Local Identity and Ethnicity in Pittsburgh AAE

Shelome Gooden and Maeve Eberhardt[*]

1 Introduction

The main theme of our investigation is the juxtaposition of ethnic identity and local identity in the speech of African Americans (AAs) in Pittsburgh. One of the motivations for this study is the fact that African Americans in Pittsburgh verbally reject characterizations of Pittsburgh speech as representative of their own speech. Instead they identify 'Pittsburghese', the local variety, as reflective of the speech of White speakers. Some specific lexical items are associated with Whites, such as *yinz* ('you pl.'). Others, for example *nebby* ('nosy'), are claimed by African Americans as well, thus aligning them with general Pittsburgh usage. A second reason for undertaking this work is that to date, there has been no explicit discussion of the speech of AAs in Pittsburgh, though the White vernacular has received a considerable amount of attention, particularly in recent years (e.g. Johnstone et al. 2004, Kiesling and Wisnosky 2003a, Johnstone et al. 2002, Gagnon 1999).

   This kind of discussion is important in the face of growing descriptions of regional varieties of African American English (AAE) (Hinton and Pollock 2000, Fridland 2003, Jones 2003, Childs and Mallinson 2004, among others). For example, work by Fridland (2003) shows that African Americans and Whites in Memphis, Tennessee have similar patterns of variation for /ai/ monophthongization due to shared historical and cultural heritage. Childs and Mallinson (2004) report that younger Texana, North Carolina African American speakers are increasingly aligning with the phonological norms seen in the speech of Whites in the area. At the same time there is evidence of different linguistic patterns between African Americans and Whites. Gordon (2000) for example, shows that in the Calumet region of northwest Indiana, minority groups including African Americans are not participating in the vowel changes prevalent in the speech of White speakers. This suggests that a coarse-grained view of the

divergence / convergence issue is perhaps misplaced in lieu of analysis at local / regional levels.

This research thus stands to enhance our understanding of phonological variation in AAE as a whole as well as variation in the Midland varieties of the dialect. It also contributes to the convergence / divergence debate, since researchers are generally still interested in whether AAE is aligning with or straying away from White vernaculars.

In the current paper, we examine variation in the use of two vowel variables in AAE in Pittsburgh, comparing it to patterns we find in the speech of White Pittsburghers. One variable is the monophthongization of /aw/ such as in *down*, *house*. The second variable is the backing and rounding of /a/ in words like *cot*, so that the contrast between /a/ and /ɔ/ is weakened. Both variables are discussed in more detail below.

2 Background

2.1 Sociolinguistic Background

Much of what is known about Pittsburghese is based on the speech of Whites (cf. Johnstone et al. 2002, Gagnon 1999, McElhinny 1993). There are several features of Pittsburgh speech which often surface in discussions about the local dialect. The most common is the monophthongization of /aw/ in words such as 'downtown', which is commonly represented as *dahntahn* on T-shirts, mugs, and other souvenirs. Other salient features in the region include the laxing of /i/, particularly before /l/ (often spelled with 'i' as in *Stillers* for Steelers, the local football team) and monophthongal /ai/, represented as, for example, *Ahrn* in reference to the local beer, 'Iron City'. Less talked about features include the vocalization of /l/, the fronting of /o/ and /u/ and the low-back merger. Whereas the low-back merger (also referred to as the 'cot / caught merger') is found throughout the northern United States (cf. Labov et al. 2006), the resulting phoneme is more often realized with the more fronted, unrounded vowel [a]. In Pittsburgh however, the realization of the merged vowel is the backed and rounded [ɔ].

The research on monophthongal /aw/ shows sociolinguistic effects attributable to several social factors such as social class, gender, age and locale. Johnstone et al. (2002) show that the highly salient monophthongal /aw/, though retreating, is more prevalent in the speech of White working class males. Likewise, telephone survey data from the Pittsburgh metropolitan area also showed that monophthongal /aw/ was receding (Kiesling and Wisnosky 2003b). However, men and city-born residents were

found to be lagging behind women and rural / suburban born residents in this change.

At this juncture, it is unclear how these findings relate to the speech of AAs in Pittsburgh. More specifically, to date, there is little evidence for whether (or how) AAs share the phonological norms observed for White speakers in the region. Our question is, therefore, whether there is a local variety of speech in Pittsburgh that encompasses AAE and the variety attributed to Whites or whether AAE is juxtaposed with local speech.

