What Does It Mean to 'Sound' Black?

In recent works including *Insecure*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *BlacKkKlansman,* sounding "real" is a tricky equation.

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On HBO's *Insecure*, the Issa Rae–helmed comedy about black women navigating life and love in Los Angeles, the show's main characters tease each other lovingly and unceasingly. The two friends, Issa Dee (Rae) and Molly Carter (Yvonne Orji), trade

barbs in a cheeky, exaggerated tone. It's a welcome dynamic, a reminder that the show is first and foremost dedicated to the story of the women's friendship (even if disillusioned <u>male fans insist</u> that Lawrence, Issa's ex, is integral to her narrative). The interactions speak to Issa and Molly's closeness—who but your *giii-iiii-iiiirlfriends* could get away with calling you a bitch so often?

Taken as standalone scenes, these barbs don't grate much; it's not unusual for marginalized people to reclaim words that originated as slurs, and to then offer these words to one another as terms of endearment. It's not rare to lend tenderness to words that could otherwise convey malice, to strip them of their venom by sheer force of will and pitch. In one such scene during Sunday night's Season 3 premiere, Molly and Issa sit down for a meal at L.A.'s famed Pann's Restaurant. Having just returned from a much needed getaway after quitting a job where she wasn't paid as much as her white male colleagues, Molly explains her new life strategy to Issa:

> "This whole vacation put everything in perspective for me. I'm on some next-level shit."
>
> "I'm listening."
>
> "So, like, vacation bae was tryna kick it with me, and I had to put him in his lane. *Bloop! You beach dick.* Quentin was tryna do some long-distance shit. I said, *Bloop! Stay in Chicago.* And my new job was tryna fuck with my benefits. I said, *Blam, you better give a bitch a PPO!*"

> "So you bloopin' and blippin' and blappin'?"

> "And blammin', bitch! I'm on some 'know better, do better' shit."

Molly, who has struggled with boundaries in prior seasons, sounds refreshingly steadfast in her convictions. But to some viewers, she also sounds … *off*. Throughout *Insecure*'s run, a small but sharp group of critics (on Twitter and in more informal conversation spaces) has questioned the specific tone with which Rae and Orji share their repartee. One particularly biting tweet alleged that Rae in particular says the word *nigga* like she just learned she's allowed to. It's an uncomfortable parsing, one that's particularly heavy considering the <u>long road Rae faced</u> to having her black-woman-centric show green-lit. In sharing skepticism about the veracity of Rae's and Orji's "blaccents," these viewers are also raising questions about the actors' connections to blackness writ large. Rae, who is of Senegalese and black-American heritage, and Orji, who is of Nigerian descent, are unquestionably black women. Concerns about the fidelity of their portrayals need not be referenda on the women's identities; there are, of course, many ways to be black, and to be a black woman.

But mapping the contours of the women's vocal performances does constitute one part of a broader skepticism about *Insecure*'s authenticity—fears or suggestions that the black lives the show depicts are not representative (enough) of the range of blackness the show claims to reflect. Whether it wants it or not, *Insecure* has

been saddled with the responsibility of portraying the struggles and triumphs of young black people of different socioeconomic statuses and ethnic backgrounds. And at times, the show has leaned into its role as an arbiter of the black-Millennial experience. On the "Wine Down" segments HBO aired after each of last season's episodes, Rae and another member of the cast or crew often made direct links between the show and what they deemed common facets of everyday black life (even when those didn't quite resonate). Still, to be the voice of an entire community is an impossible feat; to have that burden thrust upon one piece—or body—of work is a hurdle that most of Hollywood's white male showrunners have never shouldered. No one tells Aaron Sorkin that he doesn't sound (or behave) white enough.

But what does it mean for an actor, or for anyone, to "sound" black—or at least black enough? *Insecure* isn't the only recent work to raise the question, unwittingly or otherwise. Two recent films, Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* and Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, play with vocal conventions as a means of drawing attention to the absurd but deeply consequential markers that delineate race. *Insecure* finds its thematic effects sometimes undercut by a lack of vocal "authenticity" only ever demanded of black actors; *Sorry to Bother You* and *BlacKkKlansman* pass black actors the mic and let them take aim at the notion of white purity, sonic or otherwise.

