

# Flipping the Script: (Re)constructing Personhood through Hip Hop Language in a U.S. High School

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Inspired by concerns about the frequent misreading and “non-reading” (i.e., invisibility) of the subject-formation and social identification processes experienced by many African transnational youth in U.S. schools, this paper looks closely at some of the ways a small group of West African-born high school students (designated as English language learners) engaged in a range of semiotic practices to accomplish various social tasks - namely, using language to co-construct (inter)subjectivities and related identities that attempted to disrupt a pervasive “primitive African” *model of personhood* (Worthington, 2006) that they encountered in the US. By focusing on these young people, whose cultures and languages seem to be othered in particular ways by different media, this preliminary inquiry is intended to encourage further study of African transnational students’ social and academic experiences (in addition to work by Ibrahim [1999, 2003], Traoré [2004], and others). The analysis presented here attends to excerpts from a conversation between two *New African American* students which contain: (1) metapragmatic commentary on how they perceived their U.S.-born peers to be imagining them and, (2) examples of a particular discursive practice that I interpret as deeply consequential to their subject-formation and social identification processes: *flipping the script*, or *signifying* through a Hip Hop-related register.

## Introduction

*Watch me stifle em quick with the gift and the wit  
Make em quit all that riff as I flip the script  
Guru (R.I.P.) of Gang Starr, “Flip the Script” Daily Operation (1992)*

Broadly speaking, *signifying* is a practice, located in African American discursive tradition, of manipulating signs to indirectly convey meaning (e.g., troping on words, traditionally) and is usually done with the intention to confound, outsmart, and /or humble an interlocutor (Caponi, 1999; Gates, 1988; Mitchell-Kernan, 1972; Morgan, 1998; Smitherman, 2000). Deeply reliant upon metaphor and figurative language of various kinds, the linguistic styling of Hip Hop lyrics and *Hip Hop Languages* (Alim, 2004, 2006) routinely takes up signifying (as the interactional process through which many of these forms are deployed) to convey layered

social meanings. Importing a Gatesian depiction of “signifyin(g)” (Gates, 1988) into an unbounded register that we can understand as *Hip Hop languaging*,<sup>2</sup> I “remix” the notion of signifying into a practice I call *flipping the script* and suggest that when viewed through a semiotic anthropological lens, appeared to function as a cogent rhetorical device for accomplishing critical identity/ social work for a small group of West African-born high school students designated as English language learners (ELLs) who were making sense of their new social world and of selves contextualized by this new world. Although its *rhizomatic* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) roots traverse oceans and eons, the young people in this study appeared to have accessed the practice of signifying through Hip Hop languaging (as it is one of the most prominent registers of their peer-level social domain) and also seemed to link it to mass-mediated and local figures of personhood (Agha, 2007; Rymes, 2008). As a powerful mode for expressing one’s subjectivity, I take this notion of flipping the script, or signifying through Hip Hop languaging, to begin interrogating the politics of desire and Black subjectivity in a school context (Ibrahim, 1999) among this small group of students. I offer this analytic as an illustration of how certain discourses about Africa, Hip Hop cultures and associated figures, and linguistic practice come together to shape the political and social landscapes of schools (particularly, language classrooms) and thereby inform(ed) these young people’s constantly evolving sense of personhood.

To contextualize the micro-social events I am concerned with in this study, I begin by considering the role of some macro-social phenomena in ordering social relations, including the ways historic metadiscourses about language, race, and space help shape how individuals categorize and understand themselves and others, specifically by engendering notions of kinds of languages and their related *human kinds* (Hacking, 1995) and conceptualized spaces, and by framing schools as *linguistic marketplaces* (Bourdieu, 1977b, 1991). With these ideas in tow, I analyze two short excerpts from a conversation between two Liberian American sisters whose prominent home language was Liberian English and who were formally designated as ELL students, “reading” them as discursive texts and conjecturing how they may have been negotiating the construction of a particularized Black subjectivity (which I propose as the reflexive manifestation of a *New African American* identification) by pushing against a “primitive African” *model of personhood* (Wortham, 2006) that they identified as prevalent and problematic.

As an individual whose own subjectivity and social identification were (and still are) meaningfully informed and mediated by Hip Hop culture(s) and languaging (as tools for negotiating vastly different cultural realities during my youth), I am generally interested in the ways multilingual/multicultural young people employ different versions of *cultural sampling* in their own various ontological and social projects.

### **Ideology: Race and Language**

It is generally accepted that linguistic and racial categories are intricately linked by ideology, and have historically worked together to create oppressive binaries (e.g., us/ them) that reify hegemonic notions and practices. As a social construction and product of ideology, race (as racialized thinking or *race-thinking*)

is routinely expressed through language practices and beliefs. Ashcroft's 2003 essay on language and race explicates how philology and ethnology share an epistemic genealogy that easily traces its roots to 19th century evolution theory. His work highlights how the typification, or scientization, of languages was part and parcel of the scientization of race and helps sketch out the ways notions about language actually helped shape the racialization of peoples by locating them in a "scheme of humanity" (Sapir, 1921) that ranks kinds according to notions of "complexity" and "simplicity."

