
Codecloseting, *Opacité*, and the Racialized Politics of Linguistic Performativity

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Linguistic identity is a socially constructed and performed phenomenon deeply entangled with intersectional formations of race, class, and gender. In contemporary North America, dominant groups impose rigid expectations about how particular bodies should sound, often reinforcing racial and linguistic hierarchies. This paper examines “codecloseting”—the strategic concealment or suppression of a linguistic repertoire due to societal expectations and racialized language ideologies. Using frameworks of codeswitching, belonging, and Glissant’s decolonial concept of the right to opacity, we analyze how multilingual Black interlocutors, including those from Kreyòl, General American English, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), West African English, and French speaking backgrounds, navigate social spaces wherein their linguistic identities do not conform to racialized expectations. When linguistic performance does not align with dominant perceptions of Blackness, speakers may be perceived as inauthentic, subject to scrutiny, or denied belonging within racial and linguistic communities. On the other hand, white speakers of languages or lexicons racialized as Black may be socially mediated as spectacular comedic figures, evoking surprise and laughter. We explore these parallel phenomena through case studies of public figures and everyday interactions, demonstrating how linguistic mismatches disrupt racial formations and contribute to aesthetic regimes that define Blackness and languages of African origin in restrictive ways.

By interrogating the expressive limitations imposed by these regimes, as well as the strategies of subjects who subvert and refuse them, we argue for a broader, more nuanced understanding of Black linguistic diversity that resists essentialist notions of race and language.

KEYWORDS: Race; Multilingualism; Performativity; Codeswitching; Opacité.

INTRODUCTION

A common topic in civil rights legislation and courtrooms due to its status as a battleground of freedom, speech is any “act or manner of expressing a thought or feeling through words or other forms of communication.”¹ A primary element of speech, language is never merely a tool of communication or self-expression; it is a socially constructed and deeply racialized set of embodied audiovisual practices that both reflects and shapes the boundaries of identity and belonging.

In North America, the sound, pitch, volume, cadence, and tone of one’s voice are often treated as markers of racial authenticity, bound to expectations for how particular bodies should produce speech. While humans share physical organs of speech production across societies, languages and their variation patterns evolve as distinctive hallmarks of culture intertwined with layered national, regional, economic, and racial identities.² Expectations that a body’s speech production patterns correspond to its racialization and place of origin (to claim “authenticity”) and/or to its aspirational place in society (to perform affiliation with those in power and to access socioeconomic mobility) are rigorously imposed by dominant groups, media representation, and educational curricula under the guise of standardization. Not only taken up by dominant groups but also often internalized within non-dominant communities, they serve to reinforce hierarchies of race, class, and gender while informally enacting racial segregation and stereotyping in mixed social settings. To speak in ways that do not align with these expectations—whether by using stigmatized dialects of English, shifting fluidly between different

¹ “Definition of ‘speech.’” *Justia Legal Dictionary*, accessed January 15, 2026.

² Ruth Benedict, *Race: science and politics* (Modern Age, 1940).

languages, inhabiting the body with gestural acts, or displaying mastery of multiple linguistic styles and registers—is to risk surveillance, ridicule, exclusion, subjugation, oppression, and physical harm. Linguistic performance thus becomes a site of complex social navigation, wherein interlocutors both reproduce and contest racial formations with serious practical consequences.

This article develops codecloseting as a framework for analyzing how contemporary multilingual and multidialectal Black speakers navigate these racialized language ideologies. Codecloseting is the strategic concealment or suppression of one’s linguistic repertoire, especially the non-dominant or stigmatized varieties, to manage social perceptions and avoid negative consequences. Many are familiar with the more commonly used codeswitching, which is often framed as a flexible, agentic movement across varieties. Codeswitching “...involves shifting cultures to manage one’s identities in relation to their environment...[and] occurs frequently when Black people adapt to the mainstream culture and present themselves in a way that is more accepting to their white colleagues.”³ Both codeswitching and codecloseting hinge upon highly context-dependent cultural literacies—reading one’s audience, assessing interlocutors’ comfort level in additional linguistic systems or registers, and anticipating their response to a revelation of multilingualism or multidialectism. Codecloseting, on the other hand, highlights the defensive and pre-emptive suppression of language practices deemed incompatible with expectations for Black bodies.