2.2 Sociohistorical Conditions

The massive migration of African Americans to industrial Pittsburgh, like in many other cases, began during World War I when there was a great demand for labor. As Gottlieb (1997) puts it, Pittsburgh lured southern African Americans with comparatively well-paid jobs and prosperous households. This allure was there long before the great migration of African Americans, since Pittsburgh had already become the center of extensive manufacturing and mining. African Americans settled in Pittsburgh's "milltowns" like Homestead, Duquesne, Rankin and Braddock and more importantly, lived in ethnic enclaves within these areas. The data reported on here was collected in a majority African American neighborhood in Pittsburgh, the Hill District (The Hill). The African American population in Pittsburgh is 27.1% Black/African American and sections of the Hill range from 86.8-95.9% Black/African American (Pittsburgh 2000 Census). The Hill was among the first communities where African Americans settled in Pittsburgh and in its hay day, was known as Pittsburgh's *Little Harlem,* as it was the center of social, cultural, economic, and political life. In some respects though, the Hill as a community was no different from other Pittsburgh neighborhoods in that they were typically self-contained, providing all the amenities needed for everyday life. Today, the Hill is much different, geographically and in terms of infrastructure, but continues to have a majority African American population.

3 Data and Methods

The data we report on here is drawn from sociolinguistic interviews carried out by Trista Pennington, an African American fieldworker. The interviews were conducted with African Americans who were native to the Hill District, or who had strong family ties there. To the extent possible, the sample included in this analysis was balanced for gender, age at time of interview and highest level of education completed, as shown in Table 1 below.

Speaker[1]	Gender	Age	Education
Sabrina	F	32	some college
Sheila	F	41	trade school
Tammy	F	46	BA
Gina	F	59	PhD
Esther	F	70	high school
Keith	M	38	high school
Gerald	M	44	high school
Don	M	46	some college
Rodney	M	66	some college
Booker	M	73	PhD

Table 1: Speaker Characteristics

Participants were recruited through flyers and introductions to 'friends-of-friends' and family. The interviews were designed to include explicit talk about the local variety as well as about things related to Pittsburgh (for example, the Steelers, local news, etc.). As Johnstone et al. (2002) state, through this talk, speakers reveal ideas about the local dialect and the part they play in it.

Coding was done auditorily and cross-checked by both researchers. For each of the variables, the monophthongization of /aw/ and the backing and rounding of /a/, we used a 3-point scale to score each token. A score of 3 was given to those tokens which sounded local—the production of /aw/ as a full monophthong, resulting in [a], and the backing and rounding of /a/ so that it is produced as [ɔ]. Tokens which were intermediate (i.e. a partially weakened glide in /aw/ or an /a/ that was somewhat backed and rounded, but not fully) were given a score of 2. The phonetic environment of all tokens was also included in the coding scheme, though those results are not discussed here.

To compare African Americans' rate of /aw/ monopthongization and /a/ backing to that for White speakers, we exploited two separate data sources from the Pittsburgh Speech and Society Project. For /aw/ monophthongization, we used interview data collected by Barbara Johnstone in three different neighborhoods. These interviews were analyzed for /aw/ monophthongization using the same scoring procedure implemented here (see Johnstone et al. 2002, Johnstone et al. 2004). For the backing and rounding of /a/, we used the telephone survey data mentioned above (Kiesling and Wisnosky 2003b). The scoring procedure was identical to that

---

[1]All names are pseudonyms.

for /aw/ monophthongization, in this case done by one researcher and subsequently checked by the other.

We predict that African Americans will largely avoid monophthongal /aw/ due to its high salience in the community, and its association with White speakers. At the same time, we expect to find considerably more backing and rounding of /a/, a feature of Pittsburgh speech which, as noted above, is well below the level of awareness in the region. Because the feature is low in salience, we do not anticipate a substantial difference between African American and White speakers with respect to this variable.

4 Results

Varbrul analyses were done in order to determine which factors exerted the strongest effect on predicting the use or avoidance of local-sounding variants in the speech of African Americans. Results for the two variables are discussed below.

