"THE TOUGHEST ONE WE CAN FIND";

THUG PERSONAE AND MEANING ACROSS THE BOUNDARY OF ETHNICITY

by

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"The toughest one we can find"; Thug personae and meaning across the boundary of ethnicity

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the question of the "thug" in US-American discourse. Often invoked in political talks about policing, protesting and interethnic contact, is often used as a shortcut to denote urban Black and Latino men as hypermasculine, aggressive, violent and criminal. It draws heavily on long-standing racial stereotypes and leads to racially biased ideology and policy as a controlling image (Hill Collins, 2009). Still, many African Americans refer to themselves or others proudly as thugs, without denigrating purpose, even in situations where it might be offensive for nonBlack people to do so. This thesis analyzes discourse displayed at three MSM porn websites featuring thugs as a main attraction; RealityThugs and ThugHunter, two sites geared toward a mainstream, predominantly white audience and ThugBait, a site more catered to working class Black men. These sites centralize, exaggerate and eroticize thugs, painting discursive characterological figures (Agha, 2007) that this paper uses to respond to the questions; Who are thugs to mainstream society? Who are they to Black society? What is their discursive impact when invoked? "Thug" is analyzed as a socially bivalent term (Woolard, 1999), focusing its emergence within hegemonic and nondominant discourses.

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And to real thugs everywhere.

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Preface

Writing this thesis has been simultaneously painful and exciting, disheartening and invigorating. It began when two fairly everyday situations presented themselves to me at the same time. The first was at a dinner party I threw in my home, hosting about a dozen other scholars of color. One guest was shocked to find his margarita was so strong, not having realized he had double-spiked it. As a gracious host, I offered to switch him drinks for a regularly spiked one. His response drew whoops and applause from myself and several others at the table. "No," he said, "I'm a real thug!" It was the kind of revindication I had been hearing since my childhood, a claim I have made myself several times, and one my father, brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles and friends have made at various times throughout my life. I celebrated my new friend's thug persona in that moment and felt a great affinity for the idea he was indexing. I still feel this affinity.

Sometime a few weeks later, I received a message on grindr, a popular dating and hookup app for gays, bisexuals and men who have sex with men (MSM). "Hey," the message read, "looking for a thug with a big cock to come ruin me." I was disturbed, though not nearly as much as when these messages began trickling in every week or so in my first years on the app. The grindr photo showed a friendly-looking white man. I asked the man if he thought that the idea smacked of racism—equating me, an unknown Black man, with some rough, phallic would-be assailant. His response was contrarian. "It's just my preference for sex, it's not racism." I was baffled further, but after some reflection time, the focus of my bewilderment moved from the myopic response toward something else: I had celebrated a friend only days earlier for proclaiming himself to be a thug, and done so with others all my life, yet something about being labeled a thug in this way had immediately offended me. It seemed as though we were invoking the same word, identity and persona in all these cases, and yet my feelings about its applicability to me had drastically changed. Here my research began, via web search.

I already had plenty of experience with depictions of Black men in MSM pornography, but it wasn't until this time that I began to look specifically at Black men's depiction with a more critical eye. Running "thug" through a popular porn search engine, I found thousands of videos of Black and Latino men. A small number of videos of white men portraying thugs exists as well, but these are always clearly labeled "white thug" whereas unmarked thugs are nonwhite. The phenomenon of thug porn was not new to me, nor to many people interested in consuming MSM pornography. I began consuming MSM pornography as a teenager, and one of the first sites I knew to feature Black men specifically was the now defunct "Gangsta Gays" site, which features urban working-class Black men having sex. I remember the site largely as a positive piece of representation for myself, despite later growing to understand its place in larger systems of antiBlackness, homophobia, classism and so on. When I began to look at this pornography as a researcher, I paid attention not only to the videos themselves, but also to how people were talking about these videos around the internet in different communities. Several commentaries were critical, blanketly calling the genre racist. However, even as someone who generally agreed with that statement, I knew that there were some thug sites I couldn't write off so easily, and some of them seemed to slip under the critics' radar.

The question I interrogate in this thesis is largely about how, for African Americans like me, the social persona of the thug can feel empowering in one moment and disturbing, offensive or dangerous in the next. This requires an approach that takes into account social and linguistic relationships between and within speech communities, and the implications of the discourse they create about themselves and each other. I look specifically at the racialized social meaning of the term "thug" in the United States saving the many other uses of the term today and across history for a later investigation.

Introduction

In an early investigation of the idea of ethnicity as a sociolinguistic boundary, Rickford (1985) analyzes the speech of Mrs Queen and Mr King, respectively a Black and a white resident of one of the Sea Islands on the east coast of the United States. He discusses the largely comparable phonological patterns of his interlocutors' speech and largely contrasting morphosyntactic habits. By analyzing the role of contact in the diffusion of linguistic elements, he finds that interethnic linguistic difference persists not only because of geographic distance, but also because of social difference and expectations of speech from inside and outside the ethnic speech communities. Poplack and Tagliamonte (1999) also find that ethnicity may be implicated in maintaining different linguistic systems.

Of course, these socially constructed and perpetuated ethnoracial categories do not prescribe speech behavior. Just as Rickford maintains that distance—both social and geographic—can lead to linguistic variation, so too do Hoffman and Walker (2010) find that individuals' orientations to their own ethnicity can also have an effect on discourse, and that this effect is in interplay with expectations of speech that are both external and internal. Several studies conclude that ethnic speech variation is due to speakers' usage of ethnically marked semiotic resources to signal belonging (Wölck, 2002; Bell, 1997; Clyne et al., 2001). Other studies provide evidence to suggest that certain ethnic groups may show differing levels of effect on speech due to interethnic contact. Ash and Myhill (1983) find that Black Americans show greater linguistic evidence of interethnic contact on speech, and that while many Black Americans use "white" grammatical forms, white Americans rarely use "Black" grammatical forms. While some of this work strays too close to a "hard/etic" interpretation of ethnicity that prescribes certain behaviors to certain objectivized groups (see Hoffman & Walker, 2010), it does show that one's ethnicity (and one's feelings about the label and identity associated with that ethnicity) has effects on how language is used. Finally, another set of studies focuses on

the ways that language is received by an audience. (Papapavlou & Sophocleous, 2009). Hewitt (1986) spotlights use of Creolized English in the UK by white youths. When white youths encounter Creolized English, their perceptions of the speaker are either neutral or involve the speaker's "street" quality. A Black audience found the speech highly marked as white and thereby inauthentic and mocking. In other words, the ethnic positioning of both speaker and audience has an impact on the way an utterance is read. Children are not just aware of their own ethnicities, they are also aware of the ways that certain speech variables can achieve ethnic indexing and of the social impact of using stigmatized variables (Papapavlou & Sophocleous, 2009). White teenagers often resort to "indexical bleaching" to "deracialize" African American terminology, distancing themselves as cool, casual and laid-back without claiming affinity or affiliation with Black youth culture (Bucholtz, 2011). These studies are integral to this thesis, which probes into the ways that meaning is differentiated along social lines.