The concept draws from queer theory’s metaphor of the closet, suggesting that concealment can function both as a form of protection from various identified harms and as an assertion of the right not to be fully known.⁴ As Eve Sedgwick asserts in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), “‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence,” in a refusal to be understood, identified, or socially classified according to the limitations of identitarian binaries such as homosexual/heterosexual.⁵

³ Nicholas Lamar Wright, Susan D. Longerbeam, and Meera Alagaraja. “Chronic Codeswitching: Shaping Black/White Multiracial Student Sense of Belonging,” *Genealogy* 6, no. 3 (2022): 75. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy6030075>.

⁴ Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁵ Sedgwick deconstructs the closet as symptomatic of Euro-American discursive cultures insistent on oppositional binaries such as the known/unknown, center/margin, majority/minority, and others as the tropes of sexual secrecy/revelation arise in twentieth-century literature of English and French expression, ultimately destabilizing such dualistic symmetries.

On the other side of the closet's threshold, for sexual minorities in North America, particularly in repressively heteronormative geopolitical contexts, self-outing (the proud revelation of one's formerly private LGBTQ+ identity in personal, professional, and/or public spheres) is often experienced and lauded as liberational, with this overarching metanarrative annually encouraged and celebrated with National Coming Out Day in the United States and Canada (October 11, since 1988). Multilingual queer Louisiana poet of French expression Catherine Lowe draws a clear parallel between her own intersectional linguistic and queer communities in her personal nonfiction narrative poem in French, "*Je fais mon coming out*" (2019).⁶ Lowe uses the English terminology of "coming out" to describe her initial hesitation to speak a minority language in public beyond the domestic sphere, with the poem ultimately celebrating the visibility of her communities and the pride she finds in poetic expression and social life as a French heritage speaker.

Regardless of the marginalized community in question, there are sociopolitical pressures simultaneously exerting force on both sides of the closet door. To turn back to linguistic communities, opponents of codecloseting might flatly categorize and critique it as a form of social masking that perpetuates the violent self-alienation of linguistically colonized subjects. Most famously, Martinican multilingual philosopher Frantz Fanon foregrounds his scathing diagnosis of the psychopathology of colonization and neocolonial assimilation in *Peau noire, masques blancs* in sociolinguistic analysis, devoting the first chapter of the volume entirely to the subject of language (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952).⁷ Before detailing his own lived experience of linguistic policing and social shaming for speaking Martinican Creole in the predominantly French-speaking metropolitan public, Fanon declares, "il y a dans la possession d'une langue une extraordinaire puissance," or "there lies in the possession of a language an extraordinary power."⁸ Fanon opts for the term *puissance*, denoting the physical force, strength, or energy to impose one's will or effect change in the material world (for example, used in relation to military force, electricity, machinery, or a disruptive event such as an explosion). Further, he highly emphasizes his selection of *puissance* with the inverted placement of the normally postnominal adjective *extraordinaire* before

⁶ Ô Malheureuse: French Writings by Louisiana Women, ed. Ashlee Wilson Michot (University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2019).

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Éditions du Seuil, 1952).

⁸ Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 14. Translation by the authors.

the noun—a syntactic disruption that heavily weighs the word. *Pouvoir*, the other French word that translates to “power” in English, rather refers to the more abstract capacity, agency, or executive authority to act in a political or personal sense (for instance, the power of an elected legislature, power of the people, or superpower of a comic book hero). *Pouvoir* also functions as a verb of potential capacity akin to the English *can*. Rather than write against Fanon, who brilliantly establishes the *puissance* of language as a colonial tool of power, oppression, and erasure, we write alongside him to consider through a decolonial lens an underexamined dimension of the resistant *pouvoir* and possession of language—more subtle configurations of taking ownership of one’s linguistic subjectivity.

