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## The Semiotic Hitchhiker's Guide to Creaky Voice: Circulation and Gendered Hardcore in a Chicana/o Gang Persona

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*This paper aims to build on some of Jane Hill's contributions to the understanding of indexicality and the creation of an intertextual media series (Hill 2005), as well as to elucidate the varying levels of awareness that speakers have of linguistic features in the circulation of a stereotype. I show how creaky voice, a type of nonmodal phonation, becomes enregistered within an early narrative context, and is then catapulted by centrifugal media forces, taken as part of a constellation of features that cluster around the persona of "hardcore Chicano gangster." The data presented come from four separate but intricately related sources. One is a narrative of a Chicana girl from Northern California, collected in the 1990s when she was involved in gangs. I also analyze a media-based data set that includes songs about cholos by a Chicano hip hop artist, web-based text and video tutorials on how to act like a cholo, and a representation of a Chicano gangster in the video game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. I explain a mechanism through which a metapragmatically less-than-salient feature can become a semiotic hitchhiker, co-occurring with more overtly ideologized and stereotyped phenomena such as codeswitching and the usage of specific discourse markers. [creaky voice, intertextuality, metapragmatic awareness, enregisterment, Chicanos]*

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### Introduction

**A**n enduring problem in the sociolinguistic study of the meaning of linguistic variables is the interpretability and circulation of variables in new contexts of use. How does a variable travel from context to context and become part of the constellation of features that indexes a particular persona? How do variables in different contexts of use and at different levels of metalinguistic awareness become recurrent features of personae, and become accessible to character portrayals of these personae by other speakers (Agha 2007; Eckert 2008; Johnstone et al. 2006; Rampton 2009)? How do processes of racialized stereotyping operate not only across features at the lexical level (such as the use of Injun *How!*, Meek 2006) and morphological levels (as in Mock Spanish *el -o*, Hill 2008), but at the fine-grained phonetic and suprasegmental levels (Podesva 2007; Sicoli 2010)? And what is the role of the media (Goebel 2010; Hill 2008) in the enregisterment and circulation of these variables? Taking creaky voice as my object of investigation, I suggest that it travels through the mechanism of an intertextual series (Hill 2005), leading to the processes of typification (see also Keane

and Philips, this issue) and enregisterment (Agha 2003, 2007), and more broadly to processes of the creation of personae through speech features (Eckert 2008; Podesva 2007, 2011).

In what follows, I begin by discussing the phonetic definition of *creaky voice* and its sociolinguistic dimensions in the literature. From this review, it becomes clear that creaky voice (and indeed low pitch in general) in the phonetics and biology literature (and to a great extent in the sociophonetics literature through the 2000s) has been conceptualized as directly or indirectly indexing masculinity, partly as a result of pervasive sociobiological theorizing (critiqued in Mendoza-Denton and Strand 1998). I follow this overview of the literature with an analysis of the use of creaky voice in a narrative by Babygirl, a California teenage girl involved in gangs in the 1990s, showing that creaky voice obeys important discourse-internal constraints and that, in the case of Babygirl, it is used in her construction of a “hardcore” gang girl persona that is not compellingly analyzed in terms of being male, but rather in terms of the qualities, styles (Eckert 2008; Mendoza-Denton 2000) and stances (Jaffe 2009) of toughness and of being hardcore. Babygirl argues for the necessity of acting *hardcore* (literally, hard of heart), the embodied practice of being tough for both self-protection and self-preservation.

In the second part of the paper, I trace the wider circles of enregisterment and indexicality (Ochs 1990) that allow the creaky speech modality to hitchhike and spread despite its metapragmatic limitations: lack of overt recognition poses no barrier to the circulation of this feature. Circulation includes its iconic use in Chicano gangster rap in the 1990s, and the subsequent media images of Chicano rappers and Chicano gang members in videogames which are shown to play an important role in the linking of creaky voice and nonmodal speech qualities to stereotyped images of hardcore, *male* Chicano gangster personae. In these situations, insider and outsider perspectives are blurred as an original, and widely copied, user of the feature is put in the paid position of stereotyping himself: the most famous Chicano hip hop artist, Kid Frost, who used creaky voice to sing politicized raps about the streets, social justice and the Chicano condition in the 1990s is hired by an international videogame company in the early 2000s to voice himself (as a rapper), and simultaneously scripted to voice a violent Chicano gangster avatar in the controversial but wildly popular videogame *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Entertainment, 2004). I argue that in the stereotyping of Chicano gangster/“*cholo*” speech, creaky voice (and more generally, nonmodal voice quality including harsh voice and pressed voice), a less-than-salient linguistic phenomenon, is enregistered as part of an intertextual series (Hanks 1986; Hill 2005), that includes overtly mentioned speech stereotypes such as the intensifier “*órale*,” the vocative “*whassup*,” and the discourse tags “*hones*,” and “*ese*.” Intertextuality across media further facilitates the process of semiotic hitchhiking, partly due to the fact that mediated representations of gangsters (not just Chicano gangsters), have traditionally played on aspects of nonmodal voice qualities.

### Creaky Voice as Semiotic Hitchhiker

Creaky voice violates the tenets for metalinguistic awareness posited by Silverstein (1981:5): It has no referential meaning, no continuous segmentability, and no relative presuppositional qualities vis-à-vis its context of use. Most critically, it can't even be pronounced in isolation. Indeed, when directly questioned, users had a difficult time identifying creaky voice to comment on it (“What are you *talking* about?” was the response I got more than once from gang girls who were users of this speech modality, with no further elaboration or response whether I described or enacted creaky voice); speakers preferred instead to comment on the phonetic, lexical and discourse elements onto which creaky voice was necessarily docked.<sup>1</sup>

Thus creaky voice presents us with a puzzle: It is a robust, reproducible feature of language that bears important discourse functions when it appears but is not at the level of conscious awareness for most speakers. Even more puzzling is the rapid spread of such a feature and its association with a particular mediatized persona. Because the spread of the feature depends so strongly on media circulation to ensure rapid, long-distance travel, I have chosen the metaphor of hitchhiking to shed some light on this puzzle. In the case of creaky voice, we will see that it is catapulted from a speech modality that is arguably local to California in its ethnic/gender configuration (Fought 2003:78), and is propelled through a media explosion to a recognizable, enregistered, marketable product that has hitchhiked on the backs of sales of millions of units of videogame DVDs.

