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## Vine Racial Comedy as Anti-Hegemonic Humor: Linguistic Performance and Generic Innovation

*This paper analyzes the semiotic features and sociopolitical commentary of anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy in videos of Viner King Bach. The following analysis demonstrates that Vine racial comedy is heavily influenced by the generic features of African American stand-up and sketch comedians and existing multimodal genres of online discourse, but King Bach's adaptation of these features to the unique affordances of the Vine platform situates Vine racial comedy beyond the boundaries of the genres it draws on. Analysis of this digitally mediated multimodal discourse demonstrates that, while not deterministic, the medium through which discourse is constructed can significantly impact how a discourse genre is conceptually understood by expanding the semiotic resources through which the sociopolitical and discursive goals that define a genre are accomplished. [online discourse, multimodal discourse, genre, racial humor, linguistic performance]*

### Introduction

In this article I examine the discursive features and complex sociopolitical commentary of anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy, a genre of racial humor that emerged on the short-form-video-sharing platform Vine beginning in 2013.<sup>1</sup> To establish the genre's sociopolitical content and generic features, I analyze the videos of King Bach (pronounced "batch"), the persona of Black comedian Andrew Bachelor, the most-followed person on Vine and the originator of this genre of comedy. King Bach's anti-hegemonic racial humor centers around issues affecting Black Americans, but his style of comedy garnered attention from Vine viewers of all ethnoracial backgrounds, making him an influential content creator. In this article I describe King Bach's adaptation of features of existing genres of racial comedy and online discourse to the technological affordances of the Vine platform to create a unique genre of online audiovisual comedy. I demonstrate that the creation of anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy depended on the coexistence of the Vine platform—its affordances and the cultures its users created with them—the U.S. tradition of Black anti-hegemonic humor, and various genres of online discourse. Anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy is a Vine-internal genre that has expanded what can be included in the genre of comedy and what that performance may look like semiotically and stylistically; it has also, therefore, expanded the repertoire of performance strategies that may be used to accomplish the sociopolitical and discursive goals of comedy subgenres such as anti-hegemonic humor. The following description and analysis of

King Bach's anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy combines linguistic anthropological, humor studies, and media studies perspectives and demonstrates that linguistic anthropological analyses of online linguistic performance and discourse genres—humorous or otherwise—must explicitly engage with the fact that “social media participants draw on and mobilize complex multi-semioticity—combinations of specialized sets of linguistic features . . . discursive resources (such as genre, register, and style), pictures, moving image, sound and music, layout and composition” (Leppänen, Westinen, and Kytölä 2017: 8). That is, online linguistic performance and discourse genres cannot be fully understood without multimodal and interdisciplinary analytical frameworks. Although Vine closed in 2017, the popularity of vines contributed to short-form videos' rise in popularity as a genre of online discourse over the past five years. As is the case for all online discourse, theoretical understandings of the linguistic and sociocultural phenomena it encapsulates contribute to greater understanding of both the sociocultural functions of language and how discourse can change through new communicative technology.

## Theoretical Context

### *Racial Humor*

Although there is cross-disciplinary disagreement regarding its subcategorizations (e.g., by genre, topic, or structure), humor analysts generally concur on definitions of humor in the broadest sense. Humor is discourse created with the intent to amuse an audience and elicit laughter; it is necessarily sociopolitically contextualized but may have varying degrees of critical reflexivity (Attardo 1994; Krefling 2014; Webber 2013). Humor has numerous social functions, including social management (e.g., conveying social norms), mediating potentially negative reactions to the speaker's behavior, and transmitting factual information (Attardo 1994). It may be written or spoken, formulaic or freeform, short form or long form, encapsulating a wide variety of contemporary discourse forms within the category, such as satire, knock-knock jokes, cartoons, puns, television sitcoms, stand-up comedy, and new media content (e.g., memes, YouTube vlogs).

Two historically and contemporarily prominent genres of humor in the United States are stand-up comedy and sociopolitical humor. Importantly, these are not mutually exclusive categories; rather, one is defined by structure and the other by topic. Stand-up, as a form of comedy, is performance based: a live actor uses their voice and body (and perhaps props, sets, or other people) to tell a story with a specific message and a goal of eliciting laughter. According to Double (2014:19), “the three things which define stand-up comedy besides the fact of it being funny” are the performer's personality, direct communication between performer and audience, and the performance occurring in the present tense (i.e., being responsive to events that occur during the performance). Unlike in other forms of comedy, “truth is a vital concept in most modern stand-up comedy because of the idea that it is about authentic self-expression” (2014:160) and stand-up comedians have a freedom to “uncover the unmentionable” that is often hindered in broadcast media and conversation (2014:292). Sociopolitical humor, which may take the form of stand-up comedy, engages with history, social and political ideology, and difference or inequality based on identity features such as gender, religion, nationality, and race. Santa Ana (2009) identifies two types of sociopolitical humor: hegemonic and anti-hegemonic. Hegemonic sociopolitical humor “reinforc[es] the audience's belief that the status quo is natural and appropriate” (2009:38) and typically centers socially disadvantaged groups as targets of the humor. It often promotes stereotypes and minimizes or erases the macrosocial processes that cause these groups' disadvantaged status. Anti-hegemonic humor, on the other hand, simultaneously disrepresents and challenges hegemonic discourses, directing the audience's laughter at people and institutions with social power (e.g., white men, corporations) by exposing their biases

and faults (Gilbert 2004; Santa Ana 2009). One of the longest-running examples of anti-hegemonic humor in mainstream entertainment media is Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* (1999–present), which uses humor to bring attention to “factual errors, logical contradictions, and incongruities in both the dominant political discourse and the media that disseminate it” (Warner 2007:32) by openly criticizing political leaders, domestic and global policy, and news outlets such as Fox News and CNN. Krefting (2014) makes a similar distinction to Santa Ana between what she labels “charged humor” and noncharged humor. Charged humor “challeng[es] social inequality and cultural exclusion” (2014:2) and “seeks to represent the underrepresented, to empower and affirm marginalized communities and identities, and to edify and mobilize” audiences (2014:21). This is in contrast to safe, shock, and character comedy (i.e., noncharged humor), which are generally “vehicle[s] to laughter with no agenda to politicize, edify, or unite” (2014:5). In any form, anti-hegemonic sociopolitical humor must represent dominant discourses and beliefs in order to position them as objects of critique, and comedians who use this form of humor must do so in a way that clearly conveys that they do not subscribe to the ideologies they present. Simultaneously, comedians must create space for themselves to perform their own alternative or non-hegemonic viewpoint. As a result, anti-hegemonic sociopolitical humor tends to be more complex than hegemonic or non-charged sociopolitical humor, particularly when it addresses contentious topics such as race in the United States.

