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## **Lacking Liberation in Language: African American Language in the Animated Film *The Secret Life of Pets***

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### **Abstract**

This paper is in three parts. I begin with an introduction to the concept of African American Language (AAL), discussing its position in American society in relation to the hegemony of Standardized American English. I then explore the use of AAL in Illumination Entertainment's *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016). The characters' code-switching to AAL in the film is problematized, and I argue that AAL is utilized to mark animated characters as both deviant and belonging to a lower socio-economic class. Furthermore, I assert that AAL is used to introduce issues of social inequality, issues that by the end of the film appear unimportant by a central character's realization that his claims of social inequality are unsubstantiated. Thus, the film attempts to silence both AAL and the pleas for equality expressed through Black Language. Finally, this paper highlights the ways that *The Secret Life of Pets* works to shape viewers', students' and teachers' attitudes towards African American citizens and the legitimacy of AAL.

**Keywords:** African American Language, Black Language, Language and Education, Children's Film, Children's Animated Film, Language in Children's Animated Film, critical language awareness, *The Secret Life of Pets*

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### **African American Language and Standardized American English**

Although the United States of America's largest and most respected professional language organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, The Linguistic Society of America, TESOL, and others have long articulated the legitimacy of African American Language (AAL), also known as African American Vernacular English and Black Language (Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 2006; Alim, 2011), the public at large including the teaching profession have consistently refused to implement inclusive pedagogies which would break stereotypical understandings of it. These stereotypical understandings include how AAL is both named and defined in relation to Standardized American English. While AAL is frequently referred to as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), labeling it as a dialect of English, the term 'African American Language' distinguishes it as its own unique language.

I choose to use the term 'Standardized American English' to refer to the dialect of English that is most generally spoken in America. While it is often referred to as 'Standard American English,' I follow the lead of scholars such as Elaine Richardson (2003) who name it Standardized American English to acknowledge the active oppressive power that is present in the standardizing of American English as the dominant dialect in the US. Noting the dominance of white standardized English particularly in educational settings, Jordan (2007) asserts, 'White standards control our official and popular judgments of verbal proficiency and correct, or incorrect, language skills, including speech' (p. 161). Hegemony of language continues to teach us all that white standardized English is the most legitimate use of language in our society. Furthermore, there are larger societal forces that continue to bear weight on how teachers and students think about language (Haas Dyson & Smitherman, 2009).

Children's conceptions of AAL are determined both inside and outside the classroom. Specifically, the force of children's media has a history – and current trend – of stereotyping Black cultural identities and language. Despite its recognition in other social spheres, AAL is still recurrently construed as inferior or illegitimate in children's media (Debose, 2007; Bloomquist, 2015). Lippi-Green (1997) found that children's animated films work to socialize children's conceptions of language through the use and manipulation of actors' voices used in the films. Filmmakers frequently employ negative

depictions of AAL in children's media to reinforce white standards of language and literacy. As a result, the hegemonic views not only go unchallenged – they are reinforced. This paper examines how corporations such as Illumination Entertainment are using children's films to delegitimize AAL and reinforce a hegemonic view of language through derogatory portrayals of AAL and those who speak it. Specifically, this paper applies an intersectional analytical lens to Illumination Entertainment's *The Secret Life of Pets* to highlight the positioning of AAL as that which must be eradicated, lest its speakers be resigned to lower-economic status and social confinement.

### **The Language of Children's Films**

As many scholars of AAL contend, it is important to consider the message about AAL that children are receiving, not only directly in educational settings, but also through the out-of-school literature and media they consume. As Curry Jansen (2011) notes, the field of critical media studies works to 'challenge representational practices that stereotype, marginalize, or "symbolically annihilate" minority views, cultures, groups, or individuals' (p.1). Kirsh (2010) argues that, while many Americans believe that an increased number of minority characters visible in American children's media signifies progress, simply the presence of more diverse characters does not equal growth. He asserts, 'racial diversity involves the presentation of minorities in a variety of roles. Unfortunately, at this time, the roles portrayed by racial minorities are fairly limited in scope' (p. 123). While the representational diversity has increased in children's media, mere representation does not guarantee that the films are challenging negative stereotypes of minority groups. In fact, Kirsh notes, many of the depictions of minority characters only serve to reify stereotypes about the respective minority group to which they belong (p. 123). Thus, children continue to view minority characters in stilted roles, ideas that – when viewed uncritically – can limit their conceptions of the realities (and possibilities) for minority groups.