Working from a linguistic anthropology perspective, (Agha, 2007) analyzes the phenomenon of a characterological figure (also termed figure of personhood)—a discursive character that can be invoked in interaction and that is recognizable because of its discursive prominence. This character is largely a conglomeration of semiotic signs and relationships that can be used as a mechanism for invoking the character and other traits discursively associated with that character. Linguistically, these figures of personhood hold voices "enregistered" as belonging to certain "stereotypic social personae", and by these we are able to invoke them. Padgett (2017), writing on what she calls "figures of pornography" specifically, seeks to unite Agha's characterological figure theory with the textual analysis of pornography. She delineates three specific characters central to discussions of pornography and discourse: the performer, the producer and the consumer. She writes that pornography is made legible by cultural

ontologies of authenticity, a point I will return to throughout my own analysis of websites devoted to thug porn.

Similarly, Hill Collins (2009), writing from the perspective of Black feminist theory, analyzes in great depth what she calls "controlling images," advancing a theory that I wish to unite with Agha's theorization of characterological figures. Together, Hill Collins' and Agha's perspectives help us explore how discursive personae function to marginalize or centralize certain subjectivities. These characters or personas aren't necessarily 'real' in any empirical sense, but they represent real ideas about how society is thought to work. What is key about them, for Collins, is that they are often employed to justify one group's authority to control another. Controlling images enter social consciousness when a number of stereotypes are strung together to justify some political purpose or status. For example, Collins discusses the image of the "Mammy", the large Black housekeeper who entered the public imagination as exemplary of appropriate or "good" Black women. This image is constructed from an array of stereotypes applied to women, Black people and Black women specifically. Mammies are nurturing and caring, as women are idealized to be; they are nonaggressive to white people (though they can be rough with "misbehaving" Blacks), another ideal; they are not "sexy" and are not painted as sexually desirable for men of any race, nor are they threatening to white reproduction. When the Mammy was in vogue in mainstream discourse, she was heralded, celebrated and loved. For example, Hattie McDaniel won the first Academy Award for an African American for her 1939 portrayal of "Mammy" in Gone with the Wind. Images like "Aunt Jemima" still resonate with many US Americans as happy, homey faces; the white children who once held affection for their own Mammies brand them as likable, familiar and friendly, and these brands become constants in public discourse. For other US-Americans, however, the Mammy seems out of date, particularly for those who have never experienced Black maids as a social reality and who understand to some degree her racist origins in slavery and continued presence

in the Jim Crow era. As time made the Mammy inappropriate or unsuitable for discourse, she evolved into a new stereotype that Hill Collins refers to as the "Black Lady" (drawing from Lubiano 1992 and Shaw 1996). The Black Lady embodies "respectability politics"—mainstream ideas of proper, "civilized" Blackness. Hill Collins characterizes the Black Lady as a "modern mammy" because of her dedication to "hard work" (and resultant inadequacy in the Black family), often invoked when calling into question middle-class Black women's access to affirmative action (p. 84).

In this thesis I explore the way the "thug" functions in US-American discourse as a controlling image. Black women are of course not the only groups that are subject to controlling images; these images can be discursively imposed on any group by a group who has the social opportunity to control. The quotation that starts out this introduction lists a number of images of Black men—Basketball Players, Thugs and Dope Dealers—that get overlaid on Black men. Black Basketball Players and other Black Athletes are prized in modern US-American society for their "superior" athleticism. They are strong and aggressive but channel these traits in ways that are beneficial and enjoyable for onlookers, including white sports fans and white team owners and managers (Hill Collins, 2006). Thugs, on the other hand, cannot be "tamed" into using their aggression and strength for mainstream benefit, as Black Athletes can (p. 47). Instead, these men are dangerous threats to the safety and propriety of "the rest of us". Because Black men are idealized to be hypersexual and more sexually aggressive than any other group, their idealized violence can also be sexual. For instance, the idealized Rapist character in mainstream discourse is normally very closely knit with the thug and the Dope Dealer: he is violent, hypermasculine, urban and likely Black or/and Latino. Black men are socially encouraged to be more like the Athlete, who is well received because he uses his hyperathleticism and aggression for the pleasure of sports fans and the monetary benefit of team owners and managers. But we are all encouraged to be wary of thugs, their corrosive

influence on society and their dangerous capabilities. There are numerous examples of social commentators, white and Black, who invoke the thug controlling image to warn against or condemn the acts of Black men and Black people more broadly. According to Hill Collins, what is especially important is not only an image's presence, but its ability to change and shift to fit evolving social and discursive needs for the purposes of control. Discursive control and social power do not only have institutional and physical ramifications for real world actors, but also cognitive ones that affect ideologies and perceptions of self and others (van Dijk, 2008).

One common racialized controlling image of Black and Latino MSM is the "DL guy". While "DL" has "crossed over" to the mainstream and has come to connote a variety of related and tangential meanings, the "DL guy" controlling image is a man who secretly has sex with men while masquerading as straight to others, especially to straight men who he might be lusting over and straight women to whom he might transmit a disease. The idea discursively relies on ideologies about Black men and MSM as predatory, and the idea of certain diseases attributed to them. When invoked in discourse, these DL images reify those ideologies and perpetuate the suppression of gay and bisexual men of color who have sex with men.

However, Agha's characterological figure and Hill Collin's controlling image only take us so far. How can we account for the ways that these figures or images take on different social meanings across different social groups? To answer this question, I have incorporated and adapted Woolard's notion of "bivalency." In a 1999 paper, Woolard describes "bivalency" as the phenomenon by which a word, term, phrase or other linguistic item may belong to more than one language or code. She uses examples from Catalan and Castilian of words having the same or similar form or pronunciation, for example saben/saben 'they know' or pasa/passa 'go on'. Woolard demonstrates that bivalent words may be used as a communicational strategy by people who straddle social lines, allowing them to speak both codes "at once" (rather than codeswitching from one to the other). For Woolard, this means that a speaker employing

bivalent language may be understood in different ways by monolingual speakers of either code, or they may be understood more dynamically by bilingual speakers familiar with the bivalent nature of the content. She quotes Pratt (1991): "Discourses in multilingual contact zones are 'heterogeneous on the reception end,' and are 'read very differently by people in different positions of the contact zone.'" For Pratt, this language contact zone is a place in which two different speakers only have partially overlapping linguistic repertoires, i.e. a linguistic situation where some words will be bivalent and some will not. In this environment, messages may become undecidable —their meanings unpinnable—because of their bivalent meaning, connotations, social power, referential work, expressiveness, etc. A word need not be completely congruent in both codes to be considered bivalent, and relationships with words and concepts vary by language and community. This bivalency means that the pragmatic designation and expressive impact of a bivalent word in use is not intrinsically known, but rather depends on the social and ideological positions of the participants (21).

In this thesis, I choose the framework of bivalency for looking at the thug in this thesis, hypothesizing that "thug" as a lexical item sits in the overlap of many discursive spheres. I look at two such spheres and interrogate the relationship of these spheres when oriented around this socially weighty item. In particular I seek to interrogate the applicability of "bivalency" to ethnic language varieties by examining discursive constructions of the "thug" character from two different discursive centers. Previous discussions of bivalency have largely focused on overlap in speech communities between ideologically distinct languages, specifically with respect to language forms demonstrating phonological and orthographic similarity, while only hinting at possible differences in social meaning (Woolard 1999). Instead, this thesis looks across ethnolect divisions that take place within the larger speech community of US-American English speakers. My thesis argues that "thug" is a lexical item that maintains a racialized core denotative meaning with varying connotative social meanings across different ethnic groups. I

combine Agha's theory of characterological figures with Hill Collins' theory of controlling images to illustrate the thug's divergent social meanings across what I call a "mainstream" discursive sphere and a Black discursive sphere. I attempt to answer the following questions: Is "thug" "bivalent" between these two discursive spheres in the same way Woolard describes for adjacent languages? When ethnicity comes into play, how do discursive spheres interact around ethnically-coded words? I focus on MSM pornographic sites in which thugs are centralized and eroticized as discursive groundings for "ontologically authentic" thugs for their respective audiences. By comparing the social meanings that emerge from these sites, we can explore the distinctive role of the thug in each respective sphere as well as the features of the thug that hold in both spheres.

