

# Traces of Negro Dutch in the Language of Native Black Americans

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## Introduction

In Native Black American Language, there are some words for which no origin can be found among the African languages or the languages/dialects of Britain, France, and Spain – the three preeminent colonial powers in the antebellum United States. Many of these words and features have been described in previous literature as “slang” – presumed to be newly-coined forms or features in the language of Native Black Americans. However, the concentration of these forms among Native Black Americans hailing from the New York/New Jersey region in particular, when paired with the historical record, suggests a much older point of origin – the Dutch-influenced language(s)/dialect(s) spoken by the progenitors of the Native Black American population (and their descendants) of New York and New Jersey. Along with several other territories throughout the northeastern United States, these two regions once comprised the greater former Dutch colony of *Nieuw Nederland* (“New Netherland”).

Well into at least the late nineteenth century, a Dutch-influenced language was indeed spoken among descendants of Africans enslaved in the New York/New Jersey region of the United States (arguably, the same may be said for today). Referred to in previous literature as “Negro Dutch”, the term has been used to refer alternately to 1) any Dutch-inflected language spoken in the region by the Native Black American population and to 2) those Dutch-derived words that differ from that of Continental

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Dutch or the Dutch dialects spoken by the descendants of Dutch enslavers and colonizers in the former Dutch territory. Thus, the term “Negro Dutch”, as it appears in

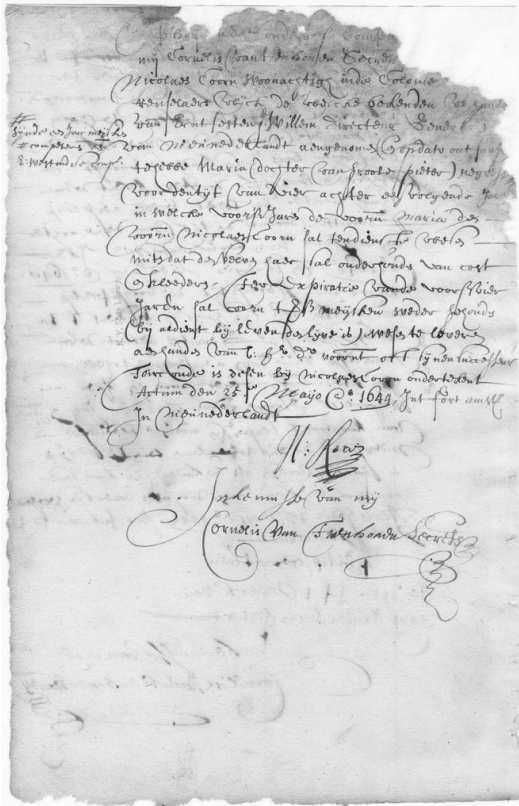


Fig. 1: Contract for the Captivity and Enslavement of a “Negro Child” Named Maria in New Amsterdam. Van Laer, Register of the Provincial Secretary, Volume II, 1642–1647, doc. 111b, pp. 223–224

this article, refers specifically to the ultimately Dutch-derived words and features occurring in the language of the Native Black American population of the United States and to the Dutch-derived language spoken by the earlier progenitors of Native Black Americans in the former Dutch colony of New Netherland.

Likewise, the term Native Black American, as it appears in this article, refers explicitly to the *ethnic group* that comprises the descendants of Africans trafficked to, held captive, and enslaved in the United States who – above all – share a common history, language, collective memory, oral tradition, culinary traditions, funerary rites, dance, music, and spiritual practices.

### Language in the Former Colony of New Netherland

Dutch and Dutch-based language varieties continued to predominate within the former Dutch colony of New Netherland, long after its surrender to England in the year 1667 – particularly in what are today the states of New York and New Jersey in the northeastern United States. For instance, in a published account of his mid-eighteenth-century visit to New York, Alexander Hamilton (1744) repeatedly lamented the omnipresence of the Dutch language in the region:

*“I now began to be quite tired of this place [Schenectady], where there was no variety or choice, either of company or conversation, and one’s ears perpetually invaded and molested with volleys of rough-sounding Dutch, which is the language most in use here. [...] I never was so destitute of conversation in my life as in this voyage. I heard nothing but Dutch spoke [sic] all the way.”* (Hamilton 1744, 84)

Hamilton’s claims as to the pervasiveness of the Dutch language in the New York region are backed by the eighteenth-century Swedish botanist Pehr Kalm, who noted much of the same in his 1770 memoir of his travels to the region:

*“The inhabitants of Albany and its environs are almost all Dutchmen. They speak Dutch, have Dutch preachers, and divine service is performed in that language. Their manners are likewise quite Dutch.”* (Kalm 1964, 343–344)

The subjects of Kalm’s observations are explicitly referred to as “Dutchmen,” but what of the Dutch-influenced language(s)/dialect(s) spoken among the region’s Native Black population, i.e., the original Africans and African descendants held captive and enslaved in the antebellum colony of New Netherland? It is generally assumed that the Dutch-influenced language varieties — and all vestiges thereof — of the Native Black American population of New York and New Jersey disappeared along with the Dutch varieties spoken by the Caucasian descendants of the original Dutch colony. However, even a cursory survey of the written record makes clear that a Dutch-derived lexicon and language was indeed in use among the Native Black American population of the former Dutch colony well into, at the very least, the late nineteenth century — leaving its imprint on the broader language of the Native Black American

population of the United States within and beyond the borders of the former Dutch colony.