Children's film and literature that portray minority groups are frequently used by educators to challenge notions of a linguistic hegemony by inviting children to critically view others or themselves in the context of perceived 'otherness'. Lütge (2013) asserts the importance of utilizing children's literature specifically in EFL classrooms in order to break down categories between 'self' and 'other'. As she notes, 'Children's literature often

challenges and transcends the binary opposition of “self” and “other” (p. 97); thus, it has the potential, when viewed critically, to help children reject such binaries. Applying this argument to narrative texts in media in addition to literature for children, films in the classroom can work to confront what is considered the standard in language and behavior and what is considered the deviation. Positive representations of minority language practices in children’s films and literature can aid in helping teachers and students alike to challenge a hegemony of language and social role; on the other hand, stereotypes of minority language can work to perpetuate a language hierarchy.

Specifically, as Lippi-Green (1997) argues, animated films teach children about the ‘sociolinguistic aspects of the systematic construction of dominance and subordination’ (p. 80). Films can impart a message to children of which languages matter in society and continue to either challenge or reinforce the control that Standardized American English (SAE) holds in the United States. Lippi-Green explains: ‘For better or worse, the television and film industries have become a major avenue of contact to the world outside our homes and communities. For many, especially for children, it is the only view they have of people of other races or national origins’ (p. 81). Film has sufficient influence to be able to impact children’s attitudes about other cultures – whether or not children have exposure to those cultures. Additionally, film has the ability to impact the way children view their own culture. Sometimes these representations are explicitly stated while other times the representations are couched in messages that are presumed to be apolitical since they are being created for a child audience. Although critical media viewership allows for audiences to reflect on the messages offered in films, adults and children alike frequently imbibe the messages without seeing or critiquing the explicit or residual racism that is being perpetuated – which is influencing how teachers and students are valuing or devaluing AAL in the classroom and in society.

### **Use of Language in the Creation of Character**

One way that film perpetuates racism and stereotypes is through negative portrayals of the language that characters use. Lippi-Green explains, ‘[F]ilm uses language variation and accent to draw character quickly, building on established preconceived notions associated with specific regional loyalties, ethnic, racial, or economic alliances’ (p. 81). Therefore, a

film can quickly help audiences identify the nature of characters based on the way that they talk or the words that they employ to express themselves. Usually, those characteristics are drawn from what audiences might already be socialized to assume about certain languages and the identities of those who speak them. If audiences are socialized to understand particular cultural identities to possess specific negative character traits, animated filmmakers need only bring in language associated with a stereotypical identity to conjure negative attitudes toward characters. Furthermore, Lippi-Green points out that, while actors bring their native language with them to any role they play in a film, it is especially important to critique the ways in which actors ‘*attempt to manipulate language as a tool in the construction of a character*’ (p. 83). These manipulations might include using language other than one’s native language or adapting one’s native language to include aspects of another language.

Bloomquist (2015) argues: ‘in some respects, animated films have not evolved in the same way traditional films have in providing a more well-rounded view of social and cultural life in a global society’ (p. 741). Bloomquist asserts that stock characters that have historically stereotyped African American identities in media still frequently occur in children’s films. She identifies Eddie Murphy as Donkey in the *Shrek* series (2001; 2004; 2007; 2010) and Mushu in *Mulan* (1998), Chris Rock as Marty in *Madagascar* (2005) and *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (2008), Tracy Morgan in *Rio* (2011), and Will Smith in *Shark Tale* (2004) as examples of the use of Black voices to create characters that ‘play secondary roles [...] that are lazy, superstitious, childlike, and comical’ (p. 750). All of these Black male actors’ voices are used in the films to represent minor characters who provide comic relief as audiences laugh at them throughout the films and keep what might have been solely tense scenes humorous instead. As Bloomquist notes, it is ‘troubling that that despite the gains African American actors have made in traditional films [...], we have yet to see the development of positive new Black character types in animated film’ (p. 751). Analysis of historical and contemporary language ideologies as they appear in children’s film can help us highlight in the classroom, and eventually thwart, persisting harmful practices that are continuing patterns of social inequities.