Almost invariably, African languages (and their related varieties throughout the "African diaspora") fall near the bottom of this hierarchy, so that even as stratifications of race are gradually dismantled in the minds of many scholars and educators, a related stratification of languages (as a way of sorting human beings) remains intact and circuitously feeds the ideological underpinnings of language teaching and learning. Moreover, the ways that students go about constructing themselves and one another also appear to be informed by these academic-cum-folk (or *vice versa*) notions about *kinds* of languages (simple v. complex) and their speakers.

Understanding that ideologies about language exist and having some sense of how they function in interaction are two very different conceptual projects. Functioning as both an unconscious system of signals *and* as a set of conscious discursive practices, I understand language ideology to encompass both underlying *predispositions* and conscious *attitudes* about language and consequently, to exist both in the mind and in practice (Woolard & Scheffelin, 1994). One way to think about the ways in which these two spheres are operationalized is through Silverstein's *first-order* and *second-order indexicality* (1976) and Ochs's *direct* and *indirect indexicality* (1990). First-order indexicality is closely related to one's attitudes towards different linguistic forms and practices and involves an uninterrupted correlation between a language form and a specific social group, social role, or characterization (Silverstein, 1976). Similarly, direct indexicality is "visible to discursive consciousness" (Hill, 2007, p. 271) and involves a rationalization for one's own language practices and assessment of others' practices (Ochs, 1990, 1996).

Second-order and indirect indexicality depict a more circuitous relationship between the linguistic practice and the social group/role or characterization that it indexes. The act of *mocking* a dialect illustrates both forms by functioning on a direct or first-order level as a way of identifying with the social group or role being simulated (when asked about instances of mocking Spanish, participants in a study by Hill explained that it was an inclusive practice showing that they were familiar with Spanish-speakers) and on an indirect or second-order level as an unconscious way of emphasizing difference and distance (Hill, 2007). Silverstein (1976) explains that analysts of ideology should concern themselves with second-order indexicality, requiring diligent discourse analysis strategies (Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough, 1989; Gumperz, 1982; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Wassink and Dyer (2004) expound on this suggestion in their discussion of how looking at second-order indexicality reveals underlying class and gender ideologies. To carry out such a project, they collected and analyzed speakers' metadiscursive (and simultaneously, metapragmatic) commentaries about particular practices, a methodology that I have adapted in this analysis.

*Race and language in school*

Bourdieu's linguistic marketplace, a frame for understanding how the *symbolic capital* (1977a) of language is negotiated, serves as a helpful heuristic (1977b, 1991) for understanding the social landscape of schools and ELL classrooms, in particular. Within this framework, we see that "a language is worth what those who speak it are worth" (1977b, p. 652), and *vice versa*, so that varieties associated with peripheral, undervalued, and/or unfamiliar social groups are generally marginalized as well.

The marginalization that I observed in the ELL classrooms in this study did not take the form of explicit deprecation of any of the languages spoken by African students, but transpired implicitly through a kind of invisibility (and in that way operated indexically on a second-order level), as many of the languages they spoke were unknown by their classmates and teachers, and sometimes could not even be named by the students who spoke them (e.g., World Englishes and "creoles"). Unlike their peers who entered the classroom with a recognizable (and sometimes highly esteemed, in the case of Spanish) language like Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin, or Hindi, these students often assumed that their peers and teachers would not have any frame of reference for their home languages. As a result, most of the focal students initially declined or evaded inquiries from their teacher and myself about what languages they spoke at home. When said teacher made a very explicit attempt to render the home language of two Liberian students visible and relevant in a classroom discussion, he was met with giggle-laden refusals. Common responses to our requests for the focal African transnational students to name their languages were "a language from my country" or "the language they speak in my village," and one student reported that Liberian English was "just a messed up English." While I did not investigate how prevalent particular imaginings of Africa were among their ELL peers, the fact that certain mass-mediated representations of Africa and Africanness are relentlessly circulated around the globe leads me to assume that such images and discourses of extreme impoverishment and "underdevelopment" may have indirectly influenced how these students constructed their African peers and thusly, their languages. And because the focal students usually provided no explicit information about their languages or home countries to counter these possible deficit-oriented perceptions of Africa, any linguistic practices associated with Africa that they performed (particular accents, speaking Krio or Twi with one another, etc.) may have also indexed these popular constructions of Africa and Africanness (on a second-order level) and subtly impacted various social interactions in and outside of the classroom.

To return to the classroom as a linguistic marketplace, we should note that Bourdieu and Passeron recognized that creating and maintaining a dominant code's power is largely dependent on formal schooling (1970) because "[it] has a monopoly over the production of the mass of producers and consumers, and hence over the reproduction of the market on which the value of linguistic competency depends..." (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 652). Bourdieu also notes that the socialization that occurs through formal schooling is the major purveyor of the *language habitus*, which he describes as "a permanent disposition towards a language" (p. 655). For Bourdieu, language habitus also serves as the source of

a kind of *linguistic insecurity* (Labov, 1966) in which speakers “who recognize [the dominant language] more than they can use it” (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 656) are under constant pressure to adopt this *power code* (Perry & Delpit, 1998) if their words are to be truly heard, and as a result, may only use their own non-dominant language in certain ways and contexts. The expediency of Bourdieu’s marketplace dwindles some when we consider that it does not deem activities like code-switching or *crossing* (Rampton, 2005) to be particularly valuable on their own, as they may constitute what he calls “illegitimate and illegal use of the legitimate language,” acts which he analogizes to “a valet who speaks the language of the gentleman, the ward orderly that of the doctor, etc.” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 653). These acts of fraud, as Bourdieu would have them, do not really fool anyone if the speaker’s “true” social position is easily read through some other perceivable sign (like accent, phenotypical features, dress, etc.). He explains, “What speaks is not the utterance, the language, but the whole social person...” (p. 653), indicating the criticality of students’ ability to not only gain competency in a dominant language, but to make themselves legible and legitimate users. Clearly then, schools provide invaluable sites of inquiry for any student of ideology (including ideologies of race, gender, and other social constructs) because they serve as both the primary technologies of explicit and implicit ideological dissemination and as fertile social spaces in which these ideologies are taken up, contested, and re-articulated.