Semiotic hitchhiking is here defined as taking place when a feature does not have its own vehicle and hitches a ride on another co-occurring vehicle to circulate and spread. Thus, in order to be considered as a semiotic hitchhiker, the first criterion that needs to be established is that a feature has no vehicle of its own. As predicted by Silverstein, this makes creaky voice a poor candidate for metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness.

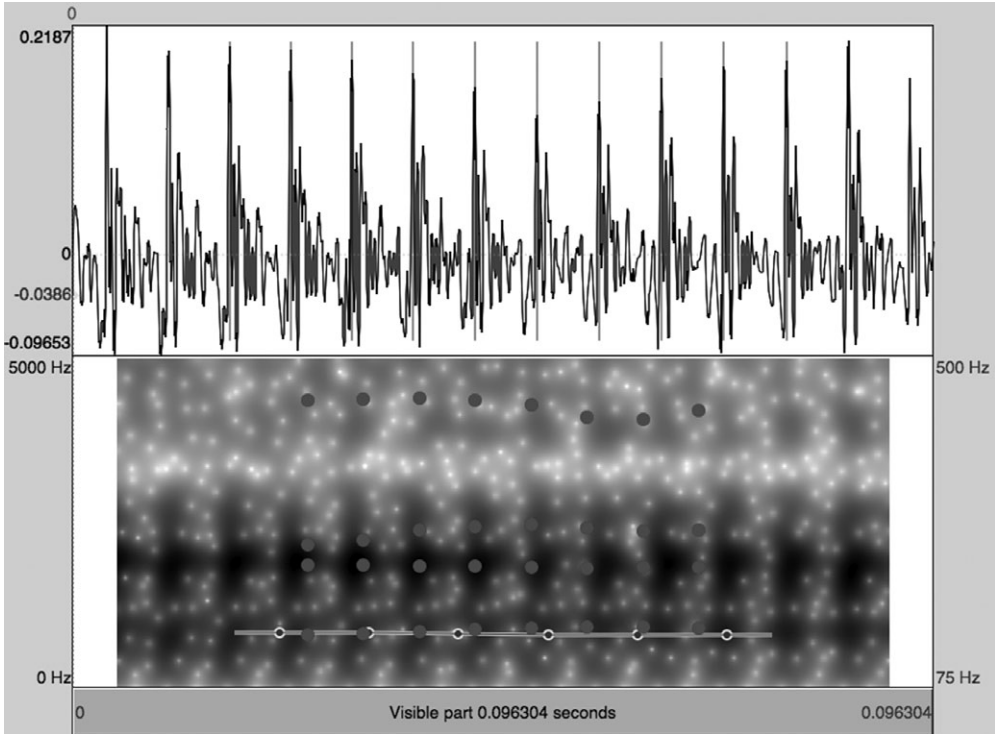
The second criterion of a semiotic hitchhiker then is that it needs to co-occur with (Ervin-Tripp 1972; Half Moon Bay Style Collective 2008; Mendoza-Denton 2000) another feature or group of features that are in simultaneous circulation.<sup>2</sup> Thus the hitchhiker travels, for free, with other ideologized and pragmatically salient elements that are considered to be part of a style/stance/persona.

Here I argue for the crucial role of intertextuality in allowing the semiotic hitchhiking of creak. In her work on Mock Spanish (Hill 2005, 2008), Hill notes that the production and reproduction of white racism relies on the intertextual circulation of metaphors, gaffes, imitations and revoicings. Mimicry of sub-groups may pass unnoticed by the broader population, and these linguistic forms of covert racism fail to elicit the kinds of denials of racism that were identified by van Dijk (1993). As she notes: "One cannot say, 'I'm not racist, but adios, sucker!'" (Hill 2008:45). Elsewhere, Silverstein (1993) has commented on noncancelability and nondeniability as emerging features of metapragmatic explicitness (see also Mertz 1998). In a classic discussion of metapragmatic awareness, Silverstein explains that the "characteristic condition of metapragmatic indexicality is cooccurrence in the configuration of indexicals that may be distinctly functioning qua signs" (1993:48). The configuration of metapragmatic indexicals may happen across modalities, and give rise to structures that themselves serve to orient speakers to genres on display, and to their incipient metapragmatic regimentation. "Configurational metapragmatic indexicality becomes crucially important in reflexive calibration of metapragmatic semiosis, as for example where intonation, stress, tonal contour, voice quality, and so on, combine with referential and denotational signs to give a determinate reading" (1993:48). Here, Silverstein relies on Gumperz's classic work on contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982), and goes on to say that "we know of no examples where a single contextualization cue [...] suffices for metapragmatic regimentation" (1993:48).

It is possible that the creaky voice identified as occurring in hardcore gangster personae is a type of generic contextualization cue across contexts of usage. By itself, it does not suffice to regiment a whole genre, especially since it is covert (as in some of Hill's examples of Mock Spanish, speakers have no awareness of the feature). On the other hand, it is robust enough that, in combination with other features such as discourse markers and codeswitching, it cues the occurrence and emerges in performances—though not descriptions—of hardcore Chicano gangster personae.