Stereotypes of minoritized racial groups are typically the foundation for hegemonic racial humor (e.g., speakers of African American English being aggressive or “sassy,” like many of Leslie Jones's *Saturday Night Live* characters). Anti-hegemonic racial humor, in contrast, aims to contradict or complicate racial stereotypes by critiquing them, constructing alternative narratives, and providing information erased by essentializing hegemonic discourses about racial groups. Such humor may take the form of hyperbolic performance to highlight the absurdity of racial ideologies, or what Weaver (2010:32) calls “reverse [racial] humor,” which “employs [racist] signs for a reverse semantic effect” to create “a discourse that is produced, situated, and directed in clear opposition to the racist meaning of the earlier discourse [from which the signs originate].” Anti-hegemonic racial humor may also subvert racial dominance by constructing whites, the racial group with hegemonic power in the United States, as lacking many desirable qualities in other aspects of U.S. culture, such as self-confidence and assertiveness (Rahman 2004). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Black stand-up comedians Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor paved ways for Black comedians into mainstream U.S. comedy circuits and demonstrated the power of comedic performance for critical racial commentary. Gregory's routines discussed “integration, the Ku Klux Klan, sit-ins, voting rights and access to education” and still “regaled audiences on both sides of the color divide” (Krefting 2014:45). Pryor “grounded his outrageous humor in the harsh realities of American racism” and forced his audiences to acknowledge the racial ideologies they subscribed to by “bring[ing] to life the most vulgar aspects of racism, often by flaunting stereotypes of race” (Carpio 2008:72–75). Whereas his Black characters were lively and clever—“humanly and culturally rich survivors who will ‘make a way out of no way’”—Pryor's middle-class white characters were “foolishly and narrowly logical and analytical, naïve, and in sum, ineffectual” (Rickford and Rickford 2000:80).

In the 2000s and 2010s, popular anti-hegemonic racial humor created by Black comedians included new styles of comedy with clear influence from Gregory, Pryor, and other Black comedians who had followed them. On their popular Comedy Central shows *Chappelle's Show* (2003–2006) and *Key & Peele* (2012–2015), comedians Dave Chappelle and Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, respectively, combined stand-up performances and sketch comedy. Both shows utilized costumes, sets, props, and other actors to create outrageous characters and plotlines that examined American racism and racial ideology in more elaborate ways than narrative stand-up

can do on its own. Using recurring characters like Clayton Bigsby, a blind, Black supporter of white supremacy, *Chappelle's Show* addressed everything from racial stereotypes to social policy to Black popular culture (see Tonder 2014 and Carpio 2008 for discussions of *Chappelle's Show's* comedic approach to racial injustice). *Key & Peele* was part of a "new direction of African American humor" whose artists "express little or no desire to speak directly to or for the so-called 'black community'": rather than "interrogating broad social and systemic inequalities [the show] approaches race either through the lens of personal experience or . . . treats it as an absurdity" (Gillota 2013:18). The show's sociopolitical critique came through one-time characters who upended racial expectation while maintaining a Black subjectivity, a similar practice to stand-up comedians who "[display] a range of personal interests, experiences, and styles of speech or dress that complicate common racial-behavioral associations" (DeCamp 2017:335). Through sketches such as "Office Homophobe" (2014) and "Black Republicans" (2014), *Key & Peele* demonstrated how race intersects with other social dimensions including gender, sexuality, class, and political ideology in a wide variety of ways. Thus, Black racial comedy has developed to incorporate the outlandish, the explicit, the subtle, the societal, and the personal as equally effective styles of anti-hegemonic racial humor.

### Genre and Genre Creation

Racial humor, in both its hegemonic and anti-hegemonic forms, is recognizable as its own genre of discourse. As defined by genre and rhetoric scholar Carolyn Miller, (1984:163) genre follows "conventions of discourse that a society establishes as a way of 'acting together.'" These conventions "form a normative whole that we can consider a cultural artifact, that is, a representation of reasoning and purposes characteristic of the culture" (1984:164–65), and as a result, people within the culture are able to recognize related instances of generic content despite differences in form. Because they draw on whole systems of meaning making rather than specific jokes, performers of racial humor are able to create content that is in dialogue with others' content without having to overtly reference specific prior texts. As Briggs and Bauman (1992:147) state regarding content of the same genre, "the link [between texts] is not made to isolated utterances, but to generalized or abstracted models of discourse production and reception." It is the practice of engaging with racial ideologies and race-based experiences that distinguishes racial humor from other genres of humor and the ways in which performers use race and humor to perform social action (i.e., reinforcing or challenging stereotypes) that distinguishes the hegemonic and anti-hegemonic subgenres.

As technology has developed over the past several decades, humor has easily transitioned to digital formats, and racial humor is recognizable whether it is text-, image-, or audio-based. This is due in part to the fact that "the creation of intertextual relationships through genre simultaneously renders texts ordered, unified, and bounded, on the one hand, and fragmented, heterogeneous, and open-ended, on the other" (Briggs and Bauman 1992:147). The "open-ended" nature of genre means that speakers can utilize the expanded repertoire of tools that new technology provide to produce discourse in creative ways, and the ideology-based production of racial humor makes it easily transferable from one form to another (cf. Cotter 2014). Miller and Shepherd (2009:282) emphasize that genre is distinct from form or medium, but there is a "rhetorical relationship between [them]"; for new online genres or genres on new platforms

sometimes a new suite of affordances fits [social need and desire] in much the same way as an old medium did, and the genre then simply adjusts, meeting the same recurrent exigence in a somewhat new, possibly better way. . . . But sometimes. . . the new suite of affordances potentiates an exigence that had not yet been met, had not yet perhaps even crystallized.

Genres of online discourse “native” to the internet are the results of speakers using what has always been available—shared communicative practices and cultural knowledge—to create something new: discourse genres that occur only in online spaces.

### *Online Discourse Genres*

Because interaction between users is a central characteristic, social media are particularly conducive to the creation of new genres and subgenres of discourse. Social media frequently “appropriat[e] the techniques, forms, and social significance of [earlier] media” (Bolter and Grusin 1999:65), and therefore the newest online genres cannot be viewed as independent from prior genres of technologically mediated content. Rather, they are adaptations or evolutions from them. Additionally, because social media users draw on communicative practices established before social media technologies developed, online discourse genres cannot be separated from those that occur in face-to-face interaction (Akkaya 2014).

Social media users have taken advantage of platforms’ various features that allow and restrict particular types of interaction and content production—such as text, image, and/or audio—to create a wide variety of online communicative styles. Many individual features are shared across platforms, but it is each platform’s combination of features that makes it unique. As a result, some discursive practices and genres only exist on specific media platforms and others are shared across different types of media. As people of color, particularly Black Americans, have embraced the use of social media at rates disproportionately higher than whites (Duggan 2015), social media features have increasingly been used to create racial humor that challenges negative racial ideologies and discourses and celebrates racial heritage, the most visible form being the discursive practices of Black Twitter (see, e.g., Brock 2012; Florini 2014).

