



# HON LOVE: POLITICS AND PERFORMANCE ON THE MARGINS OF THE SOUTH

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Language Variety in the South

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# Question

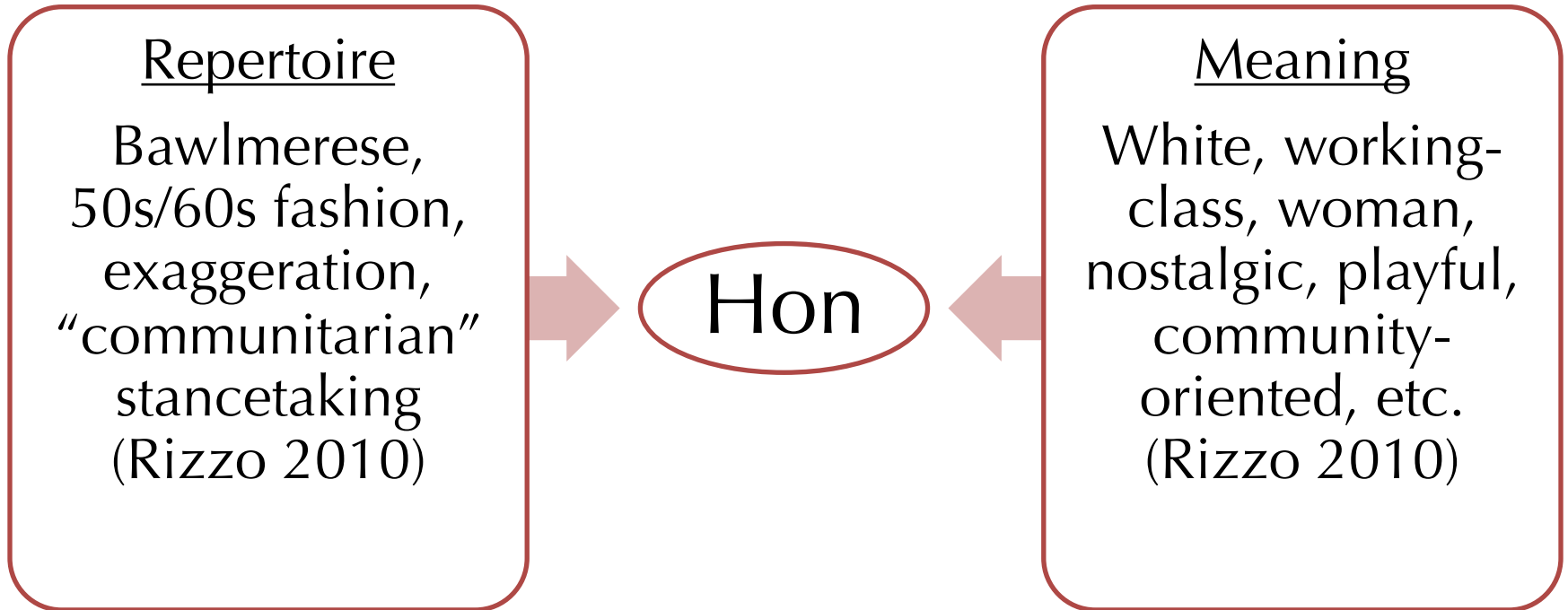
How are sociopolitical changes affecting Baltimoreans' understanding of local language and social personae?

# BACKGROUND

# The Hon

- Named social persona (D'Onofrio 2020)
- Emerged in the 1990s (Puglia 2018)
- Commemorated in HonFest
- Judged in Best Hon Contest
- Formerly commodified at Café Hon
- Community of practice, the Hon Hive, centered on this persona

# The Hon (classic)





# Examples of Hon performers [1/2]



The cover of Osborne 2010.



Advertisement for the 2022 HonFest.

