

invisible lives
silent voices

(In)Visibilities of the U.S. South

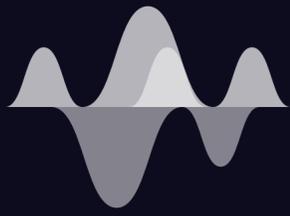
Thursday February 23rd 6-8 pm (CET)

Marc-Philippe Brunet (University of Savoie - Mont Blanc) - Indexicality and self-censorship: Invisibility from a sociolinguistic perspective.



In North-America, the variety of English spoken in the Southern states (*Southern American English*, hereafter *SAE*) is overwhelmingly considered to be one of the most incorrect breed of American English by a large proportion of Americans—including speakers of *SAE*. Southern speech is regarded as generally inferior to the linguistic standard and particularly inapt for formal contexts, wherein exhibiting such features is frequently derided. However, far from leading to invisibility from a linguistic point of view, Southern American English gives rise to an excessive and unwanted *visibility* of its speakers. Paradoxically, the erasure of marginal speakers does not come with the invisibility of their linguistic patterns, but rather with the disproportionate salience of their speech. As a result, *SAE* linguistic features are highly indexical, insofar as they are systematically associated to specific socio-demographic groups and to attributes these groups are assumed to have. In this talk, I would like to explore this seemingly conflicting sociolinguistic facet—that invisibility leads to higher linguistic visibility, and vice-versa. In particular, we will be studying the range of social indexes that come with Southern speech (such as associations to “rednecks”, “hillbillies” or “ignorants”), as well as the variety of sociolinguistic behaviors speakers display, from self-censorship and linguistic insecurity to mutism. Results show that Southern speakers are structured by their acute awareness of the salience of their speech and react accordingly, which is indicative of their conscious attempts to redefine their identity.

Marc-Philippe Brunet is a teacher of English phonology and sociolinguistics at the University of Savoie Mont Blanc. He specializes in sociophonetics, corpus linguistics, and North American phonology. In particular, his research focuses on the interactions between phonetic features and social variables, and seeks to study how variation in language leads to indexing specific social identities within given speech communities, and can be used purposefully by speakers. He is currently working on the study of linguistic insecurity and the range of social evaluations that are associated with Southern American English, based on sociolinguistic fieldwork carried out in Tennessee.



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**Maarten Zwiers (University of Groningen) - In the Shadow of the Plantation Complex:
Lives Made Visible in the Racial Ecology of the Rural U.S. South**



The plantation complex shaped society in the southern United States. During the nineteenth century, as the cotton frontier moved westward, the power dynamics of the plantation formed a blueprint for socioeconomic relations in the South: a gendered and racialized system that primarily benefited a small elite. The U.S. Civil War led to the abolition of slavery—the bedrock of the South’s economy—but plantation patterns persisted in the southern states, especially in extractive industries such as large-scale farming and oil drilling. In my presentation I intend to explain how these patterns continued to determine life in the post-World War II South, despite the declining importance of plantation agriculture in the region and the end of institutionalized racial segregation in the 1960s. The focus will be on the Deep South states of Louisiana and Mississippi, in particular the Plantationocene geography of the Lower Mississippi River Basin. Whose voices dominated and whose were stifled in this specific racial ecology? What kind of mechanisms determined such processes of amplification and simultaneous silencing? And which counter-plantation projects made injustice inflicted on humans and other-than-humans visible?

Maarten Zwiers is Senior Lecturer of American Studies and Contemporary History at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He specializes in rural studies and U.S. southern studies, wrote the monograph *Senator James Eastland: Mississippi’s Jim Crow Democrat* (Louisiana State University Press 2015), and co-edited *Profiles in Power: Personality, Persona, and the U.S. President* (Brill 2020). His work appeared in *Southern Cultures*, the *Southern Quarterly*, and the *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*. In 2020 he received an ERC Marie Skłodowska-Curie Global Fellowship for his project “Race Land: The Ecology of Segregation” (2021-2024). At the moment he is a visiting fellow at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture in Oxford, Mississippi.