Our argument unfolds at the intersection of philosophy of race, sociolinguistics, and Black studies. We bring together scholarship on codeswitching and linguistic performativity with Édouard Glissant’s decolonial notion of *opacité*, which insists on the legitimacy of remaining incompletely legible to dominant frameworks of surveillance and recognition in extractive cultural economies. Beyond codeswitching as a linguistic practice of resistant evasion or *marronage*,⁹ codecloseting carries the capacity to serve an auto-liberational act of detour, “de dire en ne disant pas” (“to say in not saying”).¹⁰ We frame codecloseting not only as a response to systemic pressures but also as a practice of withdrawal that carries potential for resistance, subversion, and the protection of Black life from appropriation.

The stakes of this inquiry are significant and beyond conceptual. When Black speakers are disciplined for failing to “sound Black” in expected or prescribed ways, they encounter forms of epistemic violence that deny the legitimacy of

⁹ By *marronage*, we intend the pursuit of freedom through flight and formation of new autonomous communities in enclaves on the margins of capitalist societies. As Neil Roberts writes, the agentic freedom or automanumission activated through *marronage* “is not a place; it is a state of being” (11). Here we extend Roberts’s theory of sociogenic *marronage*, defined as “a revolutionary process of naming and attaining individual and collective agency, non-sovereignty, liberation [...] and the cultivation of a community that aligns civil society with political society,” into the linguistic realm of the social environment (11). Roberts finds inspiration in Aimé Césaire’s 1955 neologism of “Le Verbe Marronner” (The Verb Marronner), a creative, conceptual notion of flight articulated in polyvalent poetic language that bridges “the ethical, the sociological, and the political” (5-7). Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Gallimard, 1990), 83. Translation by the authors.

their linguistic diversity.¹¹ At the same time, white speakers who socially display their abilities to adopt lexicons or styles racialized as Black are often celebrated as entertaining, edgy, humorous, or even “connected,” revealing double standards that further entrench racial hierarchies.¹² This speech becomes spectacular because it is non-normative and thereby unexpected in Eurocentric linguistic landscapes. In addition to offering opportunities for white capitalization in the entertainment and social media influencer industries, framing white speakers’ deviant ability to “sound Black” through a comedic lens further devalues languages of Black origin already marginalized in neocolonial educational, economic, and political systems. Listeners’ incredulity, shock, and laughter posit languages or dialects of African and African diasporic origin as inherently less worthy of respect and study by outside groups than globalized languages of European origin such as English and French, whose mastery is commonly cultivated (and even required) by speakers of diverse backgrounds. In other words, laughter thinly veils ongoing epistemic violence against Black lived experience and the expression of it. These layered asymmetries underscore how Black speech is denigrated, monitored, and policed within narrow aesthetic regimes that limit the expressive possibilities of Blackness itself.¹³

In what follows, we further situate codecloseting as an anti-representational position refusing neocolonial demands for transparency and eroding aesthetic regimes of racialized linguistic performativity, turning to Glissant’s right to *opacité* and its implications for linguistic resistance. We then analyze the consequences of linguistic mismatches and the social surveillance and policing of authenticity, drawing on both every day and high-profile paradigmatic cases. Ultimately, we resist and contest the ways in which established aesthetic regimes aim to draw and impose boundaries on Black linguistic identity, and we conclude by reflecting the liberatory possibilities of *opacité* in reclaiming linguistic freedom.

¹¹ H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman, *Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the US* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 25.

¹² Kara McAndrew, “Why Non-Black Creators Need to Stop Using AAVE on Social Media.” *The College Hill Independent*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.theindy.org/article/2636>.

¹³ McAndrew, “Why Non-Black Creators Need to Stop Using AAVE.”

