



TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

**«AAVE AND ITS PRESENCE IN AND INFLUENCE ON
RAP MUSIC»**

Autor: JOSÉ ANTONIO NEIRA RAMOS

Tutor: DAVID LEVEY

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ABSTRACT.

This project starts by placing the African American Vernacular English in its historical and cultural context before analyzing its main features. These form the main foundations of the current music industry, especially in the rap and hip-hop genre. Once its origins and characteristics are analyzed, contemporary issues such as appropriation will be discussed. On this matter, white rappers, like Vanilla Ice or Eminem, represent a breaking point of African American discrimination in the mass media, and the starting point of a music era characterized by artists sounding black in their songs.

Keywords: African American Vernacular English, AAVE, vernacular, dialect, Creole, blackness, rap, music, appropriation, stereotypes.

RESUMEN.

Este proyecto comienza situando el dialecto African American Vernacular English en su contexto histórico y cultural antes de analizar sus características principales. Estas constituyen los cimientos de la industria musical actual, particularmente del género rap e hip-hop. Una vez analizados sus orígenes y característica, se analizarán cuestiones contemporáneas como la apropiación. Sobre este asunto, raperos blancos, como Vanilla Ice o Eminem, representan un punto crítico de la discriminación afroamericana en los medios de difusión, y el punto de partida de un periodo musical caracterizado por artistas que suenan como negros en sus canciones.

Palabras Clave: African American Vernacular English, AAVE, lengua vernácula, dialecto, criollo, negrura, rap, música, apropiación, estereotipos.

1. INTRODUCTION.

The English language is divided into a great number of dialects and accents (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008), and it seems that most of them have a few stereotypes to deal with. Nowadays, the only authorized accents and dialect seem to be Standard English, and to a lesser extent General American (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001). People need to look beyond these two varieties and be aware that in their insides there coexist thousands of other varieties that derive from both, like African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

This preference of the two main varieties of English has made people that speak others create stereotypes and assumptions about these minor varieties; ideas that are detrimental to their cultural background since they denigrate and devastate every improvement or change these secondary varieties have created throughout their developments. Therefore, speakers of nonstandard varieties suffer from prejudice and mockery when speaking.

The prime aim of this project is to show how Africans arrived in the United States and brought with them Creole languages that fused with the colonizers' language and gave birth to the foundation of the contemporary music scene, as in *Streets* by Doja Cat (2019), "'Cause you're a one in a million, there ain't no man like you", in which she uses *ain't* and *multiple negation*, both creole-based characteristics. To display this, first, I will analyze why AAVE is considered a dialect and the two theories that explain its origins; followed by its main features and their corresponding evolution, separated into phonetic, like *plural -s* and *final clusters* absences; grammatical, as the use of the *copula be* or the *possessive -s absence*; and lexical, focused on the use of *y'all*. An outline of every feature will be presented, as well as correlations with other varieties of English when these happen. Moreover, music verses from some of the most popular rappers of the last decade will be used to illustrate the uses of these characteristics on the mainstream.

Then, evidence of white artists using the dialect in their music will be introduced. These facts bring up the issue of the contemporary music industry and panorama: Should white people speak or use AAVE? Different theories and ideas will try to answer this question from a fair point of view, considering the background presented at the beginning of the project.

2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT.

To begin the discussion of African American Vernacular, one must see through the lens in which how Black American culture has evolved throughout American history. To do so, the matter must be started by evaluating its beginning, slavery.

From the 15th century to the 19th, slavery was one of the biggest topics/issues of the moment. European Imperialism was in its highest peak, so colonizers started to expand their territories to the rest of the world, especially the American continent. They needed people to work in their new locations, so they started to transport Africans to these new places. This process of expansion was known as the trans-Atlantic slave trade (see Appendix 1).

One of the concepts that found to be remarkable in this process was the *Middle Passage*. It “was so called because it formed the central section of the euphemistically termed ‘triangular trade’” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 195). This “trade” consisted of three trips that have to do with Africa:

one from Europe (or later, the Americas) to Africa with manufactured goods and alcohol, the second from Africa to the Americas with slaves, and the third from the Americas to Europe, with bills of exchange and trade commodities. (Falola & Warnock, 2007, p. XV)

The term *Middle Passage* is more centered in the second part of the journey, in which Spanish, English and Portuguese empires started to deal with the transportation of people as slaves. Falola and Warnock (2007) remark that “from 1441 until 1867, European powers (and later the United States) shipped approximately 12 million Africans to Europe and the Americas” (p. XVI). Most of these slaves were used to supply the American demands, working in all types of jobs, but mainly in plantations, as it will be seen later.

Although this process is more known for the American transportation, it began with the shipping of sub-Saharan slaves to Europe, especially to Portugal and Spain. They were needed in Europe, but the majority of them were destined to America; and, as mentioned before, “the trans-Atlantic slave trade grew out of the need for an inexpensive source of labor for sugar plantations” (ibid., p. XVII). Interestingly, they did not use African slaves as their first option, they tried it before with the native inhabitants of the Americas. However, when natives rejected their enslavement, they started to use Africans.

In the 17th century, Great Britain entered as one of the biggest shippers in the history of the Middle Passage, transporting Africans from the Guinea Coast to the Caribbean islands. This creates a huge and fast expansion of the sugar plantations, and slave imports started to skyrocket. British imported a great number of slaves over approximately 150 years of shipping. They transported “1.9 million slaves [...] and planted the seeds of the abolitionist movement that would intensify in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (ibid., p. XIX).

Slavery started to decrease in the early 19th century. Because of the poor treatments that they received (such as dehydration or famine), slave resistances appeared as a rebellion against the colonizers. These inhuman measures were publicized, and after the violent slave revolution in Sant Domingue in 1791, the institution of slavery was “significantly compromised” (ibid., p. XX).

Pressure by abolitionists started to become more and more prominent, and in 1807, “British Parliament passed the Abolition Act, which outlawed slave trading by British subjects, and in 1808 the United States followed suit” (ibid., p. XX). They also motivated other nations to follow their path and stop slavery. Spain and Portugal agreed, but there were still uses of slaves everywhere. Finally, “by the 1860s, the turning tide of public opinion, combined with the increased enforcement of antislaving laws, lead to the cessation of the trans- Atlantic slave trade.” (ibid., p. XXI)

These exchanges of African people to the United States is the beginning of the African American history of the aforesaid country. Their arrival brought people, and people brought a culture with them.

Herskovits countered that, in fact, the legacies of Africa in the Americas [are] evident in religion, food, dance, music, family and community structure, speech and syntax, and folklore and, furthermore, that elements of African culture had been adopted by the white population. Herskovits’s work represented an early effort to understand how African cultural traditions had survived the Middle Passage and contributed to American societies. (ibid., p. XXIV)

The territories where Africans were originally transported were Southern territories of the USA, specifically Georgia, Alabama, Texas, and Louisiana, because of their agriculture. However, the result of the Great Migration (Southern people moved to the North of US) and

this fact, of our destiny as blacks, of our history and culture” (as cited in Thompson, 2002, p. 144).

This “flow of pride” by Black Americans was influenced by other African American movements, like the Harlem Renaissance (also known as the “New Negro Renaissance”); and was the foundation of some Civil Rights moments, like the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party; besides helping with the fight against segregation systems like the Apartheid. These moments were crucial to fight racism in America and around the world. Terrence Hayes’ poem *Probably Twilight Makes Blackness Dangerous* from his book *American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018) gives a marvelous overview of the black perception of some current events that occurred in the last decade (see Appendix 2). This “black pride” touched and reached every single field that surrounded African Americans, like music, as it is going to be seen in the next pages when the features of the dialect are presented.

3. DIALECT AND VERNACULAR AS CONCEPTS.

Focusing on linguistics, humans do not have the same perception of the English language that they had 500 years ago. Languages are always evolving over the ages, always changing and innovating. Old English started to evolve until it became Modern English, or Standard English (SE) in phonetic terms; and SE continues evolving day-to-day to different dialects. As Chris Baldick (2001) says, dialects are “distinctive variet[ies] of a language, spoken by members of [...] group[s], nation[s], or social class[es]. [...] [They] differ from one another in pronunciation, vocabulary, and (often) in grammar” (p. 64). Some dialects in America are Chicano English, Cajun Vernacular English, or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is going to be the main focus of the project.

Taking this into account, AAVE is therefore considered a dialect, since it fulfills all the previously mentioned requirements, spoken by African Americans in the United States of America as its name shows. Naming the dialect has been problematic since it has been called by several names. Some of these have been *Black English* (rejected by linguists, since it was not concrete enough), *Ebonics* (rejected by linguists, since it comes from *Ebony*, a problematic term that implies a negative connotation), *Black English Vernacular* or *BEV* (accepted, neutral term coined in the 1960s), and *African American Vernacular English* or *AAVE* (final term, now used by most linguists).

There are some arguments regarding what AAVE is. Some linguists agree that AAVE is “a language in [its] own right rather than a variety of English, a viewpoint which emphasizes its Niger-Congo heritage” (Penhallurick, 2010, p. 55). However, the majority of them think that it is a dialect of which probably some features might be developed “partly or wholly as the result of white dialects” (Crystal, 2007, p. 307).

One word that stands out in the concept is *Vernacular*. Lexico (March 26, 2020), the OED, designates the adjective as a term “used by people belonging to a specified group or engaging in a specialized activity”; and George Yule (2017) specifies that it is ‘typically spoken by a lower-status group, which is treated as “non-standard” because of marked differences from the “standard” language’ (p. 291). In other words, it is spoken by Black Americans in a “close” environment, as William Labov (2012) says in his *Dialect Diversity in America*, “with family, friends, and peers in intimate situations where minimal attention is given to speech” (p. 47). The American linguist also states that the vernacular is what a child first learns perfectly as a basic linguistic system, then “masters perfectly, and uses with unerring skill in later life” (ibid., p. 47).

In addition, Marcyliena Morgan (1999) indicates that “where the Black community is seen as vernacular-speaking by definition, most studies consider Whites to be speakers of Standard English” (p. 29). Besides, and considering the previous information, black people do not use the dialect in communication exchanges with other people that are not used to the dialect, every AAVE adult speaker has the possibility of changing the styles and adjusting it to a more Standard English “version” of itself (Labov, 2012).

Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes (2001) show in their book *American English: Dialects and Varieties* that there exists a historical issue about the origin of AAVE: They state that there are two main hypotheses regarding the origin of the dialect, the *Creolist Hypothesis* and the *Anglicist Hypothesis*. The former states that AAVE comes from a Creole language², like *Gullah*, which is still spoken in some regions of the United States like South Carolina and

² “Creole” originally referred to a white (man) of European descent, born and raised in a tropical colony. The meaning was later extended to include indigenous natives and others of non-European origin. The term was subsequently applied to certain languages spoken by Creoles in and around the Caribbean and in West Africa, and then more generally to other languages of similar type that had arisen in similar circumstances. (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 50-51)

Georgia. Over the years and the contact with other regional dialects, the Creole language changed to become more like other English varieties in a process called *decreolization*.

This process of decreolization involved the Creole languages undergoing differing amounts of *complication* and *purification*. Complication reintroduced certain irregularities from English, and counteracted the simplification that had occurred during [...] [the creolization]. And purification removed certain of the elements from African and other languages that had resulted from the mixing [...] [of dialects during creolization]. (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008, pp. 112-113)

This process acts gradually, that is why Creole characteristics could be still seen in some features of the dialect, such as the copula absence, which will be explained later. AAVE still has some words that come from its African origins, “the most famous of these is *OK*, which almost certainly originated in West African languages such as Mandingo” (ibid., p. 116).

On the other hand, the other hypothesis that Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2001) provide says that the foundations of the dialect come from the same origins as Anglo American dialects (dialects spoken in the British Isles); therefore, it is called Anglicist hypothesis. This means that the dialect came at the same time than the British Isles dialects, so they developed together, not from “created” languages as Creole languages. Black people learned the varieties of the areas inhabited by white people that surrounded them. Anglicist theorists assure that Creole languages like Gullah are exceptions between black varieties of English that just appeared in special circumstances of the Sea Islands that were isolated.

The issue of the historical development of AAVE has often been linked with the questions of the current-day status of African American – Anglo American speech relations, but these two issues are not necessarily related. It is, for example, possible to maintain that the creolist position is essentially correct but that decreolization has been so complete as to eliminate virtually all differences that existed at a prior point in time. Furthermore, sociolinguistic contact among whites and blacks over the generations may have resulted in speakers of both ethnicities picking up features from one another so that the two dialects are no longer as different as they once were. (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001, p. 178)

Having said this, African Americans changed their social status from being “nothing” when they arrived to be nowadays more than 13% of the population of a country with more than 328,000,000 people (U.S. Census, April 17, 2020); and the great majority of them speak or understand this dialect (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001). The spread of the use of the dialect is helped by the music industry, especially rap music.

Music is one of the biggest, not to say the biggest, transmitter of ideas worldwide: ideas are expressed through language; languages transport meaning; and meaning is spread by voices. Voices that carry accents and dialects with them. Hence, rap music is the main authority when talking about AAVE spreading, since most of the biggest and most powerful personas of the industry are African Americans that use the dialect as the foundation to begin creating music.

Most rappers have the previously explained background of discrimination since they grew up in the streets, and they pour this suffering into their songs with their “grammatical creativity, verbal wizardry and linguistic innovation in the art of oral communication” (Dyson, 1991, p. 22). According to Jon Michael Spencer (1991) “when rap is considered in its authentic context [...] there is no question that the musicality, unique expressivity, sexuality, and ideology of rap have historical, social, political, and cultural continuity –and legitimacy” (p. 2). This shows how the concept of *Négritude* influences rap. It has a legacy, a “blackness” that makes them proud; and they are not afraid of showing it in their lyrics. The last part of the project will deal with the contemporary issue of white artists using the dialect in their songs to sound “cooler”, and how many African Americans consider this to be “sullyng” the dialect.

Accordingly, and as said before, lyrics taken from music (especially raps) will be the guides and the tools that will show AAVE features in context. These characteristics will be divided into three categories, considering the nature of the feature itself: Phonetic or phonological (it will cover the different sound variations that the dialect experiences), syntactic or grammatical (it will deal with the structure variations considering the syntax of the sentences), and lexical (it will focus on one lexical component that is seen in mostly all the speakers of AAVE). All these features will be taken as variations of Standard English (or Received Pronunciation, belonging to the South of the UK) and considering the recent *uniformity controversy*.

This controversy involves how uniform AAVE is across the USA, whether it has a single set of norms to which young African Americans aspire, and whether any geographic variation in AAVE is dependent on or independent of variations in the vernaculars of European Americans and other ethnic groups. (Thomas, 2007, p. 451)

4. FEATURES.

It must be said that some elements of the dialect are just exclusive to AAVE, and others are somehow borrowed or influenced by other English dialects of America. These elements are mainly characterized by the absence of some SE features or the exclusive presence of some AAVE features, as seen in Figure 2.

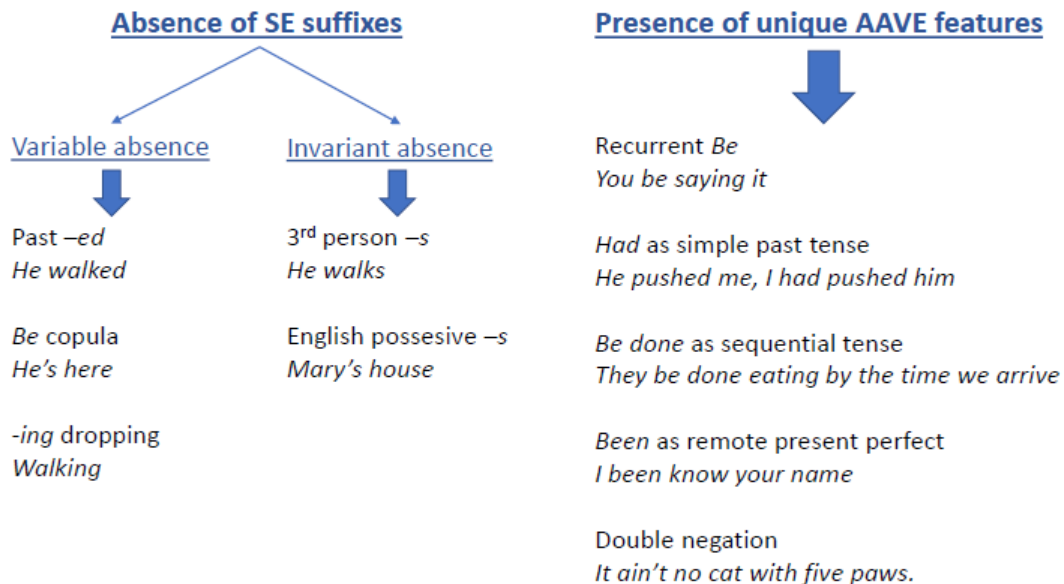


Figure 2: Features in which AAVE and SE are more different (Labov, 2012)

4.1. PHONETIC FEATURES.

Regarding the phonetical changes AAVE speakers have developed, their pronunciation has been influenced by the locations they were living in. The biggest number of these speakers were located in the South and in North areas like New York, as it is said. Erik Thomas (2007) declares that “phonological and phonetic variables may well represent the richest source of information for shedding light on how AAVE is changing” (p. 452). However, it is quite remarkable and representative of the dialect how they are prone to keep traditional features that are disappearing, but at the same time they are “more advanced in the use of new mergers” (Labov, 2012, p. 41).

4.1.1. CONSONANTS.

Agreeing with Labov, one feature that continues with the traditional tendency and breaks with General American English (GA) is *r-lessness* or *non-rhoticity*. *R-lessness* deals with the deletion of the /r/ sound in some syllables, “most common[ly] in unstressed syllables [...]

and in final and preconsonantal postvocalic positions” (Thomas, 2007, p. 453). In stressed syllables, AAVE speakers follow the *r-full* tendency of GA.

As it is known, American English is a rhotic accent, it pronounces every /r/ sound, as opposed to SE. The deletion of this sound “predominates [...] in certain areas of the Northeast – the New York City [...] area and eastern New England [...] – and in parts of the South where the plantation culture once predominated” (ibid., p. 453). It is shared by white and black people in these regions of the country, and “most of these areas have been strongly influenced [...] by the r-pronouncing pattern which is predominant in broadcasting, [...] especially young people will show a mixed pattern” (Labov, 1972, p. 13). Nevertheless, AAVE speakers show a more common use of this variety since their /r/ pronunciation frequency changes city-to-city, but it exhibits that African Americans show more non-rhoticity than whites (Labov, 2012). An example is Tierra Whack (2019), an American rapper born in Philadelphia, who keeps deleting the /r/ sound every time she says *power*, [p^haʊə], in her verse of *MY POWER*: “They'll never, ever take my power. They'll never take my power, my power, my power”.

Most linguists also agree in another use of this *r-less* feature that is prominent in AAVE speakers, like William Labov (2012), who says that in addition “/r/ is often dropped between two vowels” (p. 41). To portray this, one could take J. Cole’s (2018) verse in his song *Once an Addict (Interlude)* as an example: “Young Carolina nigga, fish out of water”. The rapper was born in Germany but moved to North Carolina when he was eight, and he pronounces [kæəlɑɪnə] rather than /kærə'laɪnə/, dropping the /r/ between the TRAP vowel and the PRICE vowel³.

The deletion of the /r/ in words is not the only elision in this dialect. AAVE is peculiar since its most characteristic phonetical aspect is the absence of elements that could be found in other dialects, such as the suffix *-ing*. This is known as *g-dropping*, in which “the nasal [ŋ], represented as *ng* in spelling, is pronounced as [n]” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001, p. 326). Moreover, ‘Linguists refer to this process as “velar fronting” since it involves the fronting of the velar nasal [ŋ], produced toward the back of the mouth, to [n], a more fronted nasal sound’ (ibid., p. 326). This dropping of the sound appears commonly in unstressed syllables; and it is

³ See Figure 3.

not exclusive to AAVE. It appears somehow in mostly all the dialects of English but is popular between vernacular speakers (ibid.).

G-dropping does not mean that the speaker converts every single [ŋ] into [n], speakers can shift from sound to sound, sometimes pronouncing one and sometimes the other. This does not mean that the speaker is using two completely different dialects, but he or she is using just one with two possibilities of pronunciation. However, these changes of sounds are not random or casual, but there are no evidences that clarify when the speaker is going to produce one or the other. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2001) declare that there are factors that influence the selection of one sound or the other, known as *constraints on variability*. These elements are divided into two main types, one of them being social factors such as social class, education, and environment; and another being the linguistic context that surrounds the construction.