On various platforms with the affordance of combining images and text, a popular shared genre of discourse is that of reactions GIFs. GIFs, or images in Graphics Interchange Format (.gif), are short, looping images from media such as television, film, and online videos and “isolate and repeat moments of action or dialogue” (Highfield and Leaver 2016:53). The specific genre of reaction GIFs is constituted by GIFs that are used “as signifiers of particular emotions, opinions, punch lines, and reactions” (Highfield and Leaver 2016:53)—particularly embodied reactions—to a situation that is established through a caption or text prior to the introduction of the GIF. Reaction GIFs are a remediated iteration of the reaction shots used for years on unscripted television broadcasts such as game shows and sporting events. Initially, the text accompanying a reaction GIF was limited to a few generic structures, such as “My reaction when X happens,” “How I feel when X happens,” “That feeling when X happens,” or simply “When X happens” (figure 1). As the reaction GIF has become widespread and easily recognizable as a genre of online discourse, the generic textual structure is no longer required to achieve this same discursive effect (figure 2).

Huber (2015: paragraph 10) describes reaction GIFs as having the “unique ability to capture and isolate bodily gesture” and bring “the meanings carried so powerfully and elegantly through bodily actions” in face-to-face communication back into what is otherwise a text-based mode of communication (see Bucholtz and Hall 2016 for a discussion of embodied discourse). In posts such as figures 1 and 2, reaction GIFs can also bring the anti-hegemonic practices of racial humor first established in offline discourse and interaction into online spaces.

When online racial humor engages with issues of discrimination and marginalization that people of color experience, it functions as a subgenre of online social activism. Twitter has become a prominent platform for voicing political concern and generating momentum for an online anti-racist movement. With affordances including rapid updates, grouping by hashtags, and constantly updating trending topics, the Twitter platform is an ideal site for breaking news and is especially



*Figure 1.* “When X happens” reaction GIF format: “White people when you laugh while telling a story about something racist that happened to you” [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



*Figure 2.* Nongeneric reaction GIF format: “Them: ‘I don’t see race,’ Me:” [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

conducive to grassroots social activism (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Twitter “hashtag activism”—that is, using the affordances of social media to engage with sociopolitical issues—has been used to bring attention to social problems that users feel are inaccurately or inadequately covered by mainstream media (see, e.g., Brandt and Kizer 2015; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Juris 2012), and its success on Twitter has contributed to the emergence of online social activism in different forms on other platforms, including Facebook, the blogging site Tumblr, and the video-based platform Vine. The remainder of this article analyzes the ways in which anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy draws on the generic practices of Black stand-up and sketch comedy, reaction GIFs, and online activism; I also demonstrate that, while Vine racial comedy constitutes its own genre, it does not exist outside of its status as a subgenre of each of the various discourse genres that inform it. In other words, labels such as *humor*, *comedy*, *anti-hegemonic humor*, *online discourse*, and *online activism* are necessary but insufficient to describe the genre on their own. By analyzing Vine racial comedy as the intersection of these existing discourse genres, the innovative aspects of this new genre of discourse are more readily apparent.

## Data and Methodology

### Vine

The video-sharing social media platform Vine<sup>2</sup> was created by Dom Hofmann, Rus Yusupov, and Colin Kroll in 2012 and acquired and launched by Twitter in January 2013. In a controversial move, Twitter closed the Vine app in January 2017, ending users' abilities to create new videos, referred to as vines, and post them to the platform; while vines are still viewable as archived content via their unique Vine URLs and short-form videos can now be posted to Twitter, Vine's once active online community of users is now defunct. The website and smartphone app allowed users to film, edit, post, and view videos up to six seconds in length that play in continuous loops. In a 2014 interview in the *New Yorker*, Rus Yusupov stated that the short-form format was chosen because "nobody's going to be mad that you wasted six seconds of their time" (Friend 2014). Videos were created and uploaded through the Vine mobile app, which included a variety of filming and editing options. When posting a video, users could add it to one or more of the platform's "channels," curated pages that grouped vines based on content and appeared on the Vine homepage. At its peak, Vine had 25 different channels, but the most consistently popular channel was "Comedy," eventually requiring a second channel ("Also Comedy") to accommodate the number of comedy vines being uploaded.

Features of the Vine platform directly and indirectly influenced the production and reception of vines in various ways. Evaluative responses (Benson 2015) of "liking," "revining" (posting someone else's video to one's own profile, similar to "retweeting" on Twitter) and commenting allowed users to immediately evaluate the content that they saw. As is the case for performance in other contexts, viewers' responses to vines shaped future content by indicating what messages and styles of performance they would patronize (cf. Krefting 2014). The potential to achieve celebrity status within the domain of Vine—in other words, to become "internet famous" (cf. Gamson 2011)—incentivized users to make vines likely to receive high numbers of positive evaluations from viewers, which acted as measures of vines' (and Viners') popularity. Viners seeking celebrity status balanced content for specific audiences (e.g., viewers of particular backgrounds) and content that would engender the largest possible public—that is, create the largest possible group of people who are connected by nature of engaging with the same vine (Warner 2002). Because vines were obligatorily public content, Viners did not control who viewed them or where they would (not) circulate, but they could be intentional in the design of their content (e.g., including specific social indexes) to influence the type and number of people who would, in Warner's (2002) terms, "show up" to engage with their content. This intentionality included both innovation and imitation in video production: creating unique, memorable vines was one way to stand out among millions of Vine users, but new, unfamiliar content was not guaranteed to be popular, since other users might be unsure how to interpret it. To avoid this issue, many users creatively imitated or adapted the styles of existing popular vines.

The process of imitation led to recognizable vine genres and eventually created a distinction between genres that were unique to individuals and those that had been adopted to varying extents by other users. For example, Zach King created a genre of three-dimensional magic tricks and visual illusions that were unlike any other magic-related vines, and Thomas Sanders' "storytime" vines, in which he narrates the activities of people he passes on the street, were his most distinctive videos. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the most popular and widely replicated genre was "#relatable" vines, which were comedic enactments of everyday experiences that most viewers could relate to, such as nervously trying to talk to a romantic interest. These vines were initially tagged with #relatable, but as the genre became more popular and recognizable over time the hashtag became unnecessary. Although these vines were representations of lived experiences, they were not slice-of-life

documentaries and their production required scripting and other preproduction planning of actors, costumes, filming locations, and post-filming edits. Relying heavily on the material affordances of Vine allowed these often socially complex experiences to be compressed into entertaining six-second videos.