### Historical Record

Little is known of the Dutch-influenced language(s)/dialect(s) employed among the enslaved Native Black population of New Netherland – a former Dutch colony which existed in the early colonial period in what are today the states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Connecticut. While sources abound – in the form of actual texts and lexicons (see Prince 1910 and van Loon 1938) – that encapsulate the Dutch dialects spoken by Caucasians in the former Dutch colony, there is scant preexisting literature on the language as spoken by the Native Black population held captive and enslaved in the region during the Transatlantic Holocaust. Alexander Hamilton – who, along with his family, participated in and profited from the barbarity of chattel slavery – provides one of the few, albeit sparse, recordings in the form of an account of an exchange between *Dromo*, Hamilton’s Black driver, and a young, unnamed Black woman in Long Island, New York in his 1744 *Itinerarium*. Hamilton quotes the exchange as follows:

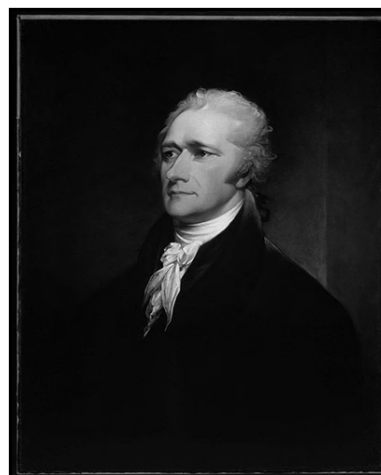


Fig. 2: Alexander Hamilton by John Trumbull , ca. 1806; Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

*“Dis de way to York?” says Dromo. “Yaw, dat is Yarikee,” said the wench, pointing to the steeples. “What devil you say?” replys [sic] Dromo. “Yaw, mynheer,” said the wench. “Damme you, what you say?” said Dromo again. “Yaw, yaw,” said the girl.” (Hamilton 1744, 47)*

While Dromo, the driver, addresses the young woman with English vocabulary, the young woman's responses strongly suggest the young woman was conversant in English. However, the *words* with which she replies are clearly Dutch (and English) in origin, i.e., *yaw* [from Dutch *ja* 'yes'] and *mynheer* [from Dutch *mijnheer* 'sir'] – with some closely resembling creole word formations, i.e., *Yarikee* [for the English 'York'].

There is other evidence of some Dutch-based language variety being spoken by these early progenitors held captive and enslaved in the region. The narrative of Sojourner Truth (1878), for instance, makes frequent mention of a Dutch-influenced language variety spoken by Truth and her family – predictably referred to as simply “Dutch” and “Low Dutch” by the Caucasian, English-speaking authors who wrote and published the nineteenth-century memoir on Ms. Truth's behalf:

*“In the evening, when her mother's work was done, she would sit down under the sparkling vault of heaven, and calling her children to her, would talk to them of the only Being that could effectually aid or protect them. Her teachings were delivered in Low Dutch, her only language. [...] She was now nine years of age, and her trials in life may be dated from this period. She says, with emphasis, ‘ Now the war begun.’” She could only talk Dutch – and the Nealys could only talk English.” (Truth 1878, 17-26)*

Later source materials also make mention of a Dutch-influenced language among the Native Black American population of the region. Gertrude Vanderbilt's memoirs, for instance, confirm the presence of Native Black American elders in the region of Flatbush (in the borough of Brooklyn, New York) who spoke some form of Dutch with each other in the late nineteenth century:

*“There are at present a few of the old colored people still living who not only understand Dutch, but who speak that language to each other when they meet.”* (Vanderbilt 1882, 252)

A late-nineteenth-century newspaper article concerning Teaneck Ridge, New Jersey – known today as Teaneck, New Jersey – makes mention of the same phenomenon, pointing to elderly members of the Native Black American population descended from those who had been held captive and enslaved by Dutch families in the vicinity:

*“The curious lingo is also preserved by the old colored folks, and one often hears an order given in it to a colored servant. [...] Nearly all the negroes in this section are descended from [enslaved Africans] who [were enslaved] by farmers whose families still own the land.”* (The Sun 1885)

The late John Dyneley Prince provides one of the few historical documents depicting Dutchisms and a Dutch-influenced language variety as spoken by Native Black American informants. Prince clearly regards the language spoken by his Native Black American informant, Mr. William De Freece, as defective and inferior. Nevertheless, Prince does manage to provide clear evidence pointing to the presence and uniqueness of Dutchisms and a Dutch-influenced language variety among members of the region’s Native Black American population. In reflecting on the language spoken by the Native Black American informant Mr. William De Freece, Prince concludes,<sup>[5]</sup>

*“The [negroes enslaved by] the old settlers used an idiom tinged with their own peculiarities. There is a small colony of old negroes living on*

*the mountain back of Suffern, N. Y., who still use their own dialect of Jersey Dutch, but they are very difficult of access, owing to their shyness of strangers.” (Prince 1910, 460)*

The presence of unique Dutch-derived lexical retentions among the Native Black American population of the United States is rarely studied, as it is generally believed that all traces of the Dutch-related language(s)/dialect(s) spoken by the Native Black American population of the United States (and their earliest progenitors) disappeared with that which was spoken by the Caucasian descendants of the original Dutch colonizers. As a case in point, J.L. Dillard, an advocate for Native Black American Language, pondered the possibility of Negro Dutch survivals among Native Black Americans before ultimately concluding:

*“Dutch Creole is the least likely of all the creoles to be significantly represented in surviving Black dialects within the continental United States. But its historical role is not necessarily so insignificant. Many of those cute Dutch words so characteristic of the Hudson valley area may have had transmission at least partly by Blacks, speakers of Neger-hollands [“Negro Dutch”].” (Dillard 1972, 20)*

The absence of literature on Negro Dutch – and, by extension, Dutch – linguistic survivals among Native Black Americans suggests general support for Dillard’s contention. However, the careful study of the lexicon of Native Black Americans reveals that unique Negro Dutch retentions did, in fact, survive and were ultimately absorbed into the greater language of the Native Black American population of the United States. These Negro Dutch survivals continue to permeate Native Black American Language, with specific Dutchisms occurring among this ethnic group with noticeable frequency and authentic utility.



Fig. 3: Sojourner Truth, circa 1864. Truth spoke a Dutch-based language in the former Dutch colony. Courtesy: Library of Congress

Moreover, by surveying Jersey Dutch (once spoken by Dutch descendants in New Jersey), Continental Dutch, and Belgian Dutch/Flemish, it becomes clear that iconic Native Black American terms such as *kat* ‘man’, ‘fellow’ and *wak* ‘poor’, ‘wimpy’, ‘unjust’, ‘low’, ‘insipid’, ‘shabby’ are, in fact, enduring Negro Dutch survivals (i.e., Dutchisms and Dutch linguistic influence as it occurs among the Native Black American population of the region) in the present-day language of the Native Black American population of the United States.

### **Wak/Wack**

In the case of *wak/wack*, there has been some discussion of putative points of origin among linguists, lexicographers, and enthusiasts, though, in most cases, the Native Black American *wak/wack* is thought to be a back-formation of the English



*wacky*. For instance, Jesse Sheidlower (2004) suggests *wacky* as a potential point of origin – a theory also proffered by Merriam-Webster<sup>1</sup>, Oxford English Dictionary<sup>2</sup>, and Stan Carey for Macmillan Dictionary (2014). However, these arguments are tenuous at best due to an obvious lack of semantic correspondence between the Native Black American *wak/wack* and the General American English *wacky* ‘crazy’. Arnold Zwicky suggests,

*“The innovative adjective “whack” is almost surely derived historically from the verb form “whacked”, in its slang sense ‘messed up, fucked (up), screwed (up), twisted’, eventually with a range of meanings going from the mild ‘awry, out of the ordinary’ to the stronger ‘wrong, bad’. [...] or maybe the adjective “whack” comes directly from the noun “whack” of “out of whack” (presumably a nominalization of the contact verb).” (Zwicky 2004)*

Like those proffered by Carey, Sheidlower, Merriam-Webster, and Oxford English Dictionary, Zwicky’s theory is burdened by a lack of semantic correspondence. With the exception of “bad” – arguably too general on its own to be considered a semantic correspondence considering the specificity and complexity of the Native Black American *wak/wack* – the definitions of the English “whacked” proposed by Zwicky fail to correspond semantically with the Native Black American *wak/wack*.

In some cases, investigators cite sex acts and illegal narcotics as points of origin for the Native Black American term. For instance, in an American Dialect Society

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<sup>1</sup> “Wack,” in *Merriam-Webster* (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated), accessed June 9, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160609073559/https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wack>.

<sup>2</sup> “Wack,” in *Lexico* (Oxford University Press), accessed June 17, 2021, [https://web.archive.org/web/20210617163317if\\_/https://www.lexico.com/definition/wack](https://web.archive.org/web/20210617163317if_/https://www.lexico.com/definition/wack).

mailing list discussion, the British *wank* ‘masturbate’ is proffered as the putative point of origin for the Native Black American *wak/wack*:

*“My casual notion would be that this “wack” = “whack” is from “whack[off]” = “masturbate”. Pretty much analogous development is seen in “jagoff” which is used like “stupid/contemptible [person]”, often without perception of the underlying “jackoff” = “masturbate[r].”*  
(Wilson 2004)

In a widely-circulated online article for the now-defunct *Gawker*, author Hamilton Nolan (2013) cites Reginald C. Dennis – a former editor for rap magazine *The Source* – who unfortunately suggests illegal narcotics as the putative point of origin for the Native Black American *wak/wack*:

*“Back in the 70s, in NYC, the term “wack” was used to describe the drug PCP or “Angel Dust.” It was descriptive without being overly pejorative back then, but by the time “Rapper’s Delight” dropped in ’79, the word had taken on its current meaning, describing something as the opposite of [...] good.”* (Nolan 2013)

Dennis’s explanation effectively demonstrates the ills that plague the research of Native Black American Language in the United States – in which racial tropes of criminality, deviance, or performance are repeatedly proffered as credible explanations for the perceived peculiarities of Native Black American Language.

To determine the origin of *wak/wack*, one must first make clear its many meanings among Native Black Americans: 1: inferior 2: unconvincing, tenuous 3: wimpy, puny, small/slight in build 4: poor (i.e., “unsatisfactory”) 5: low-quality 6: faint-

hearted, cowardly, not courageous, not bold, not funky, anemic 7: not powerful 8: raggedy, shabby 9: rickety 10: flimsy 11: soft 12: pathetic 13: insipid, watered-down 14: insubstantial 15: unjust, low in moral character 16: bad (at something).