That language and race have historically worked together to differentiate and define peoples is not surprising and has been (and continues to be) addressed in a growing body of educational and applied linguistics scholarship based on minority language students in Canada, the US, and the UK (Adger, 1998; Bucholtz, 2001; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Fordham, 1998; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejada, 1999; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Moll & Diaz, 1985; Perry & Delpit, 1998). While the amount of work in this area that specifically concerns African diasporic languages has not been abundant (despite the rapidly growing number of African transnational children and adolescents attending U.S., Canadian and British schools) some valuable scholarship has emerged that helps us better understand the recondite ways Black subjectivities are assigned to /pursued by/ contested by African transnational youth (Alim & Baugh, 2007; Alim & Pennycook, 2007; Ibrahim, 1999; 2003; Forman, 2001; Osumare, 2002, 2007; Rampton, 2005; Traoré, 2004). This analysis is a small installment in a larger project that will amalgamate students’ conversations and try to identify a range of reflexive processes through which they go about constructing performable (and thereby, construable) Black subjectivities and associated social identities.

In Ibrahim’s groundbreaking work, “Becoming Black: Rap and Hip Hop, Race, Gender, Identity, and the Politics of ESL Learning” (1999), the intersections of race and language are explored from the vantage point of the marginalized so that the processes of subject-formation among African ELL students become the analytical focal point (rather than focusing on (re)productions of power and treating racialization exclusively as a top-down process). In this piece, African “migrant” students in an urban Canadian high school displayed tenacious efforts towards acquiring what Ibrahim called Black Stylized English (BSE) and the aspects of personhood indexed by it, bringing into view a politics of desire and causing Ibrahim to pose the intensely generative question: “what



symbolic, cultural, pedagogical, and identity investments would learners have in locating themselves politically and racially at the margin of representation?" (p. 350). In particular, he is concerned with how these students both construct and perform a Black subjectivity and social identity through languaging as they go about acquiring Black English as a second language (BESL), a language that he says is mainly accessed through Hip Hop culture. In the following, Ibrahim considers the reflexive process of performativity in constructing self-conceptualizations and social identities:

As an identity configuration, becoming Black is deployed to talk about the subject-formation project (i.e., the process and the space within which subjectivity is formed) that is produced in and simultaneously is produced by the process of language learning, namely, learning BESL. Put more concretely, becoming Black meant learning BESL, as I show in this article, yet the very process of BESL learning produced the epiphenomenon of becoming Black. (p. 350)

Synthesized with Bourdieu's linguistic marketplace and a general knowledge of racialization in the US, we can begin to picture the socio-cultural landscape in which Ibrahim's students must situate themselves and see how a politics of desire repositions BSE as the language they deem most symbolically powerful. In this case, a variety that is traditionally marginalized in formal schooling contexts is conferred significant legitimacy and value as students try to attain competency in it. Beyond that, the experience of being raced as "Black" seems to engender the acquisition of "Black language," which, I posit, can be better understood as a linguistic register (Agha, 2003, 2007), or a way of speaking that indexes a recognizable figure of personhood.

One important and sobering fact to consider is that whether the African transnational students in Ibrahim's study subscribed to the linguistic hierarchy that identified Standard English as dominant/superior or to a hierarchy that valorized some variety of African American English, they most likely found that their home languages were inscribed with similar pejorative or denigrating meanings and were assigned a similarly low position in both of these hierarchies. I will return to Ibrahim's (1999) provocative work in the previously mentioned article, as well as his chapter titled "'Whassup homeboy?' Joining the African diaspora: Black English as a symbolic site of identification and language learning" periodically throughout this analysis, as they deeply informed my own questions and overall purview.

### Study Background

The research site is a suburban high school in a small city just bordering a major Northeastern city. I have spent two academic years observing two English for ELL classes taught by the same teacher<sup>4</sup> and have conducted or co-facilitated 14 audio-recorded interviews with students. I conducted five of these interviews following ethnographic interview methods and co-facilitated another ten interviews between students. Eight of the students interviewed were

from “sub-Saharan” Africa and one was from northern Africa. The rest of the students interviewed were from the Caribbean, South Asia, and the Middle East. The ELL classes were composed of students from (or who have lived in) these parts of the world as well as students from Central America, South America, and East Asia. My time in the classroom ranged from full participation (contributing to class discussions, working with students on group assignments, talking with students informally during breaks and during class, working one-on-one with students on class work) to full observation (sitting in the back of the classroom taking field notes).

### *Methods*

Like many inquiries into multilingual spaces, I am interested in the ways students manipulate their communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2010) (which include a range of semiotic practices); and for the purposes of this paper, I am focusing on data from a single conversation to locate specific instances of signifying that employ particular registers (Hip Hop and “snarky hipster”) overtly or covertly.