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE *PUISSANCE* OF TRANSPARENCY AND *POUVOIR* OF *OPACITÉ*

A leader in the Red Power movement for the civil rights of Native Americans, Standing Rock Sioux philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. took to task the residual power and ubiquitous pressure of racialized transparency in the colonial toolbox, remarking:

Our foremost plight is our transparency. People can just tell by looking at us what we want, what should be done to help us, how we feel, and what a ‘real’ Indian is really like. Indian life, as it relates to the real world, is a continuous attempt not to disappoint people who know us. Unfulfilled expectations cause grief and we have already had our share. Because people can see right through us, it becomes impossible to tell truth from fiction or fact from mythology.”¹⁴

Deloria critiques the ongoing operational language of American culture, media, and governmental institutions that relegate Indigenous subjectivities and experiences to a presumed perpetual state of transparency. His observation extends to the weaponization of academic knowledge, including cultural and linguistic, by European powers as justificatory discourses of colonialism and its supposed “enlightenment” of colonized peoples. Epistemic violence lay at the crux of the French colonial endeavor as a major driving force, with individual colonial administrators and the state itself publishing massive, widely circulated pseudo-scientific tomes claiming to present readers with encyclopedic expert knowledge of enslaved Africans, Creoles, Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, Egyptians, and others. For example, in the midst of the Haitian Revolution for independence from France, white colonial plantocrat Moreau de Saint-Méry published the multivolume *Description de Saint-Domingue* while in exile. It is a spectacularly delusional assertion of power and control through knowledge production, even as his plantations burned (1796).¹⁵ Similarly, the French state across regimes commissioned the gargantuan *Description de l’Égypte*, published in twenty-three volumes from 1809 to 1829. Thousands of pages long, this *Description* assembled essays by

¹⁴ Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer died for your sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Macmillan, 1969; repr. Oklahoma University Press, 1988), 1–2.

¹⁵ Médéric-Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l’isle de Saint-Domingue* (Philadelphia: self-published by the author in 3 vols., 1796).

civilian scholars and scientists, known as the *savants*—as well as illustrations, maps, and diagrams by roughly two thousand artists and technicians—who accompanied Napoleon’s military expedition to Egypt in 1798–1801.¹⁶ Beyond them being pricey consumer objects for the European elites, both *Descriptions* are monuments staking hollow claims to the transparency of colonized peoples, their histories, and their cultures.

It is out of, and against, this history of fatally false transparencies that Édouard Glissant revendicates the human right to *opacité*—the right to be unpredictable, unfixable, unisolated, and unknowable—as one detour on the path to freedom.¹⁷ He asserts, “[J]e réclame pour tous le droit à l’opacité, qui n’est pas le renfermement. C’est pour réagir par là contre tant de réductions à la fausse clarté de modèles universels. Il ne m’est pas nécessaire de ‘comprendre’ qui que ce soit, individu, communauté, peuple, de le ‘prendre avec moi’ au prix de l’étouffer.”¹⁸ In *Le Discours Antillais*, Glissant writes in spatial terms of another path to liberation: “The Creole language is the first geography of Detour,” particularly in its refusal of the colonial imposition of French in favor of creative circumventions, abbreviations, and hybridizations of French, African, and other sources.¹⁹ For Glissant, Creole language as a force of relation holds the disorienting and radical capacity “...à bouleverser l’ordre du monde” (“to upend, or turn upside down, the order of the world”),²⁰ theorizing this *bouleversement* through Creole language as an aesthetic of Chaos that counters any discourses of purity, order, or power through control. In constant flux and evolution, creolization unhinges any essentialist notions of *être* (being) to lean into the fluid, messy processes of *étant*, becoming.²¹ Rather than nail down a clear definition of *opacité*, Glissant offers a rhizomal web of potentiality within the negative spaces of all that it is not. Opaque,

¹⁶ France (Commission des sciences et des arts d’Égypte), *Description de l’Égypte, ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française, publié par les ordres de Sa Majesté l’Empereur Napoléon le Grand* (1809–1829).

¹⁷ Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation : poésie en entendue* (Gallimard, 2009), 68–69; *Poétique de la Relation*, 203.

¹⁸ Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde: Poétique IV* (Gallimard, 1997), 29. “I claim for everyone the right to opacity, which is not the same as closing oneself off. It is a means of reacting against all the ways of reducing us to the false clarity of universal models. I do not have to ‘understand’ anyone, individual, community, people – i.e. to ‘take them with me’ at the cost of smothering them.” Trans. Celia Britton, Liverpool University Press, 2020 (16).

¹⁹ Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais* (Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 32. Translation by the authors.