### What is Creaky Voice?

According to Hollien et al. (1966) creak "is a train of discrete laryngeal excitations, or 'pulses' of low frequency [...] it is a phonational register occurring at frequencies



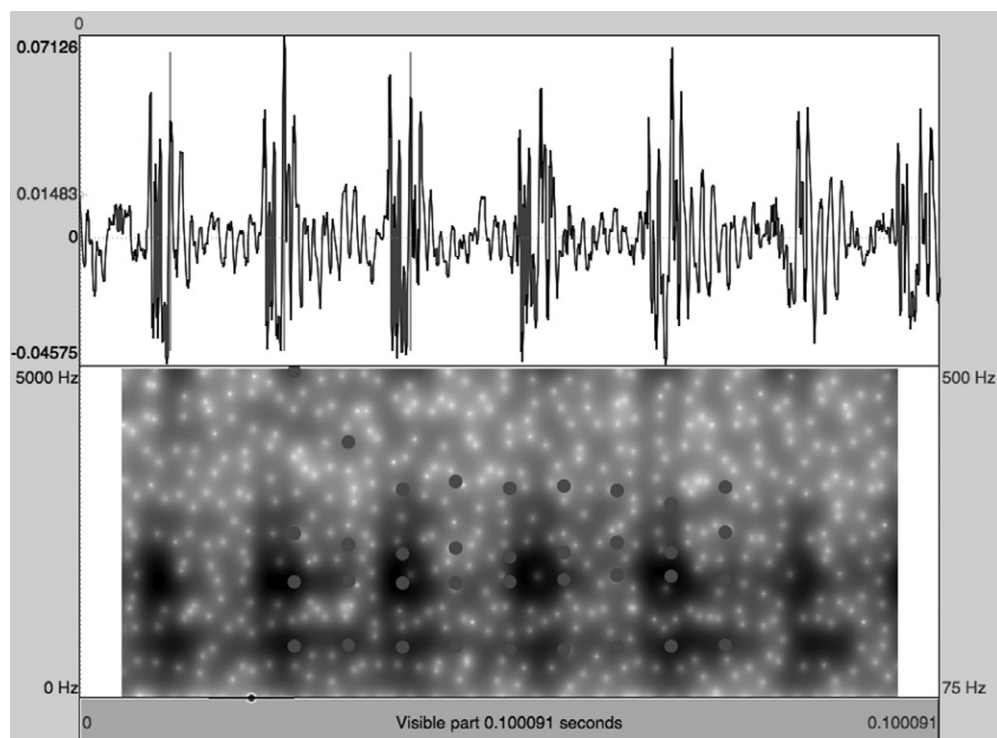
**Figure 1**  
**Modal [ae], extracted from the word “dad,” F<sub>0</sub> tracked at 144.7 Hz**

below those of the modal register.” Catford compares the auditory effect of creaky voice to that of “a series of rapid taps, like a stick being run along a railing” (1964:32).

During creak, the subglottal pressure is lower than that of modal voice, the airflow is lower, and the fundamental frequency is also lower, estimated at between 30 and 120 Hz (Hollien 1974; Laver 1980). Pulses are not entirely regular, and this aperiodicity makes it very difficult to track fundamental frequency, since we depend on both regular periodic events and sufficient amplitude to track the F<sub>0</sub> contour.

Consider Figures 1 and 2, displaying Praat waveforms and formant information for two samples of the vowel [ae] produced by the same speaker (the author) under laboratory conditions. Figure 1 shows a modal [ae] while Figure 2 shows a creaky [ae].

There are several similarities and differences to note in the two vowel samples. First, the similarities: the two samples were extracted to represent a comparable time period; both are approximately one-tenth of a second of the [ae] vowel, taken from the steady state midpoint of the utterance “dad,” in a context of voiced consonants for reduced perturbation. Both the modal and the creaky samples have similar average first and second formant readings—formants are tracked as large grey dots on the spectrogram—preserving the basic information about the [ae] vowel (modal F<sub>1</sub> = 907.4 Hz, F<sub>2</sub> = 1860 Hz, creaky F<sub>1</sub> = 805 Hz, F<sub>2</sub> = 1826 Hz). As for differences, in the creaky sample the frequency of glottal pulses is low and irregular. The F<sub>0</sub> track (the connected dots), steady at 145 Hz in the modal sample, does not reliably show up in the creaky sample. There are only two cycles in the creaky [ae] for which F<sub>0</sub> information can be resolved in Praat, and they indicate an F<sub>0</sub> of 75 Hz, considerably lower than the modal vowel (visual inspection of the waveforms allows a quick confirmation of this measurement—there are half as many major pulse-like events in the creaked sample as in the modal sample (note also relative damping in the signal between cycles in the creaked sample). The creaky voice sample contains both jitter (irregularity in the period of the wave) and shimmer (irregularity in the amplitude). Because the sub-



**Figure 2**  
Creaky [ae], extracted from the word “dad,”  $F_0$  partially tracked at 75 Hz

cycles in the creaky voiced sample are highly unpredictable compared to the modal sample, an automatic measurement algorithm can resolve neither pulses nor  $F_0$  accurately, and yields no formant frequency track to compare to the first sample.

In my own past work I have understood creaky voice as best transcribed with the widely-accepted ToBI (Tones and Breaks Indices) intonational labeling system<sup>3</sup>, well suited for the task of describing these creaked low tone realizations because it doesn't depend on automatic extraction, since labeling is done acoustically and confirmed instrumentally by experienced labelers. Mendoza-Denton and Jannedy (2000) have posited creaky voice as one possible realization of a declarative low tone target (a super-low tone) at the end of an intonational phrase in English, exploiting phenomena of declination/final lowering in English. Because creaky voice is in the lowest pitch range that by definition occurs below a speaker's modal voice, it is a candidate exponent of phonological low tones. But the story is more complicated than that, since creaky voice can be sustained (spanning more than a single pitch accent, both high and low).

### The Interpretation of Creak: Status, Affect, and Gender

Sociolinguistic studies have correlated creak with various social characteristics. Trudgill finds creak to correlate with other paralinguistic markers of the working-class Norwich dialect (1974:186), while Esling (1978) shows that in Edinburgh speech greater social status corresponds to greater incidence of creak, while lower status corresponds with whispery voice and harsh voice.