### **Defining African American Language**

In order to identify salient uses of AAL in my analysis of *The Secret Life of Pets*, a working definition of AAL is offered here. Rickford and Rickford (2000) refer to AAL as ‘Spoken Soul’ (91). As they explain, ‘Spoken Soul, like any other language variety, is much more than slang, and much more than its words’ (p. 91). They argue that AAL possesses its own vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation that makes it unique. Furthermore, they assert that AAL has defining rules and regularities that tie the language together: ‘Without regularities, a language variety could not be successfully acquired or used in everyday life’ (p. 92) as AAL certainly is in Black communities. While they identify differences that exist within AAL based on region and socio-economic class, they point out: ‘One of the many fascinating features of black vocabulary is how sharply it can divide blacks and whites, and how solidly it can connect blacks from different social classes’ (p. 93). While not all African Americans speak only AAL, ‘familiarity with distinctive black vocabulary is one of the ways in which virtually every African American can be said to speak some form of Ebonics, or Spoken Soul’ (p. 94). Rickford and Rickford (2000) explore the possible influences of Spoken Soul and how it has evolved over the past few centuries, but they argue that, whatever other languages influenced it the most, AAL functions and abides by its own unique set of vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation rules.

Scholars such as Smitherman contend that African American Language constitutes not simply a dialect of English – but a unique English-based creole language related to but distinct from English. Smitherman (1977) defines AAL as ‘a language mixture, adapted to conditions of slavery and discrimination, a combination of language and style interwoven with and inextricable from Afro-American culture’ (p. 3). She argues that AAL has two dimensions: language and style (p. 3): a combination of the words that are spoken and how they are spoken. According to Smitherman (2006), ‘Black or African American Language (BL or AAL) is a style of speaking English words with Black flava – with Africanized semantic, grammatical, pronunciation, and rhetorical patterns’ (p. 3). Furthermore, as Smitherman points out, ‘AAL comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants. This shared experience has resulted in common speaking styles, systematic patterns of grammar, and common language practices in the Black community’ (p. 3).

Smitherman also notes that AAL is not simply the language of Black Americans who are of lower socio-economic status – as it is frequently conceptualized in the dominant discourse. While factors such as socio-economic class and education do impact how AAL is viewed and spoken by African Americans, it is a language that most African Americans speak in some variety or in certain contexts. Even African Americans who are highly educated and of a higher socio-economic class, such as President Obama and Oprah Winfrey (who generally speak strict SAE in public settings) are known for speaking AAL when addressing Black communities. While there a wide variety of usages for AAL, it is a uniting factor for African American communities. Smitherman asserts, ‘African American Language crosses boundaries of gender, age, religion, social class, and region because it derives from the same source: the Black Experience and the Oral Tradition embedded in that Experience’ (2006, p. 3). It is a language that is spoken by Black Americans of all socio-economic statuses and ages in some variety because of the shared experience out of which AAL emerged.

Despite the commonality, the use of the term AAL recognizes that there are many varieties of language used within African American communities. Sonja Lanehart and Ayesha Malike (2015) note:

[T]here are many variations within the umbrella term, which includes Gullah and AAVL [. . .] as well as varieties that reflect differences in age/generation, sex, gender, sexuality, social and socioeconomic class, region, education, religion, and other affiliations and identities that intersect with one’s ethnicity/race and nationality. (p. 3)

Just like any other language and dialect, some usages of AAL are gendered. One gendered variety of AAL is Black Masculine Language (BML), which nonetheless can be spoken by Black men and women alike. BML, as Kirkland conceptualizes it, can be defined as ‘a communicative practice associated more or less with Black male identities’ (p. 835). Kirkland (2015) identifies BML as language frequently used by Black men to ‘construct subversive selves’ and as a ‘language of resistance’ (840). Kirkland goes on to assert that BML is frequently ‘pathologized, associated loosely with slang and street talk,

violence and hypersexualization, ignorance and aggression,' yet it does 'important work in the Black community' (p. 834). Kirkland notes that BML is able to 'shape shift, to alter cadences, of (mainstream) languages to fulfill a variety of functions tied to counterhegemonic articulations of Black identity' (p. 835). For example, Kirkland argues that the word *nigga* (transformed from the pejorative word *nigger*) inverts the meaning of the original term in order to give agency to speakers of BML. Therefore, while the word *nigger* invokes discriminatory meaning to the one described by the term, the word *nigga* connotes endearment. Thus, BML is able to speak back to the hegemonic language used to describe Black identities. My own analysis will rely on Smitherman's definition of AAL, use Rickford and Rickford's classification of grammar rules and vocabulary that are unique to the language to analyze the character's language, and identify vocabulary in the film that is found in Kirkland's category of BML.

