young, Black males.” (Sperling and Fitz, 2012). Indeed, Black audiences have responded positively to the film (42% of the film’s initial audience was Black according to exit polls from the *Hollywood Reporter* (McClintock, 2013)), as have Whites, despite the mainstream fear that *Django* might inspire anti-White sentiments due to the fact that (with the exception of Dr. King Schultz played by Christoph Waltz) the White characters in the film are overwhelmingly racist villains. Anecdotally, I was one of the few African Americans in a theater with a majority White audience that cheered frequently for Black characters and broke into enthusiastic applause at the end of the film.

More important than the gratuitous use of racial epithets, *Django* employs several weak, outdated caricatures of Blackness including the Black beast/Mandingo, a two- dimensional

conniving Uncle Tom<sup>1</sup>, and mammies and tragic mulattoes, who aren't even as complex as those paraded before audiences of the forties and fifties. With the exception of Django, the liberated bad-ass, and the weak attempt at creating an anti-hero in a twisted Uncle Tom (Samuel Jackson's Stephen), Tarantino's film has the same underdeveloped Black characters that American audiences have accepted since Blackness has been represented in entertainment. While the practice is common in other postcolonial empires, America, in particular, has had a protracted history of Whites creating Black caricatures. Although Blacks served as amusement for White audiences on plantations throughout the enslavement period, the national White fascination with African American life as popular entertainment began with the proliferation of minstrel shows in the late 1820's. These traveling variety shows (mostly featuring music and comedy) dominated American entertainment until well into the 1880's and featured so-called "Ethiopian delineators" who were all-White, all-male casts in blackface. Their comedy hinged on gross misrepresentations of what the actors determined to be (southern) Black culture, including singing, dancing, and delivering comedic speeches. In the early days of minstrelsy, more often than not, the actors had little or no real contact with African Americans, so their version of Black culture was almost entirely grounded in racist stereotypes. Early minstrelsy was used as a tool to further malign Blacks and to promote justifications for slavery. Some of the most influential minstrels, such as Dan Emmett, the performer best known for composing "Dixie" and "Turkey in

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<sup>1</sup> Here I do not mean "Uncle Tom," in the Harriet Beecher Stowe sense, where Tom was a heroic figure, strong, faithful, and loyal to both whites and to his fellow slaves. Instead I am referring to what Patricia Turner calls the "trope of Uncle Tom" where "few, if any popular and folk culture depictions are true to the Stowe original." (75). My use of Uncle Tom in this instance is in keeping with what Turner identifies as today's popular understanding of the Tom, having a "supposed identification with his masters/employers and... contempt for his own (black) kind...(having) racial self-hate...willing to 'sell out' blacks in order to placate whites and improve his personal well-being." (69) There are a number of other departures between Stowe's Tom and what modern audiences believe a Tom to be; for example, the original Tom was not old or particularly servile, but today's Toms are, without exception, elderly, frail, and slavishly loyal to whites. I believe that I am accurate in describing Stephen as a twisted Uncle Tom here since, in nearly every article on Samuel L. Jackson's role in *Django Unchained*, the character is referred to as such.

the Straw” claimed to have listened to the songs of slaves, and Thomas “Daddy” Rice (credited with being one of the originators of minstrelsy), reportedly imitated the dances of a crippled Black hostler named Jim Cuff (fictionalized as Jim Crow) (Comer, 2005). Even when African American actors began participating in minstrelsy in the 1840’s (also in blackface), the caricatures of Blackness persisted. These depictions of Black life were particularly damaging since, at the height of their popularity, minstrel shows played small towns and large cities alike, in every region of the country. Common both in the north and the south, their reach also extended as far west as the frontier towns of Cincinnati and Louisville, and they were enormously popular in Europe and the British Isles as well. The performances drew large and enthusiastic White audiences, many of whom had never seen an African American face-to-face—and even those Whites who were familiar with Black culture accepted these comedic distortions of Black life as valuable entertainment. For example, in his *Autobiography*, Mark Twain famously recalls the minstrel show writing that, “[t]o my mind it was a thoroughly delightful thing and a most competent laughter-compeller and I am sorry it is gone.” (as quoted in Strausbaugh, p.108)