In the former, telemarketer Cassius "Cash" Green (Lakeith Stanfield) begins to achieve unimaginable success after he adopts a "white voice" at the behest of a longtime call-center employee named Langston (Danny Glover). But Stanfield doesn't modulate

his own vocals toward whiteness; rather, the comedian David Cross voices the "white" Cash. For his part, Lee conjures a more complex racial transmogrification. In *BlacKkKlansman*, which draws from real-life events, the newly hired black Colorado Springs police officer Ron Stallworth (John David Washington) infiltrates a local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan by befriending the chapter's president over the phone and sending a white officer (Adam Driver) to play his in-person counterpart. The stunt requires Stallworth to speak in a voice "white" enough to woo people whose suspicions of his blackness could lead to the officer's demise.

Both films amplify one of the most literal (and personal) markers of race to ask salient questions about allegiance to whiteness. In both, the telephone acts as a tool of connection and transformation. It's a deft plot trick. But more often, adopting vocal conventions most canonized by white Americans isn't necessarily a conscious decision for people of color in the U.S. The notion of "talking white" is a reductive premise, a sweeping

generalization that fails to account for the multitudes within Black English and black-American vocal inflections.

John McWhorter, an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and the author of _Talking Back, Talking Black: Truths About America's Lingua Franca_, has spent much of his career studying the development of black linguistic patterns. McWhorter, who wrote recently for _The Atlantic_ about the stakes of the white poet Anders Carlson-Wee's employing Black English in his work for _The Nation_, notes that "code switching"—the way people modulate their usage of slang, intonation, and dialect for different audiences—is often an instinctive act. "Today, most black people talk a certain way at the bank and then a certain way while they're sitting down and talking to their family over dinner," McWhorter said when we spoke last week. "And it would never occur to them that they're doing anything."

But for people whose voices find their way into the public sphere, choosing what registers and pitches to pull from can be more fraught. In a 2015 piece for _Transom_, the _Uncivil_ podcast co-host Chenjerai Kumanyika wrote about the effect that the overwhelming whiteness of public radio had on his own vocal stylings. In tracing the way his voice changes when he is rapping, speaking "normally," and speaking specifically for radio or podcasts, Kumanyika gestured at how sounds associated with whiteness form the vast majority of the public-radio chorus—even when the speakers may not be white:

> "I'm not saying that voices and styles of speech map on to the

ethnicity of the speaker in any simple way. There is no single 'authentic' African-American, Latino, Asian, Native American, or white way of speaking. To say otherwise would be to participate in a reductive and inaccurate essentialism of which I want no part. However, I do think that there is what Paulo Freire called a 'dominant syntax' and flowing from that is a narrow range of public radio and podcast host voices and speech patterns that have become extremely common."

For actors whose primary years of language acquisition happened outside arenas where Black English was spoken, adopting Freire's "dominant syntax" could very well have been an unconscious act —one that is nearly impossible to reverse later in life. To learn any language, even one that others presume you must know by virtue of your skin alone, is immensely difficult without conversation partners. To speak or write Black English with any level of fluency requires diligence and, more often than not, a familiarity that is both embodied and acculturated. The language ebbs and flows temporally, but also along lines of class, region, and even national origin (after all, Americans are not the only people— black or otherwise—to speak English). Black English is, like standard American English, a language worthy of both speech and study. It is distinct and recognizable, a code of speech that can function as much as a signal of authenticity or belonging as it does a way to relay words.

Though Hollywood's overwhelmingly white gatekeepers are notoriously terrible at differentiating black actors from one another, black consumers can be far more discerning. Clichés like *revoking someone's black card* are hackneyed gambits, but

certain intangible tests of authenticity still remain for actors and creators looking to make intracommunity inroads. Donald Glover's *Atlanta*, for example, brought with its arrival a new set of skepticisms about the creator's allegiance to—and appreciation of—blackness. For the most part, Glover has overcome the long shadow of his past racial indiscretions by filling *Atlanta* with co-stars and characters whose stories (and voices) resonate with both natives of the city itself and black people around the country. Glover's sometimes stiff Earn is offset by Brian Tyree Henry's gruff Paper Boi and Lakeith Stanfield's eccentric Darius.

In his music, however, Glover (as Childish Gambino) still struggles with sounding "fully derivative." The voice is, after all, an intimate barometer. These gut checks from black consumers, unscientific though the calculus may seem, privilege singers and actors steeped in this linguistic tradition, who were raised speaking Black English alongside (or even instead of) the standard American varieties taught in schools or acquired as a result of proximity to white people. For these artists, Black English is a deep reservoir of both inspiration and technical resources to pull from. Taraji P. Henson, for example, "speaks everything," McWhorter said. "She just has more English than … frankly, you or me. She just has this huge repertoire that she can slip in and out of."