Social media – such as Twitter —is replete with examples of the Native Black American *wak/wack* in the everyday language of the broader population:

**2011** Apr 13 RIP KB *@Fettuccine20* Twitter <https://archive.is/aBY65> nobody cares about that **wack** ass watered down drink u got in ya bbm icon

**2012** May 19 Da'Sean Butler *@TheDaSeanButler* Twitter <https://archive.is/lARYo> This #Yamp is so lame/weak/**wack**/simp I'm surprised.smh dumb corny foreal.

**2014** Feb 12 Tizzy Tyler *@tyler\_smoov* Twitter <https://archive.is/Ccvh3> No woman wants a man that is wimpy & **wack**. Most want one that is strong & smart.

**2014** Jul 24 Clarence Avant *@ReadyRockDOT* Twitter <https://archive.is/M19S1> that was some **Wack** shit you did tho. [Following Tweet: fighting ya man. That's never supposed to happen]

**2014** Oct 10 The Wolf of Ball Street *@PrinceBama* Twitter <https://archive.is/PFzGI> bad karma and paying for some **wack** shit you did in the past. Probably one of the many times you curved me 😂😂

**2017** Feb 7 Marc Joseph *@Mjosephbk* Twitter <https://archive.is/TQdju> I don't applaud mediocrity... if you come with the **wackness** in the public eye you deserve to get that work.... #PointBar

2017 May 25 Gia @\_xxGiaaa Twitter <https://archive.is/GHikq> being on a **wack**, watered down show called "The Real" don't mean you're "keeping it real" either sis

2019 Apr 18 B r y a n 3 a z z y @bryaneazzy\_ Twitter <https://archive.is/Wd9Cr> If you steal from your own "friends" yous a bitch. That's some **wack**, punk, low shit

2019 Jul 7 Ms. Flossy @msflossy\_ Twitter <https://archive.is/wCHsY> The dude in the picture was my boyfriend of almost 2 years. Recently he got mad because i didnt wanna come upstairs with him at a house party so thats how he retaliated. Lmao shit **whack!** Ion gotta say names y'all know who.

2019 Jul 8 Keisha @TehyaShanice Twitter <https://archive.is/GKAvy> Girl fuck him. **Wack** ass shit. Ik I'm late but he **wack**. With that **wack** ass excuse.

2019 Jul 11 goddess @bvsedjon Twitter <https://archive.is/iETF8> Every time I watch a new (to me) anime, they either have no women as main characters, or when they do, they're wimpy **wack** bitches that cling to a strong male lead. That shit is TIRED. STOP IT.

The Native Black American term *wak/wack* is a Negro Dutch retention, ultimately derived from the Dutch *zwak*: 'puny'<sup>3</sup>, 'poor'<sup>4</sup>, 'tender'<sup>5</sup>, 'slight'<sup>6</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> Davidovic Mladen, "Puny," in *Dutch-English, English-Dutch Dictionary: with a Brief Introduction to Dutch Grammar* (New York, NY: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 153.

<sup>4</sup> Davidovic Mladen, "Poor," in *Dutch-English, English-Dutch Dictionary: with a Brief Introduction to Dutch Grammar* (New York, NY: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 147

<sup>5</sup> Davidovic Mladen, "Zwak," in *Dutch-English, English-Dutch Dictionary: with a Brief Introduction to Dutch Grammar* (New York, NY: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 418.

<sup>6</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, "Slight," in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 841.

‘feckless’<sup>7</sup>, ‘low’<sup>8</sup>, ‘shaky (figurative)’<sup>9</sup>, ‘rickety’<sup>10</sup>, ‘soft’<sup>11</sup>, ‘weak’, ‘diluted’, ‘watered-down’<sup>12</sup>, ‘of weak character’<sup>13</sup>, ‘tenuous’<sup>14</sup>, ‘insubstantial’<sup>15</sup>; ‘bad’, ‘bad at something’, ‘weak in something.’<sup>16</sup> Despite the known history of Dutch enslavers in the antebellum northeastern United States, no known preexisting literature has traced the origin of the Native Black American *wak/wack* to a Negro Dutch – and ultimately – Dutch point of origin.

While the term *wak/wack* is most closely associated with the Native Black American population – occurring most frequently among those hailing from the New York/New Jersey regions of the United States – as the above social media examples illustrate, its present-day usage has expanded beyond the borders of the New York/New Jersey region (and ethnic boundaries). To wit, among the social media examples are users as far away as New Orleans, Louisiana. The same phenomenon is readily witnessed in the geographical breakout of occurrences of *wak/wack* in music lyrics, as evidenced by *The Right Rhymes* (see *fig. 4*). This phenomenon may well be the result of transmission in travel (as it was once standard practice for Native Black Americans

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<sup>7</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Feckless,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 316.

<sup>8</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Low,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 523.

<sup>9</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Shaky,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 815.

<sup>10</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Rickety,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 764.

<sup>11</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Soft,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 852.

<sup>12</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Zwak,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 1970.

<sup>13</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Zwak,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 1970.

<sup>14</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Tenuous,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 930.

<sup>15</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Insubstantial,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 459.

