Local Identity on the Global Stage: A sociolinguistic analysis of Jay Z's New Yorker persona

Jessica Ray

University of Arizona

1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s, Hip Hop music and culture have evolved from intimate rap ciphers in local graffiti-filled streets to becoming a highly commercialized industry in the United States and across the globe (George, 2005). Perhaps most emblematic of this trajectory of Hip Hop is the rapper Jay Z, who is known for "representing" Brooklyn in the footsteps of his predecessor, Notorious B.I.G. After starting his rap career in 1996, Jay Z became not only a popular commercialized rap artist, but also a record label owner, a basketball team owner, and a musical entrepreneur whose net worth is estimated by Forbes at $520 million. Jay Z's commercial success is indicative of a classic rags-to-riches story in Hip Hop culture. The autobiographical lyrical content of his music over the last 20 years depicts his journey from his experiences as a young Black drug dealer in the Marcy public housing projects of Brooklyn to a becoming multimillionaire business mogul. Despite the fact Jay Z's success has taken him out of the projects, he still maintains his identity as a New Yorker, stating that he "made the Yankee hat more famous than a Yankee can" in his song "Empire State of Mind."

This project explores the sociolinguistic variation of r-lessness in Jay Z's speech, a feature that indexes his black New Yorker persona. The deletion of post-vocalic /ɹ/ in Jay Z's speech is particularly salient because it operates as an index (Silverstein, 2003) of group membership both in African American English (Green, 2002) and New York

English (Labov, 1972). The importance of local identity, the focus of this analysis, arises from the fact that Hip Hop artists often place a strong emphasis on projecting local urban speech and cultural practices onto a global stage (Rose, 1994). Similarly, studies of sociolinguistic performance show the ways in which mass media allows for the upscaling of local vernacular speech on a global scale (Coupland, 2009; Johnson and Ensslin, 2007).

To investigate the role that r-lessness plays in the authentication and performance of Jay Z's New Yorker persona, I analyze three factors contributing to the variation of this feature. First, I analyze rates of r-lessness in Jay Z's Hip Hop speech over a ten year period to observe the change in his linguistic practices as his commercial success distances him from the urban locality of Brooklyn. Second, I analyze rates of r-lessness in Jay Z's Hip Hop speech versus his non-Hip Hop speech, to show the influence that Hip Hop language as a genre of performance speech has on sociolinguistic variation. Lastly, I analyze rates of r-lessness in Jay Z's New York-based Hip Hop language versus the Chicago-based Hip Hop language of rapper Kanye West to investigate the overlapping indexical values of race versus region.

Ultimately, this research shows that local urban identity is in fact crucial on the global stage, demonstrated through Jay Z's highest use of r-lessness in mass mediated Hip Hop Speech. These results also demonstrate the ways in which notions of locality and race both impact the rate of r-lessness in a given performance whilst still intersecting greatly. Altogether, the analysis presented here gives insight towards a greater understanding of the authentication of local identity through linguistic stylization within Hip Hop language and more broadly, in the contexts of performance speech.

2. Background: Local Identity and Hip Hop Culture

Urban Locality in Hip Hop Culture

Scholarship on Hip Hop in the United States has posited that Hip Hop constitutes more than music: instead, it constitutes an entire culture, which consists of rapping, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti (Alim, 2006). Academic works in this field (Alim, 2006; Rose, 1994; Smitherman, 1997) have provided multiple interdisciplinary perspectives to engage with and understand the ways in which participants experience and shape Hip Hop culture. Much attention in Hip Hop literature has been focused on the presence of race and racialization in Hip Hop (Morgan, 2001; Richardson, 2006), and for good reason. However, while the majority of scholars suggest that the performance of blackness in Hip Hop necessarily entails a sense of urbanity, few have featured local urbanity itself as a central research question. This paper discusses the ways in which location, as a prevalent theme within Hip Hop culture, is one of the primary resources that artists draw upon when constructing a persona.

Tricia Rose (1994) defines rap music as "a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America." This definition clearly demonstrates the ways in which race, place, and class are intricately intertwined in Hip Hop culture. The type of locality represented in Hip Hop is not just any type of locality, but an urban locality, drawing on themes of economic marginalization and blackness in these settings. According to Rose, this urban locality in Hip Hop serves two functions: First, Hip Hop allows a wide-reaching platform for marginalized voices traditionally excluded from mainstream public discourse in the US. Second, and the focus of this study, urban locality functions as an authentic source of identity for Hip Hop artists. This is especially important given that authenticity within Hip Hop communities is constantly contested and

negotiated. This focus within Hip Hop culture is colloquially known as 'keeping it real' (Cutler, 2003) or being credible and honest about one's history and street experiences.