Other ethnic and immigrant groups such as Italians, Irish, Jews, Germans, and even poor country Whites (portrayed as rubes) were lampooned in minstrel shows, but Black characters were arguably more frequent and more popular, and the acceptance of comedic, exaggerated Black life became more powerful over time. Eventually, as minstrelsy became more widespread, it created its own frame of reference such that it no longer mattered that the performances had little to do with authentic Black music, dance, or speech patterns (Nowatzki, p.37). Even after the traveling shows faded into obscurity by the turn of the twentieth century, the farcical and damaging construction of Black identity in minstrelsy was co-opted by vaudeville shows and

early film. The comic archetypes developed in minstrel shows such as Zip Coon, Jim Crow, Uncle Tom, and Sambo provided the architecture for the Black comic roles that are shockingly prevalent even today. A number of critics have maintained that even though they were created by uninformed and perhaps ill-intended Whites, minstrel characters began with the basis of at least *some* Black “reality.” It is also the case that many of the stock characters developed in minstrel shows were later reclaimed by African American actors and writers in vaudeville and early film. Legends such as Bert Williams, Mantan Moreland, Step ‘n Fetchit, and Hattie McDaniels, elevated the roles they played so that what began as caricatures eventually became more humane and realistic versions of Black culture (Strausbaugh, p. 140). However, when we look at Black language use in the early history of the entertainment industry, particularly at the heavy-handed distortion and exaggeration of African American English, the ignorant dialogue written for Black roles, and the types of topics scripted for Black characters, I’m not sure we can feel reassured by Black participation in helping to craft these images. The subtleties of Black interpretations, when they were there for general audiences, were often too few and far between, and the linguistic construction of ethnicity too shaped by the racist ideology of the time to afford these roles much dignity in the White imagination. In this paper, we will examine the ways in which language, specifically, was used to craft a problematized version of Blackness in the earliest days of the entertainment industry—a manufactured Blackness that persists today. I propose that without a calculated distortion of Black language, the caricatures of Blacks that were crafted in the White imagination (at the expense of Blacks and to the delight of White audiences) would not have had such a long lasting and damaging impact on the ways in which Blackness has been and still is conceived. In this paper, I argue that, more significant than the tattered costumes, the servile roles, and humiliating acrobatics, and even more damaging than the blackface makeup designed

to transform White actors into Black characters is the linguistic minstrelsy that resulted in the industry's construction of "Blackness" that persists today. The linguistic features that define the speech of Black characters in contemporary entertainment were inherited from Whites who created a version of Blackness to fulfill a White audience need to demoralize, dehumanize, and subjugate Blacks both in fantasy and reality. Language is one of the most important carriers of culture and African American English is one that has had a particularly troubled history in the US as it was forged in the crucible of enslavement and has alternately been disparaged and celebrated by speakers and non-speakers alike; as such, Black language has served as the vehicle in entertainment to establish and nurture stereotypes of Blackness.

### **The Role of Language in Minstrelsy**

Black language has long been a preoccupation of Whites in entertainment and the language of minstrel shows and the comedic dialogues crafted for the "Black" actors in them was constructed in such a way as to depict Blacks as shiftless, lazy, ignorant buffoons; at turns docile, then emotive and always sexually preoccupied. It was written in broad "negro dialect" so that the often-stigmatized phonological and syntactic features of African American English were particularly exaggerated in an attempt to underscore widely held White beliefs about Black intelligence, integrity, and morality. On one hand, the language of characters such as Uncle Tom, Jim Crow, and the Mammy was simplified to construct one-dimensional meek, loyal Black servants who blissfully served White masters and longed nostalgically for the comfort and ease of plantation life. On the other, stump speeches delivered by slick, citified dandies such as Zip Coon, (a northern urban Black man trying to "live above his station") were characterized by language which poorly approximated White, upper-class speech, and which was usually rife with nonsense, malapropisms, and puns. Stump speech topics varied from pure nonsense to parodies



of politics, science, and social issues. Both the topic itself and the “coon's” inability to comprehend it served as sources of comedy. As Robert Toll points out in *Blacking Up*, “education was minstrelsy’s most popular professional target. With great pomposity and empty heads, ‘edjunktated’ Blacks felt they could explain anything,” for example transcendentalism (as quoted in Toll, p.70):

Transcendentalism is dat spiritual cognoscence ob psychological infrsgibility, connected wid conscientient ademption ob incolumbient spirituality and etherialized connection— which is deribed from a profound contemplation of the irregability ob dose incessimable divisions ob de more minute portions ob subdivided particles ob invisibile atoms dat become ana-tom-catically tattalable in de circumbulatin commotion ob ambiloquous voluminousness.