<sup>16</sup> “Zwak,” in *Van Dale Gratis Woordenboek* (Van Dale Uitgevers), accessed June 11, 2021, [https://web.archive.org/web/20210611162100if\\_/https://www.vandale.nl/gratis-woordenboek/nederlands-engels/vertaling/zwak#.YMONhm7LeZw](https://web.archive.org/web/20210611162100if_/https://www.vandale.nl/gratis-woordenboek/nederlands-engels/vertaling/zwak#.YMONhm7LeZw).

in the northern United States to travel back to the South periodically to spend time with elders and extended family for extended periods) or the dispersal and displacement of Native Black Americans native to the New York/New Jersey regions of the United States Northeast – many of whom have moved to regions extramural to the former Dutch colony (particularly to the United States South and Southwest).

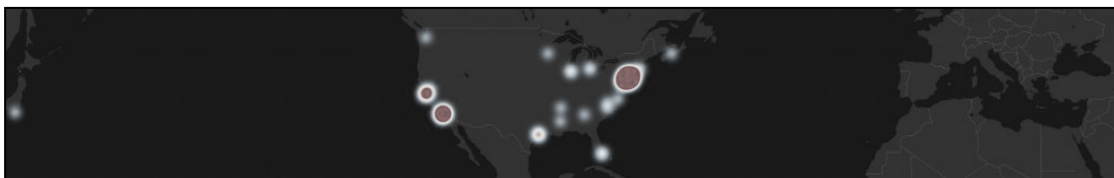


Fig. 4: Occurrences of *wack* in music lyrics by region. Courtesy: The Right Rhymes

The historical record presents a number of closely related, though semantically different, cognates. For instance, in *The Jersey Dutch Dialect*, Prince documents a term *zwak* meaning “weak in the head” in the language of some of the descendants of the original Dutch colonizers in Bergen County, New Jersey: “Weak wîk ; (Hk)=N. week ; zwâk : ‘w[eak]. in the head’ (Hk). N. [“Netherlands”] zwak=‘weak ’ in general, but often colloquial for ‘crazy.’” (Prince 1910, 483) Elsewhere in the text, Prince defines the Jersey Dutch *zwak* as “crazy”, a meaning in keeping with the colloquial usage he cites in Continental Dutch, but semantically different from the Native Black American *wak/wack*, which never means “crazy”. It should be noted that while the Dutch ‘w’ is pronounced [w] and [v], Prince describes the Jersey Dutch ‘w’ as identical to the English ‘w’: “w as Eng. w in water. W is pronounced thus in South Holland and Flemish to-day [sic].” (Prince 1910, 462) Prince’s attestation and lexical examples strongly suggest that this procopated /w/ was likely in use among the early African progenitors of the Native Black American population as well – in place of the Continental Dutch [zw] and [zv], which would have been less phonetically familiar to African ears.

Another semantically different cognate can be found in the 1938 work *Crumbs from an Old Dutch Closet* (1938), in which L.G. van Loon records a glossary of Mohawk Dutch. Among the words collected by van Loon, one finds the lexical items *swak* and *swakkies* ‘crazy’; and an additional *swak* ‘weak’. Thus, the semantic complexity and specificity of the Native Black American *wak/wack* are absent from both meanings attested to by van Loon in the Mohawk Dutch cognate(s).

The aforementioned cognates recorded by Prince and van Loon lack the depth, complexity, and nuance of the Native Black American *wak/wack* – with the Native Black American term being much closer in depth, nuance, and semantic meaning to its Continental Dutch etymon *zwak* ‘bad at something’, ‘feckless’, ‘wimpy’, ‘low’, ‘insubstantial’. However, unlike the Continental Dutch etymon, the Native Black American *wak/wack* rarely, if ever, means physically “weak” or “feeble” (as it pertains to one’s health). Instead, among the words of non-African origin, the English *weak* is typically employed for health-related weakness.

### **Kat/Cat**

The Native Black American *kat/cat* ‘fellow’, ‘man’ refers to a young man or an adult person of the male gender, regardless of one’s occupation, interests, or pursuits. (Despite popular jazz-oriented definitions proffered and preferred by the major dictionaries, in Native Black American Language, *kat/cat* has nothing to do with musical pursuits and everything to do with the male gender.) The major dictionaries, including Oxford English Dictionary<sup>17</sup> and Merriam-Webster<sup>18</sup>, cite the Old English *catt* ‘feline’ as its putative point of origin – notwithstanding the semantic disparity. This origin theory is generally accepted by the broader population. For instance, in a widely-

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<sup>17</sup> “Cat,” in *Oxford Living Dictionaries* (Oxford Dictionaries), accessed April 29, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cat>.

<sup>18</sup> “Cat,” in *Merriam-Webster* (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated), accessed March 3, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210303095854/https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cat>.

distributed article on popular “facts” website *Mental Floss*, writer Bill Demain reasoned that the Native Black American *kat/cat* ‘fellow’, ‘guy’ “*has some connection to the feline pet, for the popular conception of a jazz musician could be said to possess many similar qualities to a cat — quick on his feet, resourceful, but with a languid, slightly aloof quality.*” (Demain 2012) In stark contrast, David Dalby proffers the Wolof *-kaat*, an agentive suffix in the Wolof language, as the point of origin for the Native Black American *kat/cat*. (Kochman 1977) However, as the Wolof *-kaat* bears absolutely no gender specificity, a Wolof point of origin for the Native Black American *kat* ‘fellow, guy’ seems specious at best.

