

# Rethinking race and place: The role of persona in sound change reversal

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## Abstract

While sociolinguists defined the regional sound changes around the linguistic behavior of White speakers, recent work has shown that racialized speakers employ local sound changes in socially meaningful ways. Advocating for an approach which *places race* and *races place*, this work views racialized speakers as authentic locals, situating their linguistic behavior in the context of their communities. Using the theoretic model of *the persona*, I examine how race and place are co-constituted in Rochester, NY. Specifically, this paper examines how BAT lowering and retraction among younger speakers is led by the *Mobile Black Professional*, an emergent persona defined by their desire to relocate for work in a post-industrial economy. This investigation prompts the field to reconsider the a priori exclusion of ‘ethnic’ speakers from studies of local sound change advancement and reversal.

## KEYWORDS

African American Language, Northern Cities Shift, persona, place identity, raciolinguistics

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Earlier research in the field of African American Language (AAL) attended to the structural similarities of African Americans’ speech cross-regionally, but the field has progressed to also value the heterogeneity in their language (Wolfram, 2015). Specifically, studying vocalic variation has provided a means to both explore the uniformity of African Americans’ speech while also diversifying representations of it (Wolfram & Kohn, 2015; Yaeger-Dror & Thomas, 2010). These analyses have

been helpful for documenting the breadth of linguistic behavior among African Americans, but their linguistic behavior is often framed in terms of accommodation to or from local White norms. To broaden, rather than flatten, African Americans' identities, we can study African Americans' vocalic variation and its social meaning (Eckert, 2012) beyond its proximity to Whiteness (Bloomquist & Gooden, 2015; Hoffman & Walker, 2010; King, 2016). Developing a framework that continues the tradition of documenting regional diversity across African Americans, while also viewing their identities as multidimensional, will require a reconsideration of African Americans' subjectivity (see King, 2020).

A growing body of work on African Americans' vowel phonologies over the past two decades suggests that speakers are taking up the local sound changes to varying degrees (Wolfram & Kohn, 2015; Yaeger-Dror & Thomas, 2010). This heterogeneity reveals that African Americans construct locality in various ways and that the indexicality of these vocalic variables can go beyond race (Blake & Shousterman, 2010; Becker, 2014; King, 2016; Lee, 2018; Mallinson & Childs, 2007). The social meanings of in-group variation can be lost in the foregrounded comparison of African Americans' vocalic behavior to the local White standard. Such a comparison blurs the different positions African Americans occupy relative to one another and how they ideologize those differences. A goal of this article is to understand differences among African Americans' performances of race and place identity, rather than across racial boundaries, through the study of how sound changes propagate within Rochester, New York. I argue that the change in apparent time where the raised *BAT*, a vowel implicated in the Northern Cities Shift (NCS), lowers and retracts, is led by an emergent persona, the Mobile Black Professional (MBP). This persona is defined by their desire to relocate for work in a declining post-industrial economy. While researchers have observed the reversal of NCS patterns across inland northern regions primarily among White populations (Driscoll & Lape, 2015; McCarthy, 2011; Nesbitt, 2018; Thiel & Dinkin, 2017; Wagner et al., 2016), explanations for sound change reversals can also be located among understudied populations of speakers. This work prompts the field to reconsider the a priori exclusion of 'ethnic' speakers from community studies of local sound changes, encouraging us to recognize the nuance of how social changes affect social groups differently across the landscape.

## 1.1 | Race and place in dialectology

Initial studies of AAL described the most vernacular structures, focusing on the uniform morphosyntactic and phonological features in the sociolinguistic AAL canon (Wolfram, 2015). Wolfram (2015) acknowledges the contributions of this work while recognizing that privileging the vernacular features in AAL prioritized the most basilectal speakers at the expense of a more inclusive representation of African American communities and their languages. If the dialect is defined by the most vernacular structures and becomes a proxy for the racial group, then certain African American experiences will be represented more than others. Expanding the representation of African Americans and their speech involves resituating them relative to the dialect such that the ethno/racial category is the point of departure for analyses and not the dialect (Alim & Reyes, 2011; King, 2020). This means studying African Americans if they produce the canonical AAL patterns or not. The goal is to examine how and why African Americans draw on regional resources to construct multiple identities, rather than to dichotomize African Americans and their linguistic behavior as Black or local.

Current approaches to documenting American regional dialects suggest that 'local' speech comes first and foremost from White speakers and that speech from non-White speakers is not viewed as

'local' on its own. This critique is captured in Eckert's (2008) discussion of how deterritorialization has affected our observation of local linguistic behaviors across all ethnic groups:

In the dominant discourse of American dialectology, the white Anglo variety is considered a regional dialect, while African American and Latino varieties are considered ethnic dialects...the dichotomy between regional and ethnic varieties and the lack of attention to regional varieties of African American and Latino speech underscores a deterritorializing discourse of subordinated racial groups. (p. 27)

Equating White speech with the regional dialect maintains White speech as the model for performing locality, subordinating non-White speakers as 'participants' in the sound changes, rather than as natives who co-construct it. The empirical reality is that not all White speakers produce the local sound changes and some members of other ethnic populations do. Presently, our work risks misrepresenting the social landscape in which language lives, perpetuating racial hierarchies via the systematic exclusion of other ethnic groups from analyses of local sound changes. As such, we should examine the range of local voices and discuss who comes to ideologically represent the space and why.

The tendency to imagine White speakers as the archetypal locals may be driven by the observation there are more in the surveyed communities and they may have more ownership and access to space via processes like segregation and gentrification. However, ownership over space need not mean one controls the linguistic practices that take place in it. The equating of White speech as local may have also resulted from the recency of African Americans' relocation North and their concentration in inner cities reducing contact with local White speakers and the local dialect. Yet, the mass movement of African Americans from southern rural communities to northern cities began about a century ago and with this distance in time, we have an opportunity to survey how their descendants have employed regional linguistic resources to constructed local identities.