Thugs in mainstream MSM pornography
Textual examples of the thug at RealityThugs and ThugHunter

I use two websites as my primary sources for information regarding the mainstream thug discursive figure. In 2016, mainstream MSM porn studio and distributor Reality Dudes launched their site RealityThugs, which focuses visuals of urban African American men having sex with each other and other men of various races. I'd like to take a moment to visit the website with a critical eye on what/who "thugs" are on this site, and what we are supposed to think about them. The official website description reads:

```
(1)   We have traveled to the backstreets of Atlanta, New York and LA to
      find you the hottest thugs and we're always on the lookout for the
      biggest roughest fuckers. If you like your dudes with their pants
      sagging, hat cocked to the side and a bad attitude then you've
      come to the right place. Watch now as these horsehung [sic] thugs
      prime each other's thick asses before delivering a hard pounding
                                         ("Reality Thugs - collection," n.d.).
```

The first explicit thing we learn about "thugs" is that they live in urban locations where Black people tend to be concentrated: the description lists three such cities—Atlanta, New York and Los Angeles—as places where thugs are found. The site says that finding the thugs requires travel, indicating a geographic separation between where the thugs are and where "we" are.

Thugs get a number of important descriptions in this piece of data. They are physically large in all respects ("biggest", "horsehung" and "thick"), aggressive ("roughest" and "bad attitude") and dress in stereotypical urban African American garb ("pants sagging", "hat cocked to the side").

As of November 2017, the site's homepage displays a number of images and descriptions from various scenes produced for RealityThugs (hereafter referred to as Reality-T). Of note are three large images that take up a majority of the page. Two of these large images show interracial sex between a Black man and a white man. In both, the Black man's face is obscured—either cropped out or turned away while engaged in oral sex; we do not get a sense of how these "thugs" feel about the sex or their partners. The two white men appear in their entirety, looking directly into the camera, their faces emoting deep pleasure. The third image features two Black men engaged in anal sex. Shot from below, both men's penises take up a large proportion of the image, but again, only one man's face can be vaguely seen in the background, one eye peeking over his erection.
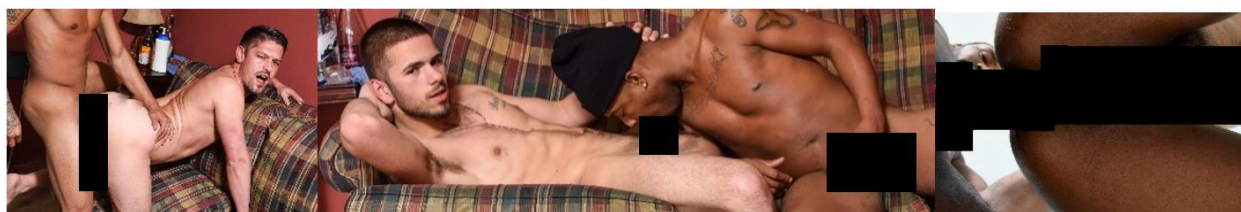

Figure 1 Prominently displayed images on RealityThugs, ("Home," n.d.). Retrieved November 2017.

A highly advertised teaser for one Reality-T scene can give us further clues into how thugs are constructed on the site. At the beginning of the teaser, we find that one Black man has broken into another's home, presumably for purposes of theft. When accosted by the resident (another Black man), the burglar is forced into oral, then anal sex with the resident, all the while insulting him with homophobic language.

ThugHunter is another MSM porn site that features African American men having sex with white men. Many of these actors, especially the white actors, are popular and well-known in

the industry, appearing in many other sites and series. The site's age wall shows a Black man giving the middle finger to the camera (a common sight on thug porn sites). Moving to the homepage, we are greeted with a large banner, seen in figure 2 below. It features five men— four Black, one white—riding in an open convertible. The white character is emphasized here too: he sits above the Black men, grinning into the camera and spreading his arms wide. In blocky graffiti-style font, the banner reads, "THUG HUNTER – Pretty fly for a white guy!" None of the four Black men have similar prominence or look at the audience.

Figure 2 The page banner on ThugHunter.com. ("ThugHunter," n.d.)

All of the scenes produced by ThugHunter (hereafter "T-Hunter") are interracial scenes, most featuring Black men bottoming for white men (54 out of sixty total scenes analyzed). The site's name alone centers the rotating cast of white pornstars, the "hunters" who "hunt" the thugs in question. The amount of space taken by this particular hunter, a regular on the site, drives the message home: this site is for the white dudes. Typically on this site, the scenario goes like this: a white pornographer and his pornstar friend enter a predominantly Black urban or suburban neighborhood in search of a "thug". Upon meeting a thug, the white men will probe him with sexually suggestive comments, and eventually, they will offer him a sum of money to participate in sex on camera. The thugs are generally hesitant, but in the end, allow the sex in order to make some money. The pair will usually have sex, with the white man topping the Black man, often in bizarre, downtrodden places both private and public.

The T-Hunter website's "Latest Scenes" menu hosts a list of sixty T-Hunter episodes, each with a photo and a caption. The Black men here are framed very differently from those on Reality-T: Nearly all of the photos focus on Black men engaged in a sex act with a white man, generally performing fellatio, being penetrated or posing covered in the white man's semen. One still shows the thug giving the white co-star a piggyback ride. There are more symbols that symbolize Black men as needing control; according to Patricia Hill Collins (2005), some identifying elements controlling image thugs include hypermasculinity, violence, aggression, criminality and greed. We find these elements in the T-Hunter "Latest Scenes" menu:

- 34 uses of words often (though not always) pejoratively applied to poor, urban and Black neighborhoods like "hood" and "ghetto".
- 19 implications of criminality, e.g. police evasion, referencing gang activity, etc.
- 19 implications of violence/danger in interactions with thugs.
- 10 references to thugs as "rough", "hard", "tough" or other similar words.
- 23 descriptions of thugs as greedy or largely money-driven.
- thugs are shown making aggressive hand gestures or gang signs 7 times.

The thugs on this site conform very well to the controlling thug image. Let's look at how the site presents the thug to us, and what happens to the thug at the cross-sections of social control and erotic fantasy.

Figure 3 Robert Axel poses on the left as a "thug" with Connor McGuire and on the right as a masseuse with Brant Dixon.