I also lean on Goffman’s interactional analysis (1981) as a way of recognizing the possible relational work being done by specific utterances (and by some paralinguistic and nonlinguistic practices as well) as evidenced through shifts in footing. Goffman describes shifts in footing as changes in one’s alignment to him/herself and to his/her interlocutors, or as a change in the “frame of events” (p. 128). Agha expounds Goffman’s notion of footing in order to emphasize the semiotic work that mediates these changes in alignment (2007). In particular, he considers the nature of footing in the case of linguistic registers, which we can understand as (malleable) sets of perceivable linguistic signs that are linked to particular stereotypic social phenomena. For this analysis, the stereotypic social phenomena with which we are concerned are figures of personhood (i.e., a social type or kind), or characterological figures of personhood, that are “performable through semiotic display or enactment (such as an utterance)” (p. 177) and are associated with American Hip Hop culture by the relevant participants. Agha explains that, “When the social life of such figures is mediated through speech stereotypes, any animator can inhabit that figure by uttering the form...” (p. 177). This allows characterological figures that one might call a “snarky hipster” or “cosmopolitan” or “Hip Hop-oriented youth” to become performable and readable through speech signs (for those within a social domain who share an understanding of the meanings ascribed to particular signs) by operating on an ideological level (or a level of second-order or indirect indexicality as explained in a previous section). The legitimacy of such performances, of course, is contingent on numerous slippery conditions.

As you will see, the following usage of a Hip Hop-related register seems to do more than just “mediate such figures through speech stereotypes” (Agha, 2007, p. 177) because of the kind of signifying that is performed on and through the register. My treatment of signifying comes primarily from Henry Louis Gates’ historicization of the practice in his seminal *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988).

As an offering of Black literary criticism, Gates is primarily concerned with analyzing written texts, but he acknowledges the multiplicity of texts and devises

a rather flexible analytic that can be dispatched to any semiotic system, or text. Gates takes Bahktin's *double-voiced word* (1981) and Mitchell-Kernan's account of *signifyin'* (1972) (along with many other samples of theoretical and empirical scholarship) and carefully recasts them along the contours of a Black literary and discursive tradition that is traced from the sacred in pre-colonial West Africa to various peoples and spaces throughout the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993). In so doing, he reveals signifyin' to be an enculturated mode of conduct (i.e., a cultural practice) that embodies the *double-consciousness* (DuBois, 1903), or twoness, of Blackness as it is experienced in places that have been colonized, seized, or merely cohabitated by a hegemonic other. Ironically, he traces the American manifestation of the Yoruba *orisha* (loosely translated as an *ancestral spiritual authority*) Esu Elegbara, the tricky liaison between the spirit and physical worlds, to the Signifying Monkey character present in a considerable amount of African American folklore and contemporary literature. Signifying is a literary and discursive tradition that Gates and others consider the trope of tropes, as the very nominalization of the practice (signifying, or signifyin(g), as he demarcates) is itself an act of signifying because it takes the Standard English lexeme *signify* and re-inscribes it with an indirect and particularized meaning (pp. 44-51). Gates pours through a profusion of theories, ponderings, and examples of signifying and reports that the only universal characteristic to be found amongst these representations is an indirectness of some kind.

I stress that signifying, which is described as a "pervasive mode of language" and as a rhetorical tradition in African American culture by Gates (1988, p. 80), goes beyond simply troping, as it were, because it is essentially the troping on (or re-inscribing of) Language itself as a proxy for ontological multiplicity. In this way, the polysemanticism of the linguistic sign reflects the speaker/writer's fragmented or compound subjectivity. The substantial body of literature on signifying encourages us to consider the practice as an integral part of a way of speaking into which individuals are socialized. Like most ingrained cultural practices, self-consciousness is not common or necessary to do specific interactional work.

### Discussion: The Proverbial Monkey on One's Back

Essentially, any communicative event is a semiotic affair that not only employs the Saussurean object (signifier) and meaning (signified), but also requires a mediator, or interpretant, for construal (Peirce, 1932). This interpretant requires a social actor to carry out the process of interpretation, and therefore reconfigures the entire semiotic event as a socially, historically, and culturally conditioned happening. From this purview, it is helpful to see the following excerpts (see Appendix for transcription key) between two focal students from the ELL class (Liberian American sisters, Adima and Poady), taken from a conversation they had while interviewing one another, as embedded within a larger co(n)text of past and future events (some local and explicitly referred to within the stretch of talk, others of indeterminable scope) in order to imagine the complex social labor that was possibly being carried out.



## FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

- 1 A: ...it's Black (.) Americans (.) (an) you know. Like one time me and some other boy  
2 got in a argument in class cuz he gon talk about (.) things like AIDS man. My  
3 teacher said something (.) and (-) discuss-
- 4 P: -HE SAY AIDS come from green African monkeys=
- 5 A: =°and then he said (-) all- that Afr-° that some man from Africa brought AIDS
- 6 P: ((inaudible))
- 7 A: you know (.4) have sex with the monkey and stuff >so I ask him was=like<  
8 WHERE WHEN OR HOW DID YOU HEAR that? Cuz I wanna know. I wanna  
9 hear about it too. And we got in a big argument (.) like huge argument I got sent  
10 down to- (.4) It just piss me off (d-) when I [hear people talk- - - - -]
- 11 P: [YEAH CUZ IT'S SO IT'S SO I- ](.2)  
12 IT'S SO IGNORANT BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW NOTHING ABOUT  
13 AFRICA cause the whi- (.) like people send people go to Africa:: and take the worst  
14 picture a Africa and they bring it here in America and they think we (still -) jungle  
15 (.) we fight with- we fight with (.2) monkeys. And that's like so embarrassing  
16 because you're like saying right that you know you from Africa=
- 17 A: =(inaudible))
- 18 P: =and they're like saying stuff like that it's so embarrassing to you cuz you like (.)  
19 that's your culture and they're talking about it=be=like 'do ya'll sleep in the  
20 TREES? do ya'll- do ya'll wear clothes?' I mean how do you not wear clothes  
21 when you-
- 22 A: =that's the question some boy ask me was that 'oh in Africa do ya'll jump from tree to  
23 tree?' (.4) I was like what kind of ignorant question is that- do ya'll jump from-  
24 do you jump from tree to tree in America? And the he was like 'no.' cuz (.) the way  
25 people you know show Africa that's what d- that's what they think [( - - )]
- 26 P: [THAT's not in]  
27 our part of Africa- that's a different part of Africa. If- if- you go in my country you  
28 gon like it- we have beach, we have good weather, we have good music- it's- it's  
29 just like- it's a good place to be- it's just like people got to go there to believe it.  
30 YOU SEE LIKE A DIFFERENT PART OF AFRICA than people don't wear  
31 clothes they think that that's where we're from- no- we're from in the city we have-  
32 we're from the big city we have fun there we have party, we have everything, we  
33 have clubs, we have ma:lls, we have shopping centers we have everything so:

Like the focal students in Traoré's report on a study she conducted with a group of African "immigrant" students in a Philadelphia high school (2004), comments that associated primitiveness with Africa and Africanness clearly bore on the ways 17-year-old Adima and her 18-year-old half sister, Poady, were experiencing their immediate social world (at school), and thus, how their sense of subjectivity was being formed. As a result, any concept that was easily correlated with primitiveness (e.g., primate similitude, close relationships with animals and nature, poor hygiene, low intelligence, low linguistic development) was also cited as a source of anxiety, frustration, hurt, or anger by the other focal students during their interviews. While no methodology allows us to actually know one's subjectivity, the explicit metapragmatic discourse that Adima and Poady share in the excerpts above can shed critical light on how they perceived their social surroundings and their U.S.-born interlocutors, as well as illuminate how they may have been conceptualizing and (re)constructing themselves in relation to these spaces and people. By deploying a range of discursive maneuvers, Adima and Poady, along with most of the focal students in this study, seemed to consciously and unconsciously counter the "primitive African" model of personhood: the most intricate (and fascinating) of these maneuvers I posit to be signifying through Hip Hop-related language, or flipping the script.

As noted earlier, this “primitive African” figure of personhood was referenced in conversations with all but one of the African transnational students interviewed. Like Adima and Poady, these students described questions and assumptions about their ways of life in their African home countries that they had encountered since arriving in the US—questions and assumptions that did not leave to question the linkage between mass-mediated, deficit-oriented constructions of Africa and signs and performances of Africanness. Adima and Poady’s more blatant metapragmatic evaluations of these comments and questions in the previous excerpt can easily be indexed on a lexical-denotational level (e.g., *ignorant* in previous excerpt, line 12; *mean* in excerpt on page 46, line 7) or on a phrasal/sentential-denotational level (e.g., “they don’t know nothing about Africa” in previous excerpt, line 12), and some of their less overt evaluations can be indexed connotationally in several different ways. Phonologically, one might interpret the young women’s perceivable rises and dips in pitch and volume (such as Poady’s very loud *trees* in line 20) as significations of various culturally-informed (from multiple cultural sources) shifts in footing, requiring that one be familiar with the languaging styles in their repertoires in order to have some sense of how to “read” their phonological shifts.

As part of Fanon’s project to “help the Black man free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment,” he discusses the notion of African primitiveness as being historically linked to evolution models that position the African as “the link between monkey and man” (Fanon & Markmann, 1967, p. 30). His notation of the profound ways such notions bear upon many African peoples’ “psyches” and lived experiences (*African* here meaning both Black-identified people from the continent and Black-identified people who acknowledge a recent African ancestry) helps elucidate some of the ways macro- and micro-level discourses about monkeys and Africa may have been functioning not only in these young transnational students’ self-conceptualization and social-identification processes, but also in the ways the young people who understood themselves (on some level) to be descendents of African people (African Americans) were forming *their* Black subjectivit(ies). Any student of African American history or culture is certainly familiar with discourses (ranging from scholarly publications to everyday colloquialisms to verbal violences that accompanied routine physical violence) that liken Blackness to primitiveness (evoking monkeys in particular) and that have been circulating in the US since the birth of the nation. These discourses may escalate anxieties among Black-identified students and encourage practices that they believe will distance them from the models of personhood engendered by such discourses. That every act of dehumanizing discursive violence reported by these focal students was uttered by another Black-identified student (either African American, African transnational, or Caribbean), and that I overheard no less than three of the focal students use the same “Black primitiveness” rhetoric at some point (sometimes as tools of emotional violence and sometimes, more indirectly, as tools of solidarity), warrants its own careful exploration that I will not attempt here.