²⁰ Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, 24. Translation by the authors.

²¹ Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, 199–200.

liberational spaces open through the resistant detours and loud revolution of Kreyòl; they might alternately lie in quiet instances of codecloseting—strategic withdrawal from representational regimes that relegate racialized subjects to objects of surveillance and spectacle for dominant groups.²²

LINGUISTIC MISMATCHES, VENTRILOQUISM, AND RACIALIZED EXPECTATIONS

In North America, linguistic expression becomes a crucial site of surveillance where authenticity is measured against racialized scripts. In the biopolitical landscape, the Panopticon is not only all-seeing but all-hearing. Racialized, opaque, or otherwise non-normative speech acts under the surveillance of the state become subject to, in Foucault's terms, internal "economic calculations" regarding the potential costs of codeswitching in public, and most especially within professional environments.²³ For instance, in 2013 a psychiatric hospital in Montreal temporarily suspended two nurses of Haitian descent for speaking Kreyòl together during their scheduled break time. The Office québécois de la langue française, the linguistic watchdog entity of the French-speaking province, threatened the hospital with heavy fines for their violation of Bill 101, which proclaims French the language of business affairs in Quebec.²⁴ Under the state-sanctioned banner of linguistic heritage activism for French, speakers of one national minority language of Canada police speakers of another, exposing the brutal hypocrisy of linguistic racism.

To "sound Black" is to conform to a set of expectations, often rooted in stereotypes about vernacular speech, affect, and cadence, that delimit the boundaries of racial belonging.²⁵ When Black speakers fail to align with these

²² In *Le spectateur émancipé* (La Fabrique-éditions, 2000), Jacques Rancière critiques the "optical machine" that relegates listeners and viewers to passive consumers of spectacle (9–10). He details the limitations of the representational aesthetic regime in *Le partage du sensible : esthétique et politique* (La Fabrique-éditions, 2008, 30–31).

²³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart; trans. Graham Burchell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 255–256.

²⁴ "Creole-speaking hospital workers elicit warning from OQLF," *CTV Montreal*, December 17, 2013. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/montreal/article/creole-speaking-hospital-workers-elicite-warning-from-oqlf/>. See also Billy Shields, "'Creolegate': a new language scandal surfaces in RDP," *Global News*, December 17, 2013. <https://globalnews.ca/news/1036472/1036472/>.

²⁵ Courtney A. Kurinec and Charles A. Weaver, "Sounding Black: Speech Stereotypicality Activates Racial Stereotypes and Expectations about Appearance." *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (December 24, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.785283>.

expectations, they are often marked as inauthentic, pretentious, or alien, and subjected to various forms of scrutiny, policing, and harm.²⁶ This phenomenon is evident across both every day and high-profile interactions. Consider the criticism leveled at public figures such as Barack Obama, who has been frequently described as “too articulate” in ways that underscore disbelief that a Black man could wield such command of standardized English.²⁷ Similarly, fictional characters like Carlton Banks on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and Braxton P. Hartnabrig on *The Jamie Foxx Show* were ridiculed for failing to embody the linguistic markers of “authentic” Blackness, reinforcing the idea that Black identity is tethered to a narrow linguistic repertoire. Even political commentator Paris Dennard, who went viral during a CNN segment that became known colloquially as the “Cheesecake Factory” clip, was derided for his perceived incongruence with racialized expectations of Black speech, among other things.

These linguistic mismatches illustrate the double bind Black speakers face: conforming to expected registers risks reinforcing stereotypes, while deviating invites charges of inauthenticity. The stakes are not only social but material. Black professionals who rely on standardized English to navigate white-dominated institutions may be accused of “talking white,” alienating them from co-racial communities, while simultaneously being held to higher scrutiny in predominantly white spaces. The costs of failing to “sound right” thus reverberate across employment, education, and interpersonal belonging.

It is important to note that the mismatch is not merely about linguistic form but about the relationship between voice and body. A Black francophone outside of Quebec or Louisiana, for example, may find their use of French or Creole treated as incongruous with dominant expectations of Blackness in an English-speaking context. Conversely, white speakers who adopt AAVE or other racialized codes are often celebrated as humorous or innovative, their linguistic mismatch treated as a praiseworthy spectacle rather than a violation.²⁸ These asymmetries underscore the racialized politics of listening: the same divergence from expectation that marginalizes Black speakers can elevate white ones.