Here I focus in on the discourse involved in a specific ThugHunter scene starring actor
Connor McGuire as a "thug-hunter" and actor Robert Axel as a "thug" character (very few of the
website's thugs are given names or are otherwise billed). Maguire begins the scene conversing
with his cameraman and producer "Joey" about thugs. When Joey suggests that the two of them
approach a pair of Black men in the background, Maguire editorializes about their thuggish
quality.

```
(2)   1.  Connor:   Eh… eh… they're too… too little.
      2.            (.)
      3.  Joey:     Yeah? (.) Why, what kinda thug you want?=
      4.  C:                                      = Like (.)
                    let's look for like the toughest one we can find,
                    [you know]?
      5.  J:                                               [Yeah?]
      6.  C:        It means more.
      7.  J:        (It) means more?
```
                                                  (*Harder They Look*, 2011)

Conner and Joey proceed down the street, stopping to taunt a Black woman passerby
by evaluating her thug qualities, then approach Axel, a Black bodybuilder, who often stars in
roles like "coach" or "wrestler". His largest role was a recurring role as a masseuse on a "happy
ending" massage pornographic site called "Rub Him". On Rub Him, Axel's character is generally
mild and accommodating with his mostly white "clients", largely unthreatening, gentle and
affectionate. On ThugHunter, however, the audience see a very different sort of character. On a
Compton street corner, Axel scowls into the camera, makes use of rapid-fire African American
English pronunciation (but rarely any uses any grammatical features besides aint-negation) and
makes several references to his life of crime.

```
(3)   8.   J:      How'd you get all those muscles?
      9.   Robert: Hard work. Jail. Hey=
      10.  J:               =Jail!?=
      11.  R:                   =ya gotta do what ya [gotta do
      12.  ...
      13.  J:       =You need some money?
      14.          (.)
      15.  R:      Hey, everybody could use some money.
      16.  J:      Okay, How's… four hundred bucks?
      17.  R:      Four hundred bucks?
      18.  J:      Just a quick little blowjob.
```

```
    19. R:          Four hundred bucks. You know what, I make
                    more money standing here in fifteen minutes
                    than four hundred bucks.
```

Axel references a previous stint in jail, as well as implying he sells drugs or other illicit commodities. Axel suggests that he has had sex with men before in jail, but that he does not have sex with men on the outside. At this point, he makes a grab for Joey's camera, and exchanges banter about carrying guns. After some haggling and rejection, Axel gives in; the group settles on a price and moves to a junkyard to have sex. It's discursively important that Axel maintains his African American-indexing accent through the scene, keeping himself in contrast with his interlocutors, even though the actor is capable of more mainstream American English speech as well. He maintains the speech as a part of his thug persona: this indicates to us the thug's "register" or stereotypic, emblematic speech (Agha, 2007)The white actors, however, try to use an African American lexical item to describe Axel's physique with "swollen". Axel seems puzzled by this in the video, either because the commonly used term is the AAE participle "swole" or he was unfamiliar with the term. The pair and the site often (try to) dip into African American language, but the tone often comes across as mocking or incoherent.

Most scenes at T-Hunter proceed in this way, with only minor variation. There are a few more elements on the website I wish to highlight for analysis, however. In a scene called "Thug for Life," Joey and a new white Hunter cruise a poor neighborhood, stumble upon a particularly aggressive thug character and after negotiating move behind a boarded-up house to have sex on an abandoned mattress. The white performer and Joey the cameraman take several opportunities to tease the thug, both during and after intercourse, for having an erection. They threaten to "out" him to "the homies" and despite his objections refer to him as "gay" several times. At the end of the scene, he begs for them to wipe the semen off him and pay their agreed price as the two white men stand over him, chortling and continuing to insult him.

Thugs as discursive personae represented in mainstream MSM porn

There are three figures of personhood central to the study of pornography in discourse; the actor, the consumer and the producer (Padgett 2017). These figures are often invoked when talking about pornography in broader discourse, whether voicing support or opposition to porn as a genre. They are also essential to the proliferation of pornography. These MSM thug sites engage with all three of these figures to create a cohesive narrative about thugs—who has access to them and who is desiring them. These narratives do not necessarily reflect the realities of what really goes on behind the scenes of pornography; rather, they are constructed narrative that bolster the site's feeling of authenticity for the intended audience. This narrative also discursively creates a "mental model" of supposed real life interactions for the audience, affecting their perception of real-world individuals (van Dijk, 2013). This is most clear in the Reality-T site description where the site addresses the audience directly. Disembodied text, ostensibly representing the "producers", is positioned from the standpoint of a curator or merchant, and thugs are spoken of as the commodity to which the audience does not have immediate access. The text positions the audience as neither thugs nor people inclined or able to seek them out for their own sexual pleasure. Neither do the producers position themselves as thugs, or having any special social affinity with them. The thugs themselves seem largely stripped of agency, a thread that holds throughout the site.

By analyzing these thugs as characterological figures, we can delineate both their social range (relationships to broader society) and their semiotic range (linguistic and embodied relationships) by finding common traits advanced across these websites as "authenticating" the thug:

Mainstream Thug Social Range	Mainstream Thug Semiotic Range
• Live in the "ghetto" (away from audience). • View homosexuality as degrading • Have great potential for violence. • Are generally criminal. • Are easily coerced by money (which the producers have).	• Clear use of African American styles of speech • Stereotyped "ghetto" wear; do-rags, sagging pants, etc. • Visible Black ancestry. • Acts of aggression • Demonstrations of hypermasculinity

Table 1 Components of the mainstream thug characterological figure

When signs like these are invoked in discourse to index social personae, Agha calls them "emblems" (2007, pp. 235-8). The emblem incorporates not only the sign itself but also—and crucially—a designation of for whom the emblem is supposed to be recognizable as an index of the specific figure. The site identifies and attempts to cater to an audience of non-thugs by invoking the emblems they should recognize as sufficiently thuggish, creating characters for their erotic story. We find here largely the characters that Hill Collins would describe as a controlling image (2005, p. 47). These thug figures perpetuate racial stereotypes about urban Black men by cleaving to semiotics of danger, criminality, hypermasculinity and aggression. The audience accordingly infers that, despite any sexual attraction to the thug, their safety is tied to distance from him (and he is especially dangerous toward non-normative sexuality). Robert Axel's thug has emerged unchanged from social systems of punishment and continues his criminal activity. He is not framed as a man deserving of agency, power or respect. The thugs also fit the bill of "DL guys", who are pretending to be straight, mortified by the idea of being outed to their communities and unable to come to terms with their own homosexual experiences.

"Submission" is a key theme to reading mainstream thugs; most thugs on these sites fulfill sexual roles that are discursively positioned as subordinating or submissive. A clear example is the burglar thug from Reality-T, who is forced to perform fellatio on and be penetrated by the other man as a shameful "punishment". These sex acts, which are more

broadly associated with women in heterosexual intercourse, become coded as "emasculating" to the hypermasculine thugs. For Connor McGuire, it "means more" to put a larger, more masculine thug into these positions, and the site tells us that he does this for our pleasure at home as well. The site's photographic themes largely reinforce the eroticization of thugs being emasculated by white men on video. One thug is taunted by the white actors for being "gay" while he sits on all fours covered in semen. The site frames the thugs and their home areas as dangerous; it frames the producers and the white actors as middle-class individuals who despite their fear of thugs are able to coerce them with wealth and dominate them sexually. The audience is implicitly framed as men who find sexual pleasure in these social dynamics.