Considering this, it could be addressed that speakers with lower status have more probability of saying *-in'* rather than *-ing*, and people with upper status have the possibility of using *-in'* when talking with friends and *-ing* when talking with their bosses, for example. Rap is characterized by using the language of the streets, a lower status language that is portrayed in music. Because of this, most rappers, either black or white, delete the velar nasal sound, pronouncing an alveolar nasal sound, as in *Anaconda* by Nicki Minaj (2014), a rapper born in Trinidad and Tobago but raised in the Bronx, who mixes both possibilities in her verse: "he keep tellin' me to chill and he keep telling me it's real, that he love my sex appeal".

Continuing with phonetic and phonological deletions, AAVE tends to follow a rule with plosives final sounds /t/ and /d/. Labov (1972) states that "t or d is variably deleted after another consonant at the end of the word, more often if it is not followed by a vowel" (p. 44). Doja Cat (2019), American rapper from Los Angeles, replaces the final /t/ from words like *that* and *shit* in her verse of *Like That*: "Tha-tha-tha-tha-tha-that's my shit, that's my wave". Hence, she says [dəs mə ɪʔ], replacing the final /t/ sound for a glottal stop at the end of the word. This occurs since the word is somehow cut. In these cases, Labov (1972) argues that "final /d/ may be devoiced to a [t̚]-like form, or disappear entirely [; while] final /t/ is often realized as a glottal stop [...] but more often disappear entirely" (p. 18).

By the same token, suffix *-ed* pronunciation in past tenses is reached by this characteristic. “In white dialects, the present is usually clearly differentiated from the past by [...] irregular past forms, and the *-ed* suffix” (ibid., p. 47). Nonetheless in AAVE, past and present are not distinguished from each other since speakers drop or delete /t/ and /d/ “as often as 90 percent of the time” (ibid., p. 47). Azealia Banks (2014), New Yorker rapper from Harlem, uses this technique in her song *JFK*: “Miss, I been this, you must’ve missed out. Dope when dressed up, ya boy strung out... His girl is pressed, now behave, calm down”. Therefore, speakers would know that she is talking in past tense in the first case because of the context and that she is using an adjective in the two other cases because of the same reason, saying [mɪsəʊ] (deleting also the final /t/ in *out*), [dresʌp], and [pres] respectively. Nonetheless, this feature can just be applied to phonetics, since “only those who are most remote from the speakers and the speech of [AAVE] would claim that the *-ed* suffix is not present in the grammar” (Labov, 1972, p. 48).

This last characteristic goes hand in hand with another unique phonetic feature of AAVE: *final consonant clusters deletion*. This simplification appears when two consonants come together at the end of words, “in which the second consonant is a stop” (Thomas, 2007, p. 455) such as /t/, /k/, /d/. These reductions are processes in which the final two syllables cluster is shortened to just one sound (Green, 2002); therefore, the clusters are affected by the last variation of /t/ and /d/ deletion in past tenses. Erik Thomas (2007) claims that “various studies [...] have shown that cluster simplification is less likely when the stop constitutes a morpheme than when it does not” (p. 456). These final sounds cannot be considered as isolated words, they need to be analyzed in different environments in which the words could be followed by a consonant or a vowel, or considering the speech context in which the clusters are produced, for example. These situations might influence the speaker who could retain the clusters in a formal speech.

However, this feature reaches a lot of words in which clusters like /-st, -ft, -nd, -zd, -nt/ can be frequently found, such as *test* [tes], *hands* [hæns], *arrest* [əres], and *permanent* [pɜːrmənən] in Jay-Z’ verse of *Black Effect* by The Carters (2018), group formed by Jay-Z, New York rapper, and Beyoncé, Texas singer: “Yes, put ‘em up, this is not a test. Now hands where I can see them, fuck a false arrest. This Off-White fit that I rock, shit permanent”. This feature is seen in other pidgins and Creole languages and is found to originate in a similar way that

English Creoles originated (Yule, 2017). This last assumption agrees with the previously explained Creolist theory since it is known that speakers pronounce in this way not because they want to eliminate the final consonant sound occasionally, “but because the languages from which [AAVE] originated do not have final consonant clusters” (Green, 2002, p. 108).

The last feature that is well-known and common to the phonetic part of the project is *Th-Stopping*. “Today, /θ/ is commonly replaced with /t/, /t̚/, /tθ/, [...] or is deleted and /d/ is often replaced with /d/ [or] /d̚/” (Thomas, 2007, p. 454). Nevertheless, in AAVE it is found that “initial dental consonants [...] are frequently pronounced as alveolar stops” (Yule, 2017, p. 292), but these changes are not just done randomly or because speakers cannot pronounce *th* sounds properly:

The distinction between the two *th* sounds is maintained in [AAVE] when speakers use voiceless sounds in one environment and voiced sounds in the other. [AAVE] speakers have rules that govern the occurrence of these sounds in word initial, medial and final positions. [...] These same speakers who produce t/d and f/v in some environments in which *th* occurs in general American English also produce the *th* sounds in some environments. They produce the voiceless *th* sound at the beginning of words, so they say words such as *thin*, *thigh*, and *thing* as they are pronounced in general American English and other varieties of English, even though they begin with the *th* sound. So speakers do not use *t* in environments in which voiceless *th* begins a word in English. (Green, 2002, p. 119)

A great example of this feature is Cardi B and her strong accent. The American rapper is known for her big personality and for having a strong New-Yorker accent. Her background is Dominican, but she was born and raised in the Bronx, and she shows this in her lyrics and way of speaking. Even though she is not purely “black” because of her roots, black people consider her as one of their community since she has been raised among them in the streets of the Bronx. Hence, Cardi (2018) tends to use this sound change a lot, as it can be seen in her song *Be Careful*, “Trust me, nigga, it's cool, though”, and *Bodak Yellow*, “Think these hoes be mad at me”. As explained before, she changes both initials /θ/ and /ð/ in *though* and *think*, saying [dθ] and [tɪŋ] respectively.

4.1.2. VOWELS.

For a better understanding, I will use Wells’ vowel system of RP to explain the vowel analysis, as in Figure 3. Labov (1972) argues that vowels are “of less importance [when analyzing the dialect] [...] since they have little impact upon inflectional rules” (p. 19), but there

are some changes in pronunciation. Some of the most characteristic vowel differentiations are highlighted by Thomas and Labov in their researches: Erik Thomas (2007) states that one of the biggest changes that the dialect has suffered is the tendency to pronounce the GOAT vowel more fronted, as /ɒ/, like the LOT vowel, called the *African American Shift*⁴. Hence, words like *though* /ðəʊ/ are pronounced [dɒ], as Cardi does in the previous example of her song *Be Careful*. Labov (1972), for his part, shows that some diphthongs are simplified to monophthongs, like the PRICE vowel to /a:/, more like a PALM vowel, as the Californian Rapper, Swae Lee (2018), does in *Guatemala*: “she had her eyes on the prize”, pronouncing [p^hra:z] rather than /praɪz/; or the CHOICE vowel to /ɔ:/, more like the THOUGHT vowel, as the American singer, Rihanna (2010), does in *What’s My Name*: “Hey, boy, I really wanna be with you”, pronouncing [heɪbɔ:] rather than /heɪ bɔɪ/. However, Labov (1972) also shows that AAVE shares some vowel characteristics with the Southern American accent, like the assimilation of the KIT vowel and the DRESS vowel before a nasal consonant (/m, n, ŋ/). These examples display that AAVE phonetics deals more with consonant variations and exclusiveness than vowel variations and that it tends to reduce or simplify its pronunciation.

KIT	ɪ	FLEECE	i:	NEAR	ɪə
DRESS	e	FACE	eɪ	SQUARE	ɛə
TRAP	æ	PALM	ɑ:	START	ɑ:
LOT	ɒ	THOUGHT	ɔ:	NORTH	ɔ:
STRUT	ʌ	GOAT	əʊ	FORCE	ɔ:
FOOT	ʊ	GOOSE	u:	CURE	ʊə
BATH	ɑ:	PRICE	aɪ	happy	ɪ
CLOTH	ɒ	CHOICE	ɔɪ	letter	ə
NURSE	ɜ:	MOUTH	aʊ	comma	ə

Figure 3: Wells’ vowel system of RP (Wells, 1982, p. 120).

4.2. GRAMMATICAL FEATURES.

Regarding the previously explained phonetic part of the project, a conclusion is derived: “In the matter of pronunciation, African Americans are followers rather than leaders, and they do not follow very far” (Labov, 2012, p. 45). That is to say that AAVE deals more with grammar than it deals with pronunciation (ibid.). Hereafter, it will be shown that the dialect

⁴ Although the origin of the fronting of the LOT vowel is unclear, it appears to be part of a chain shift in AAE in which the TRAP and DRESS vowels, and perhaps (but less obviously) the KIT vowel, are raised. This chain shift [...] might be called the African American Shift. (Thomas, 2007, p. 464)

has a lot of new developments regarding features, but they are not influenced by the white dialects that surround them, “rather, they come from deep inside the grammar of AAVE” (ibid., p. 45). Something that calls linguists’ attention is the fact that it is typical to stigmatize AAVE grammar as “illogical” or “sloppy”; due to this, speakers are criticized (Yule, 2017).

This section will be also divided into two subcategories: On the one hand, neutral-tense elements, and on the other hand, past and future elements. This division has been made in order to differentiate the features. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the neutral elements are just strictly restricted to present constructions, it means that these elements are more prone to appear in present tenses. In other words, they play bigger roles in the present, but some of them do appear in past and future (*possessive -s* and *plural -s* deletion, or *multiple negation*, for example). Therefore, past and future elements are separated in this subcategory since they have big importance in the dialect due to the variety they have when representing these tenses.

4.2.1. NEUTRAL-TENSE ELEMENTS.

Addressing neutral-tense elements and as seen in the phonetic section, it must be recalled that AAVE is characterized for deleting certain elements, like suffixes. This deletion reaches every field of the dialect, including syntax and grammar, and therefore inflections, as Labov (1972) affirms:

As we examine the various final consonants affected by the phonological processes, we find that these are the same consonants which represent the principal English inflections. The shifts in the sound system therefore often coincide with grammatical differences between nonstandard and standard English, and it is difficult at first to decide whether we are dealing with a grammatical or a phonological rule. (p. 23)

Following this trend, the most significant deletion in AAVE would be the *third-person singular -s* in present. “In general English, -s can be added to the verb only when it is the first member of the verb phrase, and can register the difference between past and present” (ibid., p. 49). However, AAVE presents an absence when using the present tense, like in *Juicy* by Doja Cat (2019): ‘He like the Doja and the Cat, yeah. He like it thick, he like it fat, yeah. [...] He ask me, “Doja where you at, huh?”’