Emblematizing white speech as local speech, and vice versa, participates in the semiotic process of *deracialization*, an ethnic erasure (Irvine & Gal, 2000), whereby racial identity among White speakers is deemphasized or disregarded. The deliberate lack of attention to race in studies of vocalic variation suggests Whiteness is unracialized (Urciuoli, 1996) and it is important to understand how Whiteness comes to be constituted for speakers (who report themselves as belonging to such group) alongside other co-constructed identities like place. While Labov's (1966) earlier work attended to different white ethnic groups, these differences have flattened in more recent work as speakers are opting for the supra-ethnic label, White-American (Becker, 2014). The loss of these ethnic labels foregrounds the racialized White-Black binary, but acknowledging White speakers as a single racial group need not suggest that there is not a racial identity or culture to study alongside the regional sound changes. For example, Van Herk's (2008) work examines the racialization of the NCS as White, paralleling the shift's advancement with White flight, or the mass movement of White residents into suburban communities in response to the influx of African Americans from southern, rural regions in what is known as The Great Migration. He argues that the NCS was a means for White speakers to socially distance themselves from the sudden and undesirable presence of African Americans.

Ignoring White speakers' regional linguistic behavior as a performance of race, but interpreting their counterparts' as only a marker of race, gives rise to the *hyperracialization* of minoritized speakers (Alim & Reyes, 2011). This kind of erasure only attends to racial identity, missing out on meaningful variation across other planes of identity. Prioritizing race as the most salient dimension reifies minoritized speakers as non-normative, given the fact that the normativity of the supposed White standard is defined by their production of local identities in the study of dialectology.

Studying race at the expense of locality, or vice versa, dismisses how the two are intimately linked in the American context and assumes that we can observe one in isolation of the other. Lipsitz (2011) has argued for viewing race as place, and vice versa, reasoning that race can be enacted through institutional practices like segregation and policing. If local policies on space have been defined on the basis of race, then studying place requires understanding how local governance has conditioned racialized groups' interactions and how members of these groups identify as belonging to racial categories via spatial affiliations. Considering race and place also departs from viewing dimensions of identity as additive, or separable from another in our analyses. Instead, an intersectional approach treats identity as co-constitutive, with one dimension informing the other (Crenshaw, 1989; Levon, 2015).

Studying race and place as co-constructed will mean that White and Black speakers' are raced and territorialized. To address the hyperracialization among African American speakers, this paper investigates locally meaningful distinctions relevant among African Americans from Rochester, observing them in the absence of a White regional comparison. This is not to suggest that race is irrelevant, but to ground discussions of linguistic behavior in relation to the communities' immediately relevant axes of differentiation (Gal, 2016).

## 1.2 | Macrosocial categories, personae, and social change

Earlier sociolinguistic work mapped linguistic variables to demographic categories (Eckert, 2012). Yet, recent work has argued that more immediate social constructs, like the figure of personhood or persona (Agha, 2003), populate demographic groups and mediate the relationship between linguistic variables and these larger social groups (Coupland, 2001; D'Onofrio, 2016; Eckert, 2016; Podesva, 2007; Zhang, 2005). D'Onofrio (2019) describes personae as:

Holistic, ideologized character types that are identifiable in the imaginations of communities, sometimes even explicitly labelled, such as the 'Valley Girl' (D'Onofrio 2015), or the 'yinzer' (Johnstone Andrus & Danielson 2006). These imagined characters are specified for macro-social, personality-based, and behavioral characteristics, and of course, linguistic styles, with individual speakers dynamically enacting different personae in different interactional moments. (D'Onofrio, 2019)

This theoretic model is useful for operationalizing intersectionality because it is a site for observing the co-construction of identities by individuals on a microlevel. This construct captures how different dimensions of identity such as race, place, and gender inform one another in personae like the Valley Girl or the Yinzer.

Personae, linked with enregistered linguistic styles, cannot be viewed a-historically nor a-contextually (Agha, 2003). This is demonstrated in Zhang's (2005) work on the emergence of professional Beijing personae, the yuppie and state professional, in the context of a globalizing Chinese economy in the 20th century. The development of these personae elucidates how linguistic variation can be a resource for speakers to enact social change (Eckert, 2016). The yuppies, wealthy professionals specializing in foreign business affairs, use a non-mainland feature, the full tone, to participate in an emergent transnational Chinese linguistic market. In contrast, state professionals favor more mainland features, which have more symbolic capital in the Mainland Standard Mandarin linguistic market.

Zhang's explanation of linguistic variation among these speakers relies on an in-depth understanding of the relevant social distinctions, as well as how those locally meaningful differences are informed

by sociohistorical dynamics. Following this approach, I ask how professional personae in Rochester, New York, participate in a changing socioeconomic landscape.

## 2 | THE COMMUNITY

### 2.1 | The racialization of space

Rochester, located in western New York, is the third most populated city in the state, with just over 205,695 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). East of Buffalo and northwest of Syracuse, it is a city with various surrounding suburbs.

Rochester's largest growth in its African American population happened during the latter half of The Great Migration (1940–1970), marked by relocation in search of industry employment. Post World War II, The United States experienced The Golden Age of Capitalism, an economic boom marked by high industry employment, home ownership growth, and high consumerism (Marglin & Schor, 1991). The manufacturing-based economy promised class mobility for African Americans and they took advantage of the rising demand. In three decades, the African American population rose from 3,262 to 49,647 (U.S. Census Bureau 2005). Currently, 40.3% of Rochester's population identifies as Black or African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Rochester meets the criteria for hyper-segregation alongside places such as Birmingham, Flint, and Chicago (Massey & Tannen, 2015). This segregation was driven in part by suburbanization, a kind of *racial project* (Omi & Winant, 2015), which organizes bodies across space, structures, and institutions based on race. White Americans were incentivized to relocate to the suburbs through subsidized mortgages made accessible by the Federal Housing Administration (Lipsitz, 2011) and Rochester's Race Riots of 1964 accelerated White flight. African Americans were restricted in their movement beyond the city due to unregulated and discriminatory housing practices (McKelvey, 1967; Miller, 2013). As racial projects affect our understanding of how racial categories come to be understood, taken up, and transformed (Omi & Winant, 2015), the racialized distribution of people across the city and the suburbs has effectively produced race as space (Lipsitz, 2011). The transformation of Rochester from 'a city' to 'a city with principle suburbs' contributed to racial formation (Omi & Winant, 2015) such that community members ideologize the suburbs as White, and the city as Black.