4.1 Monophthongization of /aw/

Only 6.9% of all tokens of /aw/ produced by African Americans were produced as fully monophthongized (see Figure 1).[2] In the Varbrul analysis, when African Americans were considered by themselves, none of social characteristics were selected as significant. The effects of social categories on monophthongal /aw/ are shown in Table 2.

The next step in our analysis involved comparing African American production of monophthongal /aw/ to the rates of the White speakers. As Figure 1 reveals below, White Pittsburgh speakers produce considerably more monophthongal /aw/ tokens than their African American counterparts, at 21.4%.

---

[2]In the coding of the tokens, we used a 3-point scale: monophthong (1), intermediate (2) or diphthong (3), as discussed in the Methodology section. In the analyses, we only considered tokens that received a score of 1, and did not include the tokens that received a score of 2. The same procedure was followed for /a/ backing and rounding.

	%	N
Gender		
Male	5	970
Female	8	849
Age		
60-80	11	454
40-59	4	1047
20-39	8	318
Education		
HS<BS/BA	7	1289
BS/BA	4	240
BS/BA<	5	290

Table 2: African Americans' monophthongization of /aw/ (social factor groups)
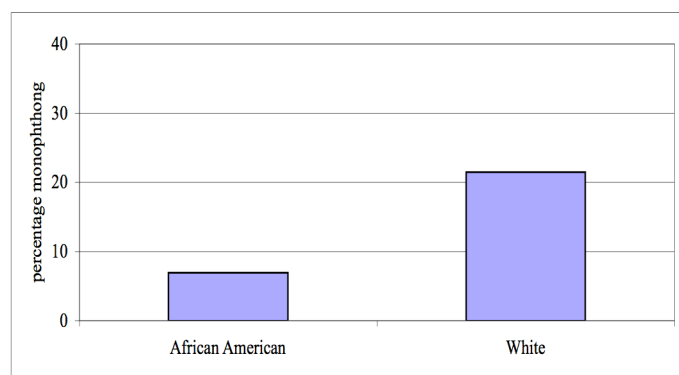

Figure 1: Percentage of /aw/ monophthongization for African American and White speakers

Although no social factor groups were significant in the analysis of African American speakers alone (in Table 2 above), when the regression was run with both White and African American speakers, race was selected as a significant predictor of monophthongal /aw/. The Varbrul analysis showed that White speakers were much more likely to produce /aw/ as a monophthong (.588), while African American speakers had a much lower probability (.251). In the following section, we discuss the results of the second variable, the backing and rounding of /a/ to [ɔ].

4.2 Backing and rounding of /a/

The analysis of the backing and rounding of /a/ followed the same procedure as above. For this variable, African Americans produced 22% of tokens of /a/ as fully backed and rounded to [ɔ] (see Figure 2). As was found for /aw/ monophthongization, /a/ was not affected by social factors within the African American group. Table 3 provides the percentages for the social factor groups for this variable.

	%	N
Gender		
Male	26	1354
Female	20	2120
Age		
60-80	21	896
40-59	24	2024
20-39	21	554
Education		
HS<BS/BA	24	2349
BS/BA	24	591
BS/BA<	13	534

Table 3: African Americans' backing and rounding of /a/ (social factor groups)

As with /aw/ monophthongization, we then compared the African American usage with data from White speakers, which in this case came from a telephone survey (Kiesling and Wisnosky 2003b). Once again, White speakers produced substantially more local-sounding tokens than did the African Americans in the sample, with 52% of all tokens of /a/ produced by White speakers as a fully backed and rounded [ɔ]. African Americans produced only 22% of /a/ tokens as [ɔ]. It is important to note that although the gap between the two groups is smaller than for /aw/ monophthongization, the same pattern obtains.
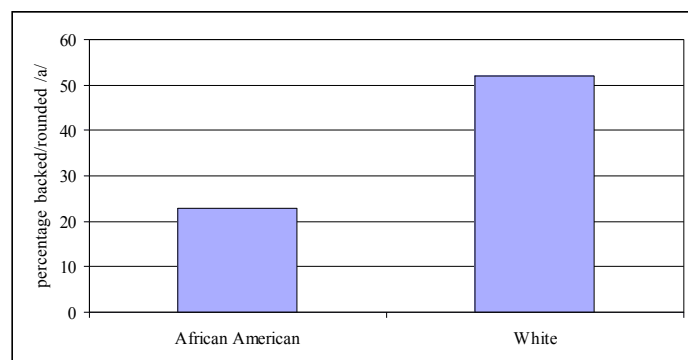
Figure 2: Percentage of backed and rounded /a/ for African American and White speakers

Race was once again the only significant predictor for the production of [ɔ] in intergroup comparison by regression. The difference in probabilities was again smaller than for monophthongization of /aw/, but still significant. The African American group showed a probability of .471 in the Varbrul analysis, and the White speakers .691.