[The absence characteristic] is found in both African American and Anglo American vernacular but occurs at substantially different percentage rates in each variety. Some African American speakers show

levels of absence between 80 and 95 percent while comparable Anglo American speakers show a range of 5 to 15 percent absence. (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001, p. 172)

Besides, William Labov (2012) assures that due to the high percentage of *third-person singular -s* absence, “irregular verbs take on an invariant form” (p. 51). For example, Kelly Rowland (2010), singer born in Atlanta and raised in Houston, in *Commander* uses the same form of *do* in third and first-person: “Baby, there’s no other who do it like I do it”. Following this tendency, verbs like *have* or *do* would be the same in all their forms.

The absence of third person *-s* can be expressed in a contrary way, in which suffix *-s* is added when there is no need to do it. This is called *hypercorrection*: “When a variable element is firmly based in the underlying grammar, speakers know where it may appear and where it may not” (Labov & Harris, 1986, p. 14); so that, there are times when the speakers may introduce an *-s* where it does not belong. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2001) declare that sometimes speakers want to achieve higher-status, for this reason, they use this technique to sound more “correct”, but they end up sounding ‘hyper-“correct” or hyper-standard’ (p. 219). Hence, this characteristic concludes meaning that the person that “hypercorrects” the words is a low-status speaker trying to sound “better”. Beyoncé parodies being from Houston and therefore being a stereotyped low-class speaker in one of her tour performances of *Single Ladies*: “Can I take y’all to where I’m from? I’m from the dirty South; Houston, Texas. And in the dirty South, we gets nasty” (Beyoncé Live, 2015).

This last feature leads to a conclusion: “Simplification is obligatory for black speakers when a final *-s* is added” (Labov, 1972, p.16). Consequently, plurals and possessive *-s* are affected. These two features are not only seen in present tenses but every environment since they do not depend on a verb to fulfill their functions.

In raps, the deletion of *the possessive -s* appears with more frequency than the deletion of the *third-person singular -s* in present. However, this feature has a rule: “use *-s* to indicate possession by a single noun or pronoun, but never between the possessor and the possessed” (Labov, 2012, p. 49). In other words, an AAVE speaker would say “this is hers” or “this is Anna’s”, but never “Anna’s house”. Instead, it would just appear the name of the possessor followed by the possessed without an *-s* between them, since “it has been argued that word order is sufficient for marking the possessive relationship” (Green, 2002, p. 102), as in *Hot Shower* by Chance the Rapper (2019), who is from Chicago: “I got muscles like Superman

trainer”. Listeners take for granted that the trainer he is talking about is Superman’s, but there is no need to use the -s inflexion of the Saxon Genitive since the word order gives the entire meaning and puts everything together.

Being consistent with the aforementioned deletion tendency, *plural -s* are eliminated. This unique feature of AAVE is something remarkable for several reasons: “First, there is the pattern of -s absence related to measure nouns with quantifiers” (Wolfram, 2004, p. 125), as in *Pure Water* by Migos (2019), group formed by Quavo, Offset and Takeoff, who are originally from Atlanta, in which they say “two step”, eliding the final -s in *steps*. This absence considering measurable nouns is characteristic from the South, as well as many other AAVE features, and some urban cities of the North (Wolfram, 2004). Secondly and exclusively to AAVE, there are times when speakers delete both plurals in a noun phrase, as in *Walk it Talk it* by Migos (2018). In this song Quavo deletes both -s suffixes when he raps “These niggas bought they fame”, saying [dənɪgə] instead of /ðəz ‘nɪgəz/.

Rap is an urban music style, and this deletion “is a trait of urban AAVE, it is relatively infrequent, with typical absence levels less than 10 per cent out of all the cases where it might occur” (Wolfram, 2004, p. 125). However, the rural places of AAVE speakers show a higher percentage of *plural -s* deletion, with levels that cover one-third of every potential case (ibid.).

According to Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes (2001), the deletion of suffixes in AAVE, such as the previously mentioned *plural -s*, *third-person singular -s*, and also *-ed* elision, is found to be absent when writing since they are inflectional suffixes. Their study also found that:

dialect differences are sometimes reflected in quantitative differences and the systematic patterning of variable differences rather than merely in more readily observable qualitative differences. Thus, in describing a dialect, we must be careful to note ways in which it differs quantitatively from other varieties as well as ways in which it differs qualitatively. (p. 255)

We shall now discuss the use of verbal markers that are of interest to linguists, starting by *be copula* absence. Labov (1972) notes that “the absence of the copula⁵ in the present before predicate noun and adjectives, locatives and comitative phrases” (p. 48) is one of the

⁵ *Copula* refers to “a type of verb [...] that joins the subject of the verb with a complement” (Cambridge Dictionary, April 10, 2020).

most famous and known features of the dialect. That is to say that AAVE speakers elide the forms of the verb *be* when speaking. An example of this would be the verse of Yo Gotti (2017), rapper from Memphis, in *Rake It Up*: “You a little bitty bitch [...] You a old hater, you a fuckin’ cougar. You a beitch and he a beitch and y’all like twin sisters”. Looking at the way *be* is deleted in the song, it would therefore seem that forms such as *is* and *are* are commonly deleted by AAVE speakers.

Although there are a number of descriptive and explanatory dimensions of copula absence that remain in dispute, including whether it is derived through a grammatical or phonological process, there is general agreement about its ethnolinguistic status. (Wolfram, 2004, p. 117)

William Labov (1972) shows that this feature can be found in other Creole dialects, such as the French Creole of the Caribbean, the English Creole of Trinidad, or the English Creole of Jamaica. Moreover, Labov (*ibid.*, p. 70-72) exhibits that this deletion just happens when using *is* or *are*. He states that first-person *am*, and therefore *I’m*, appears in the dialect (*I’m tired*), as well as other forms of *be* such as infinitive (*You got to be happy*) or following a modal (*This could be good*), with no exception. It could also be used to emphasize (*Jesus is God*), or in imperatives (*Be cool*). Regarding questions, the American linguist says that it appears in tag (*You good, aren’t you?*) and embedded questions (*I don’t care what you are*). In past tenses, it is commonly seen the form *was* (*He was in Spain*).

This characteristic tends to be seen as “illogical” or “messy”, but this is just an example of the evolution that the dialect is suffering. They express the same with fewer words; and they do not do it randomly. Looking at the way they delete the verb, it can be concluded that they do it in “contractible” forms. That is to say, “whenever SE can contract, [AAVE] can delete *is* and *are*, and vice versa; whenever SE cannot contract, AAVE cannot delete *is* and *are*, and vice versa.” (*ibid.*, p. 73). It is known that there are multiple languages in the world that do not have copula and that link their subjects with the predicate without the necessity of a verb; if this structure were truly “illogical”, then Russian, Hungarian, and Arabic would be “illogical” too (*ibid.*, p. 223).

Another nonstandard characteristic that helps to build the stereotype of AAVE speakers is *habitual be* or *invariant be*. This characteristic breaks with the above copula since it replaces the absence for the infinitive form of *be*.

This characteristic is mostly used as a set structure in which the infinitive form *be* is followed by a verb ending in *-ing* or gerund form, and it “may signify an event or activity distributed intermittently over time and space” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001, p. 255). However, it may appear followed by verbs, adjectives, passive verbs, or even “prepositional phrases [...] and adverb phrases [...] to indicate being in a place on particular occasions” (Green, 2002, p. 49). Hence, according to this, *be* serves as speakers’ jack of all trades since it can be used in many ways. Labov (1998) shows that just three rules must be applied to its use:

It does not accept negative affixation (**ben’t* or **be not*). Instead, the negative particle precedes *be* and requires *do* support (*don’t be*). It does not form tag questions (**..., be he?*). [And finally], it does not participate in auxiliary inversion (**Be he doing that?*). (p. 120)

Many possibilities of this feature are commonly seen in raps, like Cardi B (2018), who uses *be* + participle form in *Twerk*: “I be dripped up then be wiped down, uh”; Sage the Gemini (2014), Californian rapper who uses *be* + gerund form in *Nothing To Me*: “Nigga I be balling out the gym I be LeBron’ing [...] I be riding sliding slipping and dipping”; or Nicki Minaj (2020), who decides to use it followed by a noun phrase in *Nice to Meet Ya*: “Now when dem, dem talk, I smile, it be crickets”.

Since *habitual be* already carries the temporary meaning, “adverbs are not needed to express this meaning” (Green, 2002, p. 51). Nevertheless, it could also be found followed by adverbs, as in Twista’s verse (2011), who is from Chicago, in *Worldwide Choppers*: “They get in a predicament that be never reversible”. However, the most common adverb that can be found after the infinitive form is *already*, ‘but with or without an adverb it carries the meaning “this event occurs an indefinite number of times”’ (Labov, 2012, p. 58).

Over the last half century, the habitual reference of *be*, particularly with *V-ing*, has grammaticalized in a change that has been spreading from urban centers outward. Practically all studies of AAVE show that younger vernacular speakers use *be V-ing* more than older speakers [...], and that urban speakers are more likely to use it than non-urban speakers [...]. It is also possible that the use of habitual *be* may be age-graded, and that younger speakers who use it frequently will reduce its use as they get older, since it now has a strong association with black youth culture. (Wolfram, 2004, p. 119)

To conclude, AAVE grammar system is changing in a different direction than other vernacular varieties, and the use of this feature between young speakers from urban areas is a proof of this (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001, p. 179), although it is also seen in other

vernacular, like Caribbean English, that could demonstrate its Creolist origin, and also some rural Anglo varieties, that could show the possible idea of an Anglicist origin (ibid., p. 333).

It has been seen that the Creolist theory, which says that the foundation of AAVE is Creole, is linked with the majority of AAVE features. This theory shows also traces of its Creole origin in negative forms, such as *ain't* or the use of *multiple negation* structures. These two features are known for being the most Creole influenced of all AAVE characteristics.