The emphasis on 'keeping it real' and presenting an authentic rap persona results in a form of strategic essentialism (Bucholtz, 2003) in which rappers have become iconized (Irvine and Gal, 2009) as drug-dealers and gangsters who have real street experiences. While strategic essentialism within Hip Hop and Hip Hop scholarship does significantly succeed in "prioritizing black voices from the margins of urban America" as Rose suggests, this monolithic portrayal of Hip Hop participants leads to the erasure of the immense diversity of artists in Hip Hop, whose musical expressions range from the profound lyricism of politically oriented 'conscious' rap to 'trap rap,' which focuses largely on simplistic rhymes and heavy beats. Authenticity stemming from performances of urbanity and locality is investigated here not in the way it is often conceived of within the Hip Hop framework of 'keeping it real.' For the purpose of this project, my concern is not with the credibility artists such as Jay Z's self-reported street experiences. Rather than focusing on credibility, I will focus on the ways in which linguistic practices produce and are produced by social meaning regarding urbanity.

Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Local Identity

Sociolinguistic frameworks offer a solid foundation upon which to ask questions about local identity in Hip Hop. Eckert (2008) notes the way that urbanity does not simply make reference to geographic locations, but rather variables associated with urban locations refer to ideologies regarding "what the locality is about—what kinds of people live there, and what activities, beliefs, and practices make it what it is" (462). Following this definition, Jay Z's use of local speech features carries specific associations with New York City, a prestigious locale within Hip Hop culture as it is considered the birthplace of Hip Hop. When Jay Z uses language to index his New Yorker persona, then, he is not simply informing audiences that he is from New York. He is indexing an array of social associations with New Yorkers, their lifestyles, and their contributions to Hip Hop culture.

Additionally, I approach Jay Z's Hip Hop language from a perspective of authentication rather than authenticity. In Bucholtz's terms, the process of "authentication," describes authenticity as "the outcome of constantly negotiated social practices" as opposed to a "primordial" or essentializing view of identity (1999: 408). This is a useful perspective on the issue of authenticity within Hip Hop culture addressed above. Rappers consciously assert their own authenticity and question the authenticity of others because authenticity is not inherently possessed, but rather it is produced through linguistic and cultural practices. The linguistic feature of r-lessness is just one of many resources that Jay Z utilizes as a means to authenticate his Brooklyn identity.

3. Methodology

The Feature: r-lessness

This paper examines Jay Z's performance of local identity by examining the variation of post-vocalic /ɹ/ in his speech. This feature is referred to here as r-lessness and not simply deletion due to the fact that there are four varying realizations of post-vocalic /ɹ/ in Jay Z's speech: full deletion, deletion with vowel lengthening, deletion with schwa replacement, and fully realized /ɹ/.

A clear example illustrating the range of r-lessness in one of the sources considered in this study, Jay Z's most recent album, *Magna Carta Holy Grail* (2013), can be found on the first verse of the song 'Versus':

(1)   Hey sucka ni**a, wherever [wə.ɛ.vʌ] you are [ɑ:]

I thought about you, fool, while I was driving my car [kɑ:]

I wonder [wʌn.də] if you fools realize how far [fɑ:] you are [ɑ:]

You're [jə] nowhere [weɹ] in my rear [ɹəɹ] mirror [mɪ.ɹɑ]

The first three lines show consistent /ɹ/-deletion ([wə.ɛ.vʌ], [wʌn.də]) and vowel lengthening ([ɑ:], [kɑ:], [fɑ:]). The last line shows rhoticization ([weɹ], [ɹəɹ]). The first /ɹ/ in mirror [mɪ.ɹɑ] falls in onset position in the syllable so it is not viable for deletion, and the second, word-final /r/ is deleted.