Social receptions of mainstream thug

In the previous section, I described the site as a text in and of itself, identifying its semiotic portrayal of the mainstream discursive thug. Here, I want to situate these images into broader social narratives about the mainstream thug by examining how this thug exists in society and how individuals and social groups interact with it. In response to claims of racism in pornography emerging into the mainstream discourse in the late 2000s and early 2010s, many blogs and columns around the net hosted content related to the topic, where content creators and audiences could commentate on the phenomenon. One blog post in Psychology Today internet column "Sexual Intelligence" decries claims of racism in pornography as a "myth" designed by "the Left" to attack pornography (Klein 2011). He extends a paradigm in second-wave feminism that was highly critical of pornography to the accusation of racism in modern pornography. The author writes, "But criticizing pornography—the representation of sexual fantasy—for its portrayal of race is intellectually dishonest. It's emotion disguised as thought. It's the willful misinterpretation of tropes and metaphors that porn viewers understand." Such a statement would imply that the sexualized stereotypes found on ThugHunter and elsewhere are

part of those "tropes and metaphors" that are unworthy of critique and that real porn audiences will understand (and not find problematic).

At gay porn forum WayBig, comments on a large announcement post for ThugHunter itself indeed are critical of the site's thugs while still negating the idea of thug pornogprahy itself being racist. "I like the site," says user manu, "but the thugs they've been using lately look too innocent/girly to be credible" ("ThugHunter: flea market thug hunting," 2011). This seems a reiteration of Connor McGuire's assessment of thugs on the site: thugs who are not masculine and aggressive-looking enough become "denaturalized" to the audience (). They do not "mean as much" as "real thugs" in the narrative context of the site. "[T]he concept of the site would not be offensive in itself if it depicted what it s [sic] supposed to," manu continues. In this view, it is not the sexualization of thug imagery itself that is racist, but the act of misrepresenting thugs as not masculine, aggressive or criminal enough.

There is a different critique going on of mainstream thug websites like these among African American viewers however. On the surface, it seems to be the same critique: these thugs are denaturalized representations of the audience's expectations of the characterological figure. Reality-T and its promotional material specifically came under fire in a blogpost by Zach on the site Str8UpGayPorn titled, "It's 2016 and there's a new gay porn studio called Reality Thugs", where he highlights the racism of the scene (including portraying these men as inherently homophobic even while they have sex with each other) and the poor attention given to the production as a whole. He writes, "Porn has always profited by exploiting stereotypes... The real problem that RealityThugs has is that there are already dozens of so-called 'thug' porn studios out there with guys who are actually great performers in scenes that are actually well made.... If you're gonna go out of your way to make racist porn, at least make that racist porn hot" (Zach, 2016).

Robert Axel's scene at ThugHunter drew particular ire in the comments. One commenter compared Axel to Carlton, Will's geeky upper-class cousin on the sitcom Fresh Prince of Bel-Aire, referencing an episode where "Carlton went ghetto", including a GIF of Carlton dancing in a crop top. Many Black commenters found the sites to be laughably offensive and indicative of a horrible representation of Black men in pornography. There seems to be some idea that there are better ways for Black men to be represented in porn, and even as the post's title suggests, there may be better, "hotter" racist porn out there.

Several comments on the post call into question the audience of the site, with many actively decrying the site as being made for white people who are poised as willing and happy consumers of racist media.

Paul J · a year ago
Terrible dialogue, awful acting, unattractive performers; homophobic and racist. Who's going to get off to this?
∧ | ∨ · Reply · Share ›

Sed ⭧ Paul J · a year ago
White people.
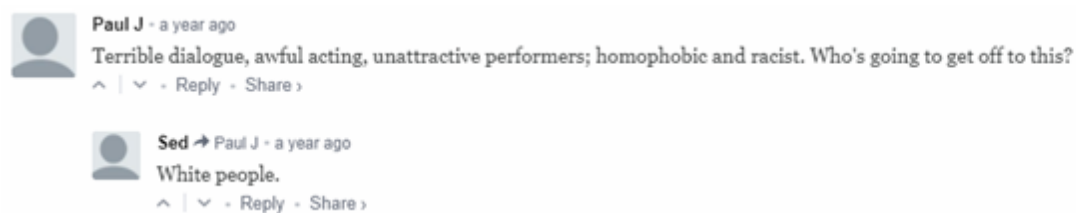∧ | ∨ · Reply · Share ›

Figure 4 A comment from Zach's post about Reality Thugs (Zach, 2016).

But perhaps the onus is consumers. Maybe just a larger share of paying consumers to these sites express these kind of preferences, and so the producers cater to them. I know many production companies are moving to a lower subscription model to attract new patrons, who might not have had the disposal income to pay for the regular full price (which we know just based on historical socioeconomic data would tilt to be predominately white gay men), and perhaps overtime these new patrons will slowly push producers to diversify their lineup.

Figure 5 An excerpt from a long comment on Zach's post from 'OhMyClarence' (Zach, 2016).

Very few of the article's 94 comments come to Reality-T's defense, and most who do simply commend it on being a studio that hires Black actors at all. Zach—who has done several blog posts and interviews involving men of color in gay porn—and his readership seem fairly decided on the degree of ignorant racism on this website, as well as the intended audience. The comments are supported by the site itself, which features Back men mostly as essentialized sexual props to white men's pleasure much more than focusing on the thugs as agentive individuals, or their pleasure. Only white men on the site are given a face, arguably the most

humanizing feature, and their faces all show the pleasure a pornographic viewer would want to empathize with (OhMyClarence makes this point in the comments about a different site). Thugs are not positioned to be empathized with by the site, indicating that the site itself is not necessarily for the pleasure of those who do identify with the thugs.

WayBig forum publicity posts for Reality-T drew an unusual number of Black commenters, as several thread participators noted. Many of them met the cite with ire, broadly calling the site "racist" and its performers "unattractive" ("Castro Supreme Fucks Phoenix at RealityTHUGS," 2016; "Reality Thugs," n.d.; "Reality THUGS," 2017; "ThugHunter," 2011). In one forum, a number of commenters—many of whom identify themselves as Black in the thread—decry the site and the genre of thug porn as racist. Later, a nonBlack commenter challenges them with a line of thinking in line with mainstream critiques of T-Hunter, saying, "Hopefully others in the black community are more open the realities that are affecting their inner-city youth and will do something to fix it. If they're all closed-minded like you, they'll be doomed" (). In his mind, these thugs, even if denaturalized, largely map onto a large community of real men in the real world, real men who should find a way to control themselves. The same commenter makes reference to uncited "statistics" about Black crime and the glorification of "prostitution, drug dealing and murder" in Black music. Several Black commenters respond that as Black people, they understand the external perception of Black communities as thug-infested "inner cities" to be a racist mischaracterization that is not representative of real Black communities. User M2 writes, "And you need to realize that the black community exists in places other than the inner cities and even in those inner cities, black people are managing to keep their youth safe. And oh, by the way, that struggle to keep youth safe in tough environments crosses many a racial line, including rural America where many white Americans are dealing with rampant addiction problems along with crippling poverty. Only, in their case it's being cast as a health crisis

brought on by an economic crisis, not the moral failure justification thrust upon black and other

minority communities."

At these sites, we see a discursive clash. Each discursive sphere has enregistered and

reified a characterological figure of thug and individual actors in those discursive spheres have

pontificated on the authenticity of mainstream pornographic examples of thugs. The mainstream

perspective of these thugs is that they are denaturalized, because they do not accurately reflect

thugs as adequately dangerous or criminal. However, there is a smaller Black discursive sphere

that also treats these pornographic representations as denaturalized, but for the reason that the

broader concept of thugs as poor, unattractive, violent men is oppressive and not representative

of reality to a large extent.