According to Darin Howe and James Walker (2000), *ain't* is argued to be an equivalent to the preverbal Creole negator [no] in AAVE, and it is used as a universal negator, as in Jamaican Creole English (p. 112). This Creole negator marker is dependent from the tense of the sentence. Howe and Walker (2000) argue that "*ain't* in AAVE is not only tense-neutral, but also aspect neutral – that is, monomorphemic, standing for negation and nothing else. It follows that *ain't* should be used in all configurations of tense and aspect" (p. 112).

Ain't stands for several possibilities of negation in SE, like *be+not*, *have+not*, and *did+not*. The first two types are common in other vernacular varieties of English, but the last one is seen to be exclusive to AAVE (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001, p. 340). This uses of the verbs could be seen in its Creole origin since it "predicts that Early AAE should employ *ain't* differently with past and non-past reference, and as a negator of all auxiliaries, *be*, *have* and *do*" (Howe & Walker, 2000, p. 112). Hence, *ain't* could appear in a lot of contexts, but it never occurs in others, like sentences that have modals or *do* in present tense, in sentences in which the adverb carries the negative meaning, or in which the negative is postposed (ibid., p. 113).

The use of *ain't* for *have+not* is seen in a lot of nonstandard older varieties of English in Great Britain, such as Nottingham, Hampshire, or Yorkshire, but they tend to use more *have+not* (ibid., p. 113). However, this tendency changes in early AAVE, in which speakers opted for the form *ain't*. Nowadays, contemporary AAVE uses this *ain't* possibility in a smaller percentage, but they still use it (ibid., p. 113-114), as in *Many Men (Wish Death)* by the New Yorker rapper, 50 Cent (2003): "I'm the diamond in the dirt that ain't been found. I'm the underground king, and I ain't been crowned".

In *be+not* context, AAVE could use the copula, but they are more prone to used *ain't*. This use of *ain't* is also seen in other varieties like African Nova Scotian English, and it "is basically restricted to present temporal reference" (Howe & Walker, 2000, p. 116), as Megan

thee Stallion (2019) says in her song *Ride or Die*: “like it ain’t problems in my life I gotta deal with [...] I ain’t scared, I’m a pop that shit. I ain’t shy, bust it wide ‘cause I been that bitch”. The Texan rapper could have used “There isn’t” or “I’m not” instead.

However, if certain *ain’t* clauses are isolated, I consider that *ain’t* could be understood as present or past, as Doja Cat (2020) does in her song *Boss Bitch*, saying “You ain’t even here to party”. This case could be interpreted as “You weren’t even here” or “You aren’t even here”. Consequently, both versions are completely possible and acceptable in AAVE.

Lastly, Howe and Walker (2000) assure that the only form that is exclusive to AAVE is *ain’t* as *didn’t* in the paradigm *do+not*. In their study, both linguists arrive at the following conclusion:

If we assume that *ain’t* is tense-neutral, there is no a priori reason for it not to occur in the environment of *didn’t*, since this environment is generally [-habitual] and [+punctual] and is therefore consistent with the aspectual requirements of *ain’t* that have been suggested. (p. 119)

This use breaks with the Creole origin of the feature since it is a recent development use, this could be “developed from rather recent phonetic changes” (ibid., p. 120). Howe and Walker (2000) show that the only phonetic explanation that has been given to this use of *ain’t* as *didn’t* is Rickford’s, who says the use appears when the initial /d/ is lost after a process of morphophonological simplification in AAVE. However, they also state that Winford thinks that this variation was presumably seen in the first AAE stages, when the dialect tried to be approximated to SE.

This context is just restricted to *didn’t*, since AAVE speakers show few uses of *ain’t* as *don’t*, while Southern whites show a higher percentage (ibid., p. 121). Therefore, *ain’t* in these two contexts, as *didn’t* and *don’t*, appears as the biggest use of the feature in rap music, as it can be seen in Cardi B’s (2019) *Wish Wish*: “I ain’t got no free time, all my shit expensive”, using *ain’t* as *don’t*, or in Atlanta rapper Kanye West’s (2010) *Monster*: “And if I’m fake, I ain’t notice”, using *ain’t* as *didn’t*.

Summing up, it is concluded that “the form *ain’t* does not have distinct past and non-past forms” (Green, 2002, p. 39), and that “although *ain’t/didn’t* variation is restricted to AAE varieties, Early AAE almost categorically prefers *didn’t*, while modern AAVE prefers *ain’t*” (Howe & Walker, 2000, p. 124). These discoveries tell that the preference of using *ain’t* in all

environments is a new development for the dialect “rather than a Creole legacy” (ibid., p. 124).

Ain't can also be “intensified” by another feature that is also stereotyped in AAVE: *multiple negation* or *negative concord*. ‘The term “negative concord” describes constructions in which the negative feature is spread over all elements in the sentence (or the clause) that can bear it’ (ibid., p. 124). It is common to see more than two negative elements per sentence; and most of the times, these elements are indefinite forms (like *nothing* or *nobody*) that match with the negative form of the main verb in the sentence. Linguists agree that the number of negators that can be found in a sentence is unlimited (Green, 2002); and also that “‘extra’ negative elements in [AAVE] sentences [are] pleonastic, suggesting that they do not contribute any additional meaning to the sentences” (ibid., p. 78). That is to say that in a sentence like *Motorsport’s* “Ain’t made no commitment with none of you bitches” (Migos, 2018), the negative marker *ain’t* carries all the meaning when marking the negation, while the following two negative noun phrases basically agree with the negation and maybe add emphasis, but do not contribute at all to the negation.

This characteristic is a classic feature in languages with Creole origins such as Guyanese Creole, since in this Creole language the negator is compulsory in sentences that are already negated with the verb phrase (Howe & Walker, 2000). In contemporary AAVE, different patterns can be followed: The most followed of them all happens when the negative weight is carried by the verb and the negation is spread all over the phrases, as in *DNA* (Lamar, 2017): “When I was 9, on cell, motel, we didn’t have nowhere to stay”. Another possibility is when the negative indefinite goes before the negative verbal phrase, like Quavo (2017) shows in *Rap Saved Me*: “Save your beef, nigga, nobody can't find no water”.

The last two possibilities are shared by almost every vernacular variety in English, but there is one last option that is incredibly used and almost unique in AAVE, the *negative inversion*, “in which two sentence or clause initial elements, an auxiliary and indefinite noun phrase, are obligatorily marked for negation. In these constructions, the initial negated auxiliary is followed by a negative indefinite noun phrase” (Green, 2002, p. 78). This has a structural resemblance to yes-no questions in which the auxiliary goes before the subject, as in Childish Gambino’s (2013) *IV. Sweatpants*, who was raised in Georgia: “Ain't nobody sicker

in my Fisker”; or in *212* by Azealia Banks (2014): “They’ll forget your name soon and won’t nobody be to blame but yourself”.

There is an exception within this use, this type of negative does not work with every kind of noun phrase. For example, when the subject is a proper name like Julia, a noun phrase beginning with the article *the*, or a possessive article, the structure does not work, or it is very unlikely to happen; in other words, one cannot find **ain’t Julia gonna do it*, **ain’t the table gonna break*, or **ain’t my mum gonna do it* (Pullum, 1999). Labov says that “negative inversion is an optional process” that gives additional emphasis to the negation (as cited in Green, 2002, p. 80).

These types of “extra” negation have been called “illogical” structures too since in SE there is no need to put another negation when the verb is already negated. However, this concordance has a large past in English: “it was the norm in Old English and persisted throughout Middle and Early Modern English” (Howe & Walker, 2000, p. 125), and it is still seen in nonstandard speeches and dialects like AAVE.

The key result of [the] comparison [of *ain’t* and the *multiple negation*] is the discovery that the negation system of Early AAE displays no distinct or unambiguous Creole behavior. This discovery suggests that, at least as far as negation is concerned, early African Americans simply learned and spoke the colonial English they were exposed to, apparently without approximation or creolization. (p. 136)

4.2.2. PAST AND FUTURE ELEMENTS.

AAVE structure is richer than SE when considering ways of expressing past and future. While SE cannot distinguish simple past from present perfect, AAVE speakers have other ways of communicating these meanings using verbs or sequent of verbs with a different interpretation, such as *completive done*. This past participle form of the verb *do* is used to refer to an action that has been completed in recent past (Labov, 1998), as in *The Box* by the Californian rapper Roddy Ricch (2019): “I done put my whole arm in the rim, Vince Carter “. In these contexts, *done* could be used to “add intensification to the activity” (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001, p. 333), expressing that someone is already tired of doing something. Therefore, this feature can be an equivalent of *have* in some cases.

It shows some correlation with other Creole languages like Caribbean Creoles that also express past tense with a similar form; however, AAVE’s “syntactic configuration [...] [and]

semantic-pragmatic function differ somewhat from its Creole counterparts” (Wolfram, 2004, p. 119) in a new way expressing an action that is completed, working as a perfect in SE. Wolfram (2004) shows that the feature also appears in white Southern English but AAVE uses it unusually: when *done* is used with punctual verbs like *tell*, the verbal marker neutralizes the fact that the action is “completed”. For example, Lil Wayne (2010) says in his song *6 Foot 7 Foot* that he “done told these fuck niggas so many times”; in this context, the rapper from Louisiana does not mean that “he completely tells”, since someone cannot “completely tell” something. In this sense, Labov (1998) suggest translating *done* as *already*, expressing “occurrence in the recent past, with effect on the present” (p. 124).

Another way of expressing past in AAVE is *preterite had*. This feature is used to indicate simple past using *had* with the past forms of verbs. In other words, it is the “black” equivalent of a simple past in SE. The Georgian rapper Quando Rondo (2018) raps “When you left a part of me had went to missing” in his song *It Ain’t Easy*: If this is considered in SE, “when you left a part of me had gone”, *had* tells the reader that “a part of me had gone” *before* “you left”, when the rapper means that “a part of me had gone” *after* “you left”, as seen in Figure 4. Labov (2012) explains that *had* reverses the moving of the action, going backward in time, while AAVE “marks a forward movement in time like a simple preterit” (p. 56). This is to say that *had* indicates that the verb that follows happens after the one that precedes.

