How Black Male Identity is Sculpted Through Language in Light of Stigmatization and Stereotyping

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1 Introduction to the Topic

Often times, I’ve encountered stigmatization of the communities I am affiliated with. The black community in particular has been under a significant amount of scrutiny, which interests me as a member of the community experiencing only one angle of the interactions of our community with others. It seems as though there is a gap developing in the black community out of the miscommunication surrounding language and identity. For this thesis, I seek to uncover how the language barrier in the black community affects the identity of speakers, specifically in regard to the use of self-referential terms that could be seen as obscene or offensive, such as the n-word. Additionally, in exploring how users with access to a wider range of the possible variation of English manage their code switching, in conducting a series of interviews with four members, I uncover the attitudes and opinions on these topics from males in the black community who speak and have an understanding of both general American English (GAE) and black English (African American English/AAE). I found that an individual’s habits develop out of practices associated with the communities they encounter, and as these respondents developed, their adaptability to various communities developed within them. This skill, that is part of their identity, is reflected in their language and interactions within unfamiliar communities. And so with time, each man interviewed materialized their own definition for their black-male identity, and their attitudes reflected those of members of a community who prioritized their own desire to take a unanimous step forward as a community over the extraneous comments from those outside of the community.

Accordingly, this thesis proceeds as follows: In section 2, I discuss the background of my topic and some of the literature explaining each of the main concepts used or discussed in my interviews, including communities of practice, code
switching, and lexical range. Then, I elaborate on the choices I made for my methodology and the relevant background for the interviewees. Section 4 covers my results and the ways in which some of the background information overlapped with what was being said in the interviews. Finally, in section 5 I discuss my conclusions on what I heard from the interviews and how those responses answered my questions or changed my perspective surrounding my research question.

2 Background and Historical Context

There has always been a history of stigmatization of minority groups in America. The stigmatizations I am specifically drawing attention to are identified based on lived experience collected in the interviews and my own lived experience. The stigmatizations themselves are not the main focus of this paper because they are of varying degrees, but all manage to influence identity in similar fashions. Some of the more common stereotypes that were discussed in the interviews were the stereotypes of tall black people being good at basketball, the identification of black language as mistakes rather than systemic configuration of syntax, and black people being seen as more dangerous and less approachable simply for being of darker skin. These stereotypes influence the development of multiple identities and languages within a single individual as they manage or navigate American prescriptivism through code switching and syntactic variation.

2.1 Linguistic Variation

Firstly, I should explain what linguistic variation is in this context, as it is going to be broken down in two ways. Linguistic variation is an overarching term for the varying ways in which information can be verbally expressed. This is then broken down further into lexical and syntactic variation. Syntactic variation is commonly taken to refer to the alternate forms of creating a felicitous sentence to express the same meaning in a given language. “Since one of the dichotomies of language is that between meaning and form, the most obvious way to define syntactic variation is to say that it involves the
availability of two or more constructions that differ in form but have the same meaning” (Fasold et al. 1989: 381). Breaking down syntactic variation is really just breaking down the constraints being used by the speaker to form utterances. On the other hand, lexical variation focuses on the terms that make up one’s lexicon and the tools with which a speaker fulfills those constraints. A speaker with a particular variety of English like AAE may distribute their morphology differently than a speaker of GAE because of the influence of their surroundings and the specific aspects of their identity they choose to project at that point in time.

So an individual who chooses to use ‘pop’ over ‘soda’ as their verbal form to express ‘carbonated drink’ can display lexical variation while still adhering to all the syntactic rules of the general American dialect. And an individual can exhibit their syntactic variation by using discourse constructions that may go against GAE’s constraints, such as the distribution of verbal markers in AAE or the use of 3rd person pronouns as 1st person reference terms. Though variation like this is mostly mutually intelligible, there are often underlying meanings embedded in the gestures associated with variation that do not always get recognized by the listener. This can be used to understand code switching; as stigmatization gets attached to varieties of English, being able to code switch permits the discourse to continue in a fashion that is generally understood through and through. This is because surface representation, idioms, and underlying meaning are particular in regards to the communities they are used in. The concept of these communities and their specified proceedings will be elaborated on in the following section.

2.2 Communities of Practice

Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992) introduced the concept of communities of practice, which adopts a meaning of community that does not focus on location and population but rather on social engagement. This is because the language is serving the
social engagement and not the place or people as individual, unconnected entities. Communities of practice are defined as such:

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short, practices - emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor. A community of practice is different as a social construct from the traditional notion of community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. Indeed, it is the practices of the community and members’ differentiated participation in them that structures the community socially (Eckert et al. 1992: 08).

The way in which the concept of communities of practice help us understand the use of code switching and identity is in group mentality and familiarity. Any given individual is a member of multiple communities, some inside of others, and all developing on each other within the identity of the individual. Interviewees from Swarthmore College are members of the Swarthmore community as well as the community belonging to their class year, Swarthmore’s black community, and so on. The presence of multiple communities allows for the individual to have a range of familiarity with the members; being more familiar with certain communities and less familiar with others. This will be the first range that helps us understand how the interviewees and other black individuals manage their code switching.

Each separate community has its own set of practices but some of the practices in different communities overlap just as would be expected as people passed in and out of different communities and their memberships overlap. Lave and Wenger (1998) claim that communities of practice are everywhere and an individual is generally in a large number of them, so at some points you can be a core member of a group and at some points you can be on the margins of a different group. As we define these enterprises and
engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relation with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn. Things learned as members of these communities develop into practices for the community over time that reflects the pursuit of the group as well as the social relations of the members to one another; so the practices are the properties of the community as they are collectively developed by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. This will be revisited to tie in the other aspect of my research: the use and management of code switching.

2.3 Code Switching

Code switching is an interesting phenomenon because it has so many layers in terms of the ways in which it is applied to everyday life. Code switching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in a given conversation. It is a particularly important tactic because of the influence of prescriptivism in America. Prescriptivists are often mistaken for "sticklers" when it comes to Standard English grammar although it is evident that there is an obvious attitude that this variety of English is superior (or expressing superior qualities) to others, and losing sight of its function as standard in school systems and communities (Milroy 2002). The languages being alternated between discussed in this paper are GAE and AAE, or black English. But I would argue that these languages are not being completely alternated between and are rather part of a lexical range that I will describe next. This is a presupposition for understanding black English is not only a language but as an identity.

2.4 Literature on Lexical Range

Professor Lisa Green’s Introduction to African American English includes studies development and language of black children. Rather than an individual having two separate grammars for two separate languages, Green proposed a spectrum of the English language. One side is fully immersed in all of the constraints and felicity conditions of
AAE and the other is immersed in all the constraints of GAE. Somewhere in the middle lies an individual’s range. A younger individual like a toddler will usually have less range simply by virtue of knowing less language. As time and language develops within the individual, the range widens depending on the speaker’s surroundings and linguistic influences. A speaker with more access to AAE will have a range that starts closer to the AAE side. Likewise, a speaker with more access to a GAE environment will converse more fluently on that side. That is not to say that these individuals still can’t have wide ranges. Speakers whose range is in the middle section of the spectrum sometimes lean slightly closer to one side because of environment, and some speakers can be fully fluent in both, with a range encompassing the full spectrum. This is better understood in relation to speaker’s membership to different communities of practice. Speakers exercise the extent of their range when they choose to employ a specific practice over another in a given community and promote a correlated identity. Doing so successfully in a fashion that bolsters or encourages the ideals of the community or conversation is a great representation of code switching. The speaker can jump to non-adjacent areas on the range of their lexicon allowing code switching to be very drastic at points in communities whose practices vary to a greater degree. Those areas on the spectrum contain features signifying their membership to different groups and their performative identity. Though one’s lexicon is constantly growing, the language is systematized in the person, and results in some sort of range. Within a given range an individual can move to whatever position on the spectrum they deem necessary (consciously or unconsciously) depending on the context of their environment and their attitude towards it. This can be used to help understand what is happening in language transaction when speakers with access to more variation combat stereotypes and stigmatization.

2.5 Black English as a Language and an Identity

To build on black English’s influence on identity, we must define identity apart from its functions outside of linguistics that cover a variety of concepts. A definition by
Mendoza-Denton (2002: 475) is fitting; “for our purposes, we will understand identity to mean the active negotiation of an individual’s relationship with larger social constructs, in so far as this negotiation is signaled through language and other semiotic means. Identity, then, is neither attribute nor possession but an individual and collective-level process of semiosis.” In layman’s terms, identity is not a static object but the process of making meaning that speakers engage in by themselves and as part of groups.

So a person’s identity is not a thing they have but rather something that is developed through the maturation of the language and community, where language reinforces identity and community, and vice versa; a mutually reinforcing set of relationships. The identity is formed through language, paralleling the language being developed in varying identities as significance is assigned at shifting degrees depending on the community. This can be applied to understanding black English as an identity and a language because of the already existing entwinement of these fields, and how influences from other communities could reflect on black identity and language. Remembering the concept of the communities of practice, an individual could be developing language and identity on a multi-communal level. Because of this, I would like to draw attention to the language of power and prestige in America.