Unfortunately, once African Americans established themselves in minstrelsy (many falsely claiming to be ex-slaves to appear even more authentic), the humiliating mischaracterizations of Blacks became even more potent. Because Black actors “inherited the White-created stereotypes and could make only minor modifications in them, Black minstrels in effect added credibility to these images by making it seem that Negroes actually behaved like minstrelsy’s Black caricatures.” (Toll, p.196)

The music of minstrel shows also drew on elements misappropriated from African American language and culture. By the time vaudeville supplanted minstrel shows in American popularity, Over 600 “Coon” songs had been added to the entertainment industry (Strausbaugh, p.99). These songs were written and performed by both White and Black composers and actors, and despite the elements of ridicule contained in Blackface performance, White audiences by and large, believed the songs and dances to be “authentically” Black. For their part, the minstrels always billed themselves and their music as such. The songs were called "plantation melodies" or "Ethiopian choruses", among other names. By using Black linguistic caricatures and so-called

Black music, the minstrels relied on their spectators' inexperience with real Black culture to fool audiences into accepting the whole performance as drawn from actual experiences in African America, thus fixing a fictional Black identity in the American imagination.

African American composers also contributed to the construction of this deformed minstrel "Blackness," but they suffered mightily. For example, the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar was widely criticized in the Black community for his seeming "willingness to sacrifice his artistic integrity to commercial success. Such artistic compromise was particularly evident in his collaborations on various theatrical ventures, from 1898 onward, with Will Marion Cook, a Black composer who was classically trained but more commercially successful in producing musical revues. These musical revues served as a performative space where the old vogue of minstrelsy and the new vogue of ragtime were blended to produce results that, while occasionally racially degrading, were also unusually fresh, vigorous, and not without comic charm. Dunbar contributed the lyrics to some of these shows, which included *Clorindy* (1898), *Uncle Eph's Christmas* (1899), and *Jes Lak White Fo'ks* (1900). The shows, and Dunbar's contributions to them, were highly successful, yet the price of his success became apparent when one of the reviews of *Uncle Eph's Christmas* referred to him as the 'prince of the coon song writers'." (Revell, p.80)

Dunbar and other Black lyricists and composers became even more popular near the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century because, in addition to the Black actors who were appearing in vaudeville acts, there were also all-Black casts that performed for Black audiences. One such show was Dunbar's *In Dahomey* (1902), a Black satire of American colonialism. Black troupes performed mostly in churches and tents but also worked under the White-owned Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) and were featured on the Dudley circuit at Black vaudeville

theaters like the Apollo in Harlem and the Royal Theater in Baltimore (Strausbaugh, p.108). Although the stock character types still flourished in these productions, it was for Black audiences that Black vaudeville actors saw an opportunity to create more complex and realistic roles, particularly in terms of dialogue. The shows still relied heavily on coon songs and the comedic sketches reminiscent of minstrelsy, but in these shows, the word play included subversive messages even though the roles seemed to perpetuate lingering stereotypes of Black life. While still existing within tightly prescribed roles, and while still incorporating many of the exaggerated southern AAE vernacular features originally intended in minstrel shows to demean African Americans, Black characters emerged as shrewd, particularly in their ability to “get over” on Whites. This was especially true for Black audiences who saw everyday Black heroes emerge under the radar, despite the degrading limitations on Black expression. Actors like Bert Williams, Eubie Blake, Ma Rainey, and Jackie “Moms” Mabley struggled mightily with the burden of continuing to fill roles shaped by what Rickford calls the “stereotyped and tired characterization” (p.67) of minstrelsy so popular with White audiences while at the same time affirming Black audiences, and using Black language to do it. For example, in their 1901 song “She’s Getting More like the White Folks Every Day,” Walker and Williams signify on Whites and the Blacks who try to emulate them:

I ain’t never seen such a monstrous change since the day that I was born,  
As bounced up here in the las’ four weeks ’tween me an’ Miss Sally Horn  
She par’ntly had a normal Constitution with good common sense to spare.  
But since she’s been following the White folks they’ve put Miss Sally in the air.  
My troubles they just started since at the big hotel she’s stayed.  
A lady sent for her up there to come and be the maid  
Where we used to go to the restaurant plain pork chops they would do  
But now she wants a porter house steak with a bottle of champagne, too.

