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STYLES AND STEREOTYPES: THE LINGUISTIC NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY AMONG LAOTIAN AMERICAN YOUTH[1]

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Abstract

The article examines how two Laotian American teenage girls in a multiracial California high school take divergent pathways through two contrasting stereotypes of Southeast Asian Americans: The model-minority nerd and the dangerous gangster. The two girls, both first-generation immigrants, each draw on contrasting linguistic and youth-cultural practices to align themselves to some degree with one of these stereotypes while distancing themselves from the other. The absence of an ethnically marked variety of Asian American English does not prevent the construction of Asian American identities; instead, speakers make use of locally available linguistic resources in their everyday speech practices, including African American Vernacular English and youth slang, to produce linguistic and cultural styles that position them partly inside and partly outside of the school's binary black/white racial ideology. The article argues that linguistic resources need not be distinctive either between or within ethnic groups in order to produce social identities.

Keywords: Identity, Youth, Race, Gender, English, Asian Americans

1. Introduction

Within the last decade or so, an outpouring of research on East, South, and Southeast Asian immigrants to the United States and their descendants has documented the diverse experiences of the extremely varied groups assigned to the category of "Asian American." Until very recently, linguistic contributions to this scholarly undertaking primarily tended to be from the perspective either of applied linguistics or of the sociology of language, with the emphasis on acquisition of English by the immigrant generation on the one hand and maintenance and shift of the heritage language by second and later generations on the other. Despite the utility of such research, what these studies often leave out is a careful consideration of language and identity, and particularly how English may become a semiotic resource for establishing new forms of identity within the racial landscape of the United States. For Asian Americans, who in the U.S. context are racialized as nonwhite, this identity project is complicated by the need to navigate the hegemonic U.S. model of race as a dichotomy between blackness

and whiteness, a view that still holds ideological sway even in local contexts in which the available racialized positions are far more complex, such as many parts of California. Thus the construction of local Asian American identities through linguistic and other semiotic resources emerges in relation to powerful racial ideologies of dichotomous difference. At the same time, Asian Americans are also the targets of widely circulating cultural stereotypes that serve to delimit and define the racialized category to which they have been assigned. This article considers the different ways in which some Asian American youth in California use local varieties of English to negotiate ideologies of race and Asianness in the production of identity.

Research on contemporary cultural ideologies associated with Asian Americans has focused primarily on the stereotype of the model minority. In this stereotype, Asian immigrants are portrayed as hard-working entrepreneurs who achieve middle-class status without the benefit of government assistance due to the high value their culture (in the singular) places on assiduous effort. By the same token, Asian American youth, the children and grandchildren of these immigrants, are represented as mild-mannered and socially incompetent nerds with a knack for math and science whose academic success owes nothing to affirmative-action policies. Although grounded in a (more or less) positive rather than negative misrepresentation of a racialized group, the model-minority myth has been shown to promote racism both because it creates an ideological expectation that minorities can and should advance socioeconomically without assistance - a belief that is damaging to Asian and non-Asian immigrants alike - and because it ignores the fact that many Asian Americans do not fit the stereotype (Chan 1991; Wu 2001). In particular, the notion of Asian Americans as a model minority focuses on a relatively small group of middle-class Asian Americans, primarily of East and South Asian descent, to the exclusion of other Asian immigrants, especially many of those from Southeast Asia, who do not bring with them the economic and educational advantages that enable social mobility in the United States. With respect to youth, Lee (1994) points out that this ideology misses the fact that some students of Asian heritage are not academically oriented and others may not achieve academic success despite their efforts. Moreover, the supposed positive valorization of Asian Americans carries a negative social subtext. According to the stereotype, Asian Americans' intelligence and industriousness is counterbalanced by social ineptitude. The model-minority stereotype relegates Asian American youth to social marginality: Smart but uncool (see also Lee 1994).

For many Southeast Asian Americans, however, the model-minority stereotype is less often invoked than is a second cultural ideology that draws on much more familiar negative attitudes of the majority toward minority groups. This ideology positions Southeast Asian Americans as problematic immigrants who are dependent on government assistance and are the sources of an array of social ills. Young people in particular are the targets of a moral panic concerning the rise of Southeast Asian American youth gangs in the 1990s (e.g., Joe 1994; Song et al. 1992; Vigil and Yun 1990). Through these contrasting ideologies, a two-tiered racialized hierarchy of Asian Americans has developed in U.S. racial discourse. While a racial status of "honorary whiteness" is conferred - albeit ambivalently and partially - upon some middle-class Asian Americans (Tuan 1999), lower-class East and Southeast Asian Americans are often subject to the same kind of racial profiling and problematizing as are African Americans.