As a video-based medium, Vine had both audio and visual affordances for video production. Visual cues that could be incorporated in the initial filming stage included clothing, props, and actors' gestures and facial expressions; audio cues included speech and sounds from objects in the filming environment (e.g., phones). In addition to recording and editing through the app, users could upload videos from other sources, such as a video previously recorded on their phone or a clip from a TV show. This set of tools resulted in a wide variety of special effects, including text, computer-generated characters, visual effects, slow motion, background music, sound effects, and voice-over narration. Vines could also be filmed in separate scenes rather than as a single continuous shot, so changes in scenery, costume, and actors were also possible within the six-second limit. Besides needing technological savvy to produce their videos, vine creators and other vine viewers also needed to be well-versed in Vine's representational conventions and have the ability to watch rapidly paced content in order to interpret the semiotically dense videos that they saw.<sup>3</sup>

### *Data Selection and Transcription*

My analysis of vines and Vine racial comedy is based on years of discourse-based online ethnography (cf. Androutsopoulos 2008; Hine 2015) until the app's closure in 2017. I engaged in participant observation as a Vine user, which included recording platform-specific cultural and linguistic practices and situating them within larger online culture and offline social practices (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Kozinets 2010). I joined Vine in fall 2013 for personal use and began viewing vines as potential data in fall 2014. I visited the site several times a week to browse new videos on the comedy channel and new videos that appeared on my personal homepage from the Viners that I followed. I perused comments on vines to compare my reaction to and interpretation of the content to those of other viewers, compared "remake" vines to the original vines that inspired them, and kept up to date with Vine trends through the curated "Trends on Vine" and "Popular Now" playlists. Although I participated in Vine almost exclusively as a viewer, I maintained knowledge of the basics of vine production by creating my own test posts, filming with my phone and using the app's various editing tools. Because I had a year of experience using the platform by the time I began collecting data in 2014, I was already familiar with popular Viners, the interactional affordances of the site, and common features of different styles of comedy vines—all of which provided a starting point for data collection and analysis (cf. Lindlof and Shatzer 1998).

I selected King Bach and his videos for analysis because of his status as the most-followed Viner, the frequency with which he appeared in other Viners' videos as a collaborator, and the large number of his vines that I personally found interesting or entertaining compared to those by other Viners. I created my data set through exhaustive sampling of vines King Bach posted between July 1, 2013 and October 31, 2015 (481 vines total). King Bach frequently cross-posted onto his Vine profile excerpts of videos from his YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram accounts, clips of himself appearing in television and film, and promotions for this content; the total number above includes these vines, but they were not analyzed for content. Only videos that were created specifically for Vine and posted by King Bach were analyzed.

My initial video selection process was based on the goal of comparing King Bach's vines to the narrative stand-up comedy of prominent Black comedians. My preliminary data set consisted of 30 videos that each contained at least two features of Black narrative stand-up comedy as identified by Carpio (2008), Rahman (2004), and Rickford and Rickford (2000). Once I created my data set, I found that this comparative framework was too narrow and did not allow for in-depth analysis of



the innovative aspects of King Bach's vines. One important aspect of his comedy that this selection process did highlight, however, was the centrality of race and ethnicity to the humor of many of his vines. Based on this observation, I conducted a second exhaustive sampling of the videos from the same time frame. In this second round of sampling, the criterion for selection was that each video must explicitly engage with race or ethnicity in some way; this is often, though not always, discernable from the title of the vine (e.g., "When White Boys Go to the Hood"). King Bach's content from this period is primarily gender-based humor, portraying heterosexual male perspectives on physical appearance, male homosocial interactions, and interactions with women. However, because of King Bach's ethnoracial background and those of his primary collaborators—predominately Black but also Latinx, Asian, and white—race is often an implicit framing for this gendered content. For example, his videos about men's over-the-top actions to protect new shoes are specifically about Jordans, a brand popular among young Black men. Thus, racial comedy that explicitly invokes race was differentiated from other categories of comedy that have a racial framing as a consequence of King Bach's ethnoracial identity. My final data set after the second exhaustive sampling consisted of 30 vines, including seven from the first data set. All of the vines except one have collaborators, and there are several overlapping and recurrent themes: comparing white and Black people's behaviors (e.g., "White People vs. Black People in Scary Movies"), shared Black cultural practices and/or experiences (e.g., "Black People's Handshakes Be Like"), (white) cultural insensitivity and/or racism (e.g., "How to Deal With Racial Profiling"), and use of the word *nigga* (e.g., "Racist Ventriloquist").

To carry out multimodal discourse analysis (Jewitt 2014; O'Halloran 2011)—that is, close analysis of both linguistic and non-linguistic features—my transcriptions of the audiovisual vine data required transcription conventions that account for movement, facial expression, dress, background scenery, and scene changes as well as capture their simultaneity with language. Taking into account the ways in which transcription decisions influence readers' perceptions of the speech event and participants (Bucholtz 2000; Ochs 1979), I transcribed the data using a three-column system. From left to right the columns represent actors (including nonspeaking actors); gesture, facial expression, scene description or other visual cues; and speech. Descriptions of nonverbal features are placed in the center column to set the scene for the reader before presenting what the actors say, and because, as a visual medium, if a scene in a vine does not have both verbal and non-verbal action it is far more likely to have only nonverbal action.

Transcription of speech primarily follows the conventions of Du Bois et al. (1993), which uses standard orthography and a wide range of symbols to capture non-linguistic sounds. In cases where non-standardized pronunciation is relevant to linguistic or character analysis, but phonetic transcription is not necessary (e.g., *yo* for non-rhotic *your*) or where standard orthography would inaccurately standardize the representation of what is said (e.g., *going to* instead of *gonna*), the most common American English orthographic representation is used. These transcription conventions permit comparison of verbal and nonverbal content across videos and represent spoken language in a way that captures pronunciation while maintaining readability.

### Vine Racial Comedy

With 16.2 million followers at the time of Vine's closure, King Bach demonstrated his mastery of vine production and consumption. As the most-followed comedy Viner and the most-followed Viner overall, King Bach's large global network of viewers made him a role model to other Viners for how to gain Vine popularity. King Bach used his comedy and film training (Friend 2014) and his experience as a Black man in the United States to create a genre of Vine comedy that was recognizably his own but had broad appeal to Vine users. In my analysis, I first discuss features that constitute

the Vine racial comedy genre (hegemonic and anti-hegemonic) as created by King Bach and are shared across vines in the data set and with other discourse genres. I then analyze two examples from the data set that exemplify features of the anti-hegemonic subgenre, followed by a discussion of the significance of this discourse genre.

### *Intertextual Generic Features in Vine Racial Comedy*

By engaging with the topic of race through comedic enactments of lived experiences, each vine in the data set is an example of racial humor. King Bach's videos address a range of topics from explicit forms of racism in interaction (e.g., racial and linguistic profiling), to institutionalized and systemic racial inequality (e.g., wealth disparity), to the many everyday forms of discrimination that "the law can't touch, [that] won't be easily proved or disproved, [and] can't simply be criminalized and deemed unconstitutional" (Jackson 2008:87). Many of the vines in the data set critique the people and institutions responsible for these phenomena, making the videos not just a general form of racial humor but specifically anti-hegemonic racial humor. Other videos make sociopolitical commentary through in-group humor based on cultural knowledge or experiences shared specifically among viewers from minoritized racial groups. For example, one vine that highlights the phenomenon of colorism among Black people ("Lightskin Selfie Tutorial") features an all-Black cast and does not explicitly invoke whiteness.

Like reaction GIFs, many of King Bach's vines are reactions to or descriptions of a specific event and have a generic "When X happens" title or caption (e.g., "When Your White Friends Get Too Comfortable"). The visual influence of reaction GIFs—with their short, repetitive movements and prioritizing of facial expression and gesture—can be seen in vines' camerawork. For instance, it is common for the frame of a video to zoom in and out to capture all relevant facial expressions and body movement (e.g., eye twitch, clenched fist). Additionally, although anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy does not involve large campaigns or specific demands, the sociopolitical critique that it offers is a form of online social activism that utilizes the affordances of the digital platform on which it occurs to bring attention to social issues.