4.3 Speaker Effects

As revealed in the preceding sections, the African Americans in our sample, as a group, perform as expected with respect to the two variables. However, the regressions show that there is within-group variation, as individual speakers do not behave uniformly. In both Varbrul analyses, the factor group 'Speaker' was selected as significant. Table 4 provides the probabilities for each of the speakers for both variables.

Figure 3 below shows the speaker effects provided in Table 4. The solid line represents the probability for /aw/ monophthongization, and the dashed line indicates the likelihood for the backing and rounding of /a/ to occur. Based on our predictions for AAE in Pittsburgh, we would expect to find lower probabilities for all speakers for /aw/ monophthongization. However, as Figure 3 shows, this pattern obtains for only six of the ten speakers in our sample.

Speaker	/aw/ monophthongization			/a/ backing and rounding		
	p	%	N	p	%	N
Sabrina	.656	13	84	.336	14	214
Gerald	.227	5	191	.609	30	282
Keith	.523	13	230	.647	26	340
Tammy	.319	10	252	.509	24	591
Don	.434	15	296	.544	24	391
Rodney	.706	19	129	.687	34	160
Gina	.632	11	155	.287	12	353
Booker	.353	6	142	.408	17	181
Sheila	.561	9	174	.661	19	555
Esther	.800	28	192	.371	28	407

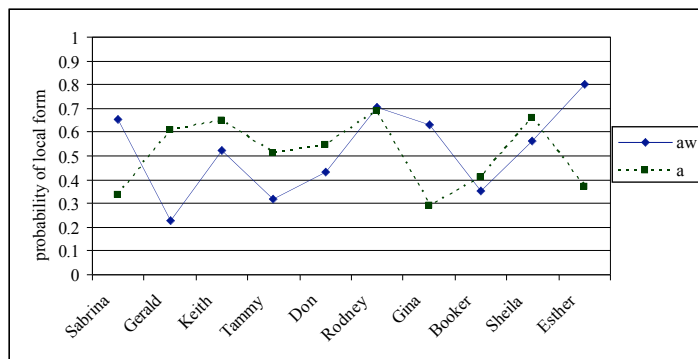Table 4: African American speaker effects for /aw/ monophthongization and /a/ backing and rounding

Figure 3: African American speaker effects for /aw/ monophthongization and /a/ backing and rounding

Despite the fact that the group as a whole adheres to the pattern predicted for AAE in Pittsburgh, four of the speakers exhibit the opposite pattern. In order to understand such results, we must turn to the individual speakers themselves and ask how they view Pittsburgh speech in terms of race and local identity. Two of these speakers, Sabrina and Rodney, are discussed in the following section.

5 Discussion

5.1 Sabrina

As the data revealed in Figure 3, Sabrina exhibits the opposite behavior to that of the group pattern—she has a high probability to monophthongize /aw/ (.656), but a relatively low probability for producing the backed and rounded /a/ (.336). A selection from her interview, reproduced below, offers insight into why she might show such an unexpected pattern. In this section of her speech, Sabrina is responding to the interviewer's question, "Have you ever heard the term 'Pittsburghese'?"

Sabrina:	1	Um
	2	Downtown ([dantan])
	3	like the way we like downtown ([dantan])
Trista:	4	Um-hum

In the excerpt above, Sabrina points out a feature of Pittsburgh speech that almost always enters talk about the local dialect, the highly salient monophthongal /aw/. Sabrina produces it here in the word 'downtown'. While it is not surprising that she cites this features of the local dialect in her answer, it is notable that she uses the pronoun 'we' in her description. The use of this pronoun, rather than 'they' or a full noun such as 'Pittsburghers' indicates that she does not see a linguistic separation of Whites and African Americans in Pittsburgh; however, this only holds true for the feature mentioned here. In the extract below, Sabrina reveals that with regard to other features of the dialect, she does see a clear difference between the speech patterns of the two.