**2.6 Language of Power and Prestige**

When variations of English are referred to as dialects, the definition of ‘dialects’ may be thought of as ambiguous or at least having more than one possible meaning. The definitions of *language* and *dialect* in the literature (Hassan 1973, Weiß 2009), as well as my interactions with people’s interpretation of what *language* and *dialect* mean seems to suggest that the definitions are divided into two groups. There is the definition of *language* with the purpose of providing cultural or political unity. *Dialects* of a language in this sense are not necessarily mutually intelligible, and in reality might be better labeled as their own language. An example of this is the variation between Mandarin and Cantonese in the context of Chinese; Chinese is labeled as the language and Mandarin
and Cantonese are the dialects, though they are not mutually intelligible (Kandrysawtz 2017). The definition being expressed in this thesis, however, as well as by many linguists, presents English as an umbrella language, the dialects are simply the ways in which specific communities choose to enforce constraints on the same language. Because English is the overarching language, these dialects are mutually intelligible for the most part. However, idioms that are community-specific and different constraints allow for varying syntactic forms are possible. Not being aware of the intended meaning of the constraint being used could result in a sort of false positive interpretation, where the addressee thinks they understood the constituent as “bad English” meaning one thing, when it is actually a display of syntactic and lexical variation. Because of prescriptivism, in the case of English, there are claims about the general variant being more significant or correct than other variants (Labov 1968). Those in power in America who predominantly speak GAE promote their language as they promote themselves: in power. These attitudes emphasize a community of practice that practices promoting dominance through language. Practices like this are somewhat jarring, because when someone from this community attempts to enforce this practice in a community that does not subscribe to the “language of power” the community reacts differently to the unfamiliarity or resistance of the view. The dialectical differences between communities in America can lead to unintentional miscommunication and misunderstanding. The variation can lead to marginalization of the minority group, or disregard or contempt towards the speaker who differs from GAE constraints.

This emphasizes the importance of code switching in social settings. N.P. Soler (1999: 276) dedicates an entire section of her analytical catalogs of U.S. Latina autobiographies to “code-switching as an expression of identity conflict” and had this very astute remark on the matter: "[C]ode-alteration enriches the linguistic repertoire, makes the phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic possibilities of the language astonishingly flexible and brings to the foreground the contrast between
cultures and ideologies" (Soler 1999: 282). In conjunction with works that explore this complex issue (Labov 1972, Gumperz 1982, Fasold 1989, and Duranti 2009), Soler (1999) reveals the social contexts which also affect participants of the present study. These works also provide influential evidence for issues regarding "identity and aspects of language use such as the pronunciation of borrowed words, and the symbolism of such choices" (Barrientos 2016: 15). My personal outlook on code switching was not one as explorative as Soler but more closely resembling an attitude of fortitude, and thus my curiosity was piqued as to how other black individuals managed their code-alteration. However, I only interview black male-identifying people in this research as I thought that if I interjected female opinion, my own opinion would overtake the academic purpose of this thesis.

3 Methodology

Mendoza-Denton (2002, 479), describes how the identity of the interviewer affects the language used by the interviewee:

In their study, Rickford and McNair-Knox (1994) found that two radically different data sets with quantitative and qualitative disparities at multiple levels of the grammar were elicited from the same African American participant in two separate control topic interviews with the crucial difference being that one interview was conducted by a Euro American researcher and the other by an African-American researcher. As might be predicted from prior research in the Frameworks of speech accommodation (Giles 1980), audience design (Bell 1984), and acts of identity (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985), the African-American participant used African American English of variables more frequently when speaking to the African-American interviewer.

I decided that I wanted to conduct my interviews with the intent of trying to spark more African American English variable use, as well as to simulate a sort of community of familiarity so the interviews would feel less like interviews and more like casual
conversations happening in everyday life. And so my interviews were conducted in open informal settings; on front porches, in the parlors of our Administrative Building, on benches in open floral courtyards, etc. Some of the interviews were done with more than one interviewee at a time, as I predicted that this might help the interviewees feel more relaxed and more inclined to use their most comfortable form of English with me. The interviews that were conducted with more than one interviewee were only performed when the interviewees were very comfortable with each other and already had an established relationship, thus providing them with the ability to converse with each other on this important matter as well as with me, and to build on each other’s ideas and input.

The interviewees were chosen based on their presented identity and social context (as well as willingness to participate). I only interviewed individuals who identify as male and as black or African American, who have had experiences with code switching (conscious or unconscious) in the form of being thrown into an unfamiliar larger community. This way, they would have something to say on how they manage their code switching as well as the attitude they felt towards the practices they encountered as they navigate different communities.

Those recruited for the interview were presented with a consent form that asked if they would agree to let me record them as I asked about their identity as a black male and their interaction with statements concerning black language and identity. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the interviewees. The questions that were asked in the interviews were open-ended and varied slightly from interview to interview depending on the interviewee because I wanted to let the course of the conversation flow naturally, but the questions still kept the interview on track. The first group of questions (#1) were just for the purpose of collecting background on the interviewee. They were asked about their household growing up, who the members of their nuclear family were, and how they interact with each other. They were asked what language was spoken at home predominantly and what languages were spoken with their friends. The second set
of questions (#2) inquired more specifically about their friends growing up; this was to see if the setting in which the individual developed was diverse (keeping in mind that diversity is relative for each individual), how those settings developed their attitude towards their identity, and how the stereotypes associated with specific aspects of identity such as being black or being male affected that identity’s representation.

Following this, the last three questions were presented to the interviewees in document form so they could read them prior to me asking them. This is made explicit on my consent form to provide a trigger warning for discussion of the n-word and identity because these are both controversial and sensitive subjects. The participants were told that they did not have to answer every question and could opt out if they felt uncomfortable or did not feel that they wanted to provide an answer. The first of these questions (#3) asked them to tell me how they identified themselves in their own words. There is no presupposition for this because I did not want to influence their answering in any way; I wanted the bare form of the definition of who they are, with as much or as little content as they saw fit to provide.

The following question (#4) asked them to identify some of the stigmas they had to deal with and what their opinions were on the stigma and those who enforced it. Finally (question #5) we got our discussion about the use of the n-word and social context versus personal use and opinions on its use and its varying users.

3.1 Background on V and S

The first interview was done with two young black men (both 20 years old); one of whom grew up in Brooklyn/Queens (S) and the other in a suburb on Long Island (V). The interview was done together to create a relaxed environment as to encourage more natural forms of speech. They both grew up in homes with varying degrees of occupancy as well as multilingual family members. S grew up in an ‘immigration station’ which resulted in a lot of people coming through his building, staying, on average, for 1-2 years. The children were all friendly with each other but S didn’t meet his first white friend until
he started living in Long Island in 2017. He mostly spoke “a mixture between Patois\textsuperscript{1}, which is just broken English: Jamaican and then just regular English”. V grew up in a small town with a core friend group that was mostly consistent for the duration of his life there, living only 2-3 blocks away from each other. The closeness in proximity of the community made it easy to become familiar with classmates and their families, first beginning in the communities formed in the individual elementary schools (there were 7 and now 5 remain) and then configuring into one middle school and one high school; so he was with the same people for a significant period of his life. The interview with V and S was interesting because a lot of their views were extensions of what the other had to say even though they did grow up in very different environments.

\textbf{3.2 Background on X}

The next interview was done with an individual who is blossomed in a very different environment from the other interviewees. Hailing from Louisville, Kentucky, X endured a different array of communities that inspired in him a different sort of attitude towards the stereotyping and stigmatization he experienced. The themes of code switching and communities of practice were more evident in his life in early high school to now unlike the other interviewees who felt their code switching experiences really escalated entering college or through being thrown into an environment that drastically differed from that of their comfort zone. He acknowledged some racial trauma for a moment; that of the divide between local Louisville born-and-bred residents, and those who moved to Louisville later on, which I thought was interesting because no one else I interviewed was familiar with such a visually abrupt and blunt representation of internal divide (assuming this divide is both among white people and black people who moved to Louisville at different times as well as internally within the group of black people who

\textsuperscript{1}Although the official language of Jamaica is Standard English, many Jamaicans also speak Patois which is a separate dialect/language. Jamaican Patois (also known as “Patwa”, “Patwa‘” or “Jamaican Creole”) is the language that is used by most Jamaicans in casual everyday conversations while Standard English is normally reserved for professional environments and is different from Jamaican English (Adams 1991).
have lived there and those who have moved there later). But with this extreme came the introduction of a black student union into his high school, which I feel could have only evolved because of the presence of such significant division within the community.