## Analysis

### Background on Casting Choices

In deciding the casting for characters in children's animated films, one of the main decisions that filmmakers must contemplate is how the actors' voices will signify the identities of animated characters that may or may not resemble the actors' physical bodies. As such, it is important to consider how filmmakers cast actors' voices to represent personalities. In the following, I have chosen to write 'white' in lowercase and 'Black' in uppercase. My rationale is that white does not necessarily mean a specific ethnic group but rather refers to skin color, while, because of a history of being forcibly uprooted and enslaved, many Black people in North America do not know their specific ethnic lineage and use Black to describe both their skin color and ethnicity. While I use 'African American' where it seems appropriate, I use Black where I do not know the specific ethnicity of an actor.

Illumination Entertainment's *The Secret Life of Pets*, released in 2016, is an animated film that tells the story of Max and Duke, two dogs who have to learn to like each other while living in the same home. Max is voiced by white actor Louis C.K. and Duke is voiced by Eric Stonestreet, also a white actor. In the film, Max and Duke get lost from their home and have to make the journey back to their beloved human. The two dogs



encounter a bunny, Snowball, voiced by Kevin Hart, who views himself as ‘flushed pet’ (*The Secret Life of Pets*), a category of animals who have come to view themselves as unwanted and thrown away by humans. Ironically, while Snowball is the only pure white character in the film and his name suggests whiteness, he is one of only two main characters voiced by a Black actor, the other character having minimal lines and a minimal role throughout the plot. Snowball, however, is a major character in the film and also is the main deviant character in the film, following a trend of children’s media in casting Black actors to fill criminal roles in films. Furthermore, throughout the film, Snowball speaks in AAL. Since audiences hear the only prominent Black voice in the film being linked to deviance, the following analysis will point out that the effects are an implicit connection of Black identities and language to criminality for viewers.

### **African American Language: Language of the Oppressed**

The first introduction audiences get to the character of Snowball is when he crashes an Animal Control van in order to free one of his fellow flushed pets. From Snowball’s first few lines, audiences can recognize that he is speaking AAL. He jumps onto the Animal Control vehicle, looking for his fellow flushed pet, an English Bulldog named Ripper, and yells ‘Rippa! Rippa, where you at?’ (*The Secret Life of Pets*) employing the zero copula rule in AAL that deletes the verb ‘are’ that would be present in Standardized American English (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 114). This element of AAL has been commonly appropriated in mainstream American culture, such as the use of the phrase ‘Where You At?’ that Boost Mobile adopted as their marketing slogan. While a distinctly AAL phrase, it is one that has commonly been used by Black Americans and non-Black Americans alike in mainstream culture.

Snowball then announces, ‘The revolution has begun. Liberated forever. Domesticated never’ (*The Secret Life of Pets*). The dogs ask Snowball who he and his henchmen are, and Snowball explains, ‘We are the flushed pets, thrown away by owners, and now we’re out for revenge. It’s like a club but with bitin’ and scratchin’” (*The Secret Life of Pets*). Audiences learn that Snowball was mistreated by his former human owners and has now adopted an attitude of disdain and hatred for all humans, assuming that they

are all unloving people. As he expresses in AAL, Snowball views himself as neglected and oppressed in this world, linking AAL to the voice of the oppressed in society.

When Max and Duke beg him to release them from their cage in the Animal Control van, he calls them 'pets', telling them that they 'have the stench of domestication all over them'. In response to Snowball's claims, the two dogs then also switch into AAL in an attempt to trick Snowball into believing that they are not pets. Despite using language that passes as Standardized American English throughout the rest of the film, the two characters, particularly Max, temporarily turn off their native dialect to adopt AAL. Max replies, 'Who you callin' pets? I ain't no pet. You got it all wrong' (*The Secret Life of Pets*) employing the use of 'ain't', the double-negative that Rickford and Rickford (2000, identify as common negative constructions in AAL (p. 122), and zero copula (p. 144). Duke offers that they burned their collars, and Max adds, 'We burned dem to the ground'. Max is adopting the word *dem*, which marks plurality in AAL (Rickford & Rickford, p. 110). The dogs explain that they hate humans, as well, further connecting views of being oppressed in society to AAL. The assumption is that if one is going to speak of oppression, that type of dialogue is most believable if shared through AAL.