The findings on voice quality and emotion are very disparate, and find creak to be used paralinguistically by different speakers to display disparate kinds of affect, ranging from anger and sarcasm to fear and disgust (Murray and Arnott 1993). Brown and Levinson in studying Tzetzal claim that creak is used to express commiseration or complaint (1978:272), while Laver claims that it signals bored resignation when it



occurs throughout the phrase (1980:126). Wilce, conducting research in Bangladeshi medical encounters, analyzes creaky voice as signaling “weakness, misery, or a sympathetic response to misery,” and described its use by patients when they “presented themselves as weak” (1997:354).

Both Catford (1964) and Wells (1982) link British Received Pronunciation with creak as well as with end-of-utterance position. Wells (1982) describes RP-speaking men as tending to go into creak towards the end of an utterance spoken with a low-fall nuclear tone. Ladefoged (1982) states that creaky voice occurs at the end of falling intonations for some speakers of English, while Monsen and Engebretson (1977) state that it occurs at the ends of utterances produced by males. Indeed, creak has been argued to be a sociolinguistic marker of masculine and even hyper-masculine speech (Henton and Bladon 1988). Carpenter (2006) investigates teenage male speech and argues that creak is indexical of masculinity. Although this view has been complicated by recent sociolinguistic research (Grivicic and Nilep 2004; Lefkowitz and Sicoli 2007; Podesva 2006), the association still remains in some areas of laboratory-based phonetics (Chen, Gussenhoven and Rietveld 2004; Gordon and Heath 1998) and in forensic phonetics (Moosmuller 2001). Other studies of creak in both large and small communities (Lefkowitz and Sicoli 2007; Yuasa 2010) offer data aligning the use of creak with female speakers. Fought 2003 intriguingly identifies creaky voice as a prominent feature of Southern California Chicano English women’s speech, and claims that it is an example of contact transfer between Southern California English and Chicano English, prevalent in women of both groups.

### Narrative Data: Creaky Voice in Vivo

As I will demonstrate, creaky voice assists gang girls in the construction of a hardcore persona in the context of a *locally-defined* economy of affect, where close metalinguistic attention is paid to the management of emotional responses displayed in a given situation. Here, the local definition of the meaning of this feature is crucial: it is the local nature of creak’s interpretation that allows it to serve as a female-marked feature in some communities and a male-marked feature in others, and to switch from denoting a specific kind of locally-determined femininity (feminine toughness) in the first data set, only to be transformed to cholo masculinity in just a few generations of intertextual serialization.

The first data set that is under analysis for this study was collected as part of a larger ethnographic sociolinguistic study on Latina girls in a high school in Northern California. Elsewhere I have analyzed aspects of English vocalic and consonantal variation in this community, as well as aspects of social organization and the broader educational and anthropological context of the research (Mendoza-Denton 2008). I have also laid the groundwork for a related discussion of how a feminine technology such as cosmetics can be recombined with other elements to take on a meaning different from the conventional one. Here I add a linguistic dimension to this recombinant account by exploring how creaky voice is used in narratives for the construction of a hardcore persona.

The interview data transcribed below was gathered in the home of the participant, Babygirl, a then-17-year-old Chicana girl who was involved in the larger ethnography that I carried out, a multiyear study of linguistic practice among Latina girls in a high school in Northern California in the early and mid-1990s.

This interview is one of the first in what would be a long-standing research relationship and later a personal friendship. Babygirl is one of the leaders of the Norteña gang, but she is not unusual in her use of creaky voice. Other native English-speaking girls from both the Norteña and Sureña gangs in the study were also users of creaky voice. Perhaps the last thing to note here is that Babygirl does not use creaky voice in other contexts. She does not use it in class, she doesn’t use it with her boyfriend, she doesn’t use it with her mom, with whom she speaks in Spanish. As a speech strategy, it is reserved for situations that convey and construct a particular aspect of her persona.

In the following transcription, Babygirl produces a narrative of her involvement with gangs. This is a small excerpt from an interview that lasted over two hours. Creak is annotated in this piece with tildes around the bolded portions that are creaked, and in the specific examples excerpted from the narratives, ToBI transcriptions are provided. As for boundary marking, intermediate phrase boundaries are annotated as single slashes (/), full intonational phrase boundaries are annotated as double slashes (//).

Transcript: Babygirl at home (0:56)

- 1 All my homeboys respect me a lot//  
 they **~never~** / you know //  
 they always look up to me / and they're always **~like~**/ you know //  
 tell me what's up / you know //
- 5 and they always protect me / you know //  
 it seems like //  
 I'm like the only female there //  
 but they always seem to protect me //  
 you know //
- 10 from other guys //  
 you know //  
 from other **~dudes~** //  
 so it's like they're //  
 it's like / we're like a whole big fa**~mily~** //
- 15 you know //  
 we could uhm //  
 we could talk about uhm . . . //  
 we could talk about uhm . . . //  
 it's like a- we're-
- 20 we could talk about **~like~** //  
 we could talk about **~like~** //  
 what happened / at home / you know //  
 how do you **~feel about things~** at home you know //  
 and we could talk **~about~** //
- 25 anything / you know and it's all between us //  
 but now //  
 it's like we don't know who to trust because of all the experiences that we have/  
 been having / you know //  
 fucking people //
- 30 you know //  
 fucking and //  
 betraying you know ourselves / and shit //  
 so it's like //  
 we just keep it to **~ourselves~** //
- 35 we're like more **~quiet now~** / you know //  
 but the thing that I've always known //  
 that I have **~always known in my~** whole life //  
 if you're down //  
 you have to be down **~with yourself~** //







Being hardcore for Babygirl is not a matter of sex or gender. It is a question of life experience and of growing up, of managing one's feelings and emotions, and in narratives this tension is iconically achieved through creak, a barely-controlled modality of voice that hints at turbulence and unruliness in the pitch range.

I end this section by acknowledging that this is a close reading of one girl's linguistic practice at a particular moment in time during my research, though creaky voice was not uncommon and occurred in many other similar narratives by English-dominant gang-involved girls. The recording described here was a happenstance witness to fragments of a persona that later, over the course of twenty years, exploded in the media. I consider the narrative by Babygirl an early example of the enregisterment of a hardcore Chicano gangster persona. In the second part of the paper, I address the crystallization and circulation of this persona.