The Native Black American *kat/cat* ‘fellow’, ‘guy’, is ultimately derived from the Continental Dutch *kerel*, also meaning ‘fellow’, ‘guy’ – and related to the Belgian Dutch/Flemish *ket* ‘fellow’, ‘guy’ and the Sranan Tongo (of Suriname) *kel* ‘adult male’.<sup>19</sup> The historical record indicates that several forms of the Dutch *kerel* ‘fellow’ existed within the region of the former Dutch colony, varying in form and nuance between subpopulations. For instance, the nineteenth-century Dutch author Gerardus Bosch states:

*“De nederduitsche taal is echter in de omstreken van Albany zeer slecht, lomp en plat, en met vele verkeerde uitdrukkingen besmet b. v. kerel is het fatsoenlijke woord voor man.” [Gloss: The Dutch language, however, in the neighborhoods of Albany is very bad, awkward and crude, and infected with many incorrect terms, e.g., kerel is the decent word for “man”.] (Bosch 1827, 274)*

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<sup>19</sup> John Wilner, ed., “Kel,” in *Wortubuku Ini Sranan Tongo: (Sranan Tongo — English Dictionary)* (Paramaribo: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1992), 60.



According to Bosch, among descendants of the former Dutch colony in Albany, *kerel* was a formal word for ‘man’, unlike the Continental Dutch *kerel*, which is always informal. Similarly, Prince documents a cognate, the Mohawk Dutch *keerel*, meaning ‘fellow’, ‘person’. (van Loon 1938, 28; 31) Finally, in the early 1900s, Prince documents what – along with the Belgian Dutch/Flemish *ket* ‘fellow’ – can perhaps be considered the missing link between the Continental Dutch *kerel* ‘fellow’ and the Negro Dutch *kat/cat*, ‘fellow’, ‘guy’. Prince publishes the Jersey Dutch *kääd’l* (pronounced like the English “cattle”), meaning ‘fellow’, ‘person’. (Prince, 1910, 473) Interestingly, this word does not appear in earlier (and fairly extensive) works on Jerseyisms, suggesting that the word may *not* have been in use among the broader population and was specific to Prince’s Jersey Dutch-speaking informants.

Much like the previously discussed *wak/wack*, no known preexisting literature has traced the origin of the Native Black American *kat* ‘fellow’, ‘guy’ to a Negro Dutch – and ultimately – Dutch origin – despite the known history of Dutch participation in the Transatlantic Holocaust in the United States Northeast.

### **Flai/Fly**

The term *flai/fly* is notable in that, on the surface, it appears to be an “obvious misuse” of an English word. Perhaps, for this reason, *flai/fly* has done very little to pique the curiosity of linguists and etymologists — despite its conspicuous concentration of use among the Native Black American population of the United States. The term *flai/fly* has several distinct but closely related meanings in Native Black American Language: *adjective* 1: beautiful, pretty 2: handsome 3: fine, elegant 4: nice 5: attractive 6: splendid 7: proud, arrogant, conceited, vain 8: bold; *adverb* 1: beautifully 2: handsomely 3: elegantly, stylishly 4: nicely 5: splendidly, magnificently 6: proudly, in a vain, arrogant, or conceited manner. There is also the closely related *flyness/flainis*, an equally

important noun in Native Black American Language: *noun* 1: beauty, prettiness, handsomeness 2: elegance, style, splendor 3: magnificence.

The earliest known occurrences of the term *flai/fly* all occur within the context of the New York region. For instance, the term appears in *47th Street Jive*, a 1941 music recording by Andy Kirk & His Clouds of Joy, featuring June Richmond, who sings the following:

*“I met a hep kat, he called me a **fly** chik.”* (Andy Kirk & His Clouds of Joy, featuring June Richmond 1941)

Earlier still, the term appears in *Are You Hep to the Jive (Yas, Yas)*, a 1940 music recording by Cab Calloway and His Orchestra:

*“Do you lace your boots high? (Yas, yas!) Are you **fly** or are you **fly**?”*  
(Cab Calloway and His Orchestra 1940)

Interestingly, an adjectival *fly* occurs in the early-twentieth-century short story *The Moment of Victory* by O. Henry (née William Sydney Porter). Set in the Texas towns of Cadiz and San Augustine, the story provides little insight as to the semantic meaning intended by Henry, leading contemporary readers to infer as to the intended meaning:

*‘Hello Willie!’ says Myra. ‘What are you doing to yourself in the [looking] glass?’ ‘I’m trying to look **fly**,’ says Willie. ‘Well, you never could \*be\* **fly**,’ says Myra, with her special laugh. (Henry 1908, 233)*

The Native Black American *flai/fly* would be an ideal candidate for the term and meaning intended by Henry. Moreover, the author's sojourn in New York City, where the North Carolina-born Henry penned the short story before finally passing away in 1910 – just two years after its first publication in the now-defunct fiction monthly *Munsey's Magazine* – would explain how a word so closely associated with the New York region would potentially appear in a short story by Henry. Most notably, the author also published short stories set in Harlem, New York.