3.3 Background on H

My final interview was with a young man from my hometown with whom I had experienced much of the stereotyping he referenced in his interviews by virtue of going to the same schools and having similar influence from upbringing. H was raised, mostly by a single mother, with his younger brother in a home where Haitian Creole and English was spoken regularly. H has always spoken very clearly and eloquently; a virtue of having a mother who is a writer as well an passion for theater, music, singing, and general choral arts. Because of this, and H’s lust for life and exuberant nature, he was often labeled as an “oreo” by his peers as their way of degrading his ability to both be black and be well spoken. More often however, the portion of his identity that was attacked by stereotyping and stigmatization was the identity of his sexuality because of his outgoing, friendly nature. H spoke of the disconnect between being friendly and being seen as manly and from this, revealed that code switching had to take place to make certain people comfortable with him or more inclined not to stereotype him. The influence of communities of practice on his life give light to the manners in which he is conducting himself now at school versus when he is home with friends and family. H recalled meeting a few members of another frat who live above his apartment. He expressed his formulated code switching abilities in the incident, throwing in ‘yo’ and ‘what’s up dude’, and his awareness of the fact that it would be uncomfortable and weird to speak with close friends in such a fashion. However, H stated outright that he was not being “fake” in that moment, but rather accessing another portion of his identity that is very much existent within him alongside the portion of his identity he more normally accesses in everyday interactions and with which he is most comfortable/familiar.
4 Results

The interviews yielded a sort of confirmation that was both exact and inexact in its revelation. The interviews enlightened me as I was more aware of the attitudes felt by my friends and peers on code switching and the use of the n-word. Additionally, these young men confirmed that there had been a shift in the sentiment toward being called African American versus being called black. All of this was centered around the language of power as was explained to me, as a result of the stigmas being developed in the language of power and distributed through the same means. Developing an identity within the language of power aside from what the language tries to create for these people and the difficulties surrounding this is what will be discussed in following sections of this paper.

4.1 Skill vs Burden

There were divisions in the opinions from those I interviewed; firstly of code switching as a skill versus a burden and secondly on what should be done with the n-word. Somewhat contrary to what I believed, a lot of the men I interviewed felt that code switching really was an asset to communication, survival, and flourishing of an individual. X explained to me that code switching is “an essential skill...until we can get people to realize how valuable the vernacular English is, like it’s not just some some invalid form of speaking, we kind of have to be able to change up our like, diction and different things like that. I don’t want that to be the main mode of how I navigate the campus but a lot of times it is and it’s really made me think about what is my true, authentic self? Like is it both being able to speak the vernacular English and intellectualize my experience or is it like, one or the other?” This statement presented the identity in the language most clearly out of all my interviews. The vision of the authentic self becomes blurred as the codes blend in an environment like a college campus, and it becomes difficult to carry all the individual entities that compose the unique identity, and so the skill is also another burden, but one that can be proudly carried as the load is
shared at times. X expressed that he thinks “everyone who goes here who’s black, to a certain degree is able to do it [code switch]. And that’s very telling of the world that we live in. But I think as long as we are able to have these candid conversations with each other in the black community, I think we’re going to be alright. And it’s a lot about me thinking of everything in terms of a process like I’m not there yet, I don’t know anyone who has arrived. So if we have to code switch in the moment, then that’s another part of the process.”

4.2 Feelings on the N-word

It was expected that interviewees who agreed that code switching was a skill would have a unified attitude towards the use of the n-words, but results for this were also unanticipated. Everyone had a different idea of what should be done but it was agreed that the use of the n-word so publicly needed to change. The most fervent attitudes were that the n-word should be used by black people exclusively or that it shouldn’t be used at all. The disagreement in this lay in the desire to claim something exclusively as our own. As X put it, “…well if you’re not going to give us reparations, at least let us have something that’s exclusively ours, something that we can exclusively reclaim. That’s just how I feel.”

This idea of “reclaiming” has become increasingly popular as of late from exposure of the concept by congresswoman Maxine Waters’ display of reclaiming her time in a House Financial Services Committee meeting. When Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin tried to sidestep her questions with banality and compliments, apparently attempting to run out the clock on her questioning, Waters shut down his rambling and redirected him to her question again and again with the phrase “Reclaiming my time,” invoking her rights to enforce House procedural rules and inevitably becoming a shining meme on the satirical platter that is the political realm of America right now. Circulation and acceptance of Waters’ actions suggests that there is a community that firmly agrees there is something to be recovered.
V and S expressed empathy for this attitude but ultimately felt that the word shouldn’t be used at all because it is a form of black people oppressing each other. However, V spoke of the influence of presupposed meaning on words and the power one holds to change or assign meaning:

Here’s the thing though; we as humans have the power, I feel like people don’t get we have the power to give a word power and meaning, you know what I’m saying? So like, we can make niglets [an alternative word we could use] a fun thing when an old white woman says ‘Oh, look at these little piglets running around’ where it’s not a bad thing. The only reason you know a word is bad is because when you said it as a kid your mom smacked you and she looked at your funny, do you know what I’m saying? If your mom never reacted bad or the people around you never reacted bad to bad words, you’re never going to know it’s a bad word. So how’s a bitch going to know if it’s racist if we never let it be known that it’s racist. We let it be known that it’s a regular thing.

Quite controversially, H believed that it was believed that even if the word was given new meaning or no meaning at all not everyone should be able to use it. His reasoning behind his claim was “that was like the last word that a lot... like billions of black people heard before they were lynched by white people so I really don’t think that in any case or scenario white people should be able to say that word. Or non-black people, rather.” Their feelings on the matter are irrefutable in their positionality against the wrath the n-word carried when it was used in its prime and still carries in causal use today in light of their varying opinions. However, the interviewees effortlessly agreed on what I thought might be a controversial aspect of their identity. The unanimous decision on the issue of being called *African American* versus *black* expatiates on this claim in section 4.3.

**4.3 African American vs Black**

This conversation on identity and language even exposed dissonance in my own understandings of identity. I had been taught to own and take pride in my identity, but
some portions of that identity are bestowed on me, and their intertwined nature made it
(at times) difficult to relate fully to every part of that identity. And I would feel guilt for
feeling proud of certain aspects of my identity over others. To elaborate, I was aware and
proud of being a black woman, as I had heard and seen great black women do wondrous
things that directly related to who I was as a person. But when I would be forced into the
box of being called *African American*, I would resist from lack of connection to my
African roots. Not only are my parents Caribbean, but I was born here, in America. I felt
like I was being inauthentic and offensive in claiming multiple cultures as my own that I
knew nothing about and had no anchoring affiliation to other than the visible expression
of my melanin. This too didn’t make sense to me because everyone I knew who was
born in, living in, or from Africa either identified as a member of a specific African
culture (Nigerian, Ghanaian, etc.) or was white and from South Africa. And so, I desired
to understand how my peers managed their identity was that at some points assumed by
others, and other points true to the self.

My interview with H was informative in this aspect. Not only did he explain why
this was at issue for black people and their identity as Americans but it is at issue for
white people too in the sense that a white person isn’t going to call themselves *European
American*, “they will just say American”.\(^2\) After looking through the transcriptions
again, I realized S had said almost the same thing earlier. But the overarching results
were the same. It was either argued or stated in the answer on identity in every case that
being identified as *black* was preferable to *African American*. Quite honestly, I felt as if I
missed something over the years because I remember when it was not too long ago that
*African American* seemed preferable to *black*. Attitudes in favor of the locational

\(^2\) There are cases in which someone who has strong ties to their specific European roots and may refer to
themselves with that in mind. Someone who grew up in an Italian household, speaking Italian and having
strong connections to Italian culture may refer to themselves as “Italian-American” from the influence of
the values and practices on the identity of the individual. But this is very different from the "generic white
American", who would probably just refer to themselves as "American". And it is also very different from
the white supremacist American, who might *emphasize* the ‘European-American’ aspect for racist reasons,
without any real connection to a particular European culture.
identifier rather that the visual claimed that the word was a harsh, blunt representation of black identity because it took away the ability to identify as both black and American. This, in addition to the influence associated with language and prestige from having a more “standard” English title, encompassed the magnitude to which things have changed: not that much.

We spoke about how this differentiation helped them understand or navigate the language of power and situations of the bestowment of an imprecise identity onto them and those results opened up a lot of space for my main question on code switching.

4.4 Language of Power and Prestige Revisited

It seemed that the language of power wasn’t one specific dialect of English but rather the language being spoken as a practice of the community, that might be based on major community beliefs. Stigmas that developed in the community are enforced in their entirety by the members of the community as is their practice. This was the case with H and X, as both were often placed in communities where the expectations of them by peers and passers-by was different because of practices in the community associated with black lives and language. When X was assumed to play basketball because he “is tall and black” he went through a lot of internal battle deciding who he was:

So they [kids at school] would always ask me ‘Oh, do you play basketball?’, and people, like people I would just meet, and I really resisted that. Like [internal dialog] ‘I’m not going to play basketball, I not going to play.’ But then I ended up playing it in high school and I actually liked it and I guess I got a lot more diverse array of friends when I started playing basketball for my school. People knew me more....And I stopped caring so much about what others expectations of me should be versus what expectations for myself should be. So like, okay, expect me to play basketball, whatever. I like playing basketball, I’m going to play basketball. Like it doesn’t matter if you already expected me to. I just happen to like this....But in terms of the stereotype with the athlete, I stopped giving that so much power and realized I should have paid more attention to what I wanted to do.
The notion of no longer giving power to these concepts will be revisited in the Discussion section of this paper.