### 2.2 | The economic landscape

The racialized opposition between the city and the suburbs is also classed, meaning the city is viewed as Black *and* poor and the suburbs are viewed as White *and* wealthy. This ideological classing is evident in how African American city residents discuss race in relation to the city and suburbs. Racquel,<sup>1</sup> 44, identifies this spatialized racial divide as follows:

Suburbs, you know, um – Suburbs were created for White flight...There's not an equitable distribution of resources because we can just – At some point, we were able to just create a whole new space. 'This is a town now. We're not a part of the city. So we'll keep the resources here for that'. Like, what? That was all based on race! Like that's not – That was just race to just draw a line and say, 'We keeping our resources over here. So there. We're taking them. Bye!'

The belief that the city is poor and Black erases the variation across African Americans' class status as there are both working-class *and* middle-class African Americans in the inner city. However, community members perceive that Rochester is an economically disadvantaged place for all African Americans. For example, Joseph, 32, states:

Yeah, if you go to different parts of it [the city] then you'll probably see a diverse group, like small groups and different parts like *around* the city, but, actual in the city of Rochester? Monroe county? No. It's just a bunch of black people trying to survive.

When characterizing urban African Americans residents in Monroe County, he perceives them all as trying to survive economic hardship. This theme of survival also shows up in discussions of the poorest spaces within the city such as 'the hood', or 'the ghetto'. For example, Jordan, 54, states, 'If people are just tryna survive and exist under what might be difficult stakes – circumstances, then it's a *hood*'. The hood is an important reference point for community members because it represents the poorest space where African Americans are concentrated.

Participants' comments on race and place should be considered alongside the economic landscape's evolution from industrial glory to its post-industrial decline. Rochester's industrial economy relied heavily on a blue-collar workforce with residents learning on the job without college degrees. Blake, 56, explains the ease of obtaining manufacturing employment:

One thing about Rochester, and I now see the history behind it, as far as industry and realizing that it was a working man's town. Uh, you showed up here back in the fifties, sixties, even the seventies. If you rolled in the town off of a bus you had a job probably the next day. And depending on – It was mostly very manufacturing and all, uh, 'cause everything was done by hand.

Furthermore, Blake details how workers who thrived in this kind of economy took pride in their ability to work with their hands:

Rochester was the stable area. You could always find work because it was growing... You don't have an education, but you're gonna still be able to work with your hands and, today, that is a very noble type of job to even have.

'Low-skilled' jobs afforded them the fruits of a middle-class lifestyle like home and car ownership, and the luxury of retiring from the only company they had ever joined.

Deindustrialization jeopardized the lifestyle of older speakers. Blue-collar jobs decreased as major industries declined or turned to automation and outsourcing. Rochester's largest employer, Kodak, sank by transitioning too slowly into the digital age (Mui, 2012). In 1984, at the height of their success, Kodak employed 60,400 people in Rochester, but had a roster of only 1640 employees by 2016 (Dickinson, 2017).

In a post-industrial economy, younger generations are navigating high rates of unemployment and low-paying jobs. The sense of job security felt among older generations contrasts with Millennials' uncertainty about their job prospects in the current climate. Manufacturing was no longer a viable path to social mobility, and the decline of the Black middle class was in tandem with the decline of Kodak. Rose, 25, discusses the impact of the changing economy:

We've been experiencing a decline of – of Black wealth in Rochester just due to the placement of Kodak now...That was the staple of Black middle class families and a lot of these middle class families are no longer middle class and a lot of these people are actually suffering...and losing your prestige, you know, does so much for these families that acquired a certain level of wealth that was not seen before in Rochester.

As the economic landscape transforms across generations, so do speakers' orientations toward job potential in Rochester. The industrial economy, which prioritized hiring blue-collar workers, has become a service-based economy, which prioritizes specialized professionals such as researchers or accountants. These sociohistorical dynamics have affected younger speakers' participation in the current socioeconomic market.

### 2.3 | The emergence of the mobile black professional

There are intra-generational differences that emerge across younger speakers' beliefs about social mobility in the current economic climate. Speakers are faced with the decision to stay or leave to find employment and draw on different linguistic capital, speech viewed as valuable for a particular market (Bourdieu, 1977; Zhang, 2005), to meet their professional goals both pre- and post-industrialization. If adherence to the valued linguistic norms can reward speakers materially, then older generations may have drawn on the regional vocalic features to participate in the industrial economy, while younger speakers may distance themselves from these regional features, even looking to join markets beyond Rochester. For example, Melanie, 27, discusses her desire to relocate and Rochester's inability to retain young Black professionals:

But I do feel like we're leaving... 'cause I feel like we don't feel like there's a need for us to be here, you know. I feel like, um, a lot of Black professionals feel like their needs will be met, um, in a different place, a place that they feel like they are needed.

An aspiring screenwriter and producer, her career aspirations are not viable in the Rochester market. Since the interview in 2016, she relocated to the D.C. area to pursue education in her field. Phil, 26, touches on the same theme, expressing the lack of opportunity for his own career path:

I don't really see a lot of opportunity as far as business opportunity here for growth and that's what I'm looking for...I'm at a point in my life where I'm thinking about starting my own business. I'm doing research about the Rochester market and as far as cars are concerned. There's not a lot of opportunity.

Phil does not view owning a car dealership as a profitable venture in Rochester, NY and plans to relocate. The MBP persona is emergent from the socioeconomic changes occurring in the landscape, orienting toward supralocal economic interests.

These narratives are supported in a recent survey for Rochester's stakeholders performed by Mia Johnson, (2017) on the out-migration of young African Americans. Johnson (2017) reports that the 'under-recognized demographic-- *young Black professionals*' were reversing their parents' and grandparents' migration (p. 4). Specifically, she cites lack of access to professional opportunities as the greatest challenge participants faced when deciding to stay in the Rochester area. These results are consonant with narratives describing New York's decline in educated, Black Americans with 18,573 relocating to

larger, self-sustaining Metropolitan Black communities like Charlotte, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. (Frey, 2004; Hunt et al., 2012). Specifically, women are migrating more than men (Hunt et al., 2012).