### *Semiotic Features of Vine Racial Comedy*

With only six seconds to convey a storyline, Viners had to create vines strategically to get their messages across efficiently. As a result, comedy vines draw heavily on cultural, racial, and linguistic stereotypes to construct their characters with easily identifiable social roles and meanings. Unlike hegemonic racial humor, however, King Bach's anti-hegemonic vines often include stereotypes in order to subvert social expectations and critically comment on the stereotypes themselves (cf. Hall 2013), a form of the "reverse humor" that Weaver (2010) identifies as a practice of Black comedians. The construction of these stereotype-based characters depends on both auditory and visual semiotic features.

The most important auditory feature of King Bach's Vine racial comedy is the stylistic use of language, a key feature of stand-up comedy generally and racial humor specifically. For Black stand-up comedians the voice is the primary means of distinguishing Black and non-Black characters and constructing them in a particular light (Rahman 2004). On Vine, even when actors of different ethn racial backgrounds fulfill the character roles, the indexical power of language remains crucial to character construction. The contrast between features of standardized English and African American Language (see, e.g., Lanehart 2015) or other ethn racial or regional varieties is one of the key ways that King Bach displays Black cultural knowledge and, at times, directs his humor to a Black "subpublic" within his total viewership (cf. Warner 2002).

Facial expressions, gesture and other forms of body movement, and dress are the most significant visual semiotic features in vines. As discussed above, one of the

affordances of the Vine platform is its audiovisual format; this allows embodied action to be as central to any performance as linguistic or other auditory content. Facial expressions instead of words can convey an emotion; gestures (e.g., hand-waving) and body movement (e.g., walking with a particular gait) can function as indexes of characters' social identities. While many vines were filmed with actors in everyday clothing to reflect the quotidian interactions they represent, some characters required special costumes or attire to index their roles or the social setting. Superhero characters, institutional occupations (e.g., police officer), and characters that embody racial stereotypes (e.g., Black gangster, white prep) typically have full costumes or otherwise highly indexical items of clothing (e.g., gold chain, pastel polo shirt). These semiotic features and the ways in which they can work together to create an anti-hegemonic comedic text are analyzed in the examples below.

### *Challenging Racial Profiling and Linguistic Stereotyping: "What THEY Hear When WE Talk"*

In the vine entitled "What THEY Hear When WE Talk," posted March 16, 2015 (<https://vine.co/v/OVJPKOFJ2Me>), King Bach uses stereotype-based humor to convey the sociopolitical significance of the relationship between race and language and its effect on social perceptions and interaction. Raciolinguistic ideologies—speakers' understandings and enactments of the complex ways race and language "mediate and mutually constitute each other" (Alim, Rickford, and Ball 2016:3)—about Black speakers in the United States are exposed and undermined by King Bach and his two white collaborators, Viners Christian Del Grosso and Curtis Lepore. In his title, "What THEY hear when WE talk," King Bach immediately sets up a difference in perspective. The audience can infer that "WE" refers to a group of people to which both King Bach and the target audience—not the entirety of the vine's public—belong (e.g., men, Black men, Black people), and "THEY" refers to people outside of this particular group. The capitalization of the pronouns highlights the importance of this group distinction before the groups themselves are made clear. When the actors are introduced, the most obvious visible distinction between them is their race, so the most reasonable conclusion is that "WE" refers to Black people and "THEY" refers to non-Black people, specifically white people in this context.

#### "What THEY Hear When WE Talk"

Line number	Actor	Scene, gesture, expression	Speech
1	KB	<i>wearing casual clothing, standing in what appears to be a parking garage</i>	
2	KB	<i>extends his right hand and shakes hands twice, the other people remaining offscreen</i>	How are ^you two fine gentlemen doing this evening?
3	CD & CL	<i>CD and CL appear on screen, both in casual clothing CD: eyebrows furrowed, lips thinly pursed CL: eyebrows raised, mouth "scrunched" with lips folded inward</i>	I was wondering if you'd like to —
4	KB	<i>KB appears on screen again, indicating perspective change</i>	
5	KB	<i>Raised eyebrows, bulging eyes, mouth wide and teeth bared Slowly rocking left to right, turns chin slightly to left</i>	<rapid pace> ^Ay man,
6		<i>Whips head back to center, flaps elbows slightly at side</i>	I #shush,
7		<i>Slowly rocking left to right, tilts head right then center</i>	I would ^knock yo fatass= [wə'na?] [joo] ['fæ: ræ]

		<i>Raises elbows to chest level, flips hands upward from waist toward chin in front of torso then back down</i>	
8		<i>Lowers eyebrows, closes eyes</i>	=bruh.
		<i>Tilts head to left, contorts mouth to right</i>	
9		<i>Winks right eye, mouth still contorted slightly to right</i>	I #came,
		<i>Whips head to right, hands move slightly upward with palms facing torso</i>	
10		<i>Tilts head left to right</i>	I was like,
11	CD & CL	<i>Appear on screen while KB continues to speak</i>	
11	KB	<i>CD: eyebrows furrowed, mouth slightly open</i>	^#shit.
		<i>CL: eyebrows raised, eyes wide, mouth slightly open</i>	
12		<i>CD: turns head to left, then back to center</i>	You gon ^gimme yo num,
		<i>CL: eyes wide, looks left then back to center, closes mouth and purses lips outward</i>	[number]
13		<i>CD: looks to the right over shoulder</i>	bruh. </>
		<i>CL: turns eyes downward, lowers chin</i>	

King Bach's character is introduced displaying behavior indexical of propriety, politeness, and approachability in mainstream U.S. society. He shakes hands with his interlocutors (as opposed to offering a high-five or giving dap) and greets them with an affectively neutral address term, using an extremely formal register of standardized English (line 2) (Lippi-Green 2012). Rather than approaching the two men with an informal "Hey, what's up?" or addressing them as "you guys," King Bach greets them as "you two fine gentlemen." Despite the formality and propriety of King Bach's embodied and linguistic behavior, his white interlocutors appear annoyed by his attempt at interaction with them—based on their pursed lips and expressive brows, it is an unwelcome and inappropriate advance (line 3; figure 3).

King Bach's reappearance on screen (line 4) at the beginning of a new stretch of discourse (line 5) that appears unrelated to his truncated utterance in line 3 indicates a change in perspective.<sup>4</sup> As the vine continues, it becomes clear that lines 2 and 3 portray objective reality, while what is portrayed in lines 5 through 13 is what "THEY"—the white people who looked so disgruntled by King Bach's attempt at polite interaction—perceive.

From this perspective, King Bach's register is informal ("Ay man"), portraying the widespread inaccurate perception of Black speech as always informal and primarily slang (Pullum 1999). This stereotype is also conveyed by his use of the informal address term *bruh* in lines 8 and 13. At the same time, King Bach's facial expressions change—eyes wide, eyebrows raised, and teeth bared while he speaks—and he begins to exaggerate body movements (figure 4).