H had a different situation in his stigmatization not because of his physical appearance but because of his outgoing attitude and articulate and ardent fashion of speaking:

I was raised to be very polite, and stuff like that, so in middle school I was always called "oreo" because I spoke so clearly, well that was one of the reasons, and I didn't like, I never like use curse words in my everyday lingo, I didn't like use slang a lot, so because of that people would say 'Oh! H, you're white'. I think it's dumb because just because a black person is... if they speak eloquently and or correctly they're considered white, which is terribly racist and awful..... I went to a gas station and the gas attendant... I was like at 'Hi, can I have some Tylenol please?' And he's like 'Sure'. He goes 'Where you from?' and I'm like 'What?' and he goes 'Where are you from?' and I was like 'I live like, 5 minutes away' and he said 'Oh, I thought you were from somewhere being speaking English so well; like you don't talk ghetto or a, you know, you don't talk like a hoodlum. I thought you were from a different country because you speak English so properly!' And I was like 'Uh, thanks?' It was weird. It's just funny that the question comes up because even now, you know, like being an African American, a black guy speaking way that I do which is I never thought anything of ever but it's off putting to people even when I was middle school or even two days ago at age twenty.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

With all of this data, I am now able to form more concrete conclusions surrounding my hypothesis on the formulation of identity in black males and the influence and management of code switching in different communities of practice.

5.1 Code Switching within the Interviews

All of those interviewed were familiar with my variant of English on different levels and vise versa. However, code switching did still occur within the interviews as it
was discussed more and more. As different aspects of identity were discussed, the community in which the different portions of the interviewee’s identity developed started to come more clearly into view. The language being used in the interviews perfectly paralleled how the language of a community is there to aid the community’s goals but how the community’s goals are only sustained by the individual. There are things that are only specific to certain communities that result in certain practices being constantly upheld, even when it seems unnecessary. V told about the *American Dream Tax*, and I felt this language had many planes of meaning in relation to this thesis:

“My parents are immigrants, right? And as immigrants, there’s something called the American Dream tax, where it’s like when you come here [America] it’s kind of known that you are going to be discriminated against. And White people, you know, are going to be discriminative towards you and do fucked up things towards you, and you kind of just have to deal with it because, you know, that’s the tax you have to pay to live here. That’s how they [immigrants] feel, you know what I’m saying? When fucked up shit happens they say ‘turn the other cheek...mind your own business, just walk away, because we’re lucky to be here.’ ...I’m born here, so I don’t feel that way. But, however, I do feel like for our generation, our American Dream tax is, like, ridicule. You know what I’m saying? We take the bullshit, all the ridicule...but my opinion on it? How much can we really get done with Trump as our president? I mean, at least 51% of America wants him as our president, so at least 51% of America doesn’t give a fuck about us.”

The language of creating something called the American Dream tax and giving it that meaning is expressive of how the black (and minority) communities perceived their American Dream experience; as taxed dreamers who are still being ridiculed for wanting to have freedom and agency in every aspect.

Additionally, some practices of the differing community surfaced simply through the presence of language on the community. The abrupt drawl with which X pronounced ‘Louisville’ every time is unmatchable by anyone who does not hail from there. And it
was amazing to watch as certain words were pronounced in a way I had never even conceived. When I would pronounce ‘Long Island’ (where I’m from) to people who were not from there, I would try my hardest to remember to separate the words to hide my thick Long Island accent, which people would often laugh at or imitate. So it was interesting to hear how these people spoke of where they were from. It was as if they would jump out of one section of their range from more general, unmarked English to the section specifically sanctioned for the community in question, whether that be the Haitian community, the Louisville community, or even new communities they create themselves.

The lexicon of the interviews also brought to light some unexpected things about the ways in which code switching registers within us. Of what I gathered from the interviews, the most interesting phenomenon to experience was the change in speech in the long responses. I had always considered code switching something done to hide aspects of identity, like something meant to mask to portions of one’s identity not applicable to the surrounding community or its practices. But in hearing code switching happen within the interviews, I have realized that it is something done to better express specific parts of one’s identity rather than hiding others. Not only was this confirmed in the straightforward answers given by the men that code switching was not a burden, but it was evident in the elocution of their long responses. One response from S exemplified this well when we spoke on the use of the n-word in social media and on television.

I mean, okay so, I feel like it’s being abused as fuck in a sense. Because there’s no longer like, we don’t even, in the news and stuff, we don’t even call people by their actual background like a Caucasian, a Caucasian. You see what I’m saying? We would call them white and then we call a black person black. **And like I was saying, cartoons nowadays are not even censored to the point where nigger is just this... is just regular.** Anybody is saying that. And it’s just like, this word has been used to suppress us for years on top of years on top of years on top of years, to the point where now, to this day, we **try to use it in an endearing way with each other which is still not helping us** because at the same time...
our slave masters has called us this to oppress us. So now we're just psychologically
oppressing each other in the sense. Every time we use the word especially when we make
it so common for our white friends or Caucasian friends to say it so swiftly without us
doing anything about it or or just stopping, it's annoying. But that's America, [laughs] you
know what I'm saying, son [to V]?

As S speaks, his thoughts become more fluent and his articulation of what he is actually
trying to express about himself and his beliefs formed out of his community's practices
becomes better illustrated through his word choice and use of lexical variation. But
notice that it is still his language, his identity, his dialect presented in the dialogue. Some
of the examples of his AAE are highlighted in red and his transition to GAE is in green.
Referring to your a friend as ‘son’ is a term most frequent in the black community and
common in that area, so I thought it was a nice way to mark his membership while still
using all general terms.

5.2 Code Switching and Identity

A person’s identity and the code being used are extremely codependent and one
can not be present without the other. Black language and the identity entwined in it,
however, had appeared to me as being at issue for code switching and presenting multiple
identities. My perception on the matter wasn’t off but my interpretation was. There is a
present issue and a level of violence between languages. But that does not define the
limits of one’s identity. That is to say, code switching becomes an essential skill once its
potential is utilized to expand an experience rather than camouflage aspects of the
identity. This idea is evident in H’s experience with his those other frat brothers living
about his apartment that I mentioned in his bio. His language toward them was
specifically angled for a casual response. The aspect of this that upsets me is that H’s
everyday identity is the one that people least expect to come from him. This is how
identity is set apart from itself at times: while 5.1 shows how the language enhances the
perception of the identity, this section shows how the identity in light of language can be
perceived in such a way as to make the language null or obsolete. And so the code, at
certain times, must match the perceived identity to not disrupt the discourse with an
identity that is not immediately recognizable to the others relevant.

Most importantly, it should be said that this point of view is chosen as the choice
to engage in code switching is made. This choice is rooted in a practice of thinking
before you speak; a practice held dear in most black communities. Just as a person’s
identity can be respected for the choices they’ve made as an individual, so also a person’s
language is respected. This was extremely relevant for V when he spoke about others
choosing not to use the n-word and his attitude towards them:

I went to a Kid Cudi concert and there was a white dude over my shoulder and every time
Kid Cudi said ‘nigga’ in the song, he said ‘player’. And I respected that shit. You know
what I’m saying? So it’s obviously not that hard for these people to just not say it, because
he didn’t once say that word…. It’s a choice! It’s a choice for people to want to say it or
not. We're allowed to tell you…. white people get mad when we say you have to think
before you speak to us, pretty much, that's all we're asking you to do just think before you
speak. Which is something that we grew up with, you know something that we learned--
it’s common sense to us...

But much to everyone’s chagrin, common sense is not nearly as common as one might
hope. It is interesting to consider how in light of the existence and performance of
communities of practice, things that most people claim as a general value aren’t given
much value on a personal level. What I mean by this is that the community may value
someone saying ‘bless you’ after a sneeze, but an individual from that community may
not care about that formality and only perform it every so often or only within the
confines of the community. I would suppose that if all the people from different
communities that fit this description came together, the new community formed would
not value saying ‘bless you’ and so it would not be a practice. And so there are people who are members of both communities with opposing practices. This concept can help us understand the Green’s lexical range. As the language of an individual overlaps their identity and vice versa, so also the range of someone’s identity overlaps the range of their lexicon. Containing the range necessary to confidently practice in both a black community and in a general community may result in having access to opposing constraints within the language. This is how code switching unifies black language and identity with lexical range and communities of practice. Code switching uses the full access of the range while holding the applicable syntactic constraints in tact. This allows the identity to present itself as a mixed bag, acquiring its rule system and distribution of meaning from an array of communities.

5.3 Conclusions; Why He Said What He Said

I think that having the above in mind helped me have an even better understanding of the responses. The code switching that happened during the interviews was more of a metaphysical display of knowledge than their actual display of linguistic variation. Even though I tried to create the illusion of a relaxed environment, the way in which we spoke to each other during the interview was very different from before or after in regards to how the men carried themselves. V and S spoke clearly and intentionally in a fashion that I was intrigued by because I was more accustomed to speaking to them in semi-mumbled, hushed slang that was inaudible most of the time. This is because the topics that were usually being discussed had a language about them that would be presented in a fashion similar to the topic itself. So mumbled rap songs with poetic verses and slurred choruses were discussed with the same motion and rhythm as the song.
long winded statements mixed in with slurred/mumbled utterances and some affirmative convoluted ad-lib/noise similar to a bird call to tie it all together. I believe that they felt that this thesis was an appropriate platform for them to take something seriously about themselves and their community without fear of backlash from stereotypes, and with their own idea of how a black man is supposed to present his own identity. Additionally there was no need for them to misrepresent themselves because of our familiarity, so the language I got was authentically sophisticated and presented an identity matching that language mixed with the attitudes and practices of their other communities.