#### CHORUS

She’s getting mo’ like the White folks ev’ry day  
Trying to do just like ’em ev’ry way.

Once she was stuck on calico patterns,  
Now all she wants is silks and satins,  
She's getting mo' like the White folks e'ry day.

I knew at her home that she only had just one plain kind of meat,  
Now she's got to have two diff'rent kinds or else she cannot eat.  
I know when chicken was a luxury she'd eat 'em boiled or fried.  
Now she must have some humming birds hearts or else she aint satisfied.  
She's got herself some irons she's been working on her hair.  
She's got herself some kalsomine to help to make her fair.  
Now she can sing "The Swanee River" like it never was sung before.  
But since she worked in that hotel she warbles "Il Trovatore".

Here not only do Walker and Williams characterize White behavior as absurd, they also signify on Blacks who foolishly aspire to "do just like 'em ev'ry way" and thus abandon their "normal constitution" and "good sense." A common theme even in Black America today, the song points out that the desire for and the attempt to adopt "White" pretensions marks Blacks as ridiculous. It juxtaposes the rejection of acceptable trappings of working class Black life and culture such as pork chops, calico, chicken and "Swanee River<sup>2</sup>" with the yearning for the excesses of White culture like steak and champagne, silks, eating hummingbirds and singing Italian operas. In the final verse above, the ultimate insult is added, where the lady in question holds Whiteness in such high esteem that she commits the ultimate rejection of Blackness—she tries to straighten her hair and bleach her skin. At the very core of the signification is that this is a woman who is a Black maid in a hotel who can never hope to realize her ridiculous aspirations.

### **Language Use and Dialect Literature**

The success of minstrel and vaudeville shows (along with the overwhelming acceptance of the language used by blackface characters in them) is directly connected to a surge in the

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, here Walker and Williams use "Swanee River," a minstrel song originally written by Stephen Foster for Christy's Minstrels. The song is supposedly written from the perspective of a former slave who longs for the plantation. Perhaps its mention in the Walker and Williams song is yet another layer of signification.

popularity of dialect literature beginning in the mid-1800s. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) is a particularly good example of such literature and, while the book itself was widely read, dramatic adaptations became far more influential and in some ways, quite damaging in terms of the construction of Blackness in the White imagination. According to critic Jim Comer, "The most popular of the blackface entertainments was the adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: an antislavery tale, it met with few objections even from the anti-theater religious right. A mixture of minstrel show, circus, and zoo, with trained dogs, ponies, and even a crocodile, it remained the most commonly performed play in America for a century."

(<http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/links/comer/> accessed June 20, 2011). During its record-breaking run, over fifty people saw the play for every *one* who read the book. There were several versions of the play that were the result of individual directors' artistic license and many performances strayed from the book, so much so that "the moralizing of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel vanished. When taken to see it, Stowe was unable to follow the plot. Companies failed when they hired professional actors as opposed to minstrel hams." (Comer). One of the most successful minstrel adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Sanford's "Happy Uncle Tom" was first performed in 1853 in Philadelphia and not only excised Stowe's abolitionist message, but featured only a series of nostalgic plantation vignettes:

Oh, White folks, we'll have you to know  
Dis am not de version of Mrs. Stowe  
Wid her de Darks am all unlucky  
But we am de boys from Old Kentucky.  
Den hand de banjo down to play  
We'll make it ring both night and day  
And care not what de White folks say,  
Dey can't get us to run away.

Other dialect writers who contributed to the construction of dubious Black identities at the time were authors such as Thomas Nelson Page (creator of a number of short-story collections including *In Ole Virginia* and *Befo' de War*) and Joel Chandler Harris (of the Uncle Remus stories) who wrote popular fiction in the plantation nostalgia genre, and who both were fascinated with minstrel shows as children (Toll, 33). Even African American author Paul Lawrence Dunbar, revered by literary critics for his "dialect poetry," also wrote coon songs like "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd" and other lyrics for minstrel shows. The work of these authors contributed more generally to the American entertainment industry as all of their fiction was adapted at some point for stage, radio, or screen; and therefore, their fabrication of Black linguistic identity ultimately had far and wide reaching consequences. Particular evidence of the extensive influence of early dialect writers is the fact that, as late as 1946, Harris' Uncle Remus stories served as the inspiration for one of Disney's most controversial films, *Song of the South*.