Thugs in Black-oriented MSM pornography
Textual examples of the thugs at ThugBait

The website ThugBait is much less known than the other pornography sites in this paper.

Whereas site promos, web advertisements and blog posts abound for the thugs at T-Hunter and

Reality-T, ThugBait's official content mostly consists of its minimalist website. Its scenes are

largely available on free tube sites like PornHub and RedTube, whereas full scenes from

Reality-T and T-Hunter are common subject to copyright takedowns when detected. Here too

we find a common scenario that threads across scenes and which can help us delineate the

discursive characterological figure the site draws from. On this site, much like on T-Hunter, each

scene involves three core characters; an unnamed but recurring cameraman, a "thug" character

represented by one actor and a "bait" character represented by the other. I use these terms in

my description because they are the characters implicated by the site's title, and it is sometimes

difficult to match actors in videos to specific actors on the website. However, in all of the T-Bait

videos I analyzed, no man is even called a "bait" and in only one video was a man referred to as

a "thug". It seems this language is largely restricted to the website, and possibly some earlier videos on the site.

A scene will generally open with the bait and/or cameraman luring the thug back to an apartment or hotel room on the understanding that he will have sex with a woman there. Once in the room, they have the thug strip and blindfold himself before the bait character begins performing oral sex on the thug. After becoming aroused, the thug removes his blindfold and is shocked to find the male bait instead of a woman. Between the trio, there is some negotiation and eventually the bait and thug have sex for the camera.

The website itself offers little in the way of text, but does have a descriptive age wall:

```
(4)  This gayblackpornsite contains images and video of straight Black
     and Latin Men with off da hook bodies, big ole dicks and phat
     azzes. This gayblackpornsite is for anyone who appreciates seein a
     straight-up thug nigga get himself off

                                        ("ThugBait Age Wall," n.d.)
```

Inside there are no text descriptions of episodes. Instead, each episode is with the name of the thug starring and in smaller font bills the bait characters as well. The list of names includes:

- Several mononyms, e.g. "D'winslow", "Tiego", "Johntavius", "Quan-T" and "Tyronse"

- Aliases/Nicknames, e.g. "Biz", "Broman", "Pronto", "Adidas", "Celly" and "Ryder"

- Alphanumeric aliases, e.g. "DarkBoi7", "Kali101", "Ya-Yo1", "G2"

- Descriptors, e.g. "Red One", "Big Dick Nick", "Brown Dude & Black Boi" and "Real Trade" ("Thugbait," n.d.).

Often, the videos begin with warm greetings and banter between the thug and either the baiter or the cameraman, similar to the rapport between Joey and the white "hunters" on T-Hunter, though explicit talk about "thugs" in the actual videos is rare.

Here I highlight some of the interactions between "thugs" and non-"thugs" in the actual text of the pornography to better illustrate how T-Bait constructs thugs it thinks its audience will be more likely to authenticate. Sometimes, we get an additional sense of the previous relationship of the characters. In one example, the scene opens on the thug and the bait

discussing the thug's troubled relationship with his girlfriend. At the outset, we immediately see

a very different representation of the thug. In contrast to the character played by Axel on the

mainstream site, this thug produces discourse that is emotional, loyal, and caring about his

girlfriend.

```
1. Thug:   She just... just all of a sudden she just keep
           having feelin like that I'm lyin to her about
           things. Which I'm not! KnowwhatImsayin, I'm keepin
           it one hundred. Y—I—I work hard. I don't (.) fuck
           around in the streets, yaknowwhatimsayin. I stay
           in the house, I come home, do this, do that.
           YknowwhatImsayin, but (.) I'm loyal to her. Very
           loyal to her. KnowwhatImsayin, whatever she aks me
           for, I get it, yaknowwhatImsayin, what's the
           problem? KnowwhatImsayin, w—I don't know what I'm
           doing wrong. I guess probably if you need to talk
           to her for me or whatever.
2. Bait:   I mean, have you spoke to her?
3. T:      I spoke to her (.) yesterday! But (.) she han't
           called me or nothin like (.) a week before that I
           aint heard nun from her. And I was like what the
           fuck. KnowwhatImsayin. This shit don't make no
           sense. Shit kinda fucked with me cause I gotta lot
           of shit that's really (.) on my mind and I talk
           only to her about. KnowwhatImsayin. (.) But see now
           I come to you cause I know you her best friend, (.)
           and I feel like it'd best for you (.) to talk—
           probably for you to just talk to her for me,
           knowwhatImsayin. I don't know what's goin on. She
           was—she like—You could probably get more out of her
           than I could. [KnowwhatImsayin]
4. B:      [I mean, shit.]
```

<div align="right">(ThugBait Scene, 2012)</div>

The two go to the bait's apartment and end up having sex, mutually agreeing not to tell

the girlfriend. In another scene a different thug removes his blindfold and finds his friend

performing oral sex on him. He stands, obviously aggravated and the following exchange plays

out:

```
(6) 1.  B:  Shit, man. (.) I had to taste it, son.
    2.  T:  Coulda been straight[1]! (.) Wanna suck dick, all you gotta do
            is ask me, yo.=
    3.  B:            =Word?=
```

---

[1] That is, honest.

```
4.  T:                  =Foolin me!
5.  B:  Word, my ba:d, my ba:d, youknowImsayin.
6.  T:  [All you] gotta do is speak up, nigga! (.) [If] you want
        some dick.
7.  B:  Shit, that's it? (.) [Damn]
8.  T:                  [KnowImsayin?]
9.  B:  Well damn, I'm speakin up, [so what's up?]
10. T:                  [Well get on it,] then, nigga!
```
(ThugBait Scene, 2012)

The thug expresses he is upset by the situation not because he finds himself receiving oral sex from his friend, but because his friend has taken advantage of his trust. In fact, he implies that he would have had sex with the bait consensually had he asked and may do so again in the future. This is not the only way this part of the scene might play out. Some feature thugs fuming around the apartment, cursing. Others may show thugs as reluctant or shocked for a few minutes, then returning to arousal and interest. There are cases where the cameraman will bribe the thug with money to stay, but these are a minority of the scenes I analyzed for this thesis. However, in several scenes, the cameraman will offer to "put some money in [a thug's] pocket" for their time and performance, sometimes unprompted by the thug.

The end of the scenario often features some banter between the participants before the scene closes out, in the same vein as sites like T-Hunter. In many cases, the cameraman will participate, asking the thugs to show off various body parts, questioning them about if they enjoyed the sex and sometimes offering them opportunities to come back and film again. All the characters speak similar varieties of African American English at the phonetic and morphosyntactic levels, and there is rarely any confusion or trouble in their communication. No thug is discursively set in contrast to the others. The cameraman and bait are antagonistic to the thug about having enjoyed the experience, and generally thugs are content enough with it. In a third scene, the cameraman asks the thug how he feels about the experience;

```
(7) 1. T:       Shi::d that shit was lit=don't tell nobody though!
    2. Camera:  Well (.) you know this gon go on the website though. I
               mean I do gotta keep it real it you.
    3. T:       Shi:d (.) {smiles} I'm a star, I guess! ha.ha.ha
```
(ThugBait Scene, 2012)

The site description describes "thugs" as being straight (though in reality we don't know explicitly how most of the characters in these videos or the actors portraying them identify). The thug above is initially reluctant about the tryst he just participated in becoming public knowledge, but this lasts only moments until he laughs, throws up his hands and proclaims himself a star.