# Examples of Hon performers [2/2]

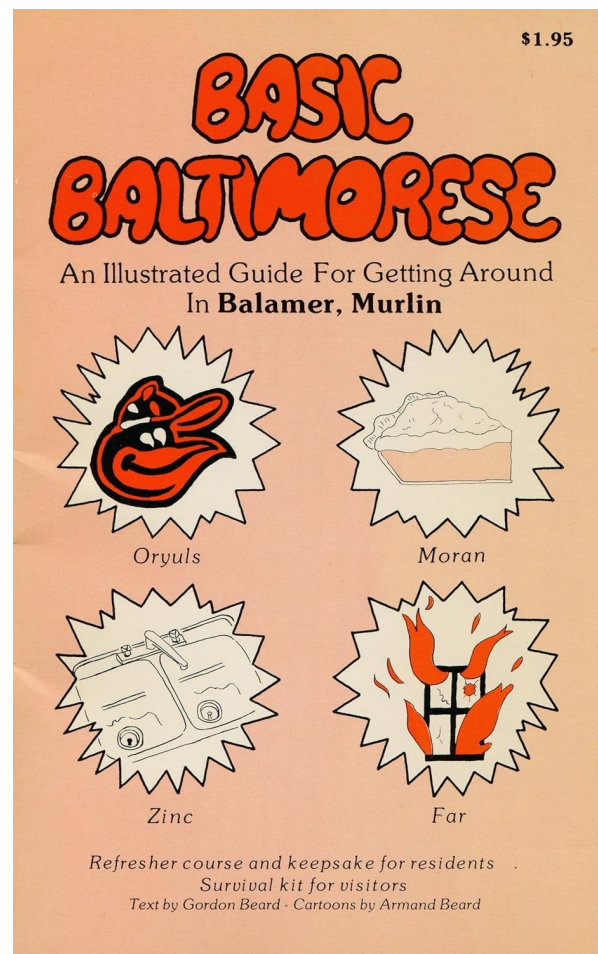


Hon performers. From Rizzo 2010.



# Baltimorese/Bawlmerese

- Based on White working-class speech
- Contains Mid-Atlantic and Southern features (Labov, Ash & Boberg 2006, Malanoski 2024)
- Phonological stereotypes:
  - fronted GOAT
  - monophthongal PRICE, especially before /r/
  - monophthongal CHOICE, especially before /l/





# METHODS

# Sample

- Collected in summer 2022
- 7 participants from Baltimore Hon Hive
- All from Baltimore area
- 6 White, 1 Black
- All women
- Birth years 1948–1982 (median: 1957)

# Data collection and analysis

- Observation of HonFest
- Sociolinguistic interview with 2 reading passages and word lists
  - 1 passage and word list read “normally”
  - 1 passage and word list read “as a Hon”
  - Order counterbalanced across participants
- Recording on Zoom H4n with built-in microphone
- Forced alignment with Montréal Forced Aligner (McAuliffe et al. 2017)
- Formant extraction with FAVE (Rosenfelder et al. 2022)

# RESULTS



# (De-)centering Bawlmerese [1/2]

## Centering Bawlmerese in the Hon

- Best Hon Contest requires competence in Bawlmerese
- Most Hon performers draw on Bawlmerese features

## Decentering Bawlmerese in the Hon

- Bawlmerese is only a small part of the Best Hon Contest
- Some Black Hon performers have explicitly rejected Bawlmerese
- This includes at least one Best Hon winner

# (De-)centering Bawlmerese [2/2]

- Language often deemphasized or not mentioned at all in descriptions of Hons
- **AM:** Can anybody be a Hon?  
**Faye:** Yeah, I think so. Um... yeah, I think it goes beyond the language, I think it's really more of the attitude that you display”

Consequence:

- You no longer have to perform Bawlmerese to successfully perform the Hon



# Play as a linguistic quality [1/2]

- Bawlmerese indexes play through its use in playful performances
- For some speakers, this link seems to have rhematized (Irvine & Gal 2000, Gal 2013): Bawlmerese is itself fun/playful (not merely a component of play)
- **AM:** So, in terms of language, what do Baltimoreans sound like?

**Faye:** I think we do a lot of talking out the sides of our mouths. Like almost like a semi smile or something. [...] Yeah, it's like that's the big thing. You gotta have your face like in this partial smile when you're saying A's and O's.



# Play as a linguistic quality [2/2]

- For some, play/humor has become a central trait of Bawlmerese while other features are deemphasized or erased (Irvine & Gal 2000)
- **AM:** Now, what, uh, what do Baltimoreans sound like? How would you describe it?  
**Lavender Rose:** [laughter] It is a funny dialect, accent, or whatever. Uh. I don't know how to describe what we sound like but the wonderful thing about what we sound like is that we don't take ourselves seriously.