The presentation of the MBP has focused on race, place, and class, but gender is also significant to the discussion of this emergent class persona. Professionalism is an available style to both Black men and women, but the professionals who express a desire to relocate for work tend to be women. From a historical lens, Black women have been perceived to have an advantage in the American urban labor markets considering they are more likely to be employed, even though employed Black men earn higher wages (Collins, 2000). Alongside increased rates of employment, The United States Department of Education (2019) reported that Black women had earned more degrees than Black Men. Women's ideologies about place are also a window into understanding their tendency to identify as professionals based on where they situate themselves in the classed, racialized opposition that is the suburbs versus the city. The hood or ghetto embodies the concentration of poverty and Black bodies for community members and it is also gendered as male. Given this observation, the propensity of MBP to be gendered as female may also reflect some women's lack of participation in these male-dominated spaces. Returning to Melanie, her discussion of the ghetto and street activity informs this view:

So people would always say that I lived up the street from the ghetto. My friends would always say that. Um, so I would label it as probably that. Um, not necessarily the ghetto but up the street because – being that my house is two houses from [Street Name], I didn't really – I didn't have access or – I don't have a lot of stories about what took place on [Street Name ] but [Street Name] was, like, crazy. A lot of violence. It was a huge gang – uh, a lot of gang activity. Yeah, so I was probably, I wanna say, just a few minutes from just crazy activity which was, in a way, it was a good thing, I think, in a sense, because I feel like I was able to be aware of two different worlds in a sense.

Melanie places her home as 'up the street' from the ghetto, distancing herself, if even by a few houses. This suggests that locality is not just about the physical location, as much as it is about participation in the activities associated with the space. Men in this community are more likely to discuss their relationship to the ghetto more than women. Thus, the female MBPs may also circumvent the poverty associated with the inner city of Rochester by avoiding the hood and its associated communities of practice. The mobility that female MBPs might seek is just as much about the appearance of 'respectability', as it is about class.

### 3 | THE VARIABLE: BAT

#### 3.1 | BAT in the inland north

The NCS is a chain shift defined over areas of the U.S. Rustbelt Region and the Inland North, including Rochester. The shift involves the movement of six vowels: BAT<sup>2</sup> BOT, BOUGHT, BUT, BET, and BIT and it is argued that the shift began with the generalized tensing and raising of BAT (Labov et al., 2006). Evidence of NCS patterning has been found in Rochester based on data from Telephone Surveys in the TELSUR corpus, which documents linguistic sound changes in progress in North American English (Labov et al., 2006). With respect to BAT, Rochester has shown evidence for a *raised continuous system* (Dinkin, 2009, p. 173) in which nearly all BAT tokens are high and fronted and there is not a sharp distance of phonetic space between BAT vowels in pre-oral and pre-nasal contexts.

Recent work done on Syracuse, a nearby city, argues that the NCS is reversing with BAT lowering and backing in apparent time and speakers adopting a nasal pattern (Driscoll & Lape, 2015).



The nasal pattern distinguishes allophones of the *BAT* vowel in pre-nasal and pre-oral contexts with the raised, tensed variant occurring before a nasal consonant and the lower, lax variant occurring before an oral consonant. Beyond the Inland North, the emergence of this nasal pattern is replacing older *BAT* systems with more complex conditioning across various parts of the East (Becker & Wong, 2009; Boberg & Strassel, 2000; Dinkin, 2011; Durian, 2012; Labov et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2016). This nasal pattern even appears as far as California (Eckert, 2008). While the adoption of the nasal pattern among younger speakers may appear to be pan-regional, in comparison, the production of a raised continuous *BAT* system might appear to mark a regional-specific affiliation within the Inland North.

### 3.2 | NCS *BAT* in African Americans' speech

The NCS is one of the most well-studied vowel shifts in North American English (Labov et al., 2006) and many theoretical contributions on language change have been made through the study of this shift. Despite the breadth in its description across northern regions, there is a dearth of research investigating African Americans' production of NCS patterns. Likely, this is because minoritized speakers were thought not to have participated in the local sound changes (see Labov, 2001, pg. 506). Given recent analyses of African Americans' vowel phonologies showing that they can take up the local sound changes to varying degrees (King, 2016; Mallinson & Childs, 2007; Yaeger-Dror & Thomas, 2010), more research is needed in NCS regions to examine which African Americans produce the local sound changes and why. *BAT*-raising has been studied among African Americans in NCS regions like Detroit (Deser, 1990), Lansing (Jones, 2003), and the Calumet Region (Gordon, 2000). While Gordon (2000) found that African American speakers were more resistant to the local sound changes than their White and racially Mixed peers; Deser (1990) found evidence of *BAT* raising, predicted by degree of school integration and Jones reported *BAT*- and *BAN*-raising among most African American speakers, with Black middle-class women potentially leading the change.

Recent research has also found that African Americans are less likely to adopt traditional, complex short-*a* systems in New York City and Philadelphia. In New York City (NYC), African Americans were not adopting the NYC phonemic short-*a* split, but were producing the nasal pattern (Becker & Wong, 2010). African Americans from Philadelphia tended to avoid the traditional short-*a* system, but were moving toward the nasal system, especially those with higher education (Labov et al., 2016). Variation across different African American communities suggests that African Americans have variable linguistic behavior and that different factors affect the kind of system that emerges across communities. Given that the city of Rochester is ideologically raced as Black, it is worth exploring NCS patterns among this African American community. As the first study to examine *BAT*-raising among Black speakers in upstate New York, this analysis is important to disrupting the idea that White speakers own the local sound change (King, 2016).

## 4 | METHODS

### 4.1 | Data collection

All interviews were conducted in 2016 and 2017. Participants were enlisted through various networks using the snowball method and people in these networks suggested other natives to interview (Milroy, 1980). Interviews ranged in length from 31 min to an hour and 41 min.