### **Language and Radio and Television**

Dialect literature and vaudeville shows influenced the approximation of Black language used in radio programs like *Amos and Andy* and *Pick 'n Pat* which continued the tradition of minstrelsy in the late 1920's. *Amos 'n Andy* was the longest running show in the history of radio (30 years) and has been described by critics as "aural blackface" (Strausbaugh, p.225); it was particularly influential due to its unprecedented popularity. The show's two stars, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, White men who met in 1920 in Durham, North Carolina, were familiar with blackface minstrelsy. When they began performing together on Chicago radio in 1925, they used the same distorted version of African American English that was the staple of minstrel and vaudeville shows. Since there was no visible way to construct ethnicity on the radio, the burden of creating Black characters in shows like *Amos 'n Andy* rested solely on the

manipulation and distortion of language. Minstrel-style wordplay humor and exaggerated African American English were common in the formative years of the program and, in this way, popular entertainment perpetuated the racist stereotype of the uneducated, ever-cheerful, and highly musical Black subject well into the 1950s. Even as the minstrel show was dying out in all but amateur theater, Blackface performers remained common acts on vaudeville stages, radio, and, ultimately, in television and films as well. When *Amos 'n Andy* became a TV show in 1953, the series used African-American actors in the main roles; in an ironic twist on what it means to be or sound “authentically Black,” the actors were instructed to keep their voices and speech patterns as close to Gosden and Correll's radio version of “Blackness” as possible (Strausbaugh, p.227). These and subsequent entertainers kept the familiar songs, dances, and pseudo-Black dialect, often in nostalgic looks back at the old minstrel show.

For example, here is an excerpt from the White actors featured in the radio show in a special episode for the beginning of daylight saving time where, “Amos and Andy bought a second hand automobile and started a taxicab business. As the scene opens now we find the boys in their rooming house out in the hall by the telephone. They have an appointment to make a couple of calls at a specified time but the Chicago Daylight saving time has them somewhat confused.”

Amos: Now, wait a minute----'fore we start callin' up dese people heah, let's figure out whut time it is.

Andy: De trouble wid my watch is dat de thing is a hour slow.

Amos: Well, and de daylight savin' time make it a hour fast----so dat make it even don't it? Whut time is you got now?

Andy: Recordin' to de watch heah, I got eight o'clock.

Amos: You got 8 o'clock----but it's nine o'clock, ain't it?

Andy: Wait a minute—it's ten o'clock. Yo' see my watch is a hour sloweh dan yo' watch is.

Amos: I aint got no watch.

Andy: Den dat makes it.

Amos: Dat makes it whut?

Andy: Wait a minute heah now----whut time is it?

Amos: We is supposed to call dis man at nine o'clock tonight. His wife say dat he wouldn't be home till 9 o'clock.

Andy: Well, yesterday when it was nine o'clock, my watch was eight o'clock an' I didn't change de time on it. Now today dey stahted dis daylight savin' bizness so dat make my watch two hours off.

Amos: Well, den, it's ten o'clock den, aint it?

Andy: We was supposed to call de man at nine o'clock.

Amos: Den we is a hour late, aint we?

Andy: Not if de man's watch is wrong, we aint.

Amos: Dis heah's de biggest mess I done ever got in.

In this excerpt, the White actors, both speakers of southern English varieties, perform linguistic minstrelsy by exaggerating select features of African American English. Some of these features include AAE phonological patterns such as /th/ pronounced as /d/ word initially (“then” and “that” as “den” and “dat”) and the realization of /r/ as a schwa when occurring word medially and finally (“started” and “here” as “stahted” and “heah”). These are regular and predictable patterns in AAE, but in the dialogue above, the speakers are somewhat haphazard in their use of the features. Notice that /r/ is vocalized in some words but inexplicably remains intact in others such as in “hours,” “yesterday,” and “start.” Meanwhile, there are other highly regular and predictable patterns in AAE that are *not* represented above, such as the reduction of word final



consonant clusters as in “fast” and “and,” which would be reduced by most AAE speakers to “fas” and “an.” Similarly, the actors use frequently lampooned AAE syntactic features of negative concord (“I ain’t got no watch”) and perfective done (“de biggest mess I done ever got in”), but missing are other AAE grammatical features that would be expected with native speakers, such as zero copula (“what time Ø you got now” instead of “what time *is* you got now”).<sup>3</sup>