### **African American Language: A Class Signifier**

African American Language use in the context of its function in the film signifies lower-economic class status. It is clear throughout the film that there is an obvious class difference between Max and Duke – as they usually live in a comfortable home with their human owner – and Snowball – as he lives on the streets, mainly in sewers. Therefore, in order to convince Snowball that they too are of the lower class and live on the streets like he does, they use AAL – which effectively tricks Snowball. Snowball falls for their pretense, begins to trust them, and takes them back to his hideout in the sewers. He holds Max and Duke up as examples to the rest of the flushed pets in the sewers as having great courage. He wants Max and Duke to tell the others how they broke away from their humans. Remarking on their gumption, Snowball exclaims, 'Everybody else need a pep talk. Not these two brothas' (*The Secret Life of Pets*). This term *brothas* is one that Kirkland identifies as a word in Black Masculine Language used 'to specifically code/capture Black masculinity, connoting close friendship and/or male-to-male nonsexual

relationships that might be defined as closer than friendship' (p. 835). Max and Duke have convinced Snowball that they are on his side, and he is using this AAL term to show his respect and trust for Max and Duke based on their declaration of their similar attitudes toward the human oppression of animals.

Bloomquist's research points to the fact that many filmmakers include the voices of Black male actors used in children's animated films, such as *Shrek*, *Mulan*, *Madagascar*, *Rio*, and *Shark Tale*, to portray characters who are 'thuggish' (p. 750). Therefore, Illumination Entertainment's casting of Kevin Hart's voice to represent a cartoon figure who is 'thuggish' draws on a history of animated films stereotyping of Black male identities to quickly identify Snowball as child-like yet deviant. Snowball lives on the street and in sewers, tips animal control vehicles on a whim, and recruits other 'flushed pets' to unite against humans. His character is fraught with chaos and deviance, and he surrounds himself with other characters who create the same type of chaos in the storyworld of the film.

This portrayal of AAL as a marker of living on the streets perpetuates the conceptualization of AAL as being a language that is only appropriate and useful in lower socio-economic circles – and, furthermore, usually only in the context of deviance. As Smitherman (2006) argues, Black Americans of all socio-economic status speak African American Language (p. 18). Instead of challenging stereotypes of AAL, *The Secret Life of Pets* perpetuates a hegemonic view of language, namely that AAL is not a language that belongs in the middle and upper socio-economic groups in North America.

### **Speaking to Social Justice – with Animals?**

Snowball's claims of oppression by humans are shown to be laughable during the film. While audiences may sympathize with his explanation of having been abandoned by one human, it soon becomes clear that Snowball has overreacted. This is something that Snowball comes to recognize himself, as the final scene of the film shows him lovingly being held by a human with whom he has now chosen to live. Although he had firmly believed that all humans were oppressors and none of them were capable of treating him fairly, these assumptions are proven to be ridiculous by the end of the plot. He has discovered that while one human may have treated him unfairly, he really is wanted as a

pet and does hold an important place as a pet for another human child. The conclusion from this ending is that he simply needed to stop believing that all humans were cruel to animals and he would be able to live peacefully with them.

Because of the casting choice to have a Black voice representing the main criminal character – and then the criminal character's use of AAL to express views of oppression – one must also question what message the film is conveying as to the views of the experienced oppression that Black identities express in the real world. The film seems to suggest that the oppression of Black identities is exaggerated and unfounded. Therefore, it implies that the pleas for equality from Black identities outside of the film are exaggerated, as well. However, systemic oppression continually denies the lives, freedoms, and human rights of Black Americans. A dismissal of Black identities (even when that identity is anthropomorphically using AAL through the body of an animal) in films expressing the discrimination that they feel on a daily basis in society only further silences their pleas for equality.

Furthermore, the film delivers a theme of us-versus-them conflict with regard to the flushed pets – the main spokesperson for that group being a Black identity – needing to learn to live with the humans in the film. Categorizing the identity of the oppressed animal as Black and the imagined oppressors as humans further dehumanizes Black Americans by offering the message that we can all live together in peace – while simultaneously denying the humanity of the oppressed. Anthropomorphism is a tool that many children's books and films use to situate societal messages; however, authors and film-creators, as well as educators, must be aware of the potential to further stereotype or dehumanize humans who face the real societal issue. This dehumanization can happen when authors/filmmakers address these issues in their fictional world and choose who to represent as humans and who to represent as less-than-human.