As shown in Table 1, this sample consists of 24 sociolinguistic interviews (12 women and 12 men) conducted by the author, a Rochester native. The table lists participants' birth year, self-reported occupations, as well as education. Education was coded according to completion of high school, completion of some college, or the completion of an associate's, bachelor's or graduate degree.

The initial sample of 24 speakers was used to assess potential generational and gender differences in the production of BAT. A subset of 15 speakers was selected for further analyses assessing whether or not the MBP persona showed differences in their production of BAT. Since the divide of staying or leaving for work is specific to younger speakers, this subset consists only of speakers from the Millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1996. Speakers who communicated plans to relocate for work were coded as a MBP, whereas speakers who did not plan to relocate for work were coded as a Non-MBP.

**TABLE 1** Demographic information for 24 African American speakers in sample

Speaker	Born	Gender	Occupation	Education
Eugene	1948	M	Retired Salesman	Associate
Gloria	1950	W	Retired Kodak Employee	High school
Blake	1960	M	Electrical Engineer	High school
Kurtis	1960	M	Retired Kodak Employee	High school
Tanya	1961	W	Retired Kodak Employee	High school
Jordan	1962	M	Entrepreneur	Some college
Marie	1965	W	Electronics Specialist	Associate
Racquel	1972	W	Entrepreneur	Graduate
Diana	1974	W	Social Worker	High school
Stacy	1981	W	Waitress	Some college
Rob	1982	M	Customer Service Representative	Bachelor
Joseph	1984	M	Environmental Service Worker	High School
Sheila	1985	W	Entrepreneur	Bachelor
Aaliyah	1986	W	Photographer	Bachelor
Chris	1987	M	Entertainer/Customer Service Representative	Some college
Torrence	1987	M	Customer Service Representative	Some college
Melanie	1988	W	Student	Bachelor
Amir	1989	M	Entrepreneur	Bachelor
Paul	1990	M	Closing Specialist	Bachelor
Rose	1990	W	Dancer	Bachelor
Phil	1990	M	Cars Salesman	High School
Elliot	1992	M	Youth Advocate	Bachelor
Andrea	1993	W	Accountant	Bachelor
Trina	1995	W	Student	Some college

## 4.2 | Data preparation

Interviews were transcribed in Elan (Wittenburg et al., 2006) and forced aligned into word and sound segments using the FAVE software package (Rosenfelder et al., 2011). Praat scripts extracted the following vowel classes from stressed positions: BEET, BIT, BET, BAT, BAN, BOT, BOUGHT, BUT and POOL. BAT and BAN were the vowels of interest, while the others were anchor vowels in the normalization of each speaker's vowel space. Because of back vowel fronting for TOO and BOOT, POOL was used as an anchor vowel. The velarization of /l/ in coda position retains the vowel in a back position.

An additional script adjusted the adjacent consonant boundaries for up to 25 tokens per vowel class. No more than two tokens per lemma were accepted, except in the case of POOL, which occurs less often. With the exception of POOL, tokens preceding a vowel, glide, /r/, or /l/ were excluded, as were tokens following a vowel, glide or /r/. Vowels less than 70 milliseconds long were also excluded. Across all vowel classes, 4,290 tokens were analyzed.

Following token collection, a script measured formants at 25%, 50%, and 75% into the vowel. The midpoint measurements were later submitted to linear mixed effects regression models. All vowels were normalized using Traunmüller's (1997) formula to convert Hertz values to Bark values. Furthermore, the Watt and Fabricius modified method (Fabricius et al., 2009) was used to normalize vowel formants based on the four corners of speakers' vowel spaces.

## 4.3 | Data analyses

Just as access to stable employment drove African Americans to relocate north during The Great Migration, the desire for viable employment is currently driving younger African Americans to leave Rochester during this post-industrial era. The following analyses assess if the local sound change follows social change (Labov, 1963) with BAT production changing alongside deindustrialization in Rochester, New York. Specifically, the lowering and backing of BAT in apparent time should mirror the collapse in industry.

The sample of 24 speakers, as well as the subset of 15 speakers, were each submitted to four different linear mixed effects regression models. These models were created in R using the lmer function (Bates, Maechler, Bolker & Walker, 2014). To assess the change in BAT production across the community (24 speakers), two models were constructed to measure the height (F1) and backness (F2) of BAT. Since BAT can be produced differently in nasal contexts (BAN), two additional models were constructed to evaluate the height (F1) of BAN and the distance of BAN tokens from the BAT mean via Euclidean distance. In each of the four models, the fixed social effects were speaker gender (female vs. male) and birth year, and the fixed linguistic effect was duration (log-transformed). The random intercepts were participant, word, and preceding and following segment. Together, these analyses illuminate if older speakers exhibit the raised continuous system (BAT raised across oral and nasal contexts) previously associated with speakers demonstrating the NCS in the Inland North and if it is being replaced by the nasal pattern (BAT lowered in oral contexts, but raised in nasal contexts) among younger speakers.

The second set of analyses assess whether or not MBPs are leading in the reversal of BAT among the millennial generation (15 speakers), moving more toward a nasal system. Four models were constructed to assess the height (F1) and backness (F2) of BAT, the height (F1) of BAN, and its distance from BAT. In each of the four models, the fixed social effects were gender and persona (MBP vs. Non MBP). The fixed linguistic effect was duration (log-transformed). The random intercepts were participant, word, and preceding and following segment.

## 5 | RESULTS

### 5.1 | The Community

A discussion of community results are reported first with attention paid to apparent-time changes and gender differences across speakers. Table 2 presents an overall picture of the regression analyses across BAT F1 and F2, BAN F1, and the Euclidean distances of BAN tokens to BAT. The values represent the estimates for the fixed effects and the interaction between them, where applicable, while the stars indicate significance. The normalized F1 values inversely correlate with height meaning the higher the value, the lower the vowel. The normalized F2 values correspond directly with backness, meaning the higher the values, the fronter the vowel. For BAT, as birth year increases, the normalized F1 values increase and the normalized F2 values decrease. These results indicate a change in apparent time such that younger speakers have lower and more retracted vowels than older speakers.