To be a black actor who grew up speaking Black English is to be the most savvy kind of interlocutor. When John David Washington voices *BlacKkKlansman*'s Ron Stallworth with an ear toward sounding white enough to fool a Klansman, he draws from a long black tradition of emulating whiteness for survival. In

the film, the plausibility of Washington's white voice is a matter of life and death. These are studied shifts. In a phone conversation with the former Klan grand wizard David Duke (played with plucky humor by Topher Grace), Stallworth directly asks what makes a negro *sound* colored. Duke points to the vowels, noting that the way Stallworth says the word *are* is an indication of his whiteness, whereas "niggers" extend the word to *are-uh*.

Stallworth's later aural unveiling of his own blackness lands with a bang because he's managed to fool Duke not just with his vernacular but also with his *vowels*. The changes in his vocal patterns aren't just about word choice, after all; they're also about phonation. As McWhorter says, "It's one thing to not use slang—it's one thing to not say *ain't*. It's another thing to change how you push air through your nostrils and your mouth." (This is also why, for example, Washington's Stallworth still sounds to black viewers like a black man trying to sound white, while the "white voice" of *Sorry to Bother You*'s Cash bellows with the full force of Cross's bumbling caucasity.)

For all the panache of Washington's "white voice" and Stanfield's lip-synching of Cross's lines, the inverse of either would be far more fraught. For actors, even black ones, who have spent the vast majority of their lives employing syntax and phonation associated with whiteness, training vocal cords away from these patterns can be far more difficult than vice versa. McWhorter's point about Henson, who plays the matriarch on Fox's *Empire* and has served as a mainstay in numerous films with predominantly black casts for decades, becomes more complex when applied to

actors whose vocal provenance is less obviously "authentic" to what black viewers associate with The Culture(™). If Black English is just one part of Henson's large vocal repertoire, are black actors who grew up without that fluency objectively lacking?

To move from speaking standard, which is to say *white*, English to employing black linguistic patterns or slang successfully is a sonic journey for which there are few, if any, shortcuts. Washington may be able to train his voice to sound "whiter"— push it into a higher register, adopt a more nasal tone, extend his vowels, and drop vernacular—but if Driver, who plays his white counterpart, tried to feign vocal blackness, the result would be jarring. It would feel cartoonish no matter how much gravity he projected. That dissonance doesn't disappear fully when a black actor adopts Black English after years of speaking differently. Whether born of survival or isolation, the "white"-sounding black voice is difficult to dress up convincingly.

This specific, visceral form of disharmony is what might give some *Insecure* viewers pause, but it's hardly new. Black actors have, after all, been pushing back against Hollywood's biases for the duration of the industry's existence. During the time when TV and films offered black actors only the most stereotypical of roles, when an *Insecure* could never have existed, the idea of someone who speaks with Rae's or Orji's voice being an avatar of black programming would have been a much harder sell (even if that same voice is part of what grants upwardly mobile, educated black people a seat at the proverbial table). *Love Jones* needed Nia Long's husk; *Living Single*, which is the inspiration for *Insecure*'s

Season 3 <u>show within a show, *Kev'Yn*</u>, crested on the rasps of Erika Alexander (who makes an appearance on *Kev'Yn*).

McWhorter noted that a recognizable vocal blackness was a key element in many black actresses' careers, whether audiences named it or not. Speaking about an unnamed black actress whose "white-sounding" voice made it difficult for her to land black roles roughly two decades ago, he recalled: "It was a great era in a way, but if you don't sound like Vivica Fox, there's always gonna be somebody who's gonna get it over you, and I think that's what happened to [the black actress who didn't achieve fame] ... There's no way she could've learned what Regina King can do ... I think that you can try a little bit, but there's always gonna be somebody who's got it natively, and as a result, you're not as good."

Insecure, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *BlacKkKlansman* are vastly different works of art with profound and varying ambitions. The voices of their leads are just one element of the works' resonance, and one tool their creators use to convey the authenticity or artifice of their characters. Whether they succeed in capturing the complexities of black vocal expression is up to viewers to determine, but their existence has already broadened the entertainment industry's narrow aural landscape. If Hollywood is serious about including a diverse set of influences, it will have to pass the mic to black voices of all registers, pitches, and timbres. The chorus sounds richest when it includes the full range of black voices—those amplified in earlier decades, those being projected now, and those as yet untapped. Seeing yourself on-screen is one thing, but some audiences still need to be heard.

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