King Bach's next utterance (line 6) is unclear, and although his words are more intelligible when he restarts in line 7, they are pronounced with exaggeratedly nonstandard phonology, making the words sound slurred together. The final consonants are not pronounced in *would*, *knock*, or *fat ass*, and *your* is pronounced in the non-rhotic form *yo*. Non-rhotic *yo* suggests that this perceived speech pattern is not simply informal register but rather is supposed to be African American Language (AAL); King Bach's language variety is confirmed by AAL grammatical and phonological features in line 12. In the construction *You gon gimme yo num*, *gon* is a shortened form of *going to/gonna* that is most widely associated with AAL, and grammatically *you gon* is an instance of zero copula, in which an optional form of *to be* is not overtly expressed (Green 2002). In other words, in standardized English the phrase would be uttered as *you are going to* where in King Bach's speech it is *you Ø gon*. Moreover, although it is not a feature of AAL as a variety, the extreme reduction of the word *number* to *num* is also significant. The random reduction of syllables and



Figure 3. Line 3: White characters' embodied responses [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

consonants is common in racist representations of AAL as the “lazy speech” of people who simply choose not to pronounce words “correctly” (Ronkin and Karn 1999).

In addition to grammatical and phonological features that are part of AAL, King Bach's language includes lexical items that did not originate in AAL but have been ideologically mapped onto it as a result of negative perceptions of Black speakers. Specifically, the use of *fat ass* (line 6) and *shit* (line 10) reflect common perceptions of AAL as containing frequent or excessive use of profanity (Spears 1998). The imperative *you gon gimme yo num[ber]* (line 12) rather than a request also indexes aggression and rudeness, and beyond this verbal pushiness the character's willingness to “knock [someone's] fat ass” (line 7) suggests a propensity for physical violence, reflecting an established association between violence and AAL speakers (Bucholtz 2011). Thus, King Bach's speech in the second version of the interaction (the white interlocutors' perspective) is recognizable as AAL based on certain grammatical and phonological features, but the content and style of the utterances are heavily shaped by negative linguistic and racial stereotypes. This misrepresentation of the Black character's speech as a result of negative ideology makes it a mock version of AAL (Hill 1998; Ronkin and Karn 1999)—a distortion of reality at two levels since in the first version of the interaction King Bach's character uses standardized English, not AAL.

Overall, King Bach's series of utterances in the second version of the interaction do not appear to form a coherent speech sequence. It is unclear if *yo[ur]* in line 7 is directed at one or both of the two white men or at the unknown interlocutor he refers to in his narrative in lines 10 through 13 (marked by the quotative *I was like* in line 10). There is also no indication of whether the two utterances are related or what was taking place in the narrated interaction besides King Bach threatening his interlocutor (s). At the same time that he is producing these incoherent utterances in mock AAL, his gestures and facial expressions become increasingly exaggerated, flapping his hands and arms up and down, winking, and contorting his mouth. Compared to his calm, measured demeanor and language in lines 2 and 3, King Bach here is transformed into a man who lacks the ability to control his own body and language for “proper” comportment. The two white men's furrowed and raised eyebrows and



Figure 4. Line 5: “Ay man” [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

sideways glances convey confusion and alarm, making clear their perception of King Bach’s speech as utterly incomprehensible (figure 5).

In this contrastive performance of reality versus perception, King Bach concisely portrays several social stigmas that Black speakers face. By beginning the scene with his character speaking in highly formal standardized English, he challenges the stereotypes that all Black people are monodialectal AAL speakers who do not speak standardized English and that Black speakers who are bidialectal do not know the “appropriate” contexts in which to use each variety. The drastic contrast between King Bach’s behavior in the first version of the scene and the white men’s perceptions of him in the second conveys the extent to which white people’s preconceived notions about race can influence their perceptions of reality. The potential for racial stereotypes to lead listeners to perceive accents that are not present has been well demonstrated by researchers (see Fought 2006 on “accent hallucination”). However, King Bach takes this phenomenon to a new level. Linguistically the white men “hallucinate” more than an accent—they perceive an entirely different variety of English—and they also “hallucinate” embodied representations of racial stereotypes. This vine exemplifies the racialization of minoritized ethn racial groups in the United States, who are viewed as dangerous, and whose cultural and linguistic differences from hegemonic white American culture and language are understood as problematic and disorderly (Urciuoli 1996). Even when people of color exhibit normative hegemonic cultural practices—as King Bach does at the beginning of the vine—their racial difference from whiteness creates the constant potential for derogation. For Black speakers, this means that no matter how formal or standard their speech is, it is still very likely that they will be perceived negatively. A well-spoken Black man is an exception rather than the rule in U.S. racial ideology, and even the supposedly exceptional examples are not enough to overcome white people’s racist expectations (Alim and Smitherman 2012).

This vine follows the Black comedy tradition of using humor to highlight the incongruities of dominant racial discourses in the United States, and specifically mirrors the styles of Black comedians who have performed exaggerated racial stereotypes of Black people to do so. Rather than highlighting his character’s strengths or making his character racially unmarked, as Black stand-up comedians



Figure 5. Line 12: White characters' confused and alarmed facial expressions [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

often do (Rahman 2004), King Bach performs a minstrellesque caricature—the “coon,” or the socially and intellectually inferior Black man—in order to critique such stereotypes. The image of the coon has persisted for nearly a century through media representations of Black people as “the slapstick entertainers, the spinners of tall tales, the ‘no account niggers,’ those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures, good for nothing more than eating watermelon, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language” (Bogle 1973:8). With the same risk of “reaffirming rather than criticizing racist views” that Pryor, Chappelle, and other Black comedians have faced, King Bach plays on racial stereotypes in order to “lead people to question their habits of mind and action” (Carpio 2008:81). Unlike stand-up comedy and many sketch comedy performances, King Bach’s Vine performance can utilize long descriptive titles, hashtags, controlled close-range camera angles, and multiple actors to more clearly embed its portrayal of the coon character within a critique of whites’ distorted perceptions of Black people—distortions resulting from, in large part, racist stereotypes that are embedded in American cultural consciousness through television, film, and other media (Bucholtz and Lopez 2011). “What THEY Hear When WE Talk” forces its audience to “wrestle with the social construction of [Black] bodies in particular contexts” (Taylor 2003:29) and in doing so brings attention to one of the numerous ways that racial discrimination occurs in the United States.

### *Mocking White Racial Insecurity: “Getting Out of Situations Using the Race Card”*

In the vine entitled “Getting Out of Situations Using the Race Card” (<https://vine.co/v/Mg201XVlqYw>) posted on May 12, 2014, King Bach and his collaborators use Vine racial comedy to address racial profiling and targeting of Black men by police, white accusations that minoritized racial groups use race to “get ahead” in life, and white Americans’ discomfort with race and racially charged interactions. Two Black men (King Bach and Jerry Purpdrank) carry a television out of a building, and when they are stopped by two white police officers (Curtis Lepore and Christian Del Grosso) the Black men use race to get out of answering one officer’s question. The title of the vine guides the audience’s interpretation of the action that unfolds,

informing viewers that the Black men's actions regarding race are intentional and should be understood from their subjectivity.