In addition to birth year effects in both the F1 and F2 dimension, birth year interacts with gender in the F2 dimension of BAT. This interaction is elucidated in Figure 1 where we observe that men's F2 values appear to remain stable across generations, but women exhibit the highest and lowest F2 values in the sample. Specifically, older women produce the frontest tokens, whereas younger women produce the backest tokens. Individual gender effects also surface in nasal contexts with men having higher normalized F1 BAN values than women, indicating men produce lower BAN tokens than women. Table 2 also displays the regression results assessing the degree of the nasal split. Only a main effect of birth year emerges, and this means that as birth year increases, the distance between BAN tokens and the BAT means also increases. Younger speakers have a greater distance between their BAN tokens and BAT means than older speakers.

It appears that the NCS pattern of tensing and raising BAT<sup>3</sup> is moving toward a nasal pattern for younger speakers, and possibly women. BAT lowering is consistent with findings in the Inland North showing that younger speakers reverse the NCS BAT pattern (Dinkin, 2009; D'Onofrio & Benheim, 2019; Driscoll & Lape, 2015; Labov et al., 2016; Thiel & Dinkin, 2017; Wagner et al., 2016). Furthermore, young women are leading in the retraction of pre-oral BAT and women produce higher BAN tokens than men.

The envelope of variation for BAT and BAN in Rochester's African American community can be observed in the plots of speakers, Blake and Melanie, as they represent generational differences across

**TABLE 2** Model coefficients from linear mixed effects models with normalized formant frequency as dependent variable, by vowel, formant, and predictor for entire sample

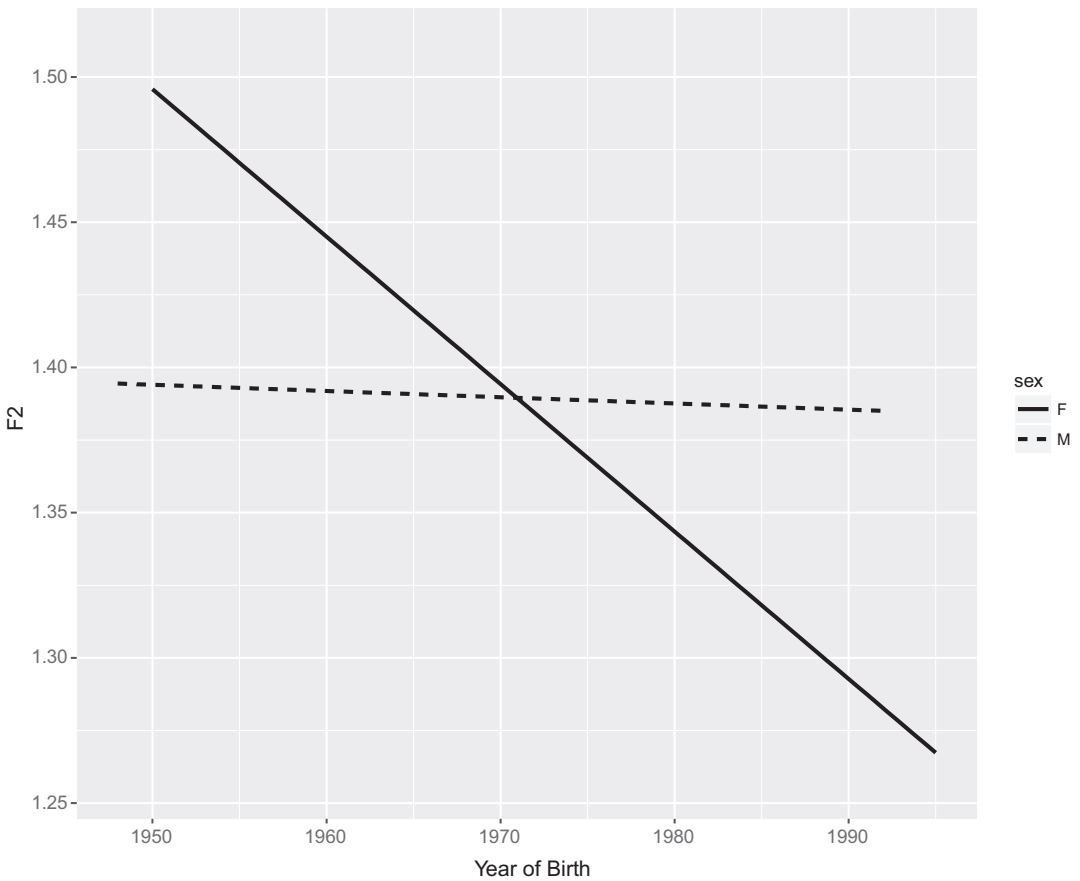
Vowel Class	Dimension	Year of Birth	Gender	Y.O.B X Gender Interaction
BAT ( <i>N</i> = 563)	F1	0.003*	-1.306	NA
	F2	0.005***	-9.436***	0.004***
BAN ( <i>N</i> = 490)	F1	-0.0008	0.05**	NA
Euclidean Distance		Year of Birth	Gender	Y.O.B X Gender Interaction
BAN→BAT ( <i>N</i> = 490)		0.005**	1.147	NA

Note: Asterisks indicate *p*-values:

\**p* < .05;

\*\**p* < .01;

\*\*\**p* < .001.