Methods

To thoroughly address each of the three factors in question, this study incorporated measures of both inter- and intrapersonal variation (Bell, 1997). This included the examination of five audio sources in the process, discussed in thorough detail below. The most accurate and optimal analysis when considering a sociophonetic variable would make use of acoustic measurements, which can be observed most clearly through the measurement of the third formant in the case of post-vocalic /ɹ/ (Stuart-Smith, 2007). However, because acapella versions of all of the music included in this study were not available, acoustic analysis was not a viable option. For this reason, all tokens were coded impressionistically. Words that I perceived to be lexically without an /ɹ/ (such as sucka and n***a, used here in reference to a song by the rap group A Tribe Called Quest) were excluded. Although Jay Z's speech includes four different realizations of post-vocalic /ɹ/, described above, tokens were coded categorically as a binary variable. Fully realized tokens were considered as r-full, whereas the other three variants were considered r-less.

4: Results

Change Over Time

Looking at the comparative rates of change over time provides an interesting opportunity to study intrapersonal variation. To examine how Jay Z's use of post-vocalic /ɹ/ is impacted by this change over time, I compared rates of r-lessness on Jay Z's *The Black Album* (2003) to his most recent album, *Magna Carta… Holy Grail*, released a decade later in 2013. The relative frequencies and percentages are as follows:

(2)

ALBUM	R-LESS TOKENS	TOTAL TOKENS	PERCENTAGE
TBA (2003)	404	647	62%
MCHG (2013)	291	398	73%

A significantly higher percentage of r-lessness occurs on *Magna Carta… Holy Grail* (2013), the more recent album. This is counterintuitive, as one would assume that the more time Jay Z spends with people outside of Brooklyn, the more his language would be influenced by non-Brooklyn varieties of English. I argue that this increase in r-lessness over time is indicative of Jay Z's growing reliance on linguistic resources for

authentication of his New Yorker persona. As Jay Z's commercial success continues to distance him both physically and socially from New York, many Hip Hop fans now consider Jay Z a "sell out," a label for rappers who are considered inauthentic. Anxiety over Jay Z's authenticity is reflected in the lyrical content of *Magna Carta… Holy Grail* (2013) where Jay Z discusses his fine arts collection and his struggles with the paparazzi—themes that do not easily translate into the Hip Hop framework of 'keeping it real' that amplifies the experiences of urban blackness. His accumulated wealth has also separated him the daily experiences of poverty and drug-dealing in the Marcy projects that he frequently refers to in his music; therefore, he is no longer able to authentically tap into non-linguistic elements of style such as clothing. As a result, he has relied more and more upon indexical features of his language such as r-lessness to authenticate his identity. Additionally, we can gain insight on this significant increase if we think of Hip Hop language as a form of commoditized speech (Agha, 2011), as well as a form of mass-mediated vernacular speech (Coupland, 2009). In this sense, Jay Z's representation of local speech on the global stage may not only be indexing his identity, but also a profitable performance.

Hip Hop versus Non-Hip Hop Speech

Studying intrapersonal variation between Jay Z's Hip Hop and Non-Hip Hop speech allows us to investigate whether Jay Z's Hip Hop speech, a genre of performance speech (Schilling-Estes, 1998) is distinct from his ordinary, non-Hip Hop speech. This factor was addressed by comparing rates of r-lessness in an hour-long interview that was released on Jay Z's YouTube channel, 'FACTS ONLY' (2013) versus those of *Magna Carta…Holy Grail* (2013), both of which were released in the same year.

(3)

SOURCE	R-LESS TOKENS	TOTAL TOKENS	PERCENTAGE
FO (2013)	179	342	52%
MCHG (2013)	291	398	73%

These results reveal that Jay Z's Hip Hop speech style is indeed a form of stylization (Eckert, 2008). Here, I consider style to be Irvine's (2001) model of style as distinction, in which style becomes visible and accessible against the backdrop of other competing styles. This distinct style of rapping versus Jay Z's interview speech (and the Hip Hop speech of other rappers, to be discussed below) provides a greater understanding of the performance of identity in Hip Hop. Although both the 'FACTS ONLY' interview video on YouTube and the album *Magna Carta… Holy Grail* (2013) are presumed to have large audiences due to their ease of access, the album is still much more likely to be heard in wider contexts (on the radio or multiple music streaming platforms), whereas the interview is something a fan would have to specifically search for in order to listen. As a result, his New York-sounding speech much more apparent in his music, demonstrating that this is because his New York background is much more salient in the mediatized contexts of his music. This reaffirms Tricia Rose's (1994) notion that local speech styles are highly salient in the performance of Hip Hop specifically. More broadly, this reaffirms Johnson & Ensslin's (2007) argument that mass media allows for the contestation and negotiation of the value of local vernacular speech in non-local contexts.