²⁶ Alim and Smitherman, *Articulate While Black*, 5–7.

²⁷ Alim and Smitherman, *Articulate While Black*, 20–22.

²⁸ McAndrew, “Why Non-Black Creators Need to Stop Using AAVE.”

By analyzing these dynamics, we see how linguistic authenticity is not a neutral measure of speech but a socially enforced criterion that naturalizes and essentializes narrow visions of Black identity. Linguistic mismatches expose the fragility of these constructions, revealing that “authentic Black speech” is less a matter of inherent cultural truth than of disciplinary enforcement. To study these mismatches, then, is to trace how Black expressive life is constrained within aesthetic regimes that both define and police the sound of Blackness.

CODECLOSETING IN PRACTICE

If linguistic mismatches highlight how dominant expectations enforce narrow notions of authenticity, then the experiences of multilingual Black speakers underscore the everyday costs of navigating those expectations. Black communities across North America are linguistically diverse, including speakers of Creole, French, languages of indigenous African origin, and multiple English varieties. Yet this diversity is often erased under the weight of monolithic stereotypes of “sounding Black.”²⁹ For multilingual speakers, this erasure produces a dilemma: whether to reveal the full range of one’s repertoire or to strategically suppress certain codes in order to avoid misrecognition, ridicule, or exclusion.

Codecloseting occurs in both high-profile public contexts and ordinary interpersonal exchanges. A Haitian American in New York, for instance, may downplay their use of Haitian Kreyòl in favor of standardized English to avoid being stereotyped as foreign or unassimilated. A Black Canadian of Caribbean descent may conceal their facility with patois in predominantly white academic or professional spaces, fearing that its use could be read as evidence of lack of seriousness or competence. Similarly, a francophone Black person living outside Quebec or Louisiana may deliberately mute their French in English dominant environments where Blackness is presumed to sound only one way, lest they face intrusive questions, xenophobic aggression, or dehumanizing exoticization. These examples reveal how codecloseting operates as a preemptive defensive posture, a way of protecting oneself from the psychic, economic, and social consequences of failing to conform to societal expectations.

²⁹ Kurinec and Weaver, “‘Sounding Black’: Speech Stereotypicality” (2021).

Public figures provide particularly telling illustrations of these dynamics. Take, for example, Wyclef Jean, the Haitian-born rapper and producer who often moves between English, Haitian Kreyòl, and French in his music. While celebrated within diasporic communities, his multilingualism has at times been framed by US media as excessive, unintelligible, or a barrier to “mainstream” audiences, reflecting discomfort with linguistic Blackness that exceeds the expected English/AAVE binary. Similarly, Michaëlle Jean, the Haitian Canadian who served as Governor General of Canada, was often compelled to emphasize her fluency in both official languages, English and French, while strategically downplaying her Creole background in public life. Her ability to inhabit the trilingual repertoire was part of her strength, but it also exposed her to questions of “authentic” Canadianness and “authentic” Blackness, as if the two could not be reconciled in one voice.

Even within US politics, Barack Obama demonstrates a subtler form of codecloseting. While he is widely recognized for his ability to codeswitch between standardized English and a more relaxed, colloquial style, scholars and journalists have noted that he strategically avoided leaning too heavily into AAVE in public life, lest he be cast as unpresidential or “too Black” for white audiences.³⁰ At the same time, moments when his linguistic performance diverged from expectations, whether in delivering sermons at Black churches or in adopting casual cadences in interviews, were scrutinized as performances of inauthenticity.³¹ Obama’s case illustrates how multilingualism or multidialectal fluency, even at the highest levels of political power, is tightly constrained by racialized listening practices.