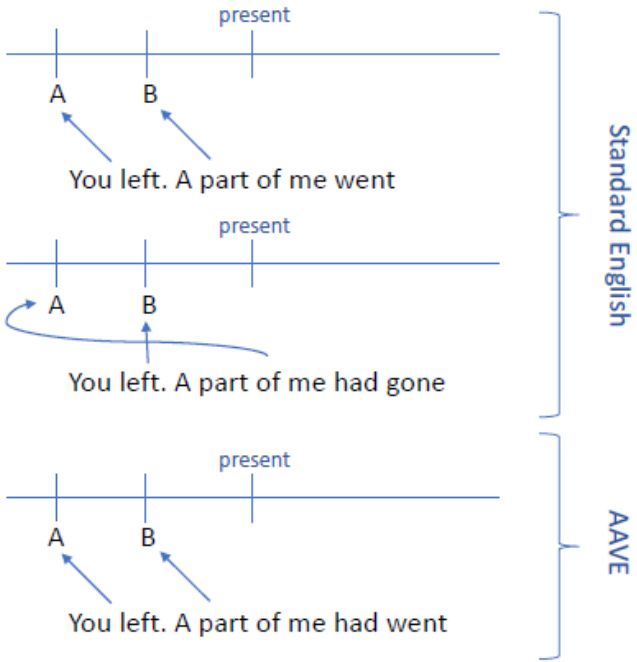


Figure 4: Differentiation of HAD uses in SE and AAVE (own elaboration).

Both last interpretations of these features show that events have happened in the past, not so long ago. However, *remote time been* shows that the event took place long ago and still remaining. While SE denotes *been* as something that happened in the past and finished long ago, AAVE uses *been* in another way, expressing “‘have for a long time’ and [implying] ‘and do so now’” (Labov, 1972, p. 53). Hence, it could be interpreted as a remote present perfect, as in *Every Season* by Roddy Ricch (2018): “I just been married to double cup”. Considering the verb *marry* and analyzing it in this context, SE and speakers of other varieties would answer *no* to question *Is Roddy Ricch still married?*, while AAVE would answer *yes*. Labov (1972) indicates that AAVE common possibilities for this question are “a: yes; b: he’s married; c: has been for a long time” (p. 54). Moreover, the American linguist (1998) states that *been* has “three semantic components: 1. A condition referred to was true in the past. 2. It has been true for a comparatively long time (non-recent). 3. It is still true” (p. 135).

Hence, one might come to the conclusion that speakers of other dialects do not recognize or understand this remote present perfect *been* since they get a different result when processing the information. These “foreign” speakers suppose that this form is “interpreted as the deletion of a contracted form of the perfect ([He’s] *béen* married), thus camouflaging some of its subtle semantic difference from other varieties” (Wolfram, 2004, p. 120). In other words, non-AAVE speakers understand that this feature is a deletion of the *-s* in *He’s been*. White people could interpret it as the above-explained *third-person singular -s* since they are more exposed and used to this feature than they are to *been* constructions.

When this feature is stressed in a sentence, it may appear as *BIN*, “pronounced with a low tone” (Labov, 2012, p. 60), and it also states that the action took place in a remote past and continues in the moment. “The remote past is relative, so it can refer to a time period of fifteen minutes ago or fifteen years ago” (Green, 2002, p. 55). Lisa Green (2002) shows in her study that this stressed *BIN* has three main interpretations: *BIN_{STAT}*, standing *STAT* for *state*, and meaning that the statement is continuously holding; in this context, *BIN* is commonly followed by a verb ending in *-ing* and predicate phrases (like prepositions, adjectives, adverbs or nouns). *BIN_{HAB}*, standing *HAB* for *habitual*, and meaning that the action occurs habitually, from time to time; in this context *BIN* is just followed by action verbs (like *run*, *put*, or *be*). And *BIN_{COMP}*, standing *COMP* for *completed*; in this context, the verb is supposed to be finished, and the state is seen as the result of a remote action.

For expressing future, AAVE speakers use what is called *sequential be done*. This feature is a combination of the above-explained *habitual be* and *completive done* and could be interpreted as “resultative or a future conditional state” (Wolfram, 2004, p. 120). On the one hand, it could be translated as Standard English future perfect, *will have*, meaning that one event will occur after the other. Also, “sometimes *be done* is preceded by *will*, [...] *gonna*, or another auxiliary” (Labov, 2012, p. 63), but it holds the same order of events, as in *F Cancer (Boosie)* by the Atlanta rapper Young Thug (2016): “By the time you just be out (What?), I’m a be done made bail (I swear)”.

As an equivalent of the future perfect, it is not simply an aspect marker but a combination of tense and aspect which indicates both completion and location in the future. The future perfect is attached to the first of two successive events in the future, and asserts that the first action will occur and be completed before the second. This relationship is prototypically indicated by the phrase *by the time*. (Labov, 1998, p. 130).

However, on the other hand, there is another use of this feature that cannot be translated as a *sequential be done*, and therefore *will have*, as in *FIND MY WAY*: “Every day I pray to God that a nigga don’t try to play, though. ‘Cause I don’t like to play, be done gave a nigga a halo (Boom, boom, boom)” (DaBaby, 2020). This sentence could be transcribed as “I be done gave a nigga a halo if he plays with me” in order to explain it better. This use is called *resultative be done*, and it does not just mean that the events will happen orderly, but it also implies that the second one will go after the first one inevitably (Labov, 2012). Wolfram (2004) shows in his study that this use of *be done* is usually related to threats and warnings as in DaBaby’s verse, and also that it is “a newer semantic-aspectual development” (p. 120) in AAVE grammar, as shown in Figure 5.

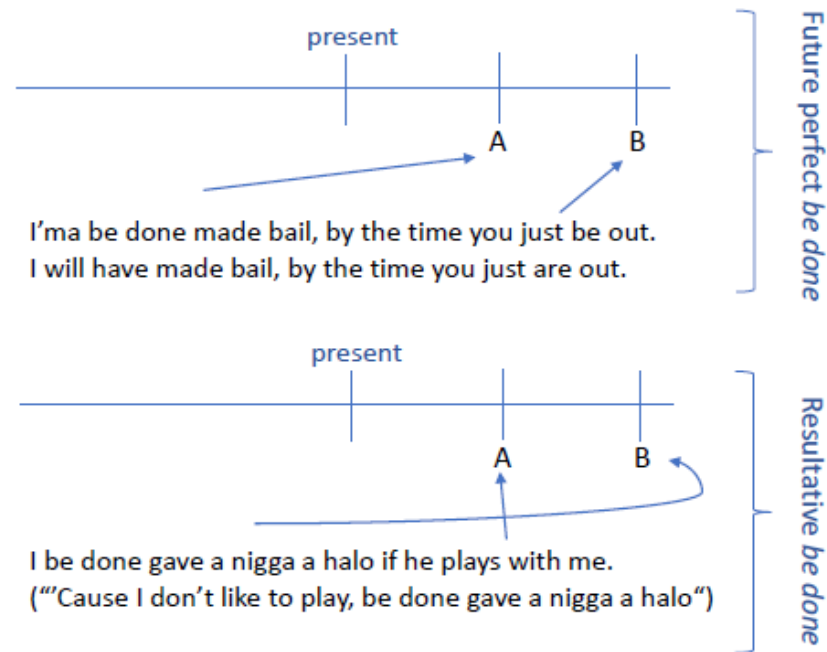


Figure 5: Different uses of *BE DONE* in AAVE (own elaboration).

Labov (1998) shows the correlation that *habitual be* and *completive done* has with this combined feature: He assures that the “habitual” meaning does not have to do with *be done* since it deals with just one situation, not with a continuum. However, the “completive” function of *done* does reside in the future perfect meaning of *be done*, but not in the resultative. What appears in both contexts of *be done* is the intensive meaning that *done* carries, especially in the resultative.

Summing up, one may derive from this grammatical part that AAVE grammar has the tendency of creating verbal markers that comes from its Creole background to express tenses, and also that these markers have a fixed set of patterns that tell non-speakers of AAVE that these verbal markers, and therefore its grammar, is governed by rules (Green, 2002). It can be also concluded that AAVE is increasing its exclusiveness and grammatical power since it shows unique features that are exclusively used in the dialect, which leads to the following assumptions:

AAVE is becoming more and more different from other dialects, [and] this divergence occurs along two dimensions: (1) African Americans participate to only a limited degree in the regional differentiation of mainstream white dialects, and (2) AAVE grammar is steadily following its own direction in the development of grammatical meanings. (Labov, 2012, p.64)

4.3. LEXICAL FEATURES.

As well as grammar, the Creole origin also influenced AAVE vocabulary. The most predominant lexical entry that stands out in the dialect is the use of *y'all*. This word is used as second-person plural of *you*, and it is the contraction of *you+all*, as in *Formation* by the Southern singer Beyoncé (2016): “Y’all haters corny with that Illuminati mess”. The feature “is quite common in both Southern and Northern versions of AAVE and therefore contrasts with the second-person plural formation in regions that are characterized by variants such as *youse*, *you guys*, or *youns*” (Wolfram, 2004, p. 125). However, it is more characteristic of Southern AAVE as seen in Figure 6.

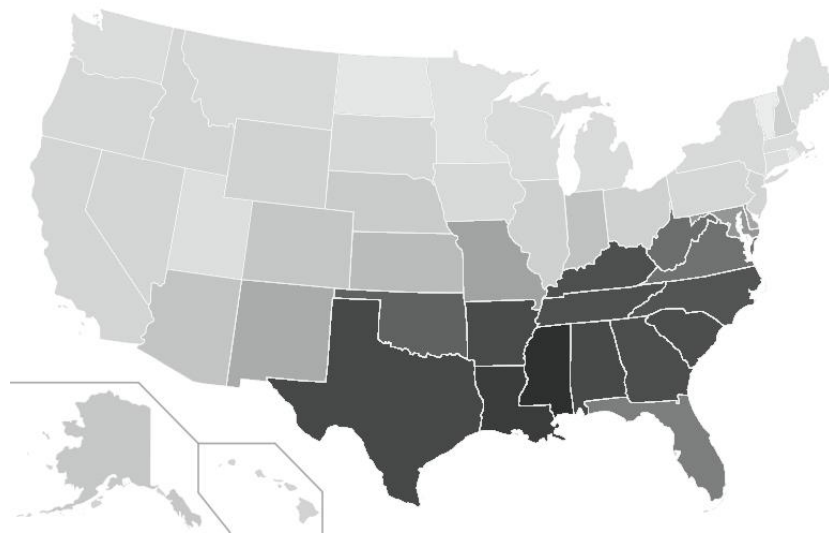


Figure 6: Areas where Y'ALL is prominent in the United States (Wikipedia, 2020).