Race versus Region

Lastly, I look at interpersonal variation of r-lessness as an index of race that shows the impact that region has in Jay Z's Hip Hop language. To address this question, I analyzed

rates of r-lessness on *Yeezus* (2013), an album by rapper Kanye West from Chicago, Illinois, versus the rate of r-lessness on *Magna Carta…Holy Grail* (2013), as well as their performances on their collaborative album *Watch the Throne* from 2011. These two rappers both speak varieties of African American English that have r-lessness as a feature. However, r-lessness is not a salient feature of Chicago English, whereas it is highly salient in New York English. Figure (4) shows the comparison of r-lessness between these rappers' Hip Hop speech performances, with Kanye West's performances shaded in grey:
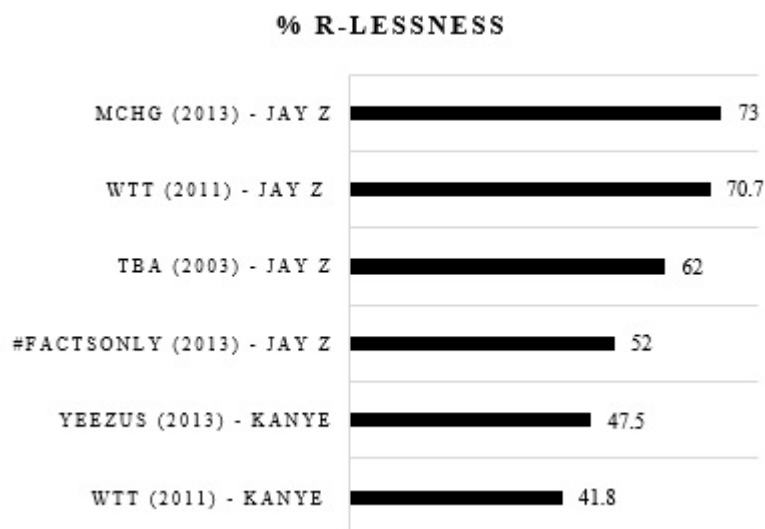
(4)

ALBUM	R-LESS TOKENS	TOTAL TOKENS	PERCENTAGE
WTT (2011)	105	251	41.8%
YEEZUS (2013)	123	259	47.5%
WTT (2011)	217	307	70.7%
MCHG (2013)	291	398	73%

While it is certain that both artists use r-lessness as a feature of African American English in their performances, Jay Z uses a much larger amount of r-lessness than Kanye West. It is important to recognize here that race and region are greatly overlapping and intersecting, as discussed previously. For this reason, it is impossible to pick apart which instances of deletion index Jay Z's race and which index his local identity, as identity is intersectional and indexes can be overlapping and multiple. However, this high rate of interpersonal variation indicates that regional identity does, in fact, have an impact on language use in Hip Hop beyond the simple entailment of urbanity with race.

Further, if we compare Jay Z's rate of r-lessness with patterns in New York City, we can see even more clearly the impact of region on his speech. Mather (2009) revisited Labov's (1972) seminal experiment on the social stratification of /r/ in NYC. The overall trend of this updated study showed that that rhoticity is increasing across the board in New York City, making r-lessness less prevalent. Yet African Americans specifically deleted /r/ more often than the overall data. If we compare this to Jay Z's rates of non-Hip Hop speech, he fits the trend: His regional variety of English contains much more r-lessness than that of other regions, but as an African American, he still shows higher rates of r-lessness than New York City at large—even increasing r-lessness over time.

5: Analysis

Altogether, the data show definite patterns that become readily visible when comparing all sources side by side, as shown here:

% R-LESSNESS

MCHG (2013) - JAY Z	73
WTT (2011) - JAY Z	70.7
TBA (2003) - JAY Z	62
#FACTSONLY (2013) - JAY Z	52
YEEZUS (2013) - KANYE	47.5
WTT (2011) - KANYE	41.8

(5)

By comparing all five sources we see that Jay Z consistently uses higher rates of r-lessness than Kanye West, even in non-Hip Hop speech. When considering intrapersonal variation, Jay Z shows two definitive trends: his 'talking' style features less r-lessness than his performance speech, and rates of r-lessness in his Hip Hop speech have gradually risen over the last decade. All of this data consistently supports the fact that r-lessness is indicative of both regional and racial identity. These aspects of Jay Z's persona are more salient on the global stage, and because of this fact, his Hip Hop language is specifically stylized to reflect and perform his Brooklyn identity.