This article examines how two Southeast Asian American girls in a multiracial high school in California, both refugees from Laos, navigated these two contrasting racial ideologies imposed on Southeast Asian Americans by using locally available linguistic and other semiotic resources. Taking different pathways through the local racial terrain, the girls both participated in and refused the binary terms of racializing discourse in the United States. The constraints on identity imposed by the stereotypes were both reinforced by and reinforcing of local racial ideologies in which language was mapped onto race in a binary fashion. Each girl's style was produced linguistically through a positive or negative orientation to the linguistic resources of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and youth slang. Given the authority of African American youth styles in shaping youth cultures in California and elsewhere, each girl's linguistic practices affiliated her with one or the other pole of this dichotomy. However, these teenagers also maintained linguistic and cultural styles apart from either of the two locally dominant racialized groups. In this way, the girls' differently constituted identities as Laotian American negotiated rather than capitulated to the school's black/white racial dichotomy.

2. Laotian Americans: The formation of an ethnic category

Laotians are among the most recent Asian immigrants to the United States, having come as refugees along with Vietnamese and Cambodians between the 1970s and the 1990s following the overthrow of the U.S.-backed anticommunist governments of their home countries. Laotians are a minority among these immigrants: Approximately 21% of Southeast Asian refugees to the United States are from Laos, about half of whom are from highland ethnic groups such as Hmong; the largest group of refugees, roughly 66%, is Vietnamese. Many Laotian refugees spent time in United Nations-funded refugee processing centers in Thailand before being allowed to enter the United States.

Laotian Americans are not a single ethnic group but comprise the lowland Tai-Kadai groups (the largest grouping), the Austroasiatic groups in the foothills, and the Tibeto-Burman highland groups - including Hmong, Iu Mien, Lahu, and others. Because of its diversity, small size, and dispersal across the United States, the Laotian American group is less visible than its Vietnamese and Cambodian counterparts. Through secondary migration and other factors, many Laotians (like other Southeast Asian refugees) settled in California, particularly in San Diego and Orange County, the Central Valley, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Compared with East and South Asian Americans and even with some other Southeast Asian American groups, Laotian Americans suffer a number of economic and social disadvantages: According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 35% live in poverty, fewer than 6% attend college, and over half of Laotian households have no member over 14 who is fluent in English (Rumbaut 1995). In addition, Laotian Americans have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy of all Asian American youth at 19%, and the academic performance of non-Hmong Lao high-school students in California has been found to be lower than that of any other Southeast Asian group (Rumbaut 1989). These facts run counter to the model-minority stereotype, touted by researchers and the media alike to account for the academic success of Southeast Asian immigrant groups, including many Laotians, despite social and economic disadvantages (e.g., Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy 1989).

As this brief overview suggests, the labels *Asian American*, *Southeast Asian American*, and *Laotian American* erase a great deal of internal diversity. [2] Their homogenizing force not only eradicates differences in experience and situation but belies the range of ethnic options (Waters 1990) available to those who are so labeled. In making sense of how ethnicity inflects individuals' identities, then, it is necessary to look beyond group labels imposed from outside and to examine how identity is forged through socially meaningful practices. Foremost among these is language, as the most semiotically complex human activity. Through their use of language, individuals and groups may deliberately claim or repudiate a given identity (or assign or withhold an identity with respect to someone else). This sort of *identity performance* foregrounds the agentive dimension of identity construction of self and other. Alternatively, language users may establish an identity by drawing on particular linguistic structures in largely nonreflective ways based on longstanding habit. Such an *identity practice* highlights the habitual dimension of identity construction. While linguistic practice and performance are both at work in the construction of different kinds of Laotian American identity, I focus here on linguistic practice, which has been examined less often than linguistic performance in the emergent body of linguistic scholarship on Asian American identity.

3. Language, style, and Asian American identity

The use of linguistic structures to index social positioning has been termed *style* (Eckert 2000; Eckert and Rickford 2001). As an indexical process, style both creates and exploits sociolinguistic stereotypes (Ochs 1992; see also Agha 1998). The question of style is especially central in the study of youth, who within the institutional structure of the educational system often elaborate the semiotic distinctions that organize social divisions in the larger society. In addition, style offers an entrypoint into the study of Asian American language and identity, an area of research that presents difficulties for traditional sociolinguistic approaches to language and ethnicity. These approaches, which are centrally concerned with the linguistic distinctiveness of ethnic groups, are ill equipped to account for situations in which speakers' language use is not ethnically distinctive. Considering linguistic practice and performance as style enables researchers to recognize how speakers may creatively draw on the existing resources of other social groups for their own identity work.