Thugs as discursive personae represented in Black-oriented MSM porn

When looking at previous sites, I identified the intended audience by looking at who the producers of the site designated as that audience, how the producers positioned themselves, and who we were supposed to identify with on the site. T-Bait positions the audience as being people invested in a thug's pleasure, and the website doesn't exclude the producers or the audience from that group. In fact, the site seems to suggest that we be "rooting for" the thugs on the site. Thugs are described simply as Black and Latino men with exceptional bodies, which could apply to many or all the men pictured above and on the site, meaning we could potentially call either model in many of these scenarios a "thug". In fact, the name "Thug Bait" is in itself ambiguous, potentially referring to either "bait to lure a thug" or to "a thug who baits others". The thugs we are meant to root for look and feel authentically urban and African American/Latino– authentic without the exaggeration Robert Axel required to make his thug readable at T-Hunter. The names of the actors billed at T-Bait index this to the audience, using common African American naming and nicknaming practices like French prefixing (e.g. D'Winslow), concatenation of name parts (e.g. Johntavius), antistandard spelling (e.g. Ryder) and African American slang (e.g. Red One, Real Trade). Thugs on T-Hunter often go unbilled, but some like Robert Axel are recognizable by their prevalence in mainstream porn, often by race-neutral sounding names. In contrast, all the thugs on T-Bait are billed by a mononym or a nickname.

There is a different interplay between the thug and other actors on this site compared to on the mainstream sites: most notably, thugs are not positioned as residents of some oblique

ghetto that the bait and cameramen have invaded. Instead, thugs are friends, acquaintances

and members of the local community. This is a common identity that affects real people of all

races and is much more universal to Black men than the image of someone selling drugs on a

street corner. In the T-Bait site, thugs are not dangerous, brooding strangers. The scenarios

found in the above transcripts would seem bizarre juxtaposed with the racially charged banter at

more mainstream sites. In fact, as we saw above, these thugs are often close enough to the bait

to feel comfortable enough asking them for relationship advice or to have consensual sex when

simply asked. At the end of the scenario, these relationships are maintained or even

strengthened for some thugs. There is also little element of shame for the thugs about having

had sex with a man, either self-directed or coming from the other participants. Quite the

opposite, most thugs walk away content from the encounter and some show interest in

repeating it. These are not thugs who inherently despise homosexuality, even if they are

identified (and may truly identify) as straight while being men who have sex with men. They may

be initially hesitant about knowledge of the encounter getting out into the community, but they

ultimately accept this and are happy with it. The photography is conscious about framing thugs

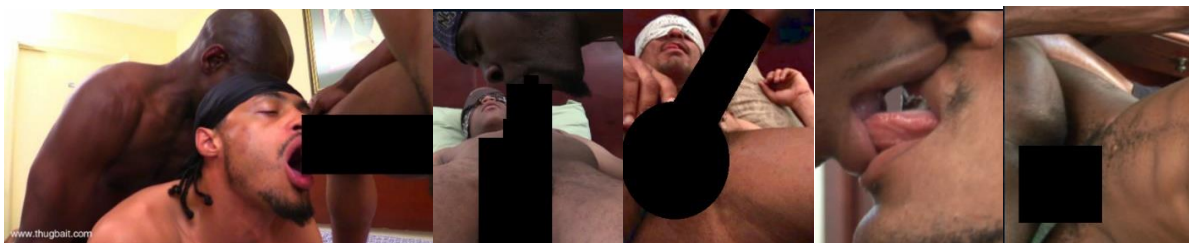enjoying various sexual pleasures.

Figure 6 Images of pleasure on ThugBait focus the thugs' pleasure. ("Thugbait," n.d.)

Of additional note is that the subject of violence and aggression is largely absent from

the site. Even in scenes where thugs are visibly aggravated by having been tricked, there are

never any threats made. A sense of impending violence is never referenced by any character. In

contrast, thugs may show emotionality by asking for relationship advice. In the above scene, for

instance, the seems somewhat confused and shaken as he opens up to his friend. His

emotionality does not manifest in violence, but in worry and sadness. Criminality too is largely absent, except for occasional references to public drinking or marijuana consumption. I turn again to Agha to help me parse this discursive thug character into its semiotic and social range from a Black discourse perspective.

Black Discourse Thug Social Range	Black Discourse Thug Semiotic Range
• Live in the nearby community • Are not subject to hegemony-informed shame • Are a part of complex everyday social networks • Encouragement and honesty in their relationships	• Use of African American speech styles • Variably working class • Visible Black/Latino ancestry • Athletic body • Demonstrations of masculinity

Table 2 Components of the Black-discourse thug

Perhaps the most salient feature of the thug on T-Bait is his agency. In example 2.6 above, for instance, the thug responds to the bait's abuse of trust by delivering an empowering lesson: "speak up, nigga!" This is a Black man's call to agency. In these videos thugs vary in personality but are consistent in that they approach the scenario with agency, acting to the best of their knowledge to their own benefit. Thugs are not tightly wound into binding codes of hardness and criminality or living under other imposed constraints of behavior; they are inclined to exercise their own agency according to their own individual subjective norms. The core elements that clung to the controlling image —violence, danger and criminality —are replaced by new qualities like respect, desire and agentivity that help Black folks to appreciate the human range of the thug, to feel close to him and perhaps to identify with him too. The function is essentially the opposite of control, where thug becomes a reclaimed image that seeks to empower Black working-class men in a white middle-class society.

Conclusions

It would be dishonest if I implied that all uses of "thug" by Black people were positive or non-controlling. Much as African Americans are a smaller subgroup of broader American society, our

discourse is still largely interwoven with a dominant US-American discourse that treats thugs as negative figures that should be controlled. There are Black Americans within all social classes and backgrounds who have adopted this discourse, viewing thugs as extant negative people who need to be controlled, and they also produce discourse invoking the controlling image. Some notable cases include mayor Stephani Rawlings-Blake (D) of Baltimore, who referred to her own citizens as "thugs" following riots in 2015 (she later recanted on twitter, implying that she used a term she "[did]n't mean" out of frustration and anger (Rawlings-Blake, 2015). Barack Obama also referred to protesters as thugs the same year, but continued to stand by the terminology. We can also see Black people wittingly or unwittingly participating in perpetuating controlling images of thugs on T-Hunter, where stereotyped thugs are played by real Black Americans. Whether they understand the white supremacy that fuels these productions or not, they perform the controlling image versions of thugs as a white audience would expect them to. This is often also true on television and in film. I therefore do not mean to imply that the thugs at T-Bait have no role in perpetuating controlling images about Black men. In this thesis, I have been more concerned with the ways different groups have discursive access to thug as a controlling image versus the Thug as a reclaimed image. My conclusion to the thesis addresses this access and its sociolinguistic implications.