The origins of *y'all* are confusing since there are two major theories for this: Montgomery's and Lipski's. In the first one, Michael Montgomery (2014) suggest that the combination of words comes from *ye aw*, a Scots-Irish construction that expresses also the plural of *you*. He suggests that this construction came to America when emigrants from Ireland moved to Appalachia around the 18th century. He also directs attention to the fact that SE shortens the second element of contractions, as in *you're* or *they're*, but it is peculiar how AAVE speakers contract the first one, saying *y'all* rather than *yo'll* or *you'll*.

By the same token, John Lipski (1993) argues that the shortening was introduced when slaves were transported from Africa to America, as explained before, and it is the result of the African-English Creole in the 19th century. Hence, these Irish and African immigrants developed their own cultures in unison in the same Appalachian location, and probably

developed the use of *y'all* in the South of America. This use will later move and spread to the North after the before-mentioned Great Migration so that the word is commonly seen and used in places like New York or Chicago.

5. RAP: WHITE OR BLACK?

These features show that AAVE is the main and basic element of rap music, along with their experiences and cultural issues, but nowadays the tables have turned. Rap music is one of the biggest global forces, and what yesterday was “pure” black, today is “a black expressive culture facing appropriation by white-controlled record industry” (Hess, 2005, p. 372). In the 1980s, white artists began to be interested in hip hop and rap music, and they started to “imitate” the blackness of the genre, although the biggest sellers in the moment were black. The first white group that became well-known in the genre was the Bestie Boys with their debut album *Licensed to Ill* (1986), but they succeeded because they were “black-managed” (ibid., p. 377). There was not any problem with the popularity of the group since they were still “white-acting” in their recordings and performance. Diehl (as cited in Hess, 2005) underlined their accents being completely white and their attempts to be and sound white while rapping.

However, this “friendship” between white and black rappers did not last very long; it finished after Vanilla Ice’s case. As said before, rap lyrics are characterized by their “blackness”, their *Négritude*, and therefore the autobiographical experiences they have suffered while fighting racism. “There is a history of white artists topping the charts with black music they have adapted for a white mainstream and making more money than the African Americans who invented the form” (ibid., p. 376).

To fit in, Vanilla Ice invented his biography saying that he grew up in the ghetto, between poverty and crime; while the truth was that he grew up in a wealthy family in a modest suburb in Dallas that did not have anything to do with crime at all (ibid., 373). Ice (1989) topped the charts in the 1990s with his single *Ice Ice Baby*, in which he uses this invented background along AAVE features: both phonetic, as the deletion of the final /t/ in past forms or the reduction of final clusters in verses like “I busted a left”, saying [əbʌsəlef], and grammatical like the use of the invariant form of *do* when he says “You better hit the bullseye, the kid don’t play”. He was canceled immediately when the information was released publicly, and Joe Brown (as cited in Hess) made the following statement:

Vanilla Ice is merely the latest chapter in a recurring American dream, in which a good-looking white kid borrows a black sound and style (even his name is nicked from the other black Ices: Ice-T, Ice Cube and Just-Ice) and walks off with the prize. (Hess, 2005, p. 379)

He was right, since Vanilla Ice became the scapegoat, the last straw that broke the camel's back, and started a trend of white artists appropriating black culture. In other words, he is the first well-known *wigger*⁶. This "war" cooled down when the biggest white rapper of history, Eminem, beat records with his music since the rapper from Missouri had a style different from Ice's: he went back to the Bestie Boys' times, and rather than trying to imitate a black person, Eminem talked about his experiences and problems of being accepted as a white rapper in a black music industry (ibid.). He settled a white rap authenticity (ibid.). However, one can notice that Eminem uses AAVE features that are shared with other dialects, for example, the use of *ain't* as *be+not* or *multiple negation* in his song *The Real Slim Shady*: "We ain't nothing but mammals – well, some of us, cannibals" (Eminem, 2000). He would never use *ain't* as the unique AAVE *do+not* use, keeping away from being considered black.

People didn't seem to pay much attention to hip hop until the extent of its white audience was revealed. The base assumptions surrounding hip hop and racial authenticity have always been that black identity is, by default, legitimate, while white identity is either suspect or invalid. (Harrison, 2008, p. 1783)

Hence, they, as white rappers using AAVE, opened the season for other white artists that saw that "talking black" sells, starting an era of white artists topping the music charts with songs that clearly sounded black. They made black music "wider and whiter" (Weinstein, 1998, p. 139) because they, as Light says (as cited in Hess, 2005), saw that "black [people] [...] buy the records, but [whites] [...] buy the cassette, the CD, the album, the tour jacket, the hats, everything" (p. 385). The biggest problem of this appropriation is that "white people don't see the privilege they carry with them" (ibid., p. 376).

Evidences of white rappers using unique AAVE features in their music are spread all over the genre, but the best examples might be Iggy Azalea and Lil Pump, who are from Australia and Miami respectively. Both rappers use grammatical structures, which are the most common "stolen" features in songs, like the use of *remote been* in Azalea's (2018) *Savior*,

⁶ *Wigger*: combination of *white+nigger*, "a usually young white person whose clothing, language, and mannerisms are regarded as imitative of those stereotypically associated with African-Americans. A white person who admires and seeks to emulate black culture" (Merriam-Webster, April 26, 2020).

“I been lookin’ for a real one to hold onto”, or the elision of *third-person singular -s* and *habitual be* in Pump’s (2017) *Gucci Gang*, “My lean cost more than your rent, you momma still live in a tent [...], none of this shit be new to me”. Moreover, they also use phonetical features in their verses trying to “sound black”. These features are not as often as grammatical but they appear sometimes, changing their own accent, like *th-stopping* in *Fancy* again, changing /ð/ for /d/ in her verse “Now tell me who dat who dat” (Azalea, 2014), or reducing final clusters in *Boss*, saying [əflerɪrɒs] in his verse “Bitch, I flex, Rick Ross. Walk in the trap, Rich Flair” (Pump, 2017).

Nevertheless, the grammatical and phonetic appropriations have not just reached rap, but also every genre of mainstream music. One could take as examples white pop artists like Ariana Grande (2016), who uses the *copula be* and the deletion of third-person -s in her song *Everyday*: “He givin’ me that good shit that make me not quit”; or Meghan Trainor (2020), who uses the *multiple negation* and final /t/ deletion in her song *Nice to Meet Ya*, saying “I know ain’t nobody perfect. I am blessed by the heavens” and pronouncing [bles] rather than /blest/.

Is it passable or adequate that white artists use the dialect? To answer this question, one must think the following: dialects go hand in hand with ethnicity. Listening to how someone talks gives more evidences of which ethnic group he or she belongs to than physical appearance (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001); in this way, ethnicity carries stereotypes and assumptions within. Hence, for example, when someone listens to somebody speaking with a Southern accent, he or she would immediately (and maybe unconsciously) think first that he or she is from the South and then the negative qualities that this entails. This portrays AAVE’s case, that carries the stereotype of being “dumb”, “sloppy”, and “illogical”, as said before. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2001) state the following about the issue:

Thus, through language, speakers are able to convey information about their personal identity on a number of different levels, ranging from their relatively permanent membership in certain well-established social groups, including social class and ethnic groups, to their more short-lived association with particular character types, such as the street-smart youth or the warm-hearted friend. Because language and identity are inextricably intertwined. (p. 35)

Standard varieties of English, like British English, are related to “socially favored and dominant classes” (ibid., p. 157), while nonstandard varieties, dialects, and accents are related to “socially disfavored, low class-groups” (ibid., p. 158). Prestigious versus stigmatized. AAVE’s

case is connected with history and thousands of years of slavery, discrimination, and segregation. As it is explained in the first section of the project, African Americans have been discriminated against forever, and this is represented nowadays with language. SE speakers think that AAVE is badly spoken English, with grammar and pronunciation errors, or, as Geoffrey K. Pullum (1999) says, “an unimportant and mostly abusive repertoire of street slang used by an ignorant urban underclass” (p. 40). Hence, why do white people use it in their songs? ‘In American society, it is possible to be dumb but “talk smart” and conversely, to be smart but “talk dumb”’ (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001, p. 35).

The term *Slang* responds to “any colloquial words or phrase associated with some subcultural and not yet incorporated as part of the mainstream language” (Pullum, 1999, p. 40); in other words, *slang* is the discriminated language of the streets. There is a big temptation of undervaluing AAVE as slang since the set rules say that it is “bad” English; but, probably, most prestigious speakers do not know that there are prestigious dialects and accents using the same stigmatized features: Pullum (1999) shows in his study that there are some features that are not necessary, for example, there is no need to produce a voiceless consonant at the end of a word since the vocal cords are not used in this process; this is why AAVE produced the reduction of consonant clusters. He also states that there is evidence that the Queen Elizabeth II drops /g/ sounds after nasals, and nobody calls the queen dumb; or that Cockney accent, that is the stereotyped working-class accent of the capital of the United Kingdom, uses also *multiple negation* in its speech, but this is not a problem since they are white and British. Pullum (1999) summarizes it as follows:

Why? Because there is a double standard here. When Standard Southern British English introduces a simplifying change in the rules of pronunciation (like “do not pronounce the g sound after a velar nasal except in the middle of a word”), it is respected as the standard way to speak, but when AAVE introduces such a change (like “do not pronounce a stop at the end of a word after another consonant with the same voicing”), it is unfairly regarded as sloppiness. (p. 52)

The British-American linguist also states that the vernacular was once proposed to be used as a means of learning Standard English. “The horror with which Americans react to [this] idea [...] has something to teach us about the prejudice still targeted on America’s Black citizens, whose variety of English is decried as if it were some repellent disease” (ibid., p. 56). In other words, they were scared. They feared being black, being discriminated. They were

scared of “linguistic ghettoization” (ibid., p. 57) and the burden this carries. Pullum (1999) says that, to argue the “stupidity” or the ghettoization that the dialect carries, people would need to use different strategies that do not depend on linguistics or language, but on racism.