"Getting Out of Situations Using the Race Card"

Line number	Actor	Scene, gesture, expression	Speech
1	CL & CD	<i>two white police officers standing in a parking lot outside of a building</i>	
2	KB & JP	<i>two Black men carrying a television out of building into parking lot, wearing tshirts and shorts</i>	
3	CL	<i>points to KB &amp; JP</i>	What're you do:in.
4	KB & JP	<i>stop walking</i>	
5	KB & JP	<i>close-up on angry faces</i>	
6	KB		What=
7		<i>JP looks down then up</i>	= <rising pitch> a ^Black man can't have a TV? </>
8	CL	<i>eyes closed</i>	No,
9		<i>CD turns to look at CL</i>	<high pitch> You can be </> ^Black and have a TV.
10	CD	<i>turns to look at KB &amp; JP</i>	Ye[ah::]
11	KB		[Yeah]=
12		<i>begins shuffling toward parking lot, carrying TV with JP</i>	= <fast pace> We gon put these ^masks on </>,
13		<i>pulls black ski mask over face</i>	cause it's ^cold [out].
14	CD	<i>nodding head</i>	[Fo sh]-
15	CL	<i>nodding head</i>	Yeah.
16	CD	<i>bumps fist against chest</i>	<clears throat>
17			Fo sho.

The vine begins with a shot of two white men in positions of institutional power: police officers, recognizable by their uniforms. When the two Black men enter the scene carrying a television, one officer (CL) immediately assumes the men are doing something questionable. By explicitly asking the men what they are doing (line 3), the first officer creates "the situation" referred to in the title (i.e., being caught in a criminal act) and invokes the racial stereotype of Black men as criminals. While the interrogative form of the officer's utterance, his pointing gesture, and his attire all index authority, his Southern American accent (line 3) undermines his apparent authoritative status, since the variety is often interpreted as an ideological index of lower intelligence and/or racist beliefs (Lippi-Green 2012).

Rather than displaying deference in response to the white officer's institutional power, the Black men overtly display indignation and anger at being questioned. Through their facial expressions (line 5; figure 6), they are able to negatively evaluate the officer's utterance before they speak, and King Bach challenges the officer's authority by not answering the question that is asked.

Instead of providing a response such as "I'm taking my TV to my car," he points out the racial bias implicit in the officer's question (lines 6–7). "What, a Black man can't have a TV?" is asked with rising pitch that culminates in falsetto, functioning here as both an interrogative challenger (Alim 2004) and an index of moral indignation (Nielson 2010). The question also brings race into the interaction, a violation of popular colorblind ideology that "discourag[es] discussions of racial matters and presum[es] that the best practice is to ignore the realities of racism" (Wise 2010:18). As a result of this ideological perspective, the introduction of race into a context where it "should be irrelevant" is treated as an action with ulterior motives, i.e., "playing the race card." The metaphor implies that members of minoritized





*Figure 6.* Lines 5–7: “What, a Black man can’t have a TV?” [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

ethnoracial groups treat life as a game and mention race only when it is convenient for them to imply racial bias on the part of their interlocutors, thereby discrediting their interlocutors and creating an avenue for their own advancement (Ford 2009).

The vine’s title tells viewers that the men are, in fact, “playing the race card” by strategically pointing out race as a potential motivating factor for the officer’s questioning. However, the successful deployment of the “race card” in this scene depends on the officers being the type of people who both want to avoid engaging in a conversation that involves race and fear being accused of racial prejudice—that is, white people. DiAngelo (2011) describes white Americans’ discomfort in situations of racial discord and their fear of being labeled racist as “white fragility.” In lines 8–9, the officer who questions the Black men displays the defensiveness characteristic of white fragility, using high pitch to index moral indignation in the same way King Bach does in the prior utterance.

As soon as the officers admit that “you can be Black and have a TV,” King Bach and his partner begin to walk away from the officers. The immediacy of their action suggests that they predicted the officers’ reaction and are confident that, regardless of what they themselves do next, the officers will not risk a second public scolding—potentially in the form of an explicit accusation of racism—by again questioning the Black men’s possession of the television. The exaggerated nature of the vine’s satire becomes apparent when the two men then pull black ski masks—a widely recognized index of criminal behavior—over their faces and claim that they are doing so “[be]cause it’s cold out” (line 12–13). The actors’ short-sleeved shirts and the sunny background allow the audience to confidently conclude that this is a lie, but the officers do not say or do anything to stop the men in light of this new information (figure 7). In other words, the men have just revealed themselves to be criminals who are stealing the television, but they have ensured that they are immune from actual accusation.

In addition to looking foolish for being too sensitive to race to competently do their jobs, the white officers become the target of the vine’s humor when they attempt to act cool—that is, attempt to “act on symbolic incidents and subtle varieties of cultural practice with eloquence, skill, wit, patience, and precise timing” (Morgan 2002:40)—by using gestures and linguistic features strongly associated with Black speakers. CD



Figure 7. Lines 12–13: “We gon put these masks on cause it’s cold out” [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

bumps his fist against his chest as a sign of solidarity with the Black men (line 16) and uses the post-vocalic non-rhoticity (*fo sho*; lines 14, 17) that is a phonological feature of AAL (Green 2002). After their apparent social faux pas of offending the Black men, the officers attempt to make amends and show affiliation through communicative accommodation (Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991). Their effort, however, simply comes across as two white men appropriating Black language and using it poorly.

Like other anti-hegemonic comedic performance, this vine turns the table on reality—in this case the many violent interactions between Black men and white police officers—by having the Black men not only resist but explicitly challenge the officers’ authority and still leave the interaction unharmed. The first officer’s Southern American accent and the Black men’s ability to “get out of the situation” are examples of “portray[ing] Blacks as more astute than whites and more capable of vigorous self-defense or self-assertive talk” (Rickford and Rickford 2000:61) as well as the “venerable tradition of the Black trickster” who uses his wit to defeat others (Watkins 1994:19). The Black men display their wit in the interaction by manipulating what is used to profile them (i.e., race) to end the interaction on their own terms. Though the Black characters portray the negative social stereotype of Black men as criminals, which is widely used in hegemonic humor, they subvert the expected social roles by becoming the protagonists of the sketch. As viewers’ comments on the vine indicate, the audience laughs with the robbers and at the officers, making remarks such as “stupid ass cops,” “lol cause it’s cold out,” and “I’m so gonna do that.” Thus, King Bach follows the tradition of Black comedic predecessors by manipulating stereotypical perceptions of Black men in order to remind his audience that negative racial ideologies and attitudes about Black Americans are malleable and socially constructed.