I propose the idea of a valence cloud to talk about how bivalent terms such as "thug" interplay between two codes. Access to discourse is not evenly distributed; some people may have only passive access to certain discourses or none at all (van Dijk, 2013). According to Woolard (1999), the use of certain codes and the employment of certain identities and social positionings in discourse has an effect on meaning, both from the point of the speaker and of the audience (21). There are overlaps in the codes of Catalan and Castilian, and in these overlaps exist the bivalent terms. For Woolard, those who operate in both discursive spheres can strategically use the bivalent terms to appeal pragmatically to both discursive spheres.

Monolingual, monodiscursive operators only have access to one discursive sphere. As such, those operators only "hear" the bivalent term according to their own discursive sphere. A term can be "undecidable" if the social positioning of the speaker and the audience is not taken into account, regardless of the term's inherent meaning. The valence cloud is a model of the distribution of decidable meanings between two discursive spheres. Each valence cloud has its own range of decidable discursive meanings for a social persona. In places where these clouds overlap, a decidable meaning is shared, whereas where separate, meanings are distinct and not normally invoked in the other valence cloud. The valence clouds relevant to any given term can be socially mediated, and as discourses are plural, so too can the relevant valence clouds to a term. Still, all discourses may not be relevant to any interaction, and all valence clouds may not come into play during any one analysis of social meaning.
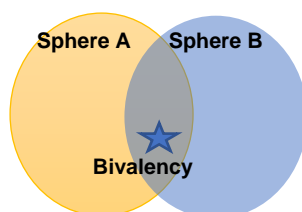

Table 3 This Venn Diagram represents the valence cloud of a bivalent term: the term appears in both codes with code-specific elements, but also has shared elements that interplay in the space where some meaning in both available codes.

I use this idea of being able to "hear" and "decide" a bivalent term in my analysis of the discursive valence of the term "thug". The perspective I am taking recalls Hewitt (1986) and Bucholtz's (2011) work on speaker and audience, which shows that some words accrue social meaning based on the speaker's ethnicity regardless of speaker intent. This thesis similarly posits that "thug" as a term and discursive persona is discursively situated in two different social places, with two different social meanings. There is a more original—though by no means inherent—social meaning majorly constructed without the perspective of Black and Latino men, and when this term enters these minority discourses, the social meanings the actors therein

construct expand the possible social meanings of the term. Multiple simultaneous thugs live in this expanded discourse and are equally available to the individuals functioning under that discourse. The use of thug as a reclaimed image is almost completely restricted to Black and Latinx uses of the term, in part because it is a reclamation based on discursive and social access to the 'real men' who are commonly labelled thugs. The figures both explicitly designate Black and Latino men, and only refer to white men by marked analogy; a white person will almost always be implicitly not a thug in a discursive context where "thug" is a racialized term for certain non-white people. A white person using the term "thug" in a racialized context invokes a racialized other, or "them".

When confronted with the discursive character, members of Black and Latinx communities have the pragmatic and discursive option of choosing between thugs as "them" (distancing orientation) or as "us" (approaching orientation)—that is, between a controlling image or a reclaimed figure. This doesn't mean that a white American could not attempt to identify with thugs, nor that white people are incapable of understanding thug in the reclaimed sense. But it does suggest that white speakers' use of the term "thug", because of their socially situated position, would carry with it their own whiteness as part of its pragmatic meaning.

The discursive practice of reclamation is not unique to African American men: terms whose intents were originally oppressive like queer, ho, bruja, nigga and bitch have both oppressive and reclaimed senses that seem to function similarly. "Bitch", for example, has been historically used to denigrate women and men who portray ideologically inferior masculinities. For decades, however, women and Queer men have embraced some uses of the term amongst themselves while still speaking against the inherent homophobia and sexism of the term when used by others. In this thesis, we have seen some of the semiotic details in how these stigmatized personae become reclaimed. The fear and social distance that thugs require are stripped away, characters' social and semiotic ranges are broadened and there is more focus

on the character's agency and desire in spite of social norms that would say otherwise. The way "thug" discursively moves from a controlling image to a reclaimed one largely mirrors the ways emblem-mediated social personae become "emblematic figures of identity"; through persistent individual and group alignments of self to the social personae (Agha, 2007). In the data from T-Bait, we see that the emblems of thugs become move variable, less stereotypic, less controlling and more representative of the *"range* of roles and statuses in different kinds of roles and scenarios" men designated as thugs can display (p. 242). There is a discursive broadening—an increase in valence level—of these emblems that pushes the possible representations of thug personae beyond ill-tasting stereotypic controlling images, towards images more appealing for self-identification.
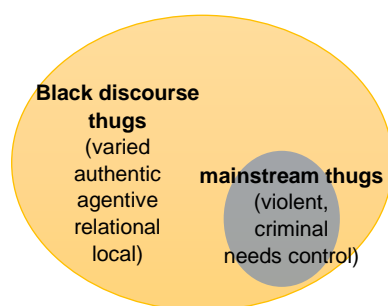

Table 4 The mainstream controlling image of thug and its associated emblems (blue) exist fully within a broader valence cloud (orange) of broader potential social meanings. Discursive access to these broader meanings is mediated, in this case, by ethnicity and the ability to identify or be identified with a racialized persona.

"Thug" as a term and a characterological figure is discursively bivalent between Black discourse and broader US American discourse. Its readability and decidability are dependent on the discursive situation of the participants invoking it. We can assume that there will be innumerable instances of bivalency between, say, African American English and General American English, two fundamentally adjacent and overlapping codes. AAVE lexicon is identical or similar to General American English the vast majority of the time. However, just as there are differences at the lexical and syntactic levels between Black and General American discourses, there are also differences at the level of pragmatic meaning. The term "wild," for example, parallels General American English in its adjectival and nominal senses but also carries a verbal

sense meaning "to behave wildly" (e.g. "Ya gurl was wildin at the party last night.") that is not shared in General American. This kind of bivalency is a key part of dialectal difference in that it is born out of sociolinguistic variation. African Americans do not operate outside of the English-language and US-American discursive sphere, a sphere shared by people of all different races, ethnicities and backgrounds. But it makes good sense that terms having a higher impact on African American social relations would develop distinctive, more nuanced social meanings within the Black discursive sphere versus the mainstream sphere. To put this in Silverstein's (2003) terms, the shifting social meanings assigned to such terms provide evidence of a new indexical order.

Occupying both discursive spheres, African Americans can understand and use "thug" in either the hegemonic, controlling sense or in the reclaimed sense specific to African Americans and Latinxs. These spheres do not each have their own senses. Rather, the thug controlling image exists almost fully inside the broader valence cloud of thug, which also contains the reclaimed image. Black folks therefore need to be discursively fluent in both mainstream discourse and in Black discourse, in part because they must interact with mainstream discourse in order to function in greater, multiethnic US-American society. This discursive structure mirrors DuBois' (Du Bois, 1994) "double consciousness":

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (3-4).

In sum, both mainstream and Black discourses have great impact on the Black individual, who must navigate the implications of both discursive spheres on a daily basis. As a term representing a characterological figure, "thug" is discursively situated in the overlap of Black/Latinx American discourse and broader US-American discourse (whose hegemonic neutral point is white and middle-class). The derogatory meaning of the term is socially

mitigated by access and participation in African American life, culture and identity, specifically by the ability to treat thugs as "us" as well as "them". In this thesis, I have provided an extended example of the way that Black discourse is double-conscious, looking from without and within.

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