X and H both unexpectedly began their interviews with really in-depth answers based on the little information I gave them about the general topic of my thesis. They are both very well-spoken individuals with very powerful voices. And while we were speaking, they both answered so placidly yet passionately and spoke with such even temperament and straightforwardness, it was as if we were in a whole different sphere of familiarity with each other and I was completely in awe. Experiencing code switching when there is awareness of its happening is totally mind blowing (as did happen for me in these interviews). It was enlightening knowing how these people usually choose to present themselves in various communities and settings, and then watching them choose (sometimes from word to word) which portion of their identity to present to me and to the readers of this paper in that moment. They spoke deliberately and with a clear end point in mind which was somewhat telling of their process of prioritizing when their presentation and identity is not at threat and the topic being spoken about is sensitive. It is not that they were more at ease and therefore spoke more clearly but that they felt more comfortable using a more extensive variety of English because of familiarity as friends
underlying my position as an interviewer and theirs as an interviewee on a topic they were all personally ardent about. This is not to say that it is at any time any easier to defy cultural stereotypes, but it is easier to talk about defying them away from judgment. I had the ability to relate to those I interviewed in a way that allowed us to understand and learn from each other so that we could have an in-depth conversation about these things uninterrupted by unnecessary sidetracked nature of judgmental comments or misunderstood ignorance, as does happen when some scholars discuss topics like the use of the n-word.

All of my interviewees spoke about their experience with language and code switching in such a fascinating way that each response seemed to have multiple tiers in meaning. Their demonstration of discussing themselves and these aspects of their identity in the form of their individual management of code switching also demonstrated lexical range, chosen replication of learned communal practices, linguistic variation, and their intimacy with black English as their language and identity. And I’ve concluded that the language barrier within the black community is constantly in a state of flux as does happen when there is pushback on the community as a whole. But progress is being made in the upholding of the foundational practices of the community; though there may not be agreement on what exactly is to be done about the mistreatment or stigmatization of the black community and its unique members, there is agreement that we should actively move forward in a unanimous fashion. The future leaders of the community are not wholly represented in the group I interviewed but the overlapping attitudes to unnecessary stereotyping and misuse or misunderstanding of black English reaches far across the entire black community. This is a good step forward to eventually becoming
on the same page as a community about practices to better the community itself and its members.
References


Appendix
i. Interview 1 and 2 (V/S)

Me: So tell me about your household growing up. Who are the members of your nuclear family, who was really inside your house for the most part; who was living there?
S: When I was growing up it was an immigration station and stuff like that. I had millions of family members stay at one time and then leave and stuff like that but like the intricate people in my family we're like my mom, my sister, and my brother until I was like 10 and everybody else were people who just stayed for a year or two.
Me: Okay, so when you are at home what language(s) were you guys speaking?
S: It was a mixture between Patois which is just broken English Jamaican and just regular English.
Me: Who is that with?
S: My parents, really anybody that was older.
Me: Okay, so when you are at home what language(s) were you guys speaking?
S: It was a mixture between Patois which is just broken English Jamaican and just regular English.
Me: Who is that with?
S: My parents, really anybody that was older.
Me: Ok
Me: Were you friends with a lot of people in your school?
S: Yeah, because my school was like, you see how that school is right there [pointing at the elementary school down the block from where the interview was being held]?
Me: Yeah.
S: My school was basically like that to me. I live in a building you see, so everyone who lives in my building I basically went to school with. So we would just walk home together and there would be like a big crowd of us and stuff.
Me: Did you have a lot of African-American friend?
S: Most of them, uh I'm at my first white friend here actually, in Long Island like a year ago. Not even, couple months.
V: Yeah man, I was just a couple months ago.
S: I had to Chinese friend. Yeah he worked at at the Chinese restaurant, his family owned (starts using hands to describe placement). Our building was right here and this would be the school was this would be the Chinese food restaurant right here about a block away so when I grew up eating Chinese food I would see him and get free Chinese food.
*we share a laugh*
Me: So when you speak to your friends growing up how would you speak to them like is it how you would speak to V or how you would speak to your family or how you would speak to people who are older than you?
S: Actually it's like, coming from where I am, it's like a different type of slang that we all speak. And the sons I speak to V that way but then I can articulate myself a certain way because I'm not that kind of people...So it's different, it's definitely different.
*I let them read the remaining questions as part of my consent form*
Me: Okay so tell me how you would identify yourself.
S: Well I'm 20, young black man in America. I don't know, like do you want me different words?
Me: You can use whatever words you want, just tell me how you would identify yourself in your words.
S: I don't know I'll say I feel as though I'm a misguided leader. I'll say that. You know what I'm saying, 'cuz I feel as though growing up, I was always in the position to lead but then I never took it on fully because I just never knew where to go with it in a sense, because I never watched anyone above me, in any sense, but other than that yeah.

Me: Yeah I got that okay. So tell me about your opinion and experience with stigmas surrounding blackmail identity, specifically for males. Anything you've heard or somebody's inflicted on you, something that you seen in the news or on TV anything like that.

V: What would be an example?

S: Like stereotypes.

Me: Yeah, stereotype like, I was just talking to V about a comment on a friends picture saying that black people can only be seen at night when they smile because of the white of their teeth and when people laugh at that or like any of the stereotypes that were associated with things like stop-and-frisk or the idea of someone coming from a different country and having a name that's native to their culture or region that isn't regularly pronounced by a white person so then the name gets butchered and made fun of or disrespected.

S: I mean, personally I feel like we shouldn't, like racially? Americans shouldn't like make fun of a person's background in the sense that we're all from somewhere. Like we're not all from here in the sense that we're all immigrants especially white people so like none of them came from here. They all come from Germany or Europe and places like that. So how could you say that a name like from Africa is weird when a name from Russia could be as ridiculous to say in a sense? You know what I'm saying, I don't like that. Skin color and all that extra nonsense doesn't really mean anything you got to see past that. Like skin color in America, we should see past it and we'll go much farther in the sense if we do.

Me: V did you want to say anything?

V: Same question?

Me: yup, if you'd like.

V: Yeah, alright so my parents are immigrants right? And as immigrants, there's a thing called The American Dream tax where there's like a thing when you come here it's kind of known that you're going to be discriminated against and white people are going to, you know, be discriminative towards you and do fucked-up thing towards you and you kind of, just like, have to deal with it, that's the tax you have to pay to live here, okay? That's how they feel you know what I'm saying because when fucked up shit happens, they'll say turn the other cheek you know mind your own business, just walk away because we're lucky to be here. So we (pointing to himself and me) are born here or I'm born here so I don't feel that way. However, I do feel like for our generation, our American Dream tax is ridicule you know what I'm saying. We don't get hosed and shit like we used to anymore at least not really but we have to take the ridicule like the tedious shit and the bullshit,

S(interrupts): What about police brutality and stuff?

V: Yeah obviously that's...that's a different scope of what we're talking about right now. That shit, I'm obviously not cool with but like what am I going to do about it? I can say I'm not cool with it, obviously I'm not cool with that. You don't have to ask me
that to know that, you know I'm saying? But like my opinion on it? How much can we really get done with Trump being our President, you know I'm saying? That's like .... , you know what I mean like, 51%, at least 51% of America wants him to be our present so at least 51% of America don't give a fuck about us. That's how I feel, shit.

Me: Okay so, you feel about the use of the n-word in social or mass media, and how do you feel about its use amongst yourselves?
V: Used in social media? Like an songs?
S: Yeah, songs and cartoons and stuff right?
Me: Yeah songs, cartoons, the news, popular culture, social media, anything like that. The question is for both of you so anyone can answer.

S: You want me to start bro?
V: Yeah you go first.