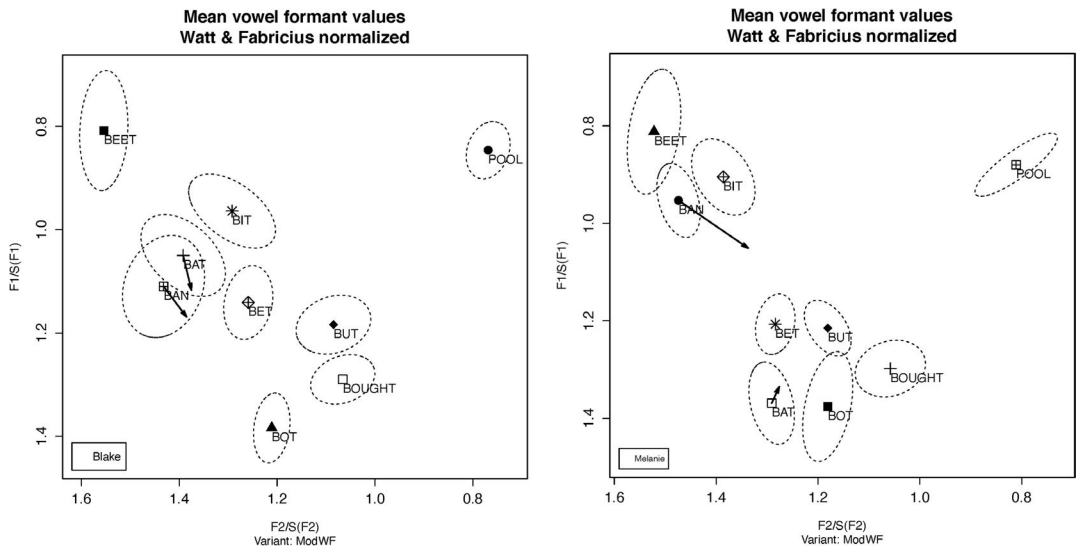


**FIGURE 1** Watts and Fabricius Normalized F2 Values plotted against birth year for BAT across sample of 24 speakers

the production of BAT in pre-nasal and pre-oral contexts (Figure 2). Recall that Blake was the older speaker, prideful of his generations' connection to the industrial economy, while Melanie, the younger speaker, is disconnected from the post-industrial economy. Blake, 55, has a raised, tensed BAT appearing higher and fronter than BET. The F1 mean for BAN appears slightly lower than the F1 mean for BAT, but the overlap in ellipses suggests that BAT in pre-nasal and pre-oral contexts is not sharply distinguished. Melanie, 26, exhibits the nasal pattern with BAN raised almost as high as BIT and BAT almost as low as BOT.

## 5.2 | The mobile black professional

The community results revealed that younger speakers are lowering and retracting BAT, but how does the construction of the MBP affect the emergence of this nasal pattern? Among the four linear mixed effects regressions constructed to assess the social conditioning on BAT and BAN among younger speakers (15 speakers, 7 MBPs), main effects only emerged in two models and are presented in Table 3. There is a main effect of persona relative to BAT's F1, or height dimension, and the Euclidean distance between BAN tokens and BAT's mean, but no significant interactions emerged in either model. With respect to BAT F1, MBPs appear to have higher F1 values, indicating they produce lower BAT



**FIGURE 2** Watts and Fabricius normalized vowel plots for an older speaker, Blake and for a younger speaker, Melanie

tokens. Importantly, the persona seems to condition the *BAT* F1, but not *BAT* F2 or *BAN* F1. Relative to Euclidean Distance, MBPs have greater distances between their *BAN* tokens and *BAT* mean. They may have greater distances in their nasal pattern among younger speakers, but the lowering of *BAT* could be the more meaningful element driving the split.

An observation of younger speakers' vowel plots illustrates the lower *BAT* pattern with Melanie and Paul. As a MBP, Melanie expressed that her career cannot be realized in Rochester's market. On the other hand, Paul identifies as a professional, but has secured employment opportunities in Rochester as a bank manager. Though he acknowledges the recent recession in the area, he believes that 'jobs are coming back'. These speakers represent different orientations toward the economy despite belonging to the same generation. As seen in Figure 3, Melanie's *BAT* is 1.394 and closer to the bottom of her vowel space. For Paul, *BAT* is lower than *BET*, with an F1 at 1.299. Furthermore, the distance between *BAT* and *BOT* vowels in Paul's plot is shorter than the distance between *BAT* and *BOT* in Melanie's plot.

**TABLE 3** Model coefficients from linear mixed effects models with normalized formant frequency as dependent variable, by vowel, formant, and predictor for younger sample

Vowel Class	Dimension	Gender	MBP
<i>BAT</i> ( $N = 348$ )	F1	0.028	-0.109**
Euclidean distance			
$BAN \rightarrow BAT$ ( $N = 245$ )	NA	-0.030	-0.113*

Note: Asterisks indicate  $p$ -values:

\* $p < .05$ ;

\*\* $p < .01$ ;

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## 6 | DISCUSSION

### 6.1 | Social change and sound change

Labov's (1963) foundational study of Martha's Vineyard revealed the importance of situating linguistic phenomena in relation to local social distinctions informed by social change. The changing social landscape affected speakers' ideologies about authority and belongingness in Martha's Vineyard with a more central /ay/ diphthong indicating not just a marker of residence, but speakers' desire to stay. In Rochester, speakers' desires to stay or leave are specific to their employment interests and affect their uptake of a sound change. Questions of rootedness (Reed, 2018) affect all ethnic groups, suggesting that race should not preclude us from studying locality more often among African Americans. Though race has been at the forefront of analyses on African Americans' speech, attention to their local identities via regional variation shows that they do employ NCS-implicated features in locally meaningful ways. While it is possible that the concurrent reversal of the raised BAT and transition into a post-industrial economy are coincidental, I frame these results in the tradition of understanding sound change in relation to social change (Eckert, 2016; Labov, 1963; Zhang, 2005). Furthermore, these results align with previous work on NCS suggesting that the motivation for this reversal is economic decline in Rustbelt regions (Driscoll & Lape, 2015; Nesbitt, 2018; Wagner et al., 2016).

### 6.2 | The social meaning of BAT

To understand the social meaning of this variable in the context of a community is to recognize its utility in advancing speakers' various social goals. Their goals are structured by how they, as members belonging to multiple demographic categories, are positioned in relation to larger social, economic, and political structures. Thus, interpreting the indexicality of the 'raised and fronted' or the 'lowered and retracted' BAT variant requires understanding African Americans' social positions in Rochester at a given point in time and space. If linguistic variants have different symbolic capital across economic climates, then what kind of value did the BAT system among older speakers engaging in the job market during the 1960s and 1970s.