In this fraught bit of talk we get a sense of the prevalence of one particular “Africa-monkey” discourse in these two young women’s experiences. Here, Adima begins a story and with only one sentence as her clue, Poady interjects and announces what she expects to be the climax of the account. She seems to presuppose that the seminal act in her sister’s story is the boy’s claim that AIDS originated in a green *African* monkey. This presupposition could be based on possible prior conversa-

tions between the two sisters or with other people in the young women's local social spheres, or it could be partially informed by any of many semiotic arenas beyond their school and community to which they have had access (such as national newspapers, news broadcasts, sitcoms, talk shows, etc.). AVERT (Averting AIDS and HIV), an international philanthropic organization focused on AIDS and HIV-related knowledge production, offers a helpful (although not exhaustive) overview of HIV / AIDS origin theories currently in global circulation ("The Origin of HIV", n.d.), with four of the five theories citing Africa and primates of some kind. The likelihood that Poady jumped to this particular conclusion purely from her own imagination is unlikely and we can assume that she has encountered discourse about the origins of AIDS being related to Africa and monkeys in some other context. In other words, the fact that she assumed this to be a salient point in Adima's story upon hearing the mention of AIDS indicates that she has either engaged in topically similar conversations with her sister or others, or that she is at least privy to the existence of such discourses.

Adima's subsequent turn begins with what seems to be further explanation of the boy's report (line 5) and after Poady shares something inaudible that sounds like a question (line 6), Adima goes on to impart that the boy in discussion claimed that an African man had had intercourse with a monkey (line 7). Her volume then rises considerably as she shares her response to the boy's report, explaining that she essentially demanded details and documentation (lines 7-9). Adima also lets Poady know that this conversation was far from benign, as it resulted in disciplinary action against her (lines 9-10). She ends the turn by sharing how the whole event (and ones like it, which she alludes have also occurred) made her feel: "It just piss me off when I hear people talk..." (line 10). Poady jumps in, talking over Adima for a bit, to share both her own evaluation and emotional reaction to this and similar events, and uses the word *embarrassing* twice (lines 15 and 18). She plainly links the story about the AIDS monkey to other unfavorable projections of Africa and Africanness she has encountered, and notes further associations with monkeys (lines 11-21, see bolded text). Adima aligns with her sister's accounts by corroborating with a similar account of a question or comment by a peer who alluded to "monkeyness," or primitiveness (lines 22-25).

These excerpts constitute the metapragmatic frame that indicate how Adima and Poady may have been evaluating certain modes of conduct and they also provide a sense of how the young women may have been perceiving certain others' perceptions of them. Clearly, they found comments that associated Africa and Africans with primitiveness to be the progeny of ignorance or meanness. These two evaluations were represented by some comparable metapragmatic assessment by the other focal students, and seem to be a reliable way of conceiving of the metadiscursive frame that helped constitute some of their orders of meaning.

### Flipping the Script: The Proverbial Monkey Wrench

In this second excerpt, Poady shares an incident in which she was insulted by a female classmate (whom she later identified as African American). Poady describes both how her peer told her she looked like a monkey and how she reacted to this comment. Her interlocutor's comment was much more abject than simply linking Africa or Africanness to monkeys; here she was actually likening Poady's

physical person to an animal. One can only speculate how such a comment might infect the processes through which a young person conceptualizes a sense of personhood in relation to a particular social space and to particular persons. At one point, Poady offers a very clear metapragmatic evaluation of the young woman and others who behaved similarly by stating that “they” are “mean” (line 7), but the rest of her discursive exploits are much more indirect and do some tricky troping known as “signifying.”

- 1 P: In my class some girl be calling me- she's- she=be=like I look like a monkey (.2) I  
 2 was [like really↑?]
- 3 A: [(giggling)]
- 4 P: (REALLY) I LOOK LIKE A MONKEY? Say that outside to me and you gon see  
 5 what↓
- 6 A: ((giggling))
- 7 P: They're so mean I just don't get it. If you wanna be mean to me (.2) say it outside of  
 8 school and you're goin to find out if I'm African or [a monkey]
- 9 A: [vi(h)olent(h)] ((giggling))

Poady's first act of signifying comes in line 2 in her reported use of a particular sign that some may interpret as indexical of a figure of personhood widely-associated with a young, hip American register: the lexical-phrasal item *really?* as a rhetorically-interrogative independent clause. By saying that she was *like* the interrogative *really?*, we cannot be sure if she actually uttered the question to the girl who made the comment and this is a stylistic feature, or if this *like* conveys a mental state or inner monologue (Romaine & Lange, 1991). Indeed, we do not know if any part of Poady's narrative following the clause “She be like I look like a monkey” is apostrophic, meaning not only is her addressee absent but the actual reported speech act could have never actually occurred. Nor can it be certain if the narrative is *constructed dialogue* (Tannen, 1986 as cited in Romaine & Lange, 1991) which Romaine and Lange define as “a recollection which is often more accurate in general meaning than in precise wording” (1991, p. 230). In either case, she reports that she responded with this single-lexeme, independent clausal interrogative either in her actual speech or in her head at the time of the encounter.