S: I mean, okay so, I feel like it's being abused as fuck in a sense. Because there's no longer like, we don't even, in the news and stuff, we don't even call people by their actual background like a Caucasian, a Caucasian. You see what I'm saying? We would call them white and then we call a black person black. And like I was saying, cartoons nowadays are not even censored to the point where nigger is just this .... is just regular. Anybody is saying that. And it's just like, this word has been used to suppress us for years on top of years on top of years on top of years, to the point where now, to this day, we try to use it in an endearing way with each other which is still not helping us because at the same time our slave masters has called us this to oppress us. So now we're just psychologically oppressing each other in the sense. Every time we use the word especially when we make it so common for our white friends or Caucasian friends to say it so swiftly without us doing anything about it or or just stopping, it's annoying. But that's America, [laughs] you know what I'm saying, son [to V]?
V: Yeah, you know I would just say that however black people feel about the n-word we got to get on the same page and then move forward from that that's it. Because I feel like there's mad people feel like 'oh we gotta keep saying it more to take it back' you know what I'm saying, type shit, like I don't really understand how it works but like if we use it amongst ourselves then it becomes our word type shit. But like, that's a mentality of a lot of people so like you have that mixed in with all the people like how S feel, like what's going to get done? And then white people are going to make the mistake I was saying the word around a nigga like S and you know, a nigga might pop off on him. [All laughing] you know what I'm saying, because he's been around niggas his whole life who are like 'oh yeah you can say it, you good, you good.' and he goes to talk like 'oh my bad nigga.' and he'll be like '(kisses teeth) what the fuck?' (laughs again) you know what I'm saying? It's a quick 'nigga moment', that shit's savage. We just got to get on the same page that's all. I don't really care about the n word, but if it's going to be such a big deal like, just need to be on the same page about it.
S: I feel like we should just get rid of this shit all together. There's so many other words you can use like bro, my guy, like homie; anything you-
V: (interrupting) I say niglet.
Me: Is that better?
S: No because that's still using the word and it still keeping it alive.
V: Yeah I guess you're still using the word but it's kind of like a Pokémon, you know you think of a Pokémon-
S: Nah, cuz listen somebody's grandmother and old age could be walking around and be like 'look at the little niglets walking around', you know I'm saying? And then we would just be back at it again what's a different word meaning the same thing.
V: Yeah I guess, here's the thing though we as humans have the power, I feel like people don't get we have the power to give a word power and meaning, you know what I'm saying? So like, we can make niglets a fun thing when an old white woman says 'oh look at these little niglets running around' where it's not a bad thing. The only reason you know a word is bad is because when you said it as a kid your mom smacked you and she looked at your funny, do you know what I'm saying? If your mom never reacted bad or the people around you never reacted bad too bad words, you're never going to know it's a bad word. So how's a bitch going to know if it's racist if we never let it be known that it's racist. We let it be known that it's a regular thing-
S: Yeah but then again it's in our schools, bro.
V: It's like that uh- (stop short)
Me: It's like that Dave Chappelle skit when he took off the hood and he was in the Ku Klux Klan.
V:(laughs) Yeah!
S:(also laughing)Oh yeah and he was in the Klan.
Me: Okay so how do you feel about it specifically like and songs are in music on other people will use it. Like how do you feel when you're at a party and Gold Digger (Kanye West, 2005) comes on and it's the version without all the bleep out words and everybody's saying nigga?
V: You see, that's the thing. I went to a Kid Cudi concert and there was a white dude over my shoulder and every time Kid Cudi said 'nigga' in the song, he said 'player'. And I respected that shit. You know what I'm saying? So it's obviously not that hard for these people to just not say it. Because he didn't once say that word.
S: It's a choice of ignorance.
V: It's a choice! It's a choice for people to want to say it or not. We're allowed to tell you... White people get mad when we say you have to think before you speak to us, pretty much, that's all we're asking you to do just think before you speak. Which is something that we grew up with, you know something that we learned-
S: It's common sense! Common. Sense.
V: That's common sense to us, so it's like for us to be like 'yo, just don't say that' and then they get offended, that's what I don't like; when you ask a white person and not say it and they are like 'oh, why not it's in the so-(cuts himself off) Don't give me a fucking reason. I asked you not to say it, I'm uncomfortable, that's it. I don't understand why I have to go past that, what I mean? The fact that people think that you have to go pass that is crazy, that's real white privilege shit. That's a real part of white privilege that I don't understand; that they don't have to think before they speak-
S: This is going to really leave me in my head tonight, about all these people shit.[Laughs]
At this point a small break was taken for a cigarette and to take a phone call. In that time, some chatter did occur but it was not recorded for privacy purposes. One of the topics was that of a 'sphere of comfortability' within which certain terms can be used because familiarity with the person ensures depth of character baby language is lacking which I asked about once the phone call have ended.

Me: You [to V] said something about a sphere comfortability. How do you think you create something like that with other human beings?

V: I guess it comes with time, proximity, relatability, you know what I'm saying? Over and the amount of time over how long you know somebody, how close you are with them; M (a friend of V) list four blocks that way (pointing to the left). J (another friend) four blocks that way (pointing in the other direction). You know, everybody's close.

Me: How long have you known M & J?

V: I've known M since I was 4. I've known J since I was 6.

Me: And they've always lived there?

V: They've always lived- we've always lived that close. Our school is for houses to the right you know, so.... We've always been close to each other so we could always hang out and shit.

Me: Oh and you didn't answer the beginning question. Who is in your nuclear family like who was growing up in your house with you.

V: 000, my guy, growing up in my house that was sometimes my dad, be in Haiti or he'd be here. He spent most of his time in Haiti when I was a kid. And my mom, her two sisters, so two of my aunts, and both of them had one kid so I had two cousins; one was a female and one is a male, and a brother and sister from my father not my mother, half brother and sister, and the dog. I usually had a dog. I had three dogs growing up.

Me: Oh and same question to you [to S].

S: Oh I forgot, I was going to elaborate on what he said before.

Me: We were talking about the level of comfortability with people.

S: Oh yeah, okay so I mean on a large scale?

Me: Well large or small, we spectrum you feel you can speak on.

S: Okay so what I would say for community-wise: I feel like everybody if you live in a community with somebody that you actually like, care about and you care about your community and you don't want to feel a sense of fear or anything, the first thing you can do is actually say hello to the person walking on the street; doesn't matter who they are, the color of their skin, or anything like that say 'Hello, how are you? how's your day?' you know you got the first Converse and seeing how that person reacts to that, it gives you more of a comfortable understanding of the person in a sense. So with that being said, you would go along in your day a lot better without having the fear because you know your neighbor. And you actually know your neighbor more than just knowing person who lives across the street. And if you can do this in your whole Community, you you work for your community, you go to the store, you go to the cleaners, it gradually helps. You understand people a lot more, you know how people are, to help, over it maybe.
You grew up mostly in Queens and shit, and then North Carolina. So do you feel like, like and which one did you see that more? When people would walk past you and give you a little nod of acknowledgement?

S: Well that was more in the South you know, 'cuz of the southern hospitality and stuff.

V: Yeah, exactly.

S: But as I grew up, before I went to North Carolina you know I've been through a lot. So to this day when I open my mouth and talk to people, and they look at me first and they're like 'whoa, he's not supposed to talk like that', I'm like 'the fuck? ok, cool.' [uneasy laugh] I still say 'hello, how are you?', 'thank you' if they give me something, 'oh, have a nice day' or 'I'll see you later' like, making sure they're comfortable around me so that if they do see my face in another situation they understand who I am is the type of person I really am, more than who they just see "on the cover" in a sense.

V: I would just say, growing up here, it's pretty regular when you walk into a store or whatever the fuck, as you pass someone, whether you know them or not, there is a wave or a nod. If you make eye contact, there's a little smile 'hi', 'good morning', 'how are you doing'. This little interchanges in the conversation. But I've always lived in these suburbs, it's always been like that around here. You know, when I go out by myself two other places, it's not always- you know, it's not a regular thing for some neighborhoods. You know what I mean? So yeah, I feel you.

Me: Yeah, what's the last question so thank you so much for helping me finish my paper.

ii. Interview 3

Me: Okay so tell me about your household growing up?

X: So I lived with my mom, my dad, and my little sister. And I'm from Louisville, Kentucky.

Me: OK.

X: But my parents aren't from Louisville, Kentucky; like my mom's from New York, the Bronx. Well I guess really born in St Thomas, then was raised in New York in the Bronx and my dad's from Cleveland, Ohio. But my sister and I are from Louisville and I think even in that there is like some cognitive dissonance sometimes because there's a community of black people who weren't from Louisville and there is a community of people who were from Louisville, like born there, that's all they know. Both my parents are professors so I guess it makes us part of like Louisville upper class there; like even within that upper class space there was a divide of people who are very much of the city and people who have come in like later. And as I got older I think I definitely heard my parents talk about that sort of dynamic more. But there definitely was a common like, perception of the sort of, like racial trauma in issues that that we all face no matter where we came from or what socio-economic position we're in because Louisville has a legacy of being one of the most segregated cities in America and one of the issues that kept coming up, like through my childhood was whether kids are going to be bussed into schools that sort of make them more diverse or whether we're going to fall back on this idea of neighborhood schools and people didn't really think about the inherent like racism behind a lot of those motives and
people pushing for those things. When I began to come of age I think, I sort of became more aware of those things but I did go to- I went to public all my life but I went to like a magnet public school.

Me: Oh okay, ask you about that in a second. So what language are you speaking at home when you were growing up?
X: Uh, just English.

Me: Okay so did you have a lot of African-American friend much younger?
X: When I was much younger I was one of one or two in my group.