Consequence:

- Specific (racialized) linguistic features are made less important in performing Bawlmerese (and thus, the Hon)





# Centering self-expression

- Many Hon performers don't draw or only loosely draw on the classic Hon image
  - Self-expression is valued in Hon performances
- Consequence:
- The specific White chronotopic image of the Hon is de-emphasized
  - Makes space for styles rooted in other cultures
- **AM:** What advice would you give to someone who wants to be a Hon?
  - **Ms. Annett:** Um, just, I mean the qualifications are changing now that, that diversity and inclusion is being part of it so I'm going to say come being yourself. Be the fullness of who you are. You know, bring your own flair, because that's what makes you a Hon. Your own flair. Like for me, I don't, I wear my locs. And so for me, when I went to HonFest this year, I wanted to use my locs and design it in the form of a Hon hair style. [...] And that was my version of a Hon, and that's what I brought.



# Centering “Hon love”

- Best Hon contestants are asked how they will serve Baltimore
- Descriptions of the Hon focus on helping and loving other people and Baltimore
- Hon Hive is trying to promote inclusion

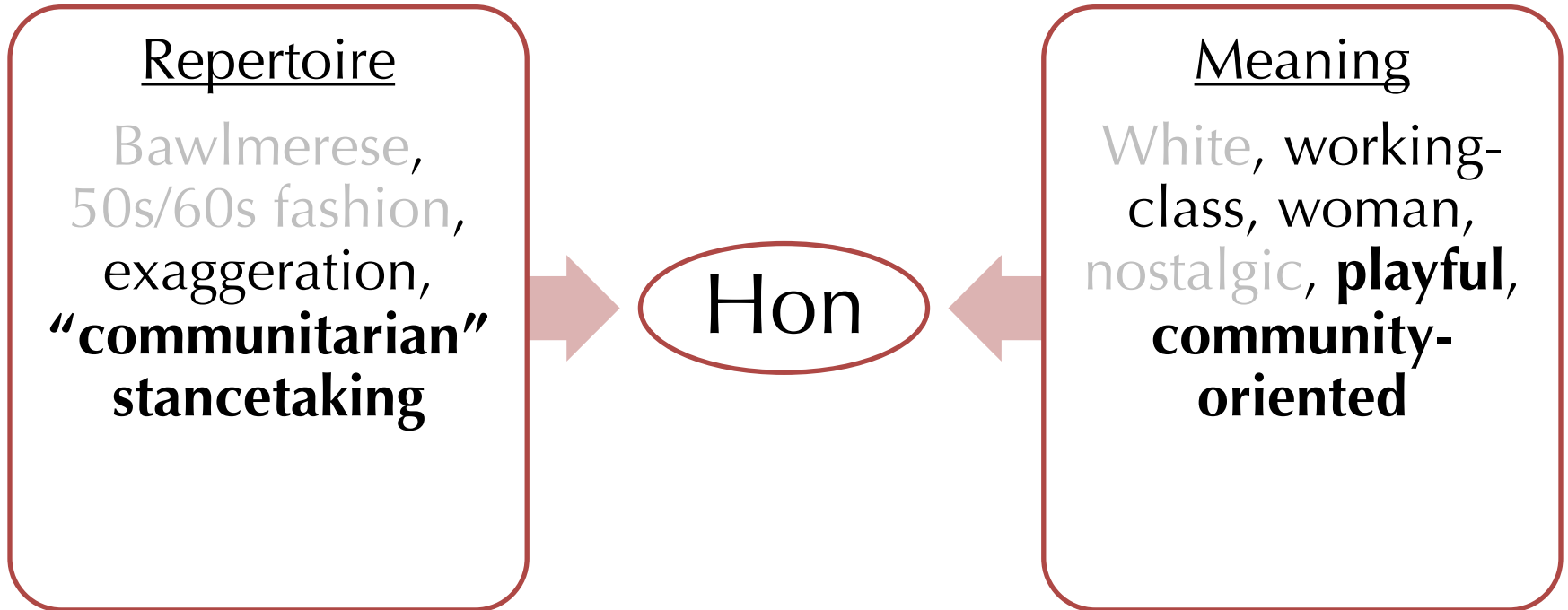
## Consequence:

- Nostalgia is de-emphasized
- Other understandings of the Hon are welcomed

- **Karen:** I think, you know I’ve always been a Hon at heart. I’ve always wanted to help people. I’ve always loved the city of Baltimore.
- **Lavender Rose:** At the end of the day, when [the Best Hon Contest contestants] got ju–, when they got judged, uh the judges asked them the same hard questions about what it is you love about Baltimore, how will you spread positivity, what will you do to serve your city, how can you, you know, help people in some way? So that’s really what the heart of it is.



# The Hon (modern)



# Discussion [1/2]

- The Hon is losing its connection to Bawlmerese
- This sets the Hon apart from the Yinzer (Johnstone, Andrus & Danielson 2006), Yooper (Remlinger 2009), and Yat (Carmichael & Dajko 2016), comparable personae whose repertoires remain primarily linguistic (to my knowledge)



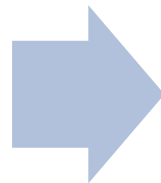
# Towards an explanation

The Hon is highly institutionalized



More susceptible to top-down changes

Hon repertoire includes distinctive non-linguistic components



Linguistic features are less crucial to performing the Hon (cf. Blommaert & Varis 2011)

# Discussion [2/2]

- Highlights the importance of considering language as part of a broader semiotic system (Eckert 2008)
- Highlights the importance of metapragmatic practices (both explicit and implicit) not only in bringing a social persona into being, but also in changing it (Agha 2003)
- To the extent that personae mediate the relationship between individual practice and larger social categories (D'Onofrio 2020), changes to personae will lead to changes in how speakers can and do position themselves in the social landscape

# Acknowledgements

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- the Hons of Honfest

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# Appendices

- A. Enregistering Bawlmerese
- B. Hons as Southern?
- C. Baltimore as linguistically Southern?
- D. Examples of the guises
- E. Ms. Annett's metalinguistic commentary
- F. Some quantitative findings

# Appendix A: Enregistering Bawlmerese



- The background:
  - Deindustrialization
  - Great Migration and White flight
- Key factors
  - John Waters films
  - Hon Man controversy
  - Café Hon
  - HonFest

“Hon Man” adding “HON” to the “Welcome to Baltimore” sign.

# Appendix B: Hons as Southern?

## Yes

- “an outrageously anti-middle-class femininity rooted in working-class southern culture” (Rizzo 2008: 265–266)
- **Faye:** So if you’re talking about HonFest and that whole thing, to me it’s an attitude, or a feeling, a feeling of openness to other people, of, um love, just basically giving love and kindness and acceptance to other people and being kind of down home like you would be say in the South, you know, “Come on in, have a glass of iced tea or a Natty Boh. What do you want to eat?” That kind of a thing.

## No

- **Bonnie:** [Hons] speak from their heart, they speak directly and they don’t play games and you know it’s just all out there and, but you know, you have to deal with it, and in dealing with the conversation, you connect with each other and you learn about each other, because just being nice and “bless your little heart” and all that kind of stuff doesn’t get anyone anywhere.



# Appendix C: Baltimore as linguistically Southern?

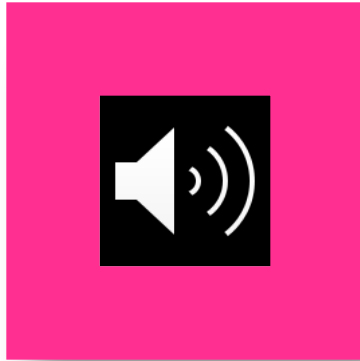
## Etically Southern

- **Angelina:** I mean, I guess it could be a little bit Southern. I mean I have had people say that to me like “you sound like you have a Sou—”, but that was up North you know I went to school in Michigan. So, you know, I don't know. I think we do the, like the [ʌ] sound, you know, like *school*, *home*, like we have a weird like, [ɛʊ], sound. But I don't even know how I would describe it.
- **AM:** Have people ever commented on the way that you speak?  
**Dottie:** Yes. And when I go to New Jersey and visit my in-laws, they call me a hillbilly.
- **Faye:** I didn't really have any problems [with my accent] anymore until I started traveling and I would meet people and they would always say, “Where are you from? Are you from the South?” or “Where is, what, what is that accent?”