### Creaky Voice in the Media: The 1990s Raps of (Kid) Frost

This section of the paper makes the argument that, just around the same time that the narrative data was gathered, the creaky voice modality began circulating, was picked up and transported through mediatized vehicles, and became part of the popular imagination of the Cholo/Chicano gangster speech persona that became stereotypically associated with "brown masculinity" (Delgado 2000). Thus, I make the argument that although in the narrative data above, creaky voice is not necessarily associated with masculinity, but instead with a counterhegemonic gendered performance of being "hardcore," once it was picked up as part of the Chicano gangster persona in popular gangster rap music and film, it acquired strong associations with Chicano men. What for the girls involved in gangs was a discourse device manipulating low-tones in narratives acquired an indirect indexicality that pointed to Chicano masculinity once it became telescoped through the wider media lens that associated gangster rapper styles exclusively with men.

During the 1990s, at the same time that the data was gathered from Babygirl in the previous section, the West Coast Chicano Rap sound was just beginning to emerge. In fact, the youth with whom I carried out ethnographic fieldwork for this project were listeners, and Babygirl was one of the youths who listened to this type of music. Chicano rapper Kid Frost (real name Arturo Molina Jr.) emerged on the West Coast Scene in the early 1990s and is still recognized as the godfather of West Coast Chicano Rap. Although a complete history of this genre is beyond the scope of this paper, one of the foci that I will provide here is to pay attention to the use of creaky voice in the raps and in the voiceovers of Kid Frost. Most of Frost's songs are about Chicano gang life and the life of Mexican-Americans in California, and there are many intertextual elements that connect the music of Frost and his popularity among the Latino gang-involved young people that I interviewed in California in the 1990s.

As I document in the larger ethnography that came out of this work, the elements of being hardcore and the economy of affect surrounding its expression are continuous with the sense-making that youth provided for their ideologies of affect, and reflect some of the issues discussed by Philips (this issue) in her discussion of phenomenological metapragmatics. The historical continuity of the hardcore gangster persona is reflected in prison-related imagery and aesthetics surrounding gang involvement, and the use of tropes such as *Smile Now Cry Later* (Mendoza-Denton 2008). In terms of Kid Frost's albums, this imagery shows up in album covers (*Smile Now Die Later*) that allude to gang life. Tracing these tropes is tricky, because they are not the exclusive province of Latinos (as is the case with creaky voice), for instance, the late rapper Tupac Shakur had a *Smile Now Cry Later* tattoo on his body. I take this as a sign of the growing popularity and acceleration in the 1990s of the Chicano symbols that become entextualized with rap music. By establishing some of these indexical links we can begin to build an argument about the positioning and emergence of personae. As in Eckert's (2008) discussion of indexical fields, I argue that the

Chicano hardcore gangster persona is made up of a collection of indices that point in the direction of a unified linguistic presentation.

Frost's first major success in the charts came with the release of his single *La Raza* from the album *Hispanic Causing Panic* (1990). In this, as in subsequent releases, his raps include some rapped, not sung, elements, mostly delivered in creaky voice. In some ways Frost became an iconic figure known for sounding Chicano and hardcore, especially in his role as the innovator in the relatively new musical genre of Chicano gangster rap. His voice and music were included in the movie *American Me* (about Chicano gangs in a maximum-security prison in California), in which the most popular single, "Ain't No Sunshine," was delivered in a remarkably sustained creaky modality. Below is an excerpt from his song "La Familia," released in 1997 on the album *Smile Now Die Later* (Kid Frost 1997). Line numbers refer to line numbers within the song, to indicate to the reader where the excerpted bits are taken from within the piece.

- 1 ~*Quihubo*~, aqui estoy, yeah it's the big boy  
 2 ~down~ with the homegirls, ~down~ with the homeboys  
 3 kicking back, listening to a Huggy Boy ~rola~  
 [this is a reference to a 1950's DJ in L.A.]  
 4 waiting for the night to hit so we can find ~some cholas~  
 [. . .]  
 9 ~*órale ese*~  
 10 cause when I do it, I do it all day (all day) [. . .]  
 14 and now I get my ~gangster roll on~  
 [. . .]  
 20 cause it ain't nothing but a ~family thing, yeah~  
 21 ~*Oye vato*~, what's up loco?  
 22 check out the ~style~ [.] of my ~vocal~  
 23 and take a look and see what the cat dragged in  
 24 ~one big bad ass Mexican~  
 25 and I'm ready for ~anyone~, down for ~anything~  
 26 and I can pass any test that any ~bring~  
 27 *vatos* wanna know where I'm from  
 28 I'm from the ~varrio, East Los Aztlán.~  
 [. . .]  
 37 ~Kid Frost~ back and ~I'm down~  
 38 and my *familia* is anyone whose skin is ~brown~  
 [. . .]  
 51 cause the Mexican people ~is a big ass gang, yeah~  
 52 ~it's a family thing, huh~

I have taken discontinuous samples from this excerpt to show some of the patterns of occurrence of creaky voice in this transcript.<sup>4</sup> For reasons of space I do not reproduce the whole transcript of the song, but will note that 25 of the 52 lines are delivered with some degree of creaky voice quality, with the most sustained, consecutive examples of creaky voice occurring in lines 21–28. Creaky voice is obeying the discourse constraints outlined in part one of this analysis, and appears on the Spanish vocatives *quihubo*, *órale*, *oye*, (lines 1, 9, and 21) and the discourse markers *ese*, *yeah*, *vato*, and *huh* (lines 9, 22, 21, and 52). As was mentioned before, creaky voice follows constraints of English final pitch lowering (lines 3, 4, 14, 20, 22, 25, 26, 28, 37, 38, 51), though it can appear initially for emphasis (1, 2, 9, 21, 37), and can be sustained over whole phrases (lines 24, 52). This excerpt also includes the closest that I've been able to find to metapragmatic commentary around creaky voice. In line 22, "check out the ~style~ [.] of my ~vocal~," Frost calls attention to his rapping style, doing so with creaky modality on the relevant words. Although it's not clear if he is specifically talking about creaky voice or perhaps referring to his codeswitching or his rhyming skills, it can be noted that at the time he was the only rapper who was using this sustained voice quality in his raps, and created a distinctive sound which set him apart from others recording around the same time (like his African-American contemporary Ice-T, his mentor Snoop Dogg, etc.). As Delgado (2000) notes, Frost has

influenced generations of Chicano rappers, and especially contemporary Chicano gangster rap, both mainstream and underground, that makes pervasive use of creaky voice and other nonmodal voice qualities.