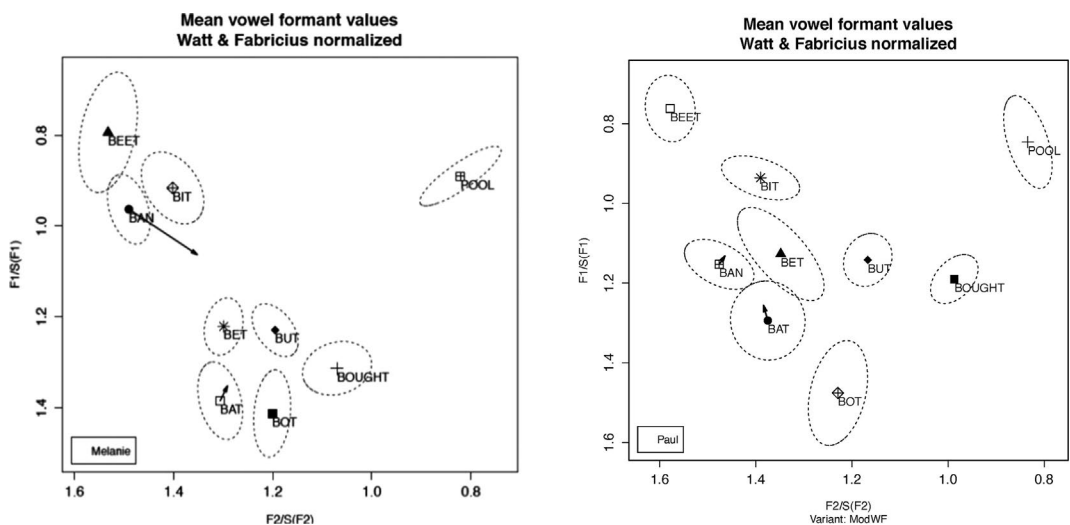


FIGURE 3 Watts and Fabricius Normalized Vowel Plot for Younger Speakers, Melanie and Paul

Given older speakers' desires to be upwardly mobile via the industrial economy, the deployment of a raised BAT in African Americans' speech could have given them the prestige of the working-class elite. Nicknamed *Smugtown*, Rochester's reputation for being uppity and affluent in the 1960s and 1970s was due to its successful economy driven by manufacturing production. For migrants, engaging in manufacturing work was a claim to the regional class identity and a vehicle to financial stability and independence, which were the reasons African Americans relocated during the Second Great Migration. Younger speakers' lowered and retracted BAT construct different forms of locality that are not defined by work in industry or a sense of job security in the current economic climate. As deindustrialization decreased employment opportunities of many workers, claiming this working-class identity as a source of pride is futile given the loss of the old socioeconomic structure. The recruitment of a lowered and retracted BAT may index their positions in a new socioeconomic landscape, contrasting with the industrial past of their elders.

The variation we observe among younger speakers' linguistic behavior reflects millennials various responses to the current socioeconomic circumstances. The construction of this MBP may require de-localizing aspects of one's voice to be mobile across different markets and this process need not only be an aspiration for African Americans. More broadly, it could contribute to the retreat of NCS features across other Northern regions (Driscoll & Lape, 2015; McCarthy, 2011; Thiel & Dinkin, 2017; Wagner et al., 2016).

The results also align with previous findings that associate BAT with a gendered business professional persona (D'Onofrio, 2016), but this persona is realized via the F1 dimension, rather than the F2 dimension. As in Zhang's (2005) work, there are multiple professional personae and older members of this community draw on NCS patterns as working-class professionals while the MBPs seem to be reversing this trend as professionals not defined by manual labor. There is also variation among younger generations. As referenced earlier, Melanie and Paul are two speakers who exhibit different productions of BAT and have different ideas about their professional positions in the current social landscape. Even though Melanie and Paul are both professionals, Melanie may be producing a lower BAT due to her desire to relocate for work.

Despite the fact that the NCS may indirectly index Whiteness, African Americans' recruitment of an NCS variable extends the indexical field for BAT. If the NCS or components of it represented a kind of social distancing among White Americans in an effort to preserve their community from the growing presence of African Americans (Van Herk, 2008), then its meaning has been reanalyzed among older African American Rochesterians to index a different kind of locality. This is important because the examination of similar linguistic behaviors across different racial groups affords us the opportunity to consider how the indexical potential of a variable is negotiated. The investigation of African Americans in analyses of sound changes highlights that they may recruit the same kinds of variables, for ideologically related, but nuanced social ends. Rather than distinguish linguistic behaviors across racial groups, this analysis reconsiders the indexicality of variables across racial lines and how these social meanings are necessarily informed by either groups' social positionings in their communities.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Linguistic features racialized as White can index more than just race. Studying the potential capital BAT has for African Americans' to navigate class provides a means to understand different constructions of professionalism among them. The raised continuous system or emergent nasal pattern tells us something about being an African American worker in Rochester in the 1960s versus the 2000s. These linguistic patterns can be stylistic moves speakers use to animate social categories, suggesting that African American identity and language is complex and dynamic.



To place race, or contextualize African Americans social and linguistic practices cross-regionally, elucidates how African Americans' negotiate their own social positions, attending to their narratives around evolving race and class dynamics in their communities. Furthermore, by racing place, we racialize speakers' in studies of regional sound changes and local identity. Establishing these analytic practices that view identity as co-constituted challenges current frameworks of race and place and reproductions of racial hierarchies which define local speech just as White speech. Moving beyond explanations of accommodation prioritizes African Americans' sense of agency from their own racialized positions in the community. In light of The Linguistic Society of America's recent Statement on Race encouraging future work to accurately reflect speakers' identities by studying race at the intersection of other social categories (Charity et al., 2019), reconsidering approaches to studying regional variation across African Americans' speech is another means to enact social justice through our research (King & Rosa, 2019).

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

A portion of the datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to some participants of this study not agreeing for their data to be shared publicly, but the portion of this dataset which is available can be found in the Corpus of Regional African American Language (CORAAL) at <https://oraal.uoregon.edu/coraal/components#PRV>.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>All names used in the text are pseudonyms to maintain speakers' anonymity.

<sup>2</sup>B\_T specifies the environment after Yaeger-Dror and Thomas (2010).

<sup>3</sup>One might suggest that this is the raised BAT associated with the AAL Vowel Shift, but this shift does not predict the movement of BAT higher and fronter than BET, as observed for the older speaker Blake in Figure 2.

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