The term *flai/fly* as it occurs in Native Black American Language is derived from the Continental Dutch *fraai*, of identical meaning:

*adjective* 'beautiful', 'pretty', 'handsome', 'nice', 'fine'<sup>20</sup>; 'brave'<sup>21</sup>

Remarkably, the Dutch *fraai* does not appear in earlier and extensive works on the Dutch dialects of the New York/New Jersey region. Instead, one consistently finds the Continental Dutch-derived *mooi* 'nice', 'pretty'.<sup>22</sup>

### **Talk Out/Outside/Out the Side of One's Neck**

The idiom *talk out/outside/out the side of [one's] neck* is especially fascinating – not only for its origin, but also for its relatively recent known antedatings and geographic distribution. Though the idiom is well-known and attested to by elderly Native Black Americans – particularly those from the New York City region of the United States – its earliest-known published citation does not appear until the late

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<sup>20</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, "Fraai," in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 1297.

<sup>21</sup> Baldwin Janson, "Fraai," in *A New Pocket Dictionary of the English and Dutch Languages in Two Parts: Nieuw Zak-Woordenboek Der Nederduitsche En Engelsche Taalen, in Twee Deelen* (Amsterdam: D.J. Changuion, 1795), 72.

<sup>22</sup> Baldwin Janson, "Fraai," in *A New Pocket Dictionary of the English and Dutch Languages in Two Parts: Nieuw Zak-Woordenboek Der Nederduitsche En Engelsche Taalen, in Twee Deelen* (Amsterdam: D.J. Changuion, 1795), 147.

twentieth century. However, as is often the case in the ill-documented historical record of the Native Black American population, the late-twentieth-century citation belies its much older usage and etymology.

Though there are three variants of the idiomatic phrase, i.e., *talk out [one's] neck*, *talk outside [one's] neck*, and *talk out the side of [one's] neck*, each variant shares an identical semantic meaning: ‘to talk nonsense, foolishness, or “bullshit”’. Their earliest (known) recordings occur in the New York/New Jersey region of the United States and exclusively among the Native Black American population of the United States – each with the aforementioned semantic meaning. For instance, the earliest-known published citation for *talk out/outside/out the side of [one's] neck* is found in the 1984 political protest song *Talkin' Out the Side of Your Neck* by funk group *Cameo*:

*“Now some of the people, some of the time / But not all of your people  
all of the time / Tricky Dick, Ford too / Jimmy Mac Carter, Ronnie  
Reagan too / Hey, you **talkin' out the side of your neck!**”* (Cameo 1984)

Cameo’s choice of both lyric and title is unsurprising as the group, formerly known as the *New York City Players*, hailed from the New York region of the United States. The phrase occurs again, over a decade later, in another music recording – this time, by vocalist Lauryn Hill:

*“**Talking out your neck** saying you’re a Christian / A Muslim sleeping  
with the jinn.”* (Hill 1998)

Like Cameo, Lauryn Hill hailed from the New York/New Jersey region of the United States, making her usage unsurprising. However, former New York Mets baseball player Darryl Strawberry – who was born and raised in Los Angeles,

California, but played Major League Baseball in New York City – offered the following usage in his 2009 autobiography:

*“My father was in the bedroom, crazy drunk, yelling nonsense—“**talking out the side of his neck,**” as we used to say.”* (Strawberry 2009, 10)

It is unclear from Strawberry’s quote whether he “used to” use the term while playing professional baseball in New York City or while growing up in Los Angeles – or from what region his parents originally hailed, for that matter. Nevertheless, with an extensive history of forced migration (and, thus, intermingling) – a Los Angeles usage on Strawberry’s part would be unsurprising. In fact, an online search returned many more recent usages (see examples below) occurring well outside of the New York/New Jersey region (though in many of the extramural cases, the meaning does seem to have less precision than its New York/New Jersey counterpart). Furthermore, with Cameo’s song becoming an HBCU marching band staple<sup>23</sup> – which in turn, led to the phrase featuring prominently in popular music<sup>24</sup> in the United States Southeast – the idiom has seen increased currency among the Native Black American population in the United States South.

**2018** Nov 1 Elle Young @theIelle Twitter <https://archive.is/LZE8M> Respect your opinion, but dont **talk out the side of your neck** about what I know or dont know. It's my opinion so keep your little shots to yourself and state what u want, but dont @ me with nonsense

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<sup>23</sup> *Jackson State University Marching Band - Neck - 2016. YouTube.* KillaKevProd, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOAlxv5RPz8>.

<sup>24</sup> *Dem Franchize Boyz – Talkin’ Out Da Side Of Ya Neck. YouTube.* VEVO, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQOnDIItTsDA>.

2018 Jul 7 K I N @KinMarie\_ Twitter <https://archive.is/7hIQi> Y'all are too young to be this classist. Calling niggas broke at 21 like they're suppose to magically have the resources and opportunities you do. Twitter really makes y'all **talk out your neck**, but you really aren't living THAT well in real life to be talking like this.

The idiom *talk out/outside/out the side of [one's] neck* as it occurs in Native Black American Language, is a calque derived from the Continental Dutch *uit zijn nek kletsen/praten*<sup>25</sup>, of identical meaning – literally, “outside/out of/out one’s neck (to) talk/chat”.