We might note that this sign (*really?*) is already tropic, meaning that the literal denotation of *asking for the verification of a previous statement's accuracy (because you genuinely are not sure)* is not the sign's intended meaning when it co-occurs with particular syntactic (before or after a clause) or phonological cues that index sarcasm. Her use of the form can be construed as signifying because this particular deployment of *really?* (as an independent clause) may be understood as an enregistered sign that is emblematic of (a) certain figure(s) of personhood (Agha, 2007), or that indexes a particular social kind that she may feel is not readily assigned to her: a hip, witty, irreverent, American social kind. Some aspects of the characterological figure I link to this register are debatable, but as a mass-mediated social kind to which most people in the US have access, I think many would contend that the most socially salient aspects are accurate.

In line 4, Poady creates an interrogative construction by pairing this emblematic token with the question “I look like a monkey?” and in so doing, indexes a social kind, or a *mass-mediated demeanor* (Rymes, 2008), who would certainly be incredulous to being physically linked to a primate. Indeed, the register evokes a social demeanor that one could argue is the very antithesis of primitiveness (American, smart, funny, hip) as it is constructed by most who have been socialized according to Northern (Western) conventions. Had Poady said, “(Do) I really look like a monkey?” one could certainly construe her question as rhetorical and sarcastic and might socially index such conduct similarly, but the use of this register’s “really” as a stand-alone, almost endophoric constituent, *before* (line 4) or *after* (lines 1-2), does very specific social work for people familiar with the register (which would be most people under the age of 30 who watch television). I interpret her actions as taking this token from a register that does not “belong” to her or her social kind, as such, and using it to indirectly emphasize the absurdity of likening her (of all people) a monkey- thereby signifying on the register. Adima aligns herself with her sister’s discursive toil and conveys her construal by laughing (line 6), a response that Gates and others would tell us is often fundamental to the practice of signifying, as it is a collaborative, interactional practice, usually expressed through humor.

It is interesting to see that Poady shifts back and forth between a narrative mode and a full-on re-enactment mode and as a result, makes rather stark deictic shifts and obfuscates the participation frameworks (i.e., addressee(s), referent(s), speaker(s)) of her narrated event and that of the actual narration. Her re-enactments commence without any kind of introductory marker (like “I said” or “I was like”) so we have to pay close attention to when she is speaking to her sister or re-enacting her utterances to the girl in the narrated story. An analysis of Poady’s manipulation of participation frameworks could provide insight into “both the internal organization of stories and the way in which they can help construct larger social and political processes while linking individual stories into a common course of action that spans multiple encounters with changing participants” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004, p. 232), or how her storytelling is situated in a chain of semiotic events that help construct its meanings. In considering participation frameworks, we should also note the important role of audience (Morgan, 1998), or over-hearers, in signifying and in the fact that Poady is aware that she is being audio-recorded and that her utterances may be heard by a range of individuals, perhaps even by the adversary of whom she is speaking. There are a number of different ways to conjecture the interactional work that could be occurring through these kinds of shifts in footing, but I will now shift to another act of signifying I believe to be occurring (lines 4-9).

After signifying through this “snarky” register, Poady shifts footing quite significantly by moving into a rhetorical construction very familiar to speakers of (and those familiar with) African American English: provocation by issuing a directive to perform some action that, if actually executed by the addressee, would not be to the speaker’s liking. This rhetorical form is akin to daring someone to do something that will engender a negative reaction from the issuer of the dare and functions interactionally as a threat of sorts. In considering the pervasiveness of Hip Hop cultures and registers around the globe and particularly in the suburbs of a predominately Black city, and taking into account these registers’ appropriation



of signifying, we can conjecture that the young Liberian women of concern here were socialized into their use of this kind of signifying through a Hip Hop register and therefore understood its stereotypic indexical power (i.e., its power to evoke a social kind who is Hip Hop-oriented and probably contemporary, street savvy, assertive, tough, etc. as well). One can easily imagine many possible contradistinctions between this model of personhood (however it is locally construed) and a “primitive African” model of personhood and speculate the kind of interactional work Poady may have accomplished in the narrated event (and the work she accomplished in the narration of the event).

This act of signifying is particularly meaningful because by using this enregistered (i.e., widely recognizable as indexical of a particular social kind) signifying construction from a Hip Hop register to talk about how she will show her interlocutor that she is indeed an African, Poady is portraying a very particular kind of African persona - one who can competently perform the rhetorical practice and cleverly flip the script, as Figure 1 shows.