Me: Oh okay, so as time went by did you start to acquire more African American friends or was it always just small groups?
X: As I got older, I'd say like seventh grade is when I started getting a lot more black friends and it just picked up from there and I think by the time high school came around I had like a lot of black friends because I'm tall and black right? So they would always ask me 'oh do you play basketball' and people, like people I would just meet, and I really resisted that. Like I'm not going to play basketball, I not going to play. But then I ended up playing at in high school and I actually liked it and I guess I got a lot more diverse array of friends when I started playing basketball for my school. People knew me more. But just by virtue, I went from a smaller middle school to a bigger high school, so just by virtue of that I got a lot more friends and a lot more black friends. And I stopped caring so much about what expectations of me should be versus what expectations for myself should be. So like, okay, you expect me to play basketball, whatever. I like playing basketball, I'm going to play basketball. Like it doesn't matter if you already expected me to. I just happen to like this.

Me: Was the basketball team very diverse or was it predominantly African-American or another ethnicity?
X: I would say it was pretty diverse, 50/50, like black and white.

Me: Oh okay.
X: But I think in high school I was coming through an age with a time of a Trayvon Martin like all that stuff so that was very very present our minds and we actually started the very first black student union in the state at our high school because we thought that was very necessary and we faced a lot of pushback from the administration. Now afterward, after we've left it's the cool thing sort of, to have a black student union now. It's sort of co-opted and even though the alumni are trying to check back up on the kids who were left behind and see if we can push back on the narrative of 'oh we were for this all along' like from the administration.

Me: Yeah
X: And really keeps entering the voice of the students.

*Showing questions*

Me: Okay so tell me how you would identify yourself.
X: I usually say like Caribbean-American and African American I think in recent years I've been trying to connect more to my mom's heritage because I don't know a lot about it, and that's been interesting. But I've always been really close to my dad's
heritage and part of the family, so I have that as well. But the go to thing really black, I'm a black man.

Me: Okay so how do you feel about being called a black man versus being called an African American man?

X: I think I almost prefer black, because I think a lot of the time African-American really centers that "American" part and sometimes I feel like really like weird about like just attaching this idea of Africa to like, America. I don't know, for some reason I just gravitate more towards black.

Me: Okay so do you have an opinion about some of the stigmas surrounding black identity, like specifically for males. Like the one you mentioned before about basketball, or anything along the lines of like using black language and not speaking proper English, or something like that?

X: I think those are all very problematic. But in terms of the stereotype with the athlete or whatever, I stopped giving that so much power and realized I should have paid more attention to what I wanted to do. And in terms of like, if you use the vernacular English; people think beside of valid form of English, of expressing yourself- I think that's totally out of line. People need to be more aware of all the different ways that we can express ourselves.

Me: So it's common for black people to use the n-word but it's also common for all types of people to just be using it with each other. So how do you feel about its use amongst other people, black people and your friends, but also do you use it?

X: I think people who aren't black should not use it. People who are black should be able to choose whether they want to use it or not. I use it. I don't want to hear anything about people saying 'oh it's in the rap song so I can use it '; nah I don't want to hear that. Like, well if you're not going to give us reparations, at least let us have something that's exclusively ours, something that we can exclusively reclaim. That's just how I feel.

Me: Yeah. Ok, so we're in the professional setting here on Swarthmore's campus. And when you relax with your friends, even on Swarthmore's campus you're still doing code-switching and stuff like that. And I don't know if it's because we're here or whatever environment it is that you learned code switching in, or if you were even aware of what was happening, but in your experience with it how has being able to code switch helped you maneuver the black community itself? I know that's a loaded question.

X: Code switching has felt like a very essential skill. Like until we can get people to realize how valuable the vernacular English is, like it's not just some some invalid form of speaking, we kind of have to be able to change up our like, diction and different things like that. I don't want that to be the main mode of how I navigate the campus but a lot of times it is and it's really made me think about what is my true, authentic self? Like is it both being able to speak the vernacular English and intellectualize my experience or is it like, one or the other?

Me: Yeah.

X: And is it disingenuous to do those two things? But I think everyone who goes here who's black, to a certain degree is able to do it. And that's very telling of the world that we live in. But I think as long as we are able to have these candid conversations with each other in the black community, I think we're going to be alright. And it's a
lot about me thinking of everything in terms of a process like I'm not there yet, I
don't know anyone who has arrived. So if we have to code switch in the moment,
then that's another part of the process.

Me: Thank you so much that was great interview had a lot of things to say and I can't
wait to talk about it and my paper.

iii. Interview 4

Me: Okay, the first question is tell me about your household growing up. Who are the
members of your nuclear family and what language or languages were you speaking
at home?

H: Yeah so my parents are divorced, since I was like two, three. So I was raised by my
mother primarily and I have a younger brother J****** who's three years
younger than me. So yeah, it was me, my brother; my brother and I, and then my mom. It
was just the three of us and so she got married when I was fourteen and she married
my stepfather and he moved in with us that same year. My stepfather had a son
named C*** who moved in with us in 2013, so two years after they were married. So
now it's my brother J******, my brother C***, myself, my mom, and my stepfather;
the five of us living at home. But every summer I would go visit my father for a
month. And so my father had his wife, my mother and my sister J**** who was also
three years younger than me. So when I was see them, and the case of my sister I
would see her much less; but the comforter my family is just the same. I'm just as
close as my sister as I am with my brother.

Me: Are J****** and J**** twins?
H: No, but they are the same age. My sister is adopted.

Me: Oh wow I didn't know that, but I digress. So what languages were you speaking for
the most part?

H: Yeah they're both 17. And primarily English with some Haitian Creole and French on
the side.

Me: Oh okay. And who was that with?
H: Everyone. All three of the adult speak all of those languages French, English, Haitian
Creole fluently so they would try to get us kids to speak a little bit of it. My grandma
only speaks French and Haitian Creole and no English so we were forced to learn a
little bit of it to talk to our grandma.

Me: Are you first gen?
H: Yeah I'm first generation born in America. Our parents are all from Haiti like, my
cousins, everyone's parents are from Haiti.

Me: Where your step parents also born in Haiti?
H: Yup, literally every adult in my family who is older than 20.

Me: Wow so did you have a lot of African-American friends growing up?
H: Yeah!

Me: When did they come into your life?
H: Kindergarten, age 5.

Me: And so when you would say 'a lot' would you mean by that? Like how many do you
think it's a lot?
H: Well in my elementary school, Brookside [one of the then seven elementary schools], there were only two white kids in the entire grade. So let's say there about 230 kids in the school; there were about 12 white kids in any given school year in the whole school. So yeah, so it was mostly black.

Me: Okay, so what did you speak with your African-American friends?

H: English.

Me: You wouldn't speak Creole or French with your friends?

H: No, had a few Haitian friends growing up but I mostly just spoke Creole with my family and also my Creole is always very limited.

Me: Alright, now I'm just going to let you read the next few questions, so you know what you're about to be asked. They are a little bit more controversial and intimate. If you'd like to opt out of any of these questions at any point or if you don't want to answer that's absolutely fine.

H: Oouuu! Okay, cool.

Me: Okay so tell me how you would identify yourself.

H: Yeah, identify myself as a human. I mean generally speaking; their specifics like man, black, musician, but I would say humans what I most identify with, or at least I try to.

Me: Yeah.

H: Yeah, if that makes sense. It's like the umbrella term, I'd say.

Me: Yeah, no that makes sense. So would you be able to give me any stigmas you've had to deal with and tell me your opinion or attitude towards what happened?

H: Oh, yeah! So growing up I was, the way I was raised was always to be really polite and stuff like that. So like growing up, in middle school I was always called an 'oreo' because I spoke so clearly, well that was one of the reasons. And I didn't like, use curse words in my everyday lingo, I don't curse a lot. So because of that people would say 'Oh, H you're white!'.

Me: I can say for the record that H and I were both called 'oreos' at the same time together at one point.