### **Sté/Stay (Continuous Marking)**

Further study of Native Black American Language may potentially reveal a greater number of Negro Dutch – and, ultimately, Continental Dutch – lexical or syntactical artifacts. Contemporary features of Native Black American Language regarded as “new” may well likely be much older survivals of Negro Dutch language. For instance, the Native Black American continuous and habitual marker (it is more accurately described as a marker of continuousness and *persistence*) *sté* or “stay” (i.e., “stay talking”), is often reasoned to be a “new mood and aspect feature of AAVE.” (Labov 2010) However, it is quite possibly much older – more specifically, a Negro Dutch retention *adapted* into the language of the broader Native Black American population of the United States. The Continental Dutch *blijven* “stay”<sup>26</sup> serves a similar purpose in the Dutch language. Consider the following Dutch and Native Black American Language extracts and their respective glosses:

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<sup>25</sup> “Uit Zijn Nek Praten,” in *Woorden.org*, accessed September 20, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180920134402/https://www.woorden.org/spreekwoord.php?woord=uit%20zijn%20nek%20praten>.

<sup>26</sup> Prue Gargano and Fokko Veldman, “Blijven,” in *Prisma Handwoordenboek Engels-Nederlands, Nederlands-Engels* (Houten: Prisma, 2013), 1178.

“*It stay rainin.*” (Native Black American Language)

Gloss: “*It keeps on raining.*” “*It persists in raining.*” “*It persistently rains.*” “*It continues to rain.*”

“*Het blijft regenen.*” (Continental Dutch)

Gloss: “*It keeps on raining.*” “*It persists in raining.*” “*It continues to rain.*” Literally, “*It stays (to) rain.*”

“*You stay talkin shit.*” (Native Black American Language)

Gloss: “*You keep talking nonsense.*” “*You persist in talking nonsense.*” “*You persistently/continuously talk nonsense.*”

“*Ze blijft onzin praten.*” (Continental Dutch)

Gloss: “*She keeps talking nonsense.*” Literally, “*She stays nonsense (to) talk.*”

Only more research – including research of the African languages – can determine if *sté* / “stay” is a creolized Negro Dutch adaptation of the Dutch *blijven* “stay”. Further study of this phenomenon – including the geographic distribution of both, earliest citations and current-day use samples in the United States – and study of the African languages may indeed reveal a potential cognate in the African languages. Nevertheless, a Negro Dutch point of origin is quite plausible.

## **Conclusion**

Negro Dutch retentions continue to permeate the language of the Native Black American population of the United States. With recurring, iconic lexical items such as *flai/fly*, *kat/cat*, and *wak/wack*, Negro Dutch retentions feature prominently in Native Black American Language. This study highlights Negro Dutch artifacts in Native Black

American Language and demonstrates the limitations of antedating with respect to ethnic groups who are oral in culture. Recent antedating of a given lexical item frequently belies its much-older existence and currency among the Native Black American population of the United States.

The case of the Native Black American *wak/wack* effectively demonstrates why it is imperative to think beyond the common tropes of “slang”, “street talk”, criminality, social deviance, and “nonsense”/“invented words” in the study of Native Black American Language. For instance, the earliest-known published occurrences of *wak/wack* do not appear until the 1979 release of Sugar Hill Gang’s *Rapper’s Delight*, the 1980 release of Funky Four Plus One More’s *That’s the Joint!*, and the 1984 release of Run-D.M.C.’s *Rock Box*:

*“I got bodyguards, I got two big cars, that definitely ain’t the **wack** / I got a Lincoln continental and a sunroof Cadillac”* (Sugarhill Gang 1979)

*“And don’t you be swayed by the people say / That we’re the **wack** / Cause they’re playin with ya head”* (Funky Four Plus One More 1980)

*“For all you sucka emcees perpetratin a fraud / Your rhymes are cold **wack** and leave the crowd cold bored!”* (Run-D.M.C. 1984)

The earliest semantically clear/verifiable recording of the Native Black American *flai/fly* occurs in the 1940 recording *Are You Hep to the Jive (Yas, Yas)* by Cab Calloway and His Orchestra, followed by the 1941 recording *47th Street Jive* by Andy Kirk & His Clouds of Joy featuring June Richmond. (Henry’s usage, whatever semantic meaning intended, also occurs in the twentieth century.) Coincidentally, Andy Kirk’s recording is just one of the early known published citations of *kat/cat*. Further



illustrating the problematic nature of relying solely on antedating to indicate word origin, *talk out/outside/out the side of (one's) neck* apparently does not occur in published form until the year 1984. The phrase occurs over a decade later – despite its ongoing currency among Native Black Americans – in a 1998 music recording by Lauryn Hill, *Doo-Wop (That Thing)*. Interestingly – and perhaps unsurprisingly – Hill, a New Jersey native, indeed hails from the New York/New Jersey region, her family having once resided in the city of New York itself. However, the founding of New Amsterdam (what would eventually become “New York” upon seizure of the region by the British crown) and the introduction of the Dutch language to the early enslaved progenitors of the Native Black American population of the United States occurred over *three centuries before* the previously discussed 1979, 1980, 1984, and 1998 music recordings by Sugarhill Gang (1979), Funky Four Plus One More (1980), Cameo (1984), and Lauryn Hill (1998).

As it pertains to persecuted and marginalized populations who are oral in culture, published citations can be scant or non-existent, providing very little insight into the actual “birth” or original usage of a given word or idiom. It is, thus, essential that linguists and lexicographers adapt their methods to suit the historical and cultural realities of Native Black Americans – and examine Native Black American cultural artifacts with full consideration of the historical and cultural realities of this particular ethnic group.

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