The affective toll of codecloseting in these contexts is significant. Just as queer theorists have described the psychological costs of remaining closeted, Black multilingual speakers often carry the burden of concealing crucial parts of their linguistic identity. To be denied the freedom to move fluidly across one’s languages is not merely an inconvenience but a form of epistemic violence; it delegitimizes the richness of Black linguistic repertoires and enforces silence on practices that sustain community and belonging. At the same time, codecloseting can be understood as a strategic and even agentic maneuver. Drawing from Glissant’s notion of *opacité*, consciously suppressing one’s linguistic repertoire can function as a refusal to make oneself fully

³⁰ Alim and Smitherman, *Articulate While Black*, 20–22.

³¹ Alim and Smitherman, *Articulate While Black*, 14–17.

transparent and thereby vulnerable to the surveillance of dominant groups. In this sense, codecloseting is not simply a symptom of oppression, but a practice that asserts the right to remain partially unknown, ungraspable, and illegible to potentially hostile or appropriative listeners.

The tension between these two framings, codecloseting as constraint versus codecloseting as resistance, reflects the complexity of Black multilingual life. On the one hand, the constant need to self-monitor produces exhaustion, alienation, and the sense that one's authenticity is always under suspicion. On the other hand, the decision not to "perform" certain codes can be seen as an exercise in agentic autonomy and as a refusal to submit to the racialized demand for total visibility. In both cases, the practice reveals the limits of racialized listening and the power of linguistic performance to unsettle dominant expectations of Blackness.

While multilingual Black speakers often suppress elements of their linguistic repertoires to avoid being perceived as inauthentic or illegible, white speakers who adopt those same repertoires are frequently rewarded. When white interlocutors use AAVE, patois, or Creole, their speech is typically framed not as a breach of authenticity but as a surprising and entertaining performance. Rather than being sanctioned for linguistic mismatch, they are celebrated as novel, edgy, or humorous. This asymmetry illustrates how racial hierarchies structure the politics of listening: what is policed in Black speakers becomes a spectacle when performed by white ones.

Contemporary popular culture presents us with many such examples. Comedians like Russell Peters have built careers on linguistic mimicry, drawing laughter from audiences by slipping into exaggerated accents and racialized speech patterns. Although Peters' own racial identity complicates this dynamic (he is Canadian-born and of Anglo-Indian descent), the ease with which he and other performers move in and out of racialized codes underscores how linguistic identities can become objects of consumption when divorced from Black embodiment.

Furthermore, many white listeners in North America, particularly those who participate in consumption of youth and popular culture, keep their ears to the ground as they surveil Black expressive culture for linguistic novelty, eager to adopt the next "new" thing in vernacular speech. In fact, Black speech and its common appropriation by white speakers in America offers an astute example of "bubble up" fashion theory, as ever-evolving speech

patterns, particularly in the domain of slang, have always comprised a key aspect of fashionable comportment and change. Stylistic innovation that “starts life on the street corner” amongst members of a subcultural or minority community becomes appropriated by members of a society’s dominant class, commodified for mass consumption, and gradually integrated into the mainstream, eventually sparking a new cycle of innovation and imitation in the fashion system.³² However, in application to Black innovation, the benign term “bubble up” obfuscates the capitalist violence of these cycles of white looting and mimicry within linguistic frameworks (Polhemus analyzes the commodification of punk, hippie, and motorcycle subcultures).

On social media platforms such as TikTok, countless white influencers have been called out for imitating AAVE, flattening a rich linguistic tradition into a set of viral catchphrases, terms like *periodt*, *sis*, or *it’s giving*, and pairing them with exaggerated gestures for comedic or aesthetic effect in order to receive paychecks and sponsorships. Similarly, Franco-Lebanese influencer Sisi Oyibo, who was raised in Lagos, Nigeria and is based in New York City, has built her content and overarching comedic lifestyle brand on viewers perceived mismatch between her white phenotypical features and her capacity to speak one of her native languages, West African English (also known as Nigerian Pidgin). In fact, her handle name itself, @sisi.oyibo, plays on this racialized mismatch, translating roughly to the oxymoron “sister foreigner.” While the Yoruba term *sisi* denotes familiarity and even a neighborly or familial relationship, the term *oyibo*, with Igbo etymology but now expanded use throughout Nigeria in Yoruba and West African English, refers to white foreigners’ lack of linguistic dexterity as people who mispronounce “Igbo” as “Ibo.”

