#BlackLanguageMatters
Fall 2017
Professor Renee Blake (renee.blake@nyu.edu)

**Time and Place:** TBA  
**Course Credit:** 4 Units

**Renée's Office Hours:** TBA (10 Washington Place, room 304)  
And by appointment

**Course Description:**
This course is about language, specifically the myriad of ways that many African Americans express their personal and community identities. The course focuses primarily on the language variety known as African American English, which often serves as a guise for deep-seated racial ideologies about African Americans and Black people more generally. In this course, students learn about the linguistic structure of African American English and theories about its origins. We explore how language is used to convey social identity, particularly regarding race and ethnicity, and make meaning of one’s life. Issues addressed include language variation, language contact and change, language appropriation, in addition to social and linguistic discrimination. Finally, we consider African American English as the nexus of ideas on race, identity, sexuality, violence and equality in the United States and globally, from James Baldwin in *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) and Ava DuVernay’s *13th* (2016) to Cornel West’s *Race Matters* (1994) and the more recent #BlackLivesMatter movement. (short course description)

This is a seminar-style course that fits squarely in the NYU’s Center for the Humanities theme “On Being Human,” and how this is realized for Black people living in 20th and 21st century U.S.A and the world, more broadly. We connect the human condition of Black people in America to historical trajectories of forced and voluntary migrations of the Black or African Diaspora. The intellectual exploration of social being and language is through reading academic texts, listening to creative spoken and written word, as well as music, and engaging with digital media and collected sociolinguistic data. Students hone skills in the areas of critical thinking, constructive criticism, data analysis, social and linguistic analysis, and structuring arguments.

Students learn about African American English from a linguistic perspective and link it to current social, political and educational issues. Students have an opportunity to build writing and technological skills in fulfilling the course requirement that includes thinking and writing as public intellectuals within the digital humanities. A goal for the course is for students to be creators of new knowledge about African Americans and language use in terms of production or perception, and to convey information to audiences in a matter that is accessible, or in other words, “keeps it real.”
Readings:
This course is interdisciplinary in nature and therefore, students read from several fields of inquiry. The beginning of the course is reading heavy, but necessarily lightens as we move into linguistic training and data analysis, with new and challenging concepts. In addition to articles, we read heavily from:


5. Other texts and readings will be provided on CLASSES

6. In addition to the reading we will have film viewings including:
- 13th (2016)
- I Am Not Your Negro (2016)
- Talking Black in America (2016)

Requirements and Grades:
Assignments (15% of grade): There are writing assignments. Earlier on in the semester there are 3 short reaction papers/production piece (2-3 pages in length) worth 5% of the final grade each.

Data analysis (35% of grade): Students analyze African American English data of different varieties. There are 3 small data analysis assignments worth 5% of the final grade each and 2 larger assignments worth 10% each.

Exam: (20% of grade): The objective of the exam is to ensure that students master basic concepts and principles.
Final Project: (30% of grade). The goal is to disseminate good information about African American English to the public. Students produce written contributions that can be conceptual or content-driven. Paper length depends on whether students analyze data or concepts about African American communication. We work on writing together throughout the semester.

**Grades are affected by lack of attendance/participation.** In this class we are talking to one another every class. We are sharing data, we are analyzing data together, we are experiencing Black culture in its many forms, we are working closely with one another. It is an engaging class period, allowing every student to hone their public engagement skills.

**Plagiarism is not tolerated.** Students are encouraged to reference NYU’s CAS statement on academic integrity (http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity).

**SYLLABUS (topics and readings)**

**African American English**

**Week 1 (September): Introduction; Class Orientation; Who and what is African American? Who Speaks American?**
VIDEO, in class: *13th* (2016)

**Week 2 (September): Introduction; Class Orientation; The State of Affairs of Black People in the USA**
VIDEO, in class: *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016)

**Reading for Week 2:**
Blake (2014) “African-American and Black as Demographic Codes.”
Heavily Suggested Helpful Background Reading:
Baugh 2000, Chapter 1 (Linguistics Pride and Racial Prejudice),
Chapter 2 (Ebonics Genesis)
Chapter 3 (A Contentious Global Debut)

**Week 3 (September): The State of Affairs of Black People in the USA- Lessons from Language**
What the Hip Hop Generation has to say: From Michael Eric Dyson to Kendrick Lamar to Beyoncé
**Reading Weeks 3-4:**
Reading for Week 1:
Rickford and Rickford 2000, Chapter 1 (What’s Going On?)
Smitherman 2001, Introduction (From Ghetto Lady to Critical Linguist)
Chapter 1 (Introduction to Ebonics)
Alexander 2010, Chapter 1 (The Rebirth of Caste)
FRSEM-UA 634

Fitzpatrick 2011, Chapter 2 (Authorship)
- Reaction Paper 1

**Week 4 (September): On Being Black and Human; Who Has a Right to Speak**
THURSDAY EVENT, in place of class: *Talking Black in America* (2017)

**Week 5 (October): African American English (AAE) Lexicon Beyond Slang; AAE Gone Viral**
Making Sense of the N-Word from James Baldwin to Marc Lamont Hill to Bobby Shmurda to NAS to Dave Chapelle

Reading for Week 5 (October 11):
Rickford and Rickford 2000, Chapter 6 (Vocabulary Section Only, Pages 91-98)
- Reaction Paper 2

**Week 6/7 (October): African American English and Language Theory (The Sound System)**
   I. Language Variation
   II. What is Phonetics and Phonology?

Reading for Week 6:
Rickford and Rickford 2000, Chapter 6 (Pronunciation Section Only, Pages 98-108)

- Data Assignment 1 (Phonology)

**Week 8/9 (October/November): AAE and Language Theory (Syntax or “Putting it all Together”)**

Reading for Week 7:
Rickford and Rickford 2000, Chapter 7 (Grammar)

- Data Assignment 2 (Phonology)

**Week 10 (November): Still Breakin’ it Down: AAE Verbal System:**
Learning about Tense and Aspect (A Wonderfully Complex System)

- Data Assignment 3 (Syntax)

**Week 11/12 (November): AAVE Verbal System (continued)**
All You Ever Wanted to Know about Aspectual Markers :-) 

- Data Assignment 4 (Phonology) & 5 (Syntax)

**Week 13 (November): Language and Culture (The Oral Tradition)**
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Reading for Week 11:
Smitherman 2001:
Chapter 11 (“How I Got Ovuh”: African World View and Afro-American Oral Tradition)
Chapter 12 (‘If I’m Lyin, I’m Flyin’”: The Game of Insult in Black Language)
Chapter 13 (‘Makin A Way Outa No Way”: The Proverb Tradition in the Black Experience)
Chapter 15 (“The Chain Remain the Same”: Communicative Practices in Hip Hop Nation)

Week 14 (December): EXAM
Work on Final Project

Week 15 (December): Linguistics, Education, and the Media; Connecting AAE to the Past
Linguistics and Education (The Oakland Ebonics Controversy and the Media)
VIDEO in class: The Story of English: Black on White

Highly Encouraged Video to Watch: "The Language You Cry In"

Reading for Week 13:
Smitherman 2001, Chapter 8 (“What Go Round Come Round”: King in Perspective)
Baugh 2000, Chapter 4 (Oakland’s Ebonics Resolutions)
     Chapter 8 (Racist Reactions and Ebonics)

Optional Reading that is Useful for Final Project writing:
Rickford and Rickford 2000:
Chapter 10 (The Media)
Chapter 11 (Ebonics “Humor”)

FINAL PROJECTS DUE (DURING FINALS WEEK)