### Discussion

As Krefting (2014) notes, comedians who perform anti-hegemonic humor are not obligated to do so in every bit. King Bach’s anti-hegemonic racial humor was interspersed between hegemonic racial humor (“4th of July in the Hood”), hegemonic gendered humor (“Females Be Like”), and absurdist humor (“When You Trip and

Spaghetti Falls Out Your Pocket”), and this complicated the way viewers have categorized him as a comedian. His racial comedy that draws on stereotypes (such as “Getting Out of Situations Using the Race Card”) has garnered ambivalent reactions: some Black viewers accuse him of cooning (performing negative stereotypes to amuse whites) and others recognize Black comedic traditions like the Black trickster outsmarting his white oppressor. Other viners of color recognized the generic conventions of King Bach’s anti-hegemonic racial comedy as distinct from his other forms of humor, and their interpretations of this comedy as anti-hegemonic is evidenced by their adaptation of these features to their own styles of comedy to make sociopolitical commentary about their experiences as people of color in the United States. For example, Rudy Mancuso has produced vines titled “Racist Glasses” (<https://vine.co/v/OXE0Azc5jre>, <https://vine.co/v/iO6aMvwaHr2>) and “Racist Elevator” (<https://vine.co/v/MLeqa1J9UU>). In these variations of reality versus perception stylistically similar to “What THEY Hear When WE Talk,” each actor transforms from his nondescript everyday self into a racial stereotype: for example, a Black weapon-toting gangster, a shirtless, sombrero-wearing Latino, a goat-owning Middle Easterner, and an East Asian ninja. By labeling these images of people of color as “racist” in the titles, Mancuso directs the audience’s laughter at the absurdity of the stereotypes themselves, simultaneously “diffus[ing] their power of humiliation and criticizing people who perpetuate them” (Carpio 2008:86).

As a discourse genre native to the internet, Vine racial comedy demonstrates the inherent intertextuality of online and offline genres, generally, and humor specifically. The six-second, semiotically dense style of Vine comedy is necessarily shaped by the affordances of the platform, but King Bach’s racial comedy is equally shaped by the generic expectations established by the Black stand-up and sketch comedians who preceded him and existing genres of online discourse. Across his anti-hegemonic vines, he engages with stereotypes, portrays experiences of racism, critiques dominant racial ideologies, and points a finger at the (white) people and institutions that perpetuate racial inequality in the United States. By fitting these discursive practices into a comedic format that draws on the existing textual and visual language of reaction GIFs and online racial discourse, King Bach enhanced Vine racial comedy’s cultural legibility. Although the Vine platform was short-lived, the popularity of Vine racial comedy demonstrated the power of audiovisual performance for social commentary in an online context. New vines are no longer being created, meaning Vine racial comedy as a genre can no longer evolve; but although some of the unique affordances of Vine have been lost (e.g., endlessly looping content), King Bach and other Viners have adapted the genre to other online platforms, namely Instagram and YouTube. In other words, the genre itself is stagnant, but it continues to influence other genres of online racial comedy performance.

Like other forms of humor that negotiate race and other sociopolitical issues, particularly those that utilize stereotypes, there is always the risk that audiences will not fully understand the subversive nature of anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy. However, in a society like the United States that adamantly resists discussing race or addressing racial issues, anti-hegemonic humor is one of the best ways to make overt discussions of sociopolitical issues more palatable to mainstream audiences (cf. Pérez 2013). Each of King Bach’s vines in the data set, along with vines by other users that follow his generic conventions, violates colorblind ideology, and the fact that these Viners gained popularity means they found ways to “enjoyably [impart] a message about the problematic limitations of racial stereotypes” that avoid “forcefully lecturing on this issue in a way that leads to irritation rather than persuasion” (DeCamp 2017:335). Particularly in collaborative vines with multiracial casts, Vine racial comedy creates the potential for linguistic and embodied performance “to induce self-knowledge, self-awareness, [and] plural reflexivity” (Conquergood 2013:19) among white viewers and people of color alike.

King Bach’s status as the most-followed Viner and the style of performance that propelled him to that position are also significant because his use of social media and

the generic features of Vine racial comedy challenge earlier conceptions of online media and discourse. Early theories of online technology that were developed based on text-based platforms (e.g., discussion forums) claimed that disembodied identity formation would be the future of online communication (Nelson 2002), but the centrality of embodied action in vines (à la GIFs) shows how the affordance of audio-visual recording has drastically shifted predicted styles of online communication. Identity and social positioning are now front and center both visually and aurally through linguistic performance and other technological means. The novelty of the Vine platform allowed for the creation of content that could make social commentary in performatively and technologically creative ways, and perhaps in the process attracted new people into the fold of public discourse about U.S. society's problems. However, although the medium of Vine was new, the style of communication that King Bach created is firmly grounded in established genres of discourse. Thus, the genre of anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy—a subgenre of Vine racial comedy, Black (offline) racial comedy, online discourse, and online activism—is inextricable from other discourse genres despite functioning communicatively and sociopolitically beyond the boundaries of the genres within which it can be subcategorized.

### Conclusion

The affordance of audio-visual performance on social media further breaks down artificial distinctions between online and offline discourse (cf. Boellstorff 2016; Keating 2017). Unlike on text- or image-based social media platforms, users can utilize dynamic language and embodiment to express ideology and index social identity in ways that were previously limited to face-to-face dialogue. Linguistic-anthropological research on online audiovisual performance—which up to now has primarily focused on language on YouTube (e.g., Chun 2013)—has documented this shift but has not engaged at length with how it complicates historical understandings of genre. My analysis of Vine racial comedy demonstrates that an innovative style of discourse such as Vine racial comedy cannot be conceptualized simply as either a subgenre of existing styles or as a wholly original style of linguistic performance. Rather, it must be theoretically and analytically understood as discourse that emerges at the historical, intertextual intersection of linguistic form and features. The ideological complexity of vines despite their brevity speaks to the significance of language and embodiment as social action, as well as the centrality of (multi)modality to genre. The ability to make metalinguistic commentary or other social critique through anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy—as opposed to reinforcing hegemonic representations or ideologies—can hinge on aural (linguistic), visual (embodied), and textual (video caption) features simultaneously shaping viewer interpretation. Thus, this type of online linguistic performance, when intentionally constructed to engage with sociocultural phenomena like raciolinguistic ideologies, must be analyzed as a flexible and context-specific tool for exposing, subverting, and restructuring cultural beliefs. Furthering linguistic-anthropological conceptualizations of identity and ideology as performative, analyses of linguistic performance on social media demonstrate how language is simultaneously shaped by and shaping speakers' social worlds.

### Notes

1. Although my analytical focus is on anti-hegemonic Vine racial comedy, the genre of comedy also includes hegemonic humor.
2. Throughout this paper I will use the following capitalization and labeling conventions: Vine (capitalized) refers to the social media platform; vine (lowercase) refers a video produced on the Vine platform; Viner refers to someone who produces vines, analogous to a "YouTuber."
3. For a more detailed description of the Vine platform, see Calhoun (2016)

4. As discussed above, viewers' familiarity with Vine's representational conventions and semiotic features is key to the interpretation of many vines. These features would not necessarily have the same function in other vines, but based on the contextual cues of the title (i.e., difference in perspective) and King Bach's use of multiple perspectives in other vines, the visual and linguistic cues can be interpreted as such.

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