Sabrina:	1	You figure there's certain words
	2	I mean I've
	3	very rarely have I ever heard
	4	a African American say yinz
Trista:	5	Okay
Sabrina:	6	Yinz guys
	7	like hey yinz guys (rendition of a 'White' voice)
	8	like
	9	to me that's like a w- w-
	10	what White people say
Trista:	11	Okay

Sabrina's explanation above is provided in response to whether she thinks there is a difference in the way that Whites and African Americans speak in Pittsburgh. This response, taken together with her explanation of what 'Pittsburghese' is, suggests that Sabrina does not associate the highly salient monophthongal /aw/ with the speech of Whites, like many African Americans in the city do. Taken in this context, Sabrina's high probability for /aw/ monophthongization is more easily accounted for—the feature does not present a conflict for her in terms of racial identity, and in fact may help her lay claims to an authentic local identity, placing her in the category of a 'true Pittsburgher'. On the other hand, forms like '*yinz*' represent a clear racial marker for her, and thus are avoided in her speech.

5.2 Rodney

Another speaker who exhibits an unexpected pattern is Rodney, who has high probabilities for both local features (.706 for /aw/ monophthongization, .687 for /a/ backing and rounding). Incidentally, Rodney also has one of the lowest probabilities in our sample for /ai/ monopthongization (Gooden and Eberhardt 2007), a commonly cited feature of African American speech (see e.g. Rickford 1999). Examination of Rodney's speech from his interview also helps to shed light on these puzzling findings. Below, Rodney discusses how other African Americans characterize his speech—as "sounding White."

Rodney	1	They say I sound White
	2	They jumpin' on me for sounding White
	3	Why are you soundin' White
	4	[That is] like what?
	5	That's not White
	6	It's English

Although Rodney objects to being told that he sounds White, there is something in his speech that other African Americans pick up on and identify with White speech. It is quite possible that one of these features is the monophthongal /aw/. The presence of this feature of local speech is possibly part of what makes him "sound White" to other African Americans. While Rodney himself does not identify this feature with Whites, like Sabrina, he also differentiates between African American and White speech patterns. In another segment of their interview, Rodney and his wife, Denise, both clearly identify the lexical item *redd up* ('to clean up') with White speech.

Trista	1	Do you ever use the word uh redd up?
Denise	2	No
Rodney	3	No
	4	I've heard it though
Trista	5	You've heard it
Rodney	6	That is a Pittsburghe-
	7	Yeah yeah I've heard it
	8	It ma- uh it's mainly White
	9	There they may be a few African Americans who say it
	10	but mostly White
Denise	11	No all I've ever heard is
	12	Y'all better get in there and clean up that room
	13	((laughs))
Rodney	14	Yeah but redd up yeah
Denise	15	Redd up was yeah
Rodney	16	Was common
	17	But it's probably something that most African Americans didn't say

Like Sabrina, Rodney does not associate certain features of Pittsburgh speech with White speech. Using these local-sounding features therefore is not something that marks race for him, even though it might contribute to the reasons that other African Americans describe his speech as "sounding White", a depiction he takes issue with.

As we have seen, examination of only group patterns can mask idiosyncratic speaker behavior. Moreover, looking in detail at speakers on an individual basis provides rich explanations for the patterns we find surfacing in a community, and sheds light on the ways in which speakers view language as it relates to their own identities (see also Johnstone 1996). At first glance, the patterns of speakers such as Sabrina and Rodney are puzzling; however, segments of their speech from interviews offer an explanation for their linguistic behavior. Such metalinguistic data gives insights into their own usage as well as their evaluation of the speech of other Pittsburghers, both African American and White.