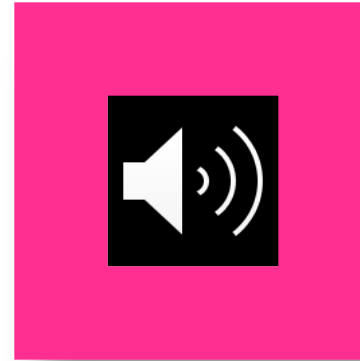
## Emically not Southern

- **AM:** What do Baltimoreans sound like? How would you describe them?  
**Angelina:** It's kind of a weird accent 'cause it's not Southern, you know, and it's not like middle, you know, like Middle America, like in Michigan or something. I don't even know how I would describe it.
- **AM:** What do Baltimoreans sound like?  
**Dottie:** Well, they, they're unique. I mean, they're not Southern because at the HonFest it comes up a lot because Baltimorese is one of the categories that they have to uh demonstrate and a lot of times we get a Southern accent and that ain't it.

# Appendix D: Examples of the guises

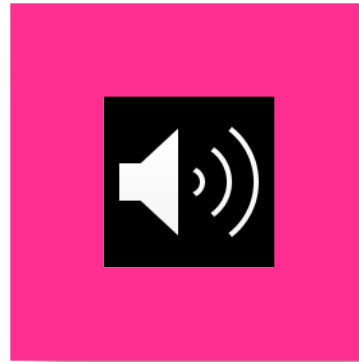


Dottie's normal  
guise



Dottie's Hon  
guise

# Appendix E: Ms. Annett's metalinguistic commentary



**AM:** Uh, what do Baltimoreans sound like?

**Ms. Annett:** It varies. Um. We, um, so it depends, because, in the African American community, it's like we have our own Baltimorese, you know, hard on the, the O's and the U's, you know [laughter].

# **APPENDIX F: SOME QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS**

# Direction of shift [1/3]

	A	AB	D	F	K	LR	MA	Total +
Tense BATH	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	4
Raised CHOICE	0	-	+	-	-	0	-	1
Fronted GOAT	+	+	+	+	-	+	0	5
Fronted GOOSE	0	-	+	0	-	+	+	3
Fronted/raised MOUTH	+	0	+	-	+	+	+	5
Raised NORTH	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Monophthongal PRIZE	+	+	-	0	-	+	-	3
Raised START	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	1
Raised THOUGHT	-	+	-	-	+	+	0	3
Total +	5	4	6	2	2	5	2	

# Direction of shift [2/3]

	A	AB	D	F	K	LR	MA	Total +
Tense BATH	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	4
Fronted GOAT	+	+	+	+	-	+	0	5
Fronted GOOSE	0	-	+	0	-	+	+	3
Fronted/raised MOUTH	+	0	+	-	+	+	+	5
Monophthongal PRIZE	+	+	-	0	-	+	-	3
Raised THOUGHT	-	+	-	-	+	+	0	3
Total +	4	4	4	2	2	5	2	

# Direction of shift [3/3]

	A	AB	D	F	K	LR	MA	Total +
Tense BATH	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	4
Fronted GOAT	+	+	+	+	-	+	0	5
Fronted GOOSE	0	-	+	0	-	+	+	3
Fronted/raised MOUTH	+	0	+	-	+	+	+	5
Monophthongal PRIZE	+	+	-	0	-	+	-	3
Raised THOUGHT	-	+	-	-	+	+	0	3
Total +	4	4	4	2	2	5	2	

# Summary of results

- Most White speakers front GOAT and tense BATH
- However, Ms. Annett, the Black speaker, does not tense BATH and only slightly fronts GOAT
- These differences may reflect differences in the targeted repertoire
  - Ms. Annett said she would use “[her] African American style”
- Performances like Ms. Annett present new models of the Hon, and may thus change people’s understanding of the Hon
- However, there are nevertheless significant similarities between Ms. Annett and the other speakers, so we expect some linguistic constancy as well



# Monophthongization