### **Implications for Educators**

As the depiction of AAL in *The Secret Life of Pets* demonstrates, contemporary American children's film creators continue to suggest to child viewers that some dialects are more valuable than others, a view which perpetuates a hegemony of language. Film narratives have the potential, when viewed uncritically, to reinforce stereotypes that are found both in

media and the world outside of media. Therefore, it is important for educators to acknowledge that these stereotypes are ones that are often found in children's media and are messages that children will be frequently encountering inside and outside of educational spaces. Alim (2005) argues, 'By viewing the role of language in society through a non-critical lens, the tradition can actually harm linguistically profiled and marginalized students' (p. 28). Because children face these representations in film, educators must prioritize a critical linguistic pedagogy in the English-language classroom and ELT, one that emphasizes guiding students to challenge the ways that languages and identities are represented in the media that surrounds them. Representing an animated character with aspects of an African American identity – and then ridiculing that character's language and social concerns – is implicitly a political decision. In order to encourage students to challenge what appear to be linguistic norms, these representations must be seen by teachers and students as political – and illustrative of attitudes, sometimes held consciously and sometimes unconsciously, that persist globally about African American identities and language. Furthermore, as Alim notes, linguistic hegemony is often viewed as attributable to '*individual* prejudices rather than discrimination that is part and parcel of the *sociostructural fabric of society*' (p. 28, emphasis in the original). As the language ideology found in *The Secret Life of Pets* demonstrates, a hierarchy of language is not just upheld by individuals, but also by institutions, such as media corporations.

Alim contends: 'rather than *harming* linguistically profiled and marginalized students, our goal should be *arming* them with the silent weapons needed for the quiet, discursive wars that are waged daily against their language and person' (p. 29, emphasis in the original). Film can serve as a powerful tool in the classroom to address the discursive wars that surround minority students' cultural identities and their uses of language. Through an emphasis on being a critical media viewer, teachers can empower students to challenge media that reinforce an ideology of linguistic supremacy by naming and then confronting how a film is maintaining a language hierarchy. As Lütge (2013) reasons, teaching children's literature (and other forms of media) in the classroom can work as a 'perfect starting point for reflections on the perspectivity of individual viewpoints' (p. 98). It can help students and teachers alike to identify stereotypical attitudes about language that they may hold themselves and that travel beyond North American society.

Viewing children's animated films such as *The Secret Life of Pets* can serve to make explicit the more veiled messages that stereotype AAL and African American identities so that that ideology may be challenged in the classroom. This direct instruction benefits all, including speakers of more marginalized languages and language varieties. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages asserts: 'In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). In order to focus on developing students' whole identities, teachers must challenge in the classroom the stereotypes about language that many African American students face. Children's media can serve to help educators guide students to view media critically, understand stereotyped representations to be a (conscious or subconscious) political decision, and work to dismantle linguistic supremacy inside and outside of the classroom.

### Conclusion

Focusing on North America, Alim and Baugh (2007) contend that 'the ideology and practice of linguistic supremacy' needs to be challenged (p. 4). However, corporations such as Illumination Entertainment are continuing to reproduce a hegemonic view of language that degrades not only AAL – but the identities of those who speak the language. They are accomplishing this through the employment of AAL in a film that centres on the conflict of animals learning to live contentedly with humans, a message that degrades and dehumanizes those who use AAL. The characters' employment of AAL is linked only to deviant characters and dialogue around and about oppression. Furthermore, through the message that AAL is a marker of the lower class, *The Secret Life of Pets* perpetuates the linguistic ideology that AAL is a language that is only acceptable in lower socio-economic contexts, a hegemonic idea that both teachers and students might carry with them into educational spaces. While organizations such as NCTE are outspokenly contending for equality for Black identities (and AAL), teachers' and students' linguistic understandings and ideology are still being shaped by corporations such as Illumination Entertainment. In order to be able to promote Critical Language Awareness in the classroom, we must critically analyze the cultural media that is affecting teachers' and students' ideas about

African American Language and hold accountable the corporations that choose to perpetuate a hegemonic view of language.

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