While white figures such as Victoria Waldrip (better known as Woah Vicky) and Danielle Bregoli (better known as Bhad Bhabie) have risen to prominence largely by adopting Black vernaculars and mannerisms, gaining massive audiences and even monetizing their performances, Black creators (and other professionals) using the same linguistic features often face algorithmic suppression or accusations of unprofessionalism. A recent case widely covered in North American media has been the criticism and villainization of Black WNBA star Angel Reese. Since coming to prominence as a collegiate athlete at Louisiana State University, Reese has faced ongoing

³² Ted Polhemus, *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* (Thames and Hudson, 1994), 8.

criticism of her appearance, demeanor, and language for being “too hood... too ghetto,” precisely the same qualities that are celebrated in and monetized by white personalities like Waldrip and Bregoli.³³

Another iteration of this double standard in the social media world is addressed by linguists H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman in their extensive discussion of copula use (or omission) among Black and white Twitter users, noting that “...the Black Language copula has blown up all over the Black Twittiverse in TTs (trending topics) and hashtags such as #uknowuugly.”³⁴ They go on to say that non-Black commentators “...sometimes call out this use of copula absence as a sign of ‘Black people’s ignorant ways,’ or ‘their lazy, ungrammatical speech’...[whereas] Black [commentators], on the other hand, respond by noting that Twitter is all about being concise. Rather than ‘deficient,’ one could argue that copula absence is ‘efficient’.”³⁵ Here, we clearly see the competing value judgments that can be ascribed by various commentators to the deployment of a particular linguistic tool.

Even in mainstream film and television, white actors deploying racialized vernaculars are often played for comic effect. The humor depends on the perceived incongruity between the speaker’s white body and the Black-coded speech they produce. A well-known example is Gary Owen, a white comedian who frequently adopts AAVE in stand-up routines, garnering laughs precisely because his speech is framed as incongruous with his appearance. The laughter stems not from appreciation of linguistic dexterity but from the spectacle of mismatch. By contrast, when Black speakers produce similar mismatches, such as a francophone or Caribbean Black person speaking outside of expected AAVE or standardized English, they are not met with laughter but with suspicion, critique, or exclusion.

The double standard here is stark. Black speakers must carefully manage their linguistic performances to avoid sanctions, while white speakers are free to play with and profit from the very codes that marginalize Black people. This dynamic reflects what Luvell Anderson might describe as the politics of racial humor, wherein comedy relies upon and reinforces existing

³³ Associated Press, “‘I’m too ghetto’: College basketball star slams racial hypocrisy over hand gesture outrage.” *Yahoo! Sports*, April 3, 2023. <https://sports.yahoo.com/m-too-ghetto-college-basketball-173925530.html>.

³⁴ Alim and Smitherman, *Articulate While Black*, 8.

³⁵ Alim and Smitherman, *Articulate While Black*, 8.

hierarchies of race and power.³⁶ It also illustrates the appropriation of Black linguistic creativity as cultural capital for white performers—a process that further entrenches racial inequalities in who is granted linguistic freedom and who is denied it.

Analyzing these appropriations alongside the practices of codecloseting reveals two sides of the same coin. For Black speakers, linguistic mismatch often results in social penalty while for white speakers, the same mismatch between a body's racial optics and its subject's speech production is recast as entertainment. This asymmetry exposes the racialized politics of listening that undergird both phenomena of the *imprévu*, or unexpected (more literally, unforeseen). The laughter provoked by a white influencer adopting Black speech is not harmless fun but a symptom of an aesthetic regime that commodifies Blackness while disciplining Black people themselves. It reminds us that while the embodiment of language carries the transformational capacity of ultimately *imprévisible* (unpredictable) human relation,³⁷ in racially stratified, discriminatory, and violent societies, linguistic life is always lived under unequal conditions of surveillance, freedom, and risk.

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³⁶ Luvell Anderson, "Racist Humor." *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 8 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12240>.

³⁷ Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, 46.

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