### Creaky Voice on the Web: Tutorials on How to be a Cholo

The broader media circulation of the cholo stereotype continues unabated beyond the 1990's and the 2000's, picking up speed on the internet and other media with websites, serialized youtube videoblogs, tutorials, music, and TV shows instructing mainstream audiences on how to recognize/become/act like/dance like/dress like a cholo, or how to make yourself up like a chola. My contention here is that after Frost put together a recognizable style that could be neatly packaged for consumption, the circulation of the stereotype (and with it the semiotic hitchhiker, creaky voice) acquired speed. Most of the web tutorials that are text-based focus on elements of the style that include clothing and music, and when they mention language they only mention features that are at a relatively high level of metapragmatic awareness: Spanish use, discourse markers, and distinctive expressions all make the lists of overt instructions. This is our data for metapragmatic unawareness. Only in tutorials that are video blogs (vlogs) and recorded demonstrations is it possible to find examples of nonmodal voicing, and this is the positive data showing that the feature is still transmitted through the mediatized formats.

The first sample comes from the website Wikihow (2011) <http://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Cholo>, a type of encyclopedia for do-it-yourselfers: It is entitled "How to Be a Cholo," and I have preserved both the site's original spellings, its enumeration sequence and its definitions to highlight the order in which various components of being a cholo are represented:

A *Cholo* is a Mexican *gangster* (aka, Vato Loco). These days, it seems many people would like to be a Cholo, so they can lean like a Cholo<sup>5</sup> and dress like a Cholo on Easter. This is the definitive guide to becoming a Cholo, so all those eses' recognize that you are properly representing la raza.

1. Get some Cholo music, like Duende, Hi-Power Soldiers, Soilder Ink, Low Profile, Brown-side, Kinto Sol, Big lokote, Lil Rob, or South Park Mexican A.K.A. [S.P.M]. Mr.Capone-e, Mr. Sancho, Knightowl, Dont forget Kid Frost.
2. If you don't know anything, don't say anything.
3. Make sure you've got some back up.
7. End your sentence with "ese" or "orale" or homes.
12. Don't walk around with the wrong color unless you are ready for a beat down ese.
13. [. . .] When looking for a chola, always look at attitude. If she rude to boys and has that firme class; poofed hair, darker makeup, tom-boyish clothes, has the firme accent like "orale, Simon, ese y esa, and says homegirl and homeboy, then you found a firme ruka. ORALE!

In this parodic how-to-tutorial, elements of being a cholo are offered to non-Chicanos who may want to "dress up" as a cholo. Here we can clearly see elements of Hill's (2005) work on the intertextuality of *mañana*, connecting how linguistic and other semiotic features of this persona acquire racialized and racist meanings in the transition to being circulated in the media. Clearly entextualized are the connection between being a cholo and listening to gangster rap music, wearing colors, and using discourse markers. The very idea of "dressing up as a cholo" points both to the implicit audience of the website as well as to the robust enregisterment of the persona.

Codeswitching and discourse marker use are mentioned, as are specific material and bodily practices (Bourdieu 1984). There are many more examples that can be uncovered in even a cursory internet search, but one that is repeatedly, intertextually re-posted online (and is reposted in the number one-rated definition of a cholo on urbandictionary.com (Urban Dictionary 2011) is a satirical web tutorial on how to be a cholo by a user pseudonymed "Ego." In his serialized vlog, Ego performs "hardcore cholo gangster," and in the first vlog, his introduction of how to be a cholo, he once

again mentions all the expected elements: clothing, music, and language; but because this is a video, we are able to see the heretofore metapragmatically hidden, hitchhiking feature—he utilizes nonmodal voice quality (harsh and pressed voice) throughout his performance.

The examples analyzed above of non-cholos<sup>6</sup> representing cholos for mass consumption recapitulate findings in Hill (2008). It is through these reproductions that we can see how outsiders quote and reproduce personae in ways that they perceive to be funny and authentic but that are in fact deeply problematic, with all that is entailed in organizing others to dress up for Halloween. We see how this indexicality takes on new meanings in the intertextual media series that is developed. In the next section we examine the ultimate exposure-explosion of this persona: Sales of 17.5 million (and counting) reiterations of the association between cholo gangsters and the material and linguistic elements we have discussed so far, including creaky voice.

### Creaky Voice in Videogames: “Place, Peril, and Pigmentation”

*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is the third installment in the Grand Theft Auto Series of videogames for Xbox, PCs, and Playstations produced by Rockstar Entertainment (2004). GTA San Andreas was released to critical outrage for its violence and sexual content, though it was accompanied by tremendous sales. It remains the bestselling game for Playstation 2 of all time, at 17.5 million units, with an original list price of US \$60.00. The 2010 Guinness Book of World Records lists it as the 3<sup>rd</sup> best-selling video game of all time (Guinness World Records 2009).

The GTA San Andreas game is an open-ended, nonlinear third-person shooter game (so-called sandbox style) in which the player participates in a number of gang-related excursions in three different cities: Los Santos (a fictional city based on Los Angeles), San Fierro (based on San Francisco), and Las Venturas (based on Las Vegas). An interesting feature of the GTA San Andreas game is that it included about 800 voice actors, some of them very well-known Hollywood personalities and musicians, especially rap and hip hop artists whose voices were highlighted in dramatic prerecorded animation/narration sequences. Within the game, players are able to drive around and roam from city to city, carrying out “missions” that mostly involve jacking cars (hence the name: *Grand Theft Auto*) in order to enhance their status and achieve pre-set objectives within the game. An innovative feature of the game at the time was that it allowed a lot of open exploration and players could engage in all kinds of unscripted antisocial activities within the “fantasy” of the game. It is possible within the GTA environment to steal vehicles, drive around in them, run over pedestrians, rob, beat up, shoot and kill passersby, commit illegal and violent sexual acts, and so on. By far the biggest critiques of this game have involved controversies around the portrayal of violence, of women, and of minorities.