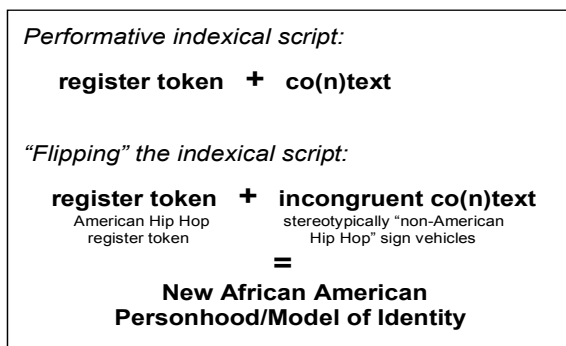


Figure 1. Flipping the Performative Indexical Script

Stereotypes about registers are basically categories of communicative behavior that reflexively create presupposed ways of being for which a perceivable and shared model exists. That is to say, they “set text-defaults on the construal of behavior for persons acquainted with them” (Agha, 2007, p. 148). These *text-defaults* (2007), or register tokens, can be operationalized in various ways by manipulating their textual environments to create intricate indexical scripts (register token(s) + co(n)text) for performing and (mis)construing particular interactional tasks. In the case of Poady “borrowing” phrasal tokens from an American Hip Hop register and using them in conjunction with signs that may have had a different stereotypic indexicality (e.g., her identity as an ELL African student, her accent, her self-proclamation of being African), I claim that she took the performative indexical script (register token + co(n)text) and effectively flipped the script by making it convey indexically-incongruent *and* mutually-constitutive messages that had to be read together for accurate construal (register token + incongruent co(n)text = Hip Hop register token + stereotypically “non-American Hip Hop” signs) (Figure 1). In so doing, she was performing a *new* kind of African personhood that clearly drew from (and reformatted) an American register and model of personhood. As noted earlier, the successful uptake of such mixed messages and the new model of personhood Poady attempted to introduce is not easily determinable. In future work, I plan to explore whether or not other

examples of flipping indexical scripts are widely read like Bourdieu's "valet who speaks the language of the gentleman" (1977, p. 653), or if such work does indeed kindle new ways of imagining/understanding African transnational young people amongst their peers.

## Conclusion

Regardless of their accuracy or primacy in popular media, discourses that denote an African primitiveness (like the AIDS genesis theories that imply certain linkages between primates and African people) appeared to serve as the archetypal account of alterity for the students in this study, pushing Africanness (for these students and their American-born peers) even closer to primate in the metaphorical strata of humanity. This analysis does not attend to the exact source of these Africa-monkey discourses, or the particularities of their larger spheres of circulation, but instead focuses on the fact that they found their way into these young people's daily lives and seemed to be consistently recycled into de- or sub-humanizing representations of their homes, cultures, families and selves. The intricate ways in which these students engaged in disassembling this model of personhood looked to be functions of both conscious and unconscious motivations and behaviors and therefore operated on various levels of indexicality.

To return to Ibrahim's work with African "migrant" youth, his conceptualization of the process of *becoming* was informed by his own lived experience as a Sudanese refugee in North America on whom Blackness was ascribed and simultaneously imbibed and reformatted (2003). Ibrahim discusses how the focal students in his study come to embrace "Black cultural and representational forms as sites for positive identification" (2003, p. 177) (namely, those Black representations created through and by Hip Hop cultures) upon encountering the mostly negative representations supplied by dominant culture. This alternative conception of newly-bestowed and assumed Blackness not only helps shape the politics of desire and resistance that play out in the language learning classroom, but also requires a localization (in terms of cultural, not physical, space) of Blackness. Like the young people in Ibrahim's research (1999, 2003), Adima, Poady, and some of their African transnational peers seemed to desire and valorize very specific forms and practices from the mass-mediated and locally experienced representations of American Blackness they encountered, and from my observations seemed to go on to synthesize these forms and practices with some from their "home" cultures, and from other cultures, in very meticulous ways.

From their displays of knowledge about Spanish, French, Indian filmography, Jamaican Patois and Haitian Creole, Gullah and AAE, Standard English grammar, sex, friendship, and life in general, a close analysis of four focal young women (including one of the young women in this analysis) revealed that they routinely appropriated various models of personhood that may have effectively countered the primitive African stereotype, often doing so by signifying through registers associated with each social kind. Through Hip Hop signifying in particular, I infer that the young women in this analysis wielded language to reflect their own complicated occupation of Blackness which co-terminously functioned as a reconfigured Africanness, and as a New African American model of identity. Poady and Adima appeared to discursively co-construct social identities that drew from an array of models of personhood and

that countered a primitive African model which they felt circumscribed the ways they were being imagined by their peers. Beyond typical troping, their deft reordering of signifying, a practice understood to convey the twoness of *Atlantic Blackness*, to instead talk about contemporary *Africanness*, not only revisited the practice's presumed origins in many ways, but also worked on a higher level of indexicality (by employing ideology) to better represent a complex subjectivity informed by a multiplicity of places, peoples, and cultures.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I conceptualize *subjectivity* quite simply as the (fluid) set of phenomena that inform how an individual experiences the world and I conceive of *identity* as the patterned processes through which the world experiences an individual. The two are clearly reflexive and they index phenomena that, I contend, must be considered together.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that this analysis is not looking at Hip Hop Language (HHL) as defined by Alim (2004, 2006) and Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook (2009) but at languaging conventionally correlated to Hip Hop-related "figures of personhood" (Agha, 2007), or more specifically, a stylized African American English (AAE) (Ibrahim, 1999) that functions as a linguistic register (Agha, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, one of the home languages spoken by the two focal students in this analysis, Liberian English, is subjected to a widely held notion of *creole exceptionalism* (DeGraff, 2003), which considers it and its speakers anomalous in a certain typology of languages.

<sup>4</sup> I also observed a second ELL class on approximately five occasions.

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Appendix

**Transcription conventions and symbols used:**

- (.) indicates noticeable pauses; numbers indicate length of pause by beats
- [ ] indicate overlapping speech
- a dash indicates cut-off of speech
- :: colons indicate elongation of the preceding sound
- (( )) double parentheses explain gestures, laughter, and other paralinguistic and nonlinguistic information
- = indicates no break between turns and/or speakers
- - - indicate unclear speech
- CAPS indicates increased volume
- under indicates stress
- >abc< indicates words running together
- °hat° indicates very low volume
- ↓ indicates lowered intonation
- ↑ indicates raised intonation