Below is another excerpt from the show, this time performed by the African Americans who starred in the television series, featuring Andy played by Spencer Williams and Tim Moore as Kingfish, “one of TV’s most outlandish flimflam artists” (Watkins, 200):

- Andy: I done told the clerk where I was goin’ and he said he ain’t never heard a’ nobody going to Arabia on vacation cause it’s too hot over there. Does he know what he’s talkin’ bout?
- Kingfish: Well, ahhh...yes, and no, Andy
- Andy: what’cha mean?
- Kingfish: Well, I’ll explain dat to you. At one time Arabia was the hottest country in de world. But dats all changed now in the past few years.
- Andy: What’ch mean, done changed?
- Kingfish: Well, Andy, they opened up the Suez Canal and let the breeze blow into Arabia...
- Andy: How could it do dat?
- Kingfish: Andy Brown, I’m surprised at you, a man of your intelligence askin a crazy question like dat. I’ll explain dat to you...Now on one end of Arabia, they got dah Suez Canal wit de gates open. And den, on the other end, is dah Polish Corridor.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, however, that not all speakers of African American English use every feature in every possible environment—wide variation exists between speakers, and even within the speech of individuals. It is also the case that AAE shares some grammatical and phonological features with varieties of English spoken by southern whites. Unfortunately, in the blackface imitation of African American English, the rules of the variety are misapplied (sometimes intentionally and sometimes out of linguistic ignorance) so that the dialect is presented to audiences as comedy, purposefully ridiculing blacks.

Andy: Well, what about it?

Kingfish: Well, dere you is. Arabia is de only country in de world wit cross ventilation.

Andy: I don't guess dah clerk knowed nothin' bout dat.

In keeping with the linguistic style set by the earlier actors, the television Amos and Andy use some of the same AAE features. In their later incarnation however, we don't see as many AAE features as we did in the radio show dialogue. It is likely that the need to construct ethnicity solely through the use of language is diminished by the presence of Black actors on camera, and thus the dialect used, while still a marker of a particular kind of "Blackness," is less exaggerated than when done in linguistic Blackface.

### **"Black" Language and Film**

According to Henry Giroux, since their inception, "American movies have been obsessed with race and images of Blackness" (p.195); political scientist Michael Rogin notes that the three most important films in early cinematic history centrally feature Blackness. *Uncle Tom's cabin* (1903) was the first full length film at 12 minutes; *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was the first feature length Hollywood epic and is still ranked by film critics among the best crafted films in American cinematography; and *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was the first full length movie with sound, famously featuring Al Jolson as a vaudeville performer in Blackface singing "My Mammy." The early days of African Americans on screen were filled with nostalgia films and "race movies," many of which featured southern plantation life, but also included films on Black American life. The depictions of Blacks in silent films bore the hallmarks of minstrel characters, without the singing, dancing and speechifying so well loved in vaudeville, yet these characters failed to truly fulfill ravenous White appetites for "authentic" trappings of Black culture (Strausbaugh, p.140). The introduction of sound in film allowed for the industry to return to

imaging Blacks in the way that was most entertaining for White audiences and with sound, films soon overtook vaudeville shows in popularity. The Mammies, Uncle Toms, and Coons were still one-dimensional, inaccurate, and humiliating representations of Black life, but they were increasingly played by Black actors (who still over-played AAE to conform to industry expectations) who were seen at worst as race traitors and at best as unwitting pawns, exploited by the powerful entertainment industry.

If we leap ahead to contemporary film and television, even after the brief Black cinematic saturnalia of the 1960's and 70's that was Blaxploitation, we see that many of the same troubling character types born in the cradle of minstrelsy are thriving. A number of critics (e.g., Bogle, 2001 and Giroux, 2002) argue that today's comedic Black actors like Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, and Wanda Sykes, and producers such as Tyler Perry and the Wayans Brothers have been (and still are) complicit in maintaining low standards of Black identity in the entertainment industry by falling into the same trap as their predecessors. Although we could look to any number of examples, consider the similarities between the minstrel stump speech mentioned earlier in this paper and a mock public service announcement entitled "Keep your Butt in School," delivered by Oswald Bates, a popular character played by Damon Wayans on the 1990's variety show, *In Living Color*:

First of all, we must internalize the flatulation of the matter by transmitting the effervescent of the Indonesian proximity in order to further segregate the crux of my venereal infection. If I may retain my liquids here for one moment I'd like to continue the redundancy of my quote unquote intestinal tract see because to preclude on the issue of world domination would only circumvent excuse me circumcise the revelation that reflects the aphrodisiac symptoms, which now perpetrates the jerry curls activation. So but you not misinterpret the chauvinistic... Allow me to expose my colon once again. The ramifications inflicted on the incision placed within the fallopian cavities serves to be holistic, taken from the Latin word "jalapeño."