GTA: SA provides a true smorgasbord of carnivalesque stereotypes, from black gangster families to crooked white business and arms dealers, to a blind Chinese gang leader who races his car across the country, to Chicano gangsters. As in most video games, the demographics inside the game over-represent minorities in violent characters, and under-represent women except as sexual objects. (Indeed, if the player doesn’t bother to work out or eats too much fast food, his health and attractiveness will suffer within the game, and he won’t be able to attract female characters). Because of this skewed representation, cholas have literally no playtime, since the game is meant to represent a male-centered universe. In this way, creaky voice is limited to the representation of male cholo characters.

My main focus for the purposes of this analysis is the character of T-Bone Mendez, the leader and main intimidator of the Loco Syndicate within the San Fierro Rifa gang. T-Bone is voiced by the rapper Kid Frost, and Kid Frost’s rap song *La Raza* is one of the songs included in the radio loop soundtrack playlist that blasts out of the loudspeakers of vehicles within the game. Different cities in the game have different radio stations; Radio Los Santos plays mostly 1990s rap. Other artists included in the



soundtrack (separately available for purchase) include 2pac, N.W.A., Ice-T, Snoop Dogg, Cypress Hill, and others from the original West Coast Rap sound.<sup>7</sup>

For the purposes of thinking about enregisterment, it is instructive to consider that the game development company claims to have done a lot of research to come up with the gangs in the different locales. However, as De Vane and Squire (2008) contend, the Scottish developers had never been to California until they began preproduction research for the game, and they were surprised that it wasn't as they had imagined. So in a sense, GTA: San Andreas is the curious product of an already mediatized, hyperreal fictional California that had circulated globally through 1990s media stereotypes, including those found in hip hop. It is within this context that I consider T-Bone Mendez as being already part of an intertextual series (Hill 2005), one that, as Michael Marriott of the New York Times aptly described it, embeds GTA: San Andreas in the context of "place, peril, and pigmentation," (Marriott 2004), resulting in what some users have described as "pixellated minstrel shows" (Marriott 2004).

T-Bone Mendez originally appears in the introductory setup of GTA San Andreas, and is encountered in the scene entitled "Photo Opportunity," the first scene upon reaching the fictional San Fierro (San Francisco). T-Bone is viciously beating an anonymous man, suspecting him of being a snitch. Parts of the plot are explained in the interaction with Mike Toreno (voiced by white actor James Woods, known for playing crooked lawyers and unsavory characters), who promises T-Bone a cut of all the drugs he can move coming in from Panama. In this scene T-Bone doesn't say very much but establishes the Chicano gangster character as someone not to be messed with.

- 1 T-bone Mendez: (beating up anonymous figure) You gonna tell me right ~**now, homie.**~ Tell me! You better tell me what I want to know.
- 2 Mike Toreno: Hey Mendez! (Mendez stops) Come on, enough.
- 3 Mendez: Punk ass. I think this *vato's* a fucking ~**rat, ese.**~ I can smell it on him.
- 4 Toreno: I think that's something else we can smell. He ain't going to talk now.
- 5 Mendez: So what do we do now, homes?
- 6 Toreno: I think I got us a buyer down in Los Santos.
- 7 Mendez: *Por cuánto*, homes? How much?

I analyze the excerpt above together with the next scene in which the game-player encounters T-Bone (Mission #49), where a pimp named Jizzy-B (voiced by African-American comedian actor Charlie Murphy, known for his writing and acting on the comedy series *Chappelle's Show*) is talking to T-Bone. Below is an excerpt from the dialog; it bears mentioning here that the voice characters who are playing Latino gang members are all using Chicano English phonology, while Jizzy-B in particular exhibits features of AAVE and a falsetto voice stereotyped of African American men, providing a pitch contrast for T-Bone's creak:

- 1 T-Bone Mendez: ~**Órale, ese.**~
- 2 Jizzy: Don't mind him, we go way back.
- 3 T-Bone: Hey, homes, don't be such a ~**pinche liability.**~
- 4 Jizzy: Liability? Liability for what? Now, there's three of us and I'm getting 20%. What type of math is that? That's fool's math, playa! You and Mike. I'd sell my soul to you guys, and that's what it's going to come down to, huh? Screwing me out of my 13%.
- 5 T-Bone: You know the deal. You ~**agreed.**~ Besides, we could have said 5%, and what would you . . . ?
- 6 Jizzy: And what, what, what!? Cat got your tongue? You as bad at talking as bad as you is at mathematics?
- 7 T-Bone: Hey, you want to make this shit ~**personal, ese?**~  
(T-Bone's phone rings. He answers.)
- 8 T-Bone: Hello. . . Yeah. . . What? Man . . . Damn!  
(To Jizzy)
- 9 T-Bone: Hey man, ~**I gotta bounce.**~
- 10 Jizzy: Oh no you don't! I invented that trick, baby.

Later on in the videogame, the player once again encounters T-Bone, this time riddling him with bullets in order to advance within the game. T-Bone dies unceremoniously in Mission "Pier 69," but creaky voice lives on, looped forever in the Radio Santos soundtrack.