6: Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, I have demonstrated the specific effects that urbanity and locality have upon Hip Hop speech. The study of Jay Z's intra- and inter-personal variation of r-lessness shows not only that local identity is an important subject of discussion in Hip Hop culture, but that it is so central to Hip Hop identities that that locality manifests itself linguistically. In other words, the importance of local identity on the global stage is both reflected and produced through Hip Hop language. These results also give more insight in regards to the relationship between urbanity and ethnicity, ultimately revealing that although these two elements of identity overlap in complicated ways, they are worthy of individual attention.

This analysis serves to enhance the culturally-oriented literature that already exists on Hip Hop culture. This paper has supplemented existing Hip Hop scholarship by demonstrating the ways in which Hip Hop artists (in this case, Jay Z) use language to speak to personal experiences and cultivate their own identities through staged performances. More broadly, this research illustrates Schilling-Estes' (1998) assertion that performance speech does in fact contain clear sociolinguistic patterns, and is an important object of sociolinguistic study. Ultimately, this study lends itself to a larger understanding of not just *what* elements of identity are important within Hip Hop culture, but more importantly *how* these elements are performed and authenticated through linguistic stylization. This is made possible through a sociolinguistic lens that considers both the social meaning of language, especially within the framework of Hip Hop studies, as well as the quantifiable presence of linguistic variation.

References

Agha, A. (2011). Commodity registers. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *21*(1), 22-53.

Alim, H. S. (2006). *Roc the mic right: The language of hip hop culture*. Routledge.

Bell, A. (1997). Language style as audience design. In *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 240-250). Macmillan Education UK.

Bucholtz, M. (1999). "Why be normal?": Language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. *Language in society*, *28*(2), 203-223.

Bucholtz, M. (2003). Sociolinguistic nostalgia and the authentication of identity. *Journal of sociolinguistics*, *7*(3), 398-416.

Coupland, N. (2009). The mediated performance of vernaculars. *Journal of English Linguistics*.

Cutler, C. (2003). "Keepin' It Real": White Hip-Hoppers' Discourses of Language, Race, and Authenticity. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *13*(2), 211-233.

Eckert, P. (2008). Variation and the indexical field1. *Journal of sociolinguistics*, *12*(4), 453-476.

Johnson, S., & Ensslin, A. (2007). *Language in the media: Representations, identities, ideologies*. A&C Black.

George, N. (2005). *Hip Hop America*. Penguin.

Green, L. J. (2002). *African American English: a linguistic introduction*. Cambridge University Press.

Irvine, J. T., & Gal, S. (2009). Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. *Linguistic anthropology: A reader*, *1*.

Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic patterns* (No. 4). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mather, P. A. (2012). The Social Stratification of/r/in New York City Labov's Department Store Study Revisited. *Journal of English Linguistics*, *40*(4), 338-356.

Morgan, M. (2001). Nuthin' but a G thang": Grammar and language ideology in Hip Hop identity. *Sociocultural and historical contexts of African American English*, 187-210.

Richardson, E. (2006) *Hiphop Literacies*. Routledge.

Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Wesleyan.

Schilling-Estes, N. (1998). Investigating "self-conscious" speech: The performance register in Ocracoke English. *Language in Society*, *27*(01), 53-83.

Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication*, *23*(3), 193-229.

Smitherman, G. (1997). "The Chain Remain the Same" Communicative Practices in the Hip Hop Nation. *Journal of Black Studies*, *28*(1), 3-25.

Stuart-Smith, J. (2007). A sociophonetic investigation of postvocalic/r/in Glaswegian adolescents. *Proc. ICPhS, Saarbrücken*.

Discography

Carter, S. (2003). *The Black Album* [MP3]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records.

Carter, S., & West, K. (2011) *Watch the Throne* [MP3]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records

Carter, S. (2013). *Magna Carta…Holy Grail* [MP3]. New York: Roc-A-Fella Records

[Jay Z's Life+Times]. (2013, July 23). *JAY Z #FACTSONLY Interview Part 1- THE TRUTH with Elliot Wilson*. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wc900jur8ZI

[Jay Z's Life+Times]. (2013, July 24). *JAY Z #FACTSONLY Interview Part 2 – THE TRUTH with Elliot Wilson*. [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Re8S3xZbRNI

West, K. (2013). *Yeezus* [MP3]. New York: Def Jam Records.

Department of Linguistics and School of Anthropology
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85719

jessicaray@email.arizona.edu