A parody of the United Negro College Fund public service announcements (made obvious by the voice-over narration, “This is The United Negro Scholarship Fund because a mind is a terrible thing to develop without help.”), while clearly written to exaggerate gross sexual and biological ignorance (slightly more subtle when employed in minstrel shows), this speech otherwise differs little from the malapropism-riddled monologues of coon characters in the late 1800’s. While many of their standup routines have been biting perceptives and have cut to the quick of contemporary race relations (e.g. see the work of Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, and Bernie Mack), the majority of today’s popular Black comedians in *cinematic* roles (those which are the creation of teams of writers, producers, directors, etc.) are no more sophisticated in their lampooning of African American linguistic styles, nor have many of them been particularly instrumental in creating complex, multidimensional Black characters. Unfortunately, we don’t see the same sort of humanizing influence that early Black comedians were said to have contributed to the industry.

Of course, the counter-argument is that, with a few exceptions (e.g. Paul Mooney, Spike Lee, Julie Dash), today’s Black actors, directors, and producers are also laboring under the same demands as their predecessors. As is evident with the characters from “Django,” the entertainment industry still narrowly defines Black images, and American audiences (both Black and White), continue to accept, and in fact, welcome, a predictable version of on-screen Blackness. In African America at large, there is still the push-pull (Smitherman, p.11) of celebrating Black life and Black language for its historical and cultural relevance while the very same trappings of Blackness are consistently poached and exploited largely for the benefit of White audiences.

Throughout this essay, I have hoped to tie each phase of Black representation and the use of Black language in the entertainment industry to the need to depict Blackness in a way that has reflected African Americans' position in our socio-political history. We can only understand the role of African Americans in the perpetuation of racist stereotypes in film and television in light of our country's history of race relations. Minstrel shows and early dialect literature proliferated during the period of the abolition movement and then emancipation; vaudeville shows and coon songs were most popular during reconstruction and during Jim Crow segregation. Radio shows like *Amos 'n Andy* and *Pick 'n Pat* and the race films that were common during early cinematic history fed the American appetite for a particular conception of Blacks during the end of legal segregation up until the Civil Rights movement. Contemporary film is set against the back-drop of the post-Civil Rights era and reflects the current political and cultural fiction of a post-racial America. At each stage of our entertainment history, Black language and culture has been both co-opted and denigrated to reflect Black standing in society.

### ***Django* and Language Use in Films Today**

Since *Django*, there have been films that feature realistic Black characters (e.g., *The Butler*, *Fruitvale Station*), but they have not been as commercially successful as Tarrantino's, nor have they inspired as much debate among critics and audiences. This should make us question the reception of historically inaccurate revisionist fantasies like *Django*, and similarly, *The Help*. In this wildly popular novel and film, a White woman distorts, ignores and trivializes the experience of Black domestic workers in the 1950's south. Along with a host of other problems (historical inaccuracies, negative depictions of Black men, etc.), the language of Black women in both the film and the novel causes concern. Despite the fact that all of the characters in *The Help*

are southern (and therefore speak a non-standard dialect), only the dialogue of the African American women is written to mark them as simplistic, comedic, and “ethnic.” In an open statement about the film, the Association of Black Women Historians points out that: “both versions of *The Help* also misrepresent African American speech and culture. Set in the South, the appropriate regional accent gives way to a child-like, over-exaggerated “Black” dialect. In the film, for example, the primary character, Abilene, reassures a young White child that, “You is smat, you is kind, you is important.” In the book, Black women refer to the Lord as the “Law,” an irreverent depiction of Black vernacular.” (Jones et al., 2011). Critics point out that, in *Django*, dialect is similarly manipulated. In a review of the film for the website Screen Machine, Andrew Gilbert argues, “*Django* repeats this pattern of sidelining Black history to some extent. Its narrative structure proffers an enlightened White man who frees and civilizes Django—a slave who just happens to speak and act like an educated White man (along with his wife Broomhilda) despite *every other* Black character speaking in the dialect and grammar of slaves.” This is not entirely true; in the opening scenes, Django’s dialogue is reflective of his enslaved status. As he and Schultz arrive in the town of Daughtrey Texas, they have the following conversation:

Django:	All of it. I can't be walkin' in no saloon. I can't be sittin' my ass on no chair, at no table. I can't be drinkin' no drink. And I definitely can't be sharin' no drink, with no White man, in public.
Dr.Schultz:	So if you and I did those things that would be considered enough of a infraction to make the saloon keeper go get the sheriff?
Django:	You bet your sweet ass they get the sheriff.
Dr.Schultz:	Well in that case Django, after you.
Django:	Whoa - I ain't funnin, I can't go in there.

Dr.Schultz: Django you're going to have to learn to trust me, and as the man said, "There's no time like the present."

Here Django uses grammatical features commonly associated with AAE such as invariant be, negative concord, ("can't be walkin' in no saloon"), and copular deletion ("they Ø get the sheriff") as well as AAE phonological patterns like -g dropping (walkin', sittin', drinkin').

Towards the end of the film, however, after Schultz has emancipated Django, and once the two have been working together as bounty hunters and are presented as equals in the film, Django sounds less like a slave. In one of the final scenes with slave-owner Calvin Candie, the following conversation occurs at the dinner table where Django is seated along with Whites, positioned as an equal:

Django: Eskimo Joe's a quality nigger, no doubt about it. But if it was my money, I wouldn't pay twelve thousand dollars for him.

Dr.Schultz: What would your price be?

Django: Well, if I was inclined to be generous, and I don't know why I would be inclined to be generous....nine thousand...maybe.

(Candie's lawyer chimes in.)

Moguy: But the real question is, not how much he cost, but how much he can earn?

Dr.Schultz: Django?

Django: In a year's time, seven or eight fights - outside of Mississippi - where his Candyland pedigree weren't well known - Virginia...Georgia-- all goes well... twenty to twenty-one thousand dollars.

In the second excerpt, gone are the overt, stigmatized markers of AAE that earlier characterized Django as unsophisticated; perhaps his time with Schultz is supposed to be interpreted as an education of sorts as he speaks General American English towards the end of

the film. Most significant, however, is that his change in dialect underscores his change in status from slave to free, civilian to hero. Django's linguistic shift signals to audiences that, in becoming more like his White benefactor in occupation, dress, and use of language, the Black protagonist has evolved into someone with higher status. Even though he has become outwardly "civilized," Django remains brutally violent and takes his bloody revenge by slaughtering the entire Candie family. Needless to say, the audience's takeaway message, whether Tarantino intended it or not, is that despite appearances, lurking beneath the veneer of respectability, Black men remain savage.

## **Conclusion**

My chief criticism in this paper is not that Black language in film is a source of cultural shame—even when at its most offensive and inaccurate, African American audiences have had a deep appreciation for Black comedy in the national media. My 83-year-old African American father had fond memories of listening to *Amos 'n Andy* as a child and reported that Blacks in his neighborhood felt a connection to the characters, no matter how counterfeit they might have been at times. My criticism is that Americans, Black and White, should have left the stock character types far behind in our cultural consciousness. White audiences should have moved beyond the need to see ignorant and debased, shucking and jiving, violent and over-sexed Black faces on screen. White actors are offered a broad range of roles and White audiences are presented with a variety of lenses through which they can imagine and reimagine themselves but Black actors and audiences are still not allowed the same. Contemporary Black actors should be able to use Black language and represent Black culture in a way that is more consistently in alignment with our realities—the kind of acting that every other demographic has been afforded. That over-the-top AAE is still a source of ready and productive ridicule is troubling, and it is even more disturbing



that without the manipulation of particularly stigmatized features in AAE, “Black” characters are seen at best as extraordinary and at worst, as not culturally Black at all. Some of these characters are so entrenched in our cultural ethos that Blacks and Whites alike accept them unquestioningly. It is troubling that in the entertainment industry, to satisfy the demand for a particular version of African America, we still need to distort the dialect (along with other exaggerated Black cultural practices) to establish ethnic footholds; when relics of the minstrel age still loom so large they are perpetuated, generations over, unchecked.

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