Then, if they do not want to be considered black, why do they do it? Black people’s main opinion is that white people want to be cool. Marcyliena Morgan (1999) shows in her study that being or acting cool is maybe the main cultural concept for African Americans. This is to say that their self-presentation and their social face exposure is the biggest issue in the African American community (Morgan, 1999), and this is transferred to music. In rap music, discourse and fluency are important parts in interaction with the audience, “all participants (including hearers) constantly assess and address potential meanings within and across contexts” (ibid., p. 32). Being black is cool, and this is portrayed in African American speech. Hence, since white people cannot be physically black, what is the quickest way of achieving their “cheekiness”? Copying their dialect, becoming *wannabes*⁷.

It is all a matter of business. Tricia Rose (1994) shows in her study that rap “is Black America’s most dynamic contemporary popular cultural, intellectual, and spiritual vessel” (p. 18). Whoever touches the genre makes money in the music business. White people who are taking advantages of this appropriation act cleverly, if they see that the black genre is a threat in their business because they are making more money, they just simply arrive, take everything, and go. *Vini, vidi, vici*.

In addition, “Hip Hop nation has emerged as a cultural, social, and political force, constituted and instantiated through language style” (Morgan, 2001, p. 187). It is a way of gaining power and being listened to in the world, a way of influencing and reaching the audience quickly, since “it is the preferred music for 67% of Black and 55% of [...] white youth” (ibid., p. 189-190). Therefore, white people cannot let them take control. This leads to a conclusion: negritude and blackness sell.

6. CONCLUSIONS.

Throughout the analysis of this dialect regarding contemporary music paradigms, one must conclude that the most modern feature that AAVE has is the rich development that it

⁷ *Wannabe*: “a person who wants or aspires to be someone or something else or who tries to look or act like someone else” (Merriam-Webster, April 27, 2020).

has gone through and is still suffering nowadays. This is achieved thanks to its countless semantic possibilities in its grammatical and phonetic system (Labov, 1998). The dialect presents Creole origins that made it special in a territory marked by its Anglicist development. It is interesting how both origins coexisted and created phonetical and grammatical components that have influenced other dialects that surround it.

It is also interesting how some of these Creole-based features differentiate AAVE from the Anglo American environment and other varieties with unique features, both grammatical, like the absence of the *plural -s*, the *remote time been*, or the *possessive -s* absence; and phonetic, like the *final cluster reduction* or the *deletion of final /t/ and /d/* sounds (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2001). Yet, at the same time, the Creole influenced this “English” environment in the use of other shared features like the absence of *be* forms, for example. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2001) display the correlation announcing that both dialects (AAVE and Anglo American dialects in the South) delete the verb when it is *are* or *is* followed by other forms like *gonna*, but they do not do it when it is *am*. Labov (as cited in Green, 2002) summarized the relation that AAVE has with other varieties of English as follows:

It is proposed that AAVE consists of two distinct components: the General English (GE) component, which is similar to the grammar of OAD [(other American accents)], and the African American (AA) component. These two components are not tightly integrated with each other, but follow internal patterns of strict co-occurrence. On the other hand, they are not completely independent structures. On the one hand, GE is a fairly complete set of syntactic, morphological, and phonological structures, which can function independently. Through the GE component, speakers of AAVE have access to much the same grammatical and lexical machinery as speakers of OAD and use it for much the same range of grammatical functions. On the other hand, the AA component allows speakers of AAVE to construct sentence types that are not available in OAD. The AA component is not a complete grammar, but a subset of all of the grammatical and lexical forms that are used in combination with much but not all of the grammatical inventory of GE . . . In the end, we will see that the distinct positive features of AAVE in this AA component are free to develop a specialized semantics that is used primarily in highly affective, socially marked interactions. (p. 219)

This project presents different examples of music and how the dialect forms the basis of the rap genre. It is perhaps the world’s most important source of AAVE. However, one might question why white people use the dialect since everybody knows the stereotypes and assumptions it carries. It is quite peculiar how the tables have turned. The African American community has gone through a lot of twists and turns, as explained at the beginning of this

project. Back in time, they were portrayed as dumb and lazy people, they were just used as objects, and were mocked by white people with blackface practices. Nowadays, they are still stereotyped in movies and series with such comments, and in addition, they are seen as violent people. Hence, it is remarkable how they went from being ridiculed and mocked to being envied by white people in music, up to the point of copying and mimicking their “bad” things: style, culture, and language.

White people are doing so because they try to be cool and therefore earn money. But, talking black does not make you black. Greg Tate (2003) displays this issue in his book *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture*, and he is right: White people take the “cool” and the language, but they do not know that they are taking a manner of living and a legacy. What Tate identifies as the burden are those things that are explained at the beginning of the project: the burden is slavery, segregation, violence, shootings, beatings, insults, murders. They simply take advantage of their privilege in order to be successful without thinking about the consequences.

There are some rappers and artists that are going too far even using the N-Word as if it were something cool to use. In my opinion, these are examples of ignorance in the modern world, since they do not know the background this word or any African American cultural item has. But, what impresses the most is the fact that they are not canceled or even warned, they are rewarded with compliments and money. They are still selling millions and millions of CDs, teaching young people that the use of such word is something cool that needs to be imitated.

The facts and examples given in this project are irrefutable, and to prove this, one could take the Grammys as an example. The most important awards in the music industry are still too “white” in all the genres, but it is remarkable that this also happens in the Best Rap Album: Since the introduction of the category in 1995, there have been 128 nominees for the win, and just 11 were white rappers (Grammy awards, April 21, 2020). Considering this information, just the 8.59% of the nominees were white, putting white rappers at disadvantaged compared to black rappers. But, if we consider the number of wins, Eminem is the most awarded rapper in this category with 6 wins, followed by Kanye West with 4 (ibid.). It is interesting how a genre that was built in the black community, by black people, for black people, is ruled by white people. Whites that are winning because they have stolen black culture.

What this project tries to show is that dialect “does not mean marginal, archaic, rustic, or degraded mode of speech” (Pullum, 1999, p. 44). The world needs to stop dwelling on stereotypes and racism and stop disguising it as something cool. We reward appropriation, just because white people do it. But, as Jay-Z (2013) says: “Ain’t nobody got time for that”.

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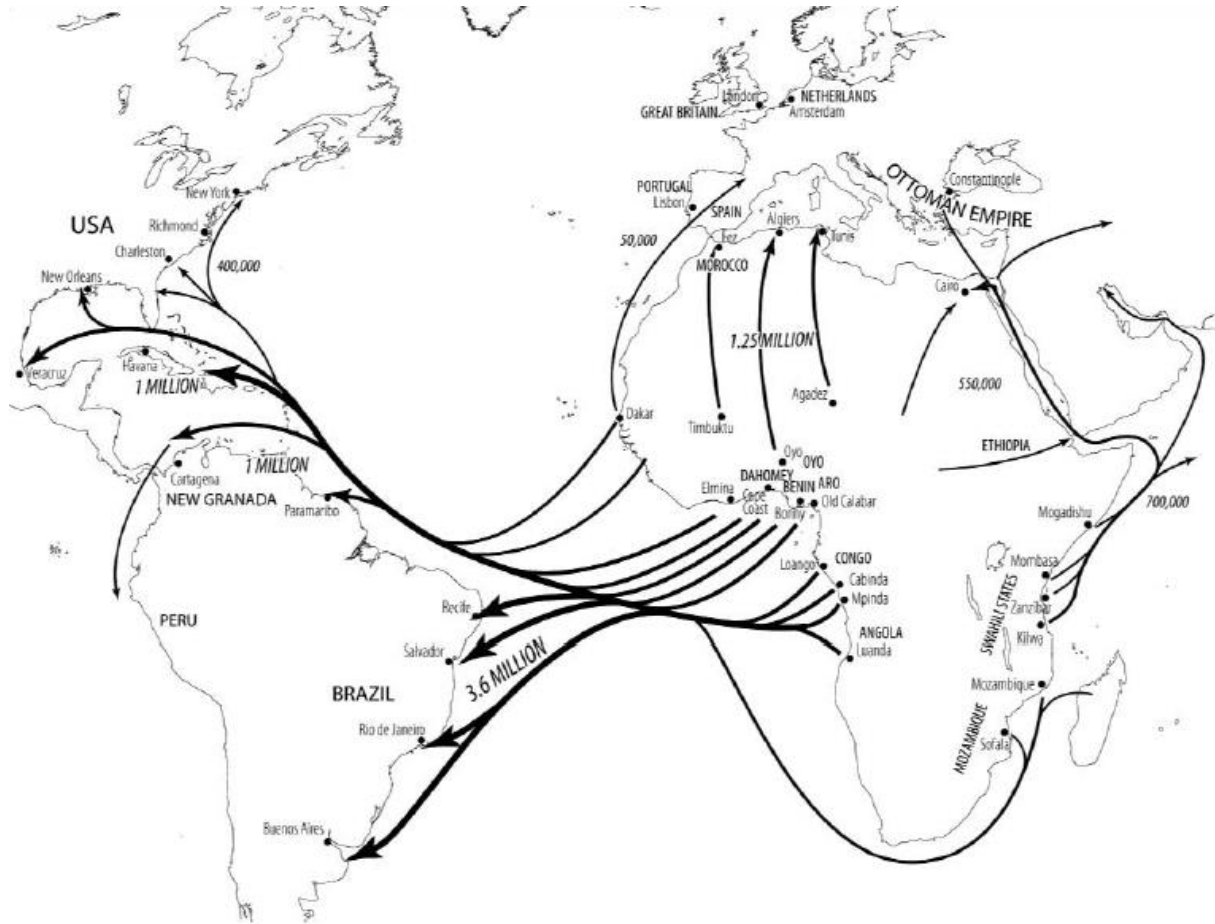
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9. APPENDICES.

Appendix 1

Routes used to transport Africans during the Middle Passage.



Source: Falola & Warnock (2007).

Appendix 2

Probably Twilight Makes Blackness Dangerous (2018) by Terrance Hayes.

Probably twilight makes blackness dangerous
Darkness. Probably all my encounters
Are existential jambalaya. Which is to say,
A nigga can survive. Something happened
In Sanford, something happened in Ferguson
And Brooklyn & Charleston, something happened
In Chicago & Cleveland & Baltimore & happens

Almost everywhere in this country every day.
Probably someone is prey in all of our encounters.
You won't admit it. The names alive are like the names
In graves. Probably twilight makes blackness
Darkness. And a gate. Probably the dark blue skin
Of a black man matches the dark blue skin
Of his son the way one twilight matches another.

Source: Hayes (2018, p. 9).