6 Summary and Conclusions

In Pittsburgh, /aw/ monophthongization, which so richly represents the speech of Whites, is limited in the speech of African Americans. We interpret the low levels of the highly salient /aw/ monophthongization as symbolic distancing from what AAs interpret as "White speech". Ogbu

(1999) argues that the collective identity of AAs is a social identity oppositional to the collective identity of White Americans. Using local features associated with Whites threatens speakers' "language identity" (Ogbu 1999), authentic membership in the community and racial solidarity with other speakers. It is thus reasonable that speakers will avoid high salient features that would risk them being labeled as "talking White". If we accept the idea of oppositional identity, then we can reasonably expect speakers who identify strongly with African American culture to move (these aspects of) their speech away from the local Pittsburgh norm. We believe that the backing and rounding of /a/ appears in the speech of African Americans precisely because it is below the level of consciousness and does not carry the same attributes of "Whiteness" as does /aw/ monophthongization. As is evident, however, oppositional identity cannot be the whole story and is perhaps viable only in terms of group dynamics since the individual speakers present a more complex picture of variation. In fact, Ogbu's conceptualization of oppositional identity is clear in not addressing individual differences. However, recall that speakers like Sabrina and Rodney use local sounding features but have very strong ties to the AA community and in fact celebrate and express pride of African American culture. Thus, oppositional identity only provides a partial explanation of the facts presented here.

This paper shows that both a view of the group in tandem with a focus on the individual are important in understanding patterns of variation among African Americans in Pittsburgh. Additional work of this type in other communities will help to further explain the complex interaction of different identities, e.g. racial identity and local identity, and may help to shed light on apparent discrepancies between research findings on African Americans participation in regional sound changes.

References

City of Pittsburgh Census. 2000. *A Comparative digest of Census data for Pittsburgh's neighborhoods*. Pittsburgh, PA: Department of City Planning.

Childs, Becky and Christine Mallinson. 2004. African American English in Appalachia: Dialect accommodation and substrate influence. *English World Wide 25*: 27–50.

Fridland, Valerie. 2003. 'Tie, tied and tight': The expansion of /ai/ monophthongization in African-American and European-American speech in Memphis, Tennessee. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7:279–298.

Gagnon, Christina 1999. Language attitudes in Pittsburgh: 'Pittsburghese' vs. standard English. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Pittsburgh.

Gooden, Shelome and Maeve Eberhardt. 2007. AAE in Pittsburgh: Ethnicity, Local Identity and Local Speech. Paper presented at The Linguistics Society of American, Anaheim, CA.

Gordon, Matthew. 2000. Phonological Correlates of Ethnic Identity: Evidence of divergence? *American Speech* 75:115-136.

Gottlieb, Peter. 1997. *Making Their Own Way. Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh 1916-1930*. University of Illinois Press.

Hinton, Linette and Karen Pollock. 2000. Regional variations in the phonological characteristics of African American English. *World Englishes* 19:59–71.

Johnstone, Barbara. 1996. *The Individual Voice in Language: Self-Expression in Language and Linguistics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Johnstone, Barbara, Jennifer Andrus, Dan Baumgardt, Anna Schardt and Scott Kiesling. 2004. Whose social meaning? Pittsburgh monophthongal /aw/ in perception and production. Paper presented at NWAV 33, Ann Arbor, MI.

Johnstone, Barbara, Neeta Bhashin, and Denise Wittofski. 2002. "Dahntahn" Pittsburgh: Monophthongal /aw/ and representations of localness in southwestern Pennsylvania. *American Speech* 77:148–166.

Jones, Jamila. 2003. African Americans in Lansing and the Northern Cities Vowel Shift: Language Contact and Accommodation. Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Michigan State University.

Kiesling, Scott and Marc Wisnosky. 2003a. The decline of /aw/-monophthongization in Pittsburgh. Paper presented at NWAV 32, Philadelphia, PA.

Kiesling, Scott and Marc Wisnosky. 2003b. Competing norms, heritage prestige, and /aw/-monophthongization in Pittsburgh. Unpublished Manuscript, University of Pittsburgh.

Labov, William, Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg. 2006. *The Atlas of North American English*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

McElhinny, Bonnie. 1993. We all wear the blue: Language, gender and police work. Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University.

Ogbu, John. 1999. Beyond language: Ebonics, proper English, and identity in a Black-American speech community. *American Educational Research Journal* 36:147–184.

Rickford, John. 1999. *African American Vernacular English*. Malden, MA: African Blackwell.

Department of Linguistics
University of Pittsburgh
2816 Cathedral of Learning
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
sgooden@pitt.edu
maest38@pitt.edu