H: Yeah, middle school, it was so gross. I think it's done because if a black person speaks eloquently and/or correctly they're considered white, which is terribly racist and awful; but you know, kids. So that was really dumb. Just the other day actually, on Saturday I went to a gas station and the gas attendant, I said 'hi can I please have some Tylenol' and he was like 'sure,'. Then he was like, 'Where you from?' and I was like, 'What?' and he asked again 'where you from?' so I was like I live 5 minutes away. And he said 'oh I thought you were from somewhere, you speak English so well. You don't sound ghetto and you don't talk like a hoodlum or whatever. At first I thought you were from a different country because you speak English so properly. And I was like, 'Thanks!' It was weird. That this question comes up because even now, being like, an African American, like a black guy speaking the way that I do, which I never thought anything of ever, it's off-putting to people. Even when I was in Middle School, or even two days ago at age 20. People are like, 'What?'. So yeah, it's terrible that people think that talking correctly, or speaking correctly rather is a facet of being white or not black or not as black as you should be, which is bad because how you speak doesn't determine your racial background. I am black. But it's just unfortunate that that is a stereotype that we have.
Me: Wow okay, there are 2 questions I'd like to ask based off of what you just said.
H: Okay.
Me: Firstly, do you consider anything to be correct speech versus incorrect speech or what do you mean by your use of 'correct'?
H: Sure, well maybe 'correct' was the wrong term to use.
Me: Well 'correct' is a term that people are using so I just want to know what you mean by that.
H: Well just, umm, grammatically correct English.
Me: Okay so I know that you said that you identify as human. How do you feel about being called Black versus being called African American?
H: Yeah, personally I don't really associate with the term African-American because I don't know much about Africa. If you were to ask me to name all the countries in Africa, I wouldn't be able to, you know? I feel bad about that but, I'm Haitian, you know? Haitian-American is definitely what I am, I know a lot about Haiti, I speak Haitian Creole, my family is all Haitian but I don't associate with the continent of Africa other than being proud of the continent and all the countries there. I wish I knew more about it, I want to learn more about it, and I plan on learning more about it but I am black. You know, Raven-Symone it's not crazy. She was like 'I'm American, I'm not African American'. And everyone else just keeps saying she's...she's...she's... but she's like 'No, I'm not saying I'm not black, I'm saying I'm not African American' and she's right. You don't see white people walking around saying 'I'm European American'. They just say they're American, you know? SO ARE WE! So I don't associate with the term African-American because I don't think I'm African-American. I think I'm a black person, an American, a Haitian-American, sure but you don't see white people don't say I'm Irish-American or Italian-American. No, they're just American. So are we. That's how I feel about the term African-American. Just call me black. I think black is a beautiful term, I love that term. I love being black and I love everything about it. I don't have that same pride for being called African American because I'm African American.
Me: I get that. Okay so how do you feel about the use of the n-word I want to say in mass media, so like social media, online, in the news, movies, songs, on TV; in general idle speech amongst your friends and other things like that?
H: I forgot to answer part of one of your last questions so do you want me to answer this question first or answer the last question that I forgot about first?
Me: Go back to your last answer because I can always react the question still, I don't want you to forget your answer.
H: Okay so about the stigma thing, growing up, being someone who's really into music, musical theatre, acting; I was always called gay a lot or feminized. Once I got into High School people grew up and tried to stop doing that, but from like, 9 to 14 that was really a thing because I was so into musical theater and dancing, and because I was so open... Even now, it's more rare now, but if I meet a guy like, from the south- you know C**** [a close friend of H that I've met], her friends is visiting from the south. So when I met him, I was like, 'Hey man, it's nice to meet you.' I gave him a hug. C**** told me how he asked C**** 'Is H gay?' Fine, fair question. And she goes 'No, he's very heterosexual. Why?' and he goes 'well, you know, because he was just so...open.' Isn't that just sad? I feel like so many straight, sorry, heterosexual
men feel like they're chained by that. They feel that because I'm a heterosexual man, I can't hug another man. And if they see a person like me not worrying about macho masculinity, don't think 'Oh, I guess he's gay'. And that's sad to me...that being open and friendly and kind and loving and affectionate means he must be homosexual. Yeah that's always been a stigma that I've had to deal with, not that there's anything wrong wrong with homosexuality because there's not. But I'm not homosexual, I just don't care about gender norms.

Me: yeah and well now that we've gotten past that question I feel like I can tell you a lot of my thesis and about like, black male identity and language and since it's based in linguistics I wanted to focus on language terms and self-reference how do you say the n-word and things like that and how that develops identity and seeing how people deal with different aspects of speech differentiation kind of. You were talking about the stigmatization of the use of elegant speech and the association with being called an 'oreo' and that specific stereotype was very influential and inspirational for why I wanted to do this. But when things like that would happen I think we've both experience bits of code-switching at that point. I don't know if you're familiar with code switching but it's a very important topic for my paper. It's kind of just like, when you're in a different situation and you're trying to speak a specific kind of way versus another form of speech that usually use.

H: Mhmm yes. Yes.

Me: It seems like you understand what I'm referring to when I say code switching so I want to know based on whatever you think I mean or whatever you have in your mind as the definition for code switching, what is your opinion on that. And what do you think is happening when you code switch.

H: If I'm understanding you correctly, I never used to do that, code switch, until recently. I realize that some people aren't receptive to the way I am, my openness, all the time. It's more appropriate in certain situations, and growing up, becoming an adult, I realize that sometimes I need to accommodate, not necessarily being fake; it's just another side of me that I can pull out. For example, at my apartment, there are six guys who live upstairs in a different frat than I am. When I met them I was still my friendly open self; but I was saying things like 'hey man, what's up?' Like 'Yo, what's good bro?', stuff like that. It wasn't like I was being totally brand new or anything. It was just a bit of code switching. Like if I had spoken like that with my best friends or something, I would have been weird. Like I know it would have been weird just from personal experience, there's six of them and there's just one of me, so let me just be ..... Let me just accommodate to the situation, because if I had been like 'oh my gosh, how are you!?... I mean I still do, that but I molded it to the situation, you know?

Me: Okay so do you feel like being able to do that is a skill or having to do that is a burden?

H: I don't think it's much of a burden. Growing up I was mostly just like 'I'm going to be exactly who I am.' and that's it. I'm still like that. But the way I am is shocking for some people for whatever reason and that's okay. I think if you do it appropriately that's fine. But like, if you're being completely brand new about it and being a different person entirely, and acting fake about it, that's something else. I was still being my super kind thoughtful self. I was just molding it to fit that kind of
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ambiance. I don't think it's a burden, and it's not difficult to do because there's different parts of me, you know? Growing up I had a lot of diverse kinds of friends, you know? So I would be like, 'Today I'll use this H' and ' in the space I'll use this H.' And they're all genuine parts of me. Some parts I go to more normally just because of who I hang out with and stuff like that, but the other parts I have to go to, it's fine; it's not like it's a fake thing, it's just a different thing, which is okay.

Me: Okay yeah so the next question was that one that I'd ask about the use of the n-word your feelings about that. So how do you feel about that in media and when your friends use it or people that you're around?

H: I think, if you are black, use that word as much as you want. If you are not black, I do not want to hear that word come out of your mouth.

Me: Okay, very straightforward answer. Nothing past that?

H: Yeah I think it's great that people who are black feel like they can use that word and own it and change the meaning when they use it, I think that's awesome. That's so powerful for me. Yeah I think it's kind of like the whole "nasty woman" thing. But really only use it if you're black.

Me: Okay yeah, so a really big part of my thesis is theorizing that there is a language barrier or language gap within the black community caused by multiple linguistic differentiations in meaning of influential terms in the community, my main one being the n word. There is divided between people who feel the n word black people, people who feel like it shouldn't be used at all, and people who feel like anyone should be able to use it. You've seen white people using the n-word and you have to think in some environment some black person like this white person use the n-word just by standing there and letting them stay and not saying anything. So my question is how do you think you would close that gap dividing all the different attitudes towards the language that we should use?

H: Yeah, you know growing up, all of our white friends would use it.

Me: Yeah.

H: Yeah and like being a high schooler I didn't know any better. I didn't know that it wasn't okay for them to use it and I'm sure neither did they, or they probably wouldn't have used it. But now I think we're all a little bit more informed about the matter. So when I was going to college I was more aware and I realized 'okay this isn't not okay for white people to should be saying,' so since then if I ever experienced a white person saying it I'll say 'Don't say that,' I would tell them. I went to Florida for spring break and there were a lot of Southerners there. I went to this party and there were some southern white guys, and we're all having a good time and one of the guys said, not to me, to his friend, the n-word as like, an exclamation I guess. And I was like, 'What did you just say?'' and he was like 'What?'' so I explain to him why he can't say that, and he goes 'oh I'm sorry.' I was just like, 'it's not okay, but now you know so it's fine now.' he's from the south, it's a different culture there. A lot of white people use it with their black friends, it's just different in terms of that. My friends from the south tell me that. But yeah if I see that happen, I'll let that person know that they can't use it and explain it; you have to explain in a peaceful manner, otherwise the person just shuts off. So I think if you really just explain to them why they can't use it.... And obviously if they want to use their clearly they want to use it anyway, I can't do anything about that. But I will just do my part as a
black person to explain how I feel about it and how that makes me feel uncomfortable and how that should be reason enough for them not to use it, if that makes sense.

Me: Yeah, that makes sense. Just to be a little bit controversial here, some interviewees have responded to the question saying that we have the power, as human beings, to give meaning and power to a word. So if we just choose not to let this word have that power over our lives, does it mean that anyone can use that word at that point?

H: Once we make it so the word has no meaning?

Me: Yes.

H: In my opinion?

Me: Yeah.

H: I don't think so because that was like the last word that a lot... like billions of black people heard before they were lynched by white people so I really don't think that in any case or scenario white people should be able to say that word. Or non-black people, rather. It's just ugly. Even white people who aren't racist who use it... Just don't. Like I said that's literally the last word that so many black people heard before they were lynched or raped or killed. It's not good. So I can't imagine a situation and which it would be okay for everyone to use it. I think we can use it because we are ancestors of people who dealt with that, so we have that... I don't know the right word to use. It's not a privilege. It's not a right. Well I guess it is a right to use that word how we deem appropriate but I don't think anyone else can use that word and I do get offended when people who aren't black use it. So to answer your question I guess, no.

Me: Wow ok, thank you so much for all of your great answers I asked you a lot of extra questions to be more specific based on some of the things that other interviews led to so thank you for your time and patience and I think we're all done.

H: Lit!