In these scenes, we see a scripted Frost, who embodies the merger of insider and outsider perspectives on the persona. Where once Frost sang about Aztlán and Chicano pride, and was the archetypal exponent of Chicano cholo voice, now he is scripted by Scottish game developers and packaged for a largely white audience. In this new context, Frost retains his phonology and the creak in his voice. As before, it bears saying that constraints of discourse type and structure and phonological boundary effects still operate in T-Bone's use of creaky voice. Creaky voice, though not obligatory, occurs mostly in the context of phrase-final lowering (lines 1 and 3 in the first excerpt; lines 1, 3, 7, and 9 in the second excerpt), and for special emphasis in highly stereotyped words like "Órale." Here, as in other Chicano gangster rap, *órale* is pronounced with a hyper-Spanish trill not normally used in intervocalic contexts in Spanish phonology.

But in this new context, we find some obvious changes. Frost no longer sings about Aztlán, or marks his solidarity with Chicanos in the streets, and his persona is associated exclusively with guns and violence. The spread of Frost's speech persona into videogames and its trendsetting popularity in rap music serve to enregister this speech modality as indexical of a hardcore and tough Chicano gangster male persona. Thus it is in its circulation into outsider genres that the "hardcore" quality of creak becomes enregistered as a higher-order index of masculinity, in part because these videogame characters are dominated by men and fictional male characters and avatars. The increasingly exclusive association of cholos with Chicano masculinity, machismo, guns and violence are consolidated through the intertextual circulation by outsiders of creaky voice and other aspects of hardcore gang personae. Recall that in the early 1990s, when Babygirl explained her reasons for being hardcore, they were framed in the context of self-protection ("that's how you know **~who are your true friends~**"), and were part of a way of managing affect that included being careful with one's words and valuing silence over speech (Mendoza-Denton 2008). The catapulted media transformation of this persona associates cholos with mindless violence, aimless masculinity, and sexism.

### Conclusion

In her work on Mock Spanish, Jane Hill notes that most speakers to whom she has presented her arguments on the racist indirect indexicalities of Mock Spanish:

"Do not accept it and indeed deny it vociferously. Thus the indirect indexicality operates, for them, covertly —although [. . .] it is overt enough to permit the surprising surfacing of racist images and occasionally of overtly racist language along with Mock Spanish tokens. Indirect indexicality need not necessarily be covert. However, it seems to be well suited to the production and reproduction of deeply naturalized and presupposed elements of context." (Hill 2005:114)

It is in the spirit of Jane Hill's work that I offer this analysis of the gendered naturalization, enregisterment and circulation of creaky voice. I have shown how a single feature acts as a semiotic hitchhiker, and how its indirect indexicality changes from hardcore persona to Chicano masculinity in successive contexts of circulation and through intertextual serialization. Through its co-occurrence with other features, the semiotic hitchhiker becomes accessible to character portrayals of a persona, reproducing racism through typification and circulation. This study examines a case where pitch resources are being exploited without a prior association (there is no inherent, direct-indexical reason, in the end, why Chicano gangsters—even if they were all men—should have lower pitches than other men, or be more "masculine" in pitch than all the other gangsters in rap music and videogames). Presumably one reason why indirect indexicality (Chicano gangster speech is not just masculine but macho

and sexist) emerges in the mediatized personae is that cholos/gangsters are perceived to push the boundaries of behavior usually stereotyped as being masculine: violence, trouble-making, and “dangerous” unpredictable behavior.

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### Notes

1. Users were willing to provide commentary on various other speech practices, including codeswitching and discourse markers; they even gave some well-defined examples of differences in vocalic height, such as the semantic difference between b[I]tch and b[ae]tch (b[ae]tch is a friendly vocative), and on uses of Mock Spanish phonology (Mendoza-Denton 2008).

2. This discussion of “docking” is inspired by the long-standing autosegmental phonological literature on floating tones and the laboratory phonological literature on intonation. As far back as 1976, Goldsmith defines a floating tone as “a segment specified only for a tone which, at some point during the derivation, merges with some vowel, thus passing on its tonal specifications to that vowel. [. . .] This [. . .] fixes the floating tone as one of the segments [. . .] If a tone ‘floats’ when it has no vowel associated with it, let us say that the process of associating a floating tone is ‘docking.’ ” (1999[1976]:153)

3. The Tones and Breaks Indices system (developed in Beckman and Pierrehumbert 1986; Pierrehumbert 1980) is a phonological system in which pitch tunes are modeled as interpolation between pitch accents which, high (H\*) or low (L\*), render prominent the item on which they appear (Beckman and Ayers 1997; Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg 1990).

In the ToBI framework, pitch accents can be single tones (H\*), or appear in complex combinations, as in the bitonal pitch accent H\*+L, and involve a many-to-one mapping between intonational meanings and specific tunes (Arvaniti 2007; Hirschberg and Ward 1995). Additionally, intermediate phrases can be low or high targets, annotated as L- and H- phrase tones. Full intonational boundary tones are realized low or high targets, and annotated as L% and H% boundary tones. A complete description of and labeling guidelines and tutorials for the English ToBI system can be found in Beckman and Ayers 1997.

4. In the transcriptions that follow, I focus more on the enregisterment dimension of creak and less on the discourse constraints of creaky voice, so I will not provide ToBI transcriptions, having already established the discourse characteristics of the usage of creaky voice, but will instead adopt the transcription convention of using ~tildes~ and **boldface** font to signal where creaky voice occurs. Codeswitching into Spanish is indicated by *italics*. It should be noted that creaky voice is still following the discourse constraints as stated before, occurring primarily in final lowering positions and often on discourse markers.

5. “Lean like a Cholo” refers to the title of a catchy hip hop song by Down AKA Kilo (2007). The song features an electronic imitation of nonmodal voice in its refrain: “Elbows up, side to side,” a detailed instruction for how to lean (dance) like a cholo.

6. The question of whether non-cholos are representing cholos is an important one here: in the Wikihow example, looking at the “History” tab of the wiki shows that it has gone through many rounds of editing (around 345 line-by-line revisions at press time, with the original entry having been created in 2007) by different users. Although it is not possible to tell whether someone is a cholo or not by their IP address or username, many of the user-editors represent themselves as non-cholos, non-Chicanos, or international contributors. The “Discuss” tab of the Wiki reveals even more intricacies to these politics of representation.

7. A playlist may be obtained by googling “Radio Los Santos.”

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