Distinctiveness-centered models of language and ethnicity that, despite serious problems, have been widely used for the study of other ethnic groups within the United States fail outright when confronted with Asian Americans' speech practices, especially but not only those of the English-speaking second generation. Inspired by research on ethnic varieties of American English, such as AAVE and Chicano English, some researchers have investigated the question of whether Asian American speech communities likewise have developed their own varieties of English. Although a few studies have found small differences in some Asian Americans' speech compared with European Americans (Hanna 1997; Mendoza-Denton and Iwai 1993), it has generally been assumed, with good reason, that the tremendous cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity of Asian Americans precludes the formation of a distinctive "Asian American

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[2] Despite the limitations of these or any other category labels, as a deliberate act of coalition building the construction of a panethnicity across Asian (or Southeast Asian or Laotian) ethnic groups can have political advantages (Espiritu 1992). See also Reyes (this volume).

English." Typically, middle-class Asian Americans acquire the phonological and grammatical form of Standard English associated with their geographic region within the United States, unlike many middle-class African Americans and Latinos, whose Standard English may include some phonological elements associated with their ethnic communities. Given the smaller numbers of Asian Americans compared to African Americans and Latinos and their relatively greater access to the middle class, it is unsurprising that many native-born middle-class Asian Americans would speak more or less like their European American counterparts. Little attention has been paid, however, to working-class Asian Americans' language. Research on Latinos' English language use has demonstrated that Standard English is not the only available target for speakers in the first and second immigrant generations (Goldstein 1987; Wolfram 1973; Zentella 1997); both New York Puerto Ricans and California Chicanos have been found to draw on AAVE in addition to their own ethnic group's variety of English as part of their linguistic repertoires. It is plausible that working-class Asian Americans who may not have an ethnically distinctive variety of their own might similarly draw on resources from other ethnic groups with whom they have contact, but this possibility has not been explored by sociolinguists. (While it is likely that at least some Asian American groups may have developed an ethnic variety of English, such a phenomenon has not yet been documented by scholars.)

Even if the variety of English spoken by Asian Americans is not structurally distinctive from that of other ethnic groups, it may nonetheless serve as a resource for constructing social identity. This point is underscored by Mendoza-Denton and Iwai (1993), who note, in an analysis of Japanese American and European American girls' phonology, that young people's linguistic practice is not determined by ethnicity; teenagers with similar demographic backgrounds may speak differently due to different orientations to youth-cultural styles (see also Bucholtz 2002; Mendoza-Denton 1999). Such style-based identities are often shaped by ethnicity, insofar as certain styles are available to some ethnic groups but not others. This is particularly the case with AAVE, which has become increasingly used as a cross-ethnic marker of youth identity among young people of color; European Americans' use of AAVE is generally more likely to be met with suspicion or ridicule from both ingroup and outgroup members (Bucholtz 1997; Cutler 2003), unless speakers have credentials within the local speech community (Sweetland 2002).

Because Asian Americans are widely considered to lack a distinctive variety of English and because they are often viewed as primarily defined by the immigrant experience, even after several generations in the United States (Tuan 1999), research on Asian American communities' language use has been largely focused on educational and macrosociological issues regarding second language acquisition and heritage language shift, with little sustained discussion of the ways in which social identities may be intertwined with linguistic practice. Only recently has scholarship on Asian American language use turned to the question of identity (e.g., Kang and Lo under submission; Reyes 2002; for a parallel development in England, see Rampton 1995), particularly regarding the intersection of race and ethnicity with gender. Those studies that have begun to emerge in recent years offer an innovative point of departure for scholarly analysis by focusing centrally on how speakers linguistically negotiate widespread racialized and gendered ideologies about Asians and Asian Americans. Scholars have begun to document the ways in which, through the appropriation of the dialects and languages of other groups, Asian American men may challenge

stereotypical notions of their masculinity (Chun 2001) or may enter into dialogue with gender ideologies within Asian American communities (Lo 1999). Other research points to the ways that stereotyped Asian femininity may be parodied and refuted in comedic performance (Chun 2002). Such research focuses in particular on various kinds of identity performance, in which linguistic styles and their concomitant stereotypes of race and/or gender are used deliberately and artfully to produce identity effects and to counter as well as produce cultural ideologies. In addition to this valuable perspective, it is important to understand how habitual and less fully purposeful productions of language and language ideologies constitute identity practice, a more routinized form of identity work.

The connection between practice and performance as different techniques for producing identity is built into the view of identity that Kira Hall and I have formulated (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). In this approach, identity is understood as a set of relational and emergent social outcomes of ideologically shaped discourse, via both practice and performance. Styles, as well as other linguistic resources, may be put to use to establish these relations between social groups or individuals. Of particular relevance in the context of the analysis below are two identity relations: *Adequation*, or the ideological creation of an interactionally sufficient but necessarily incomplete similarity between social groups or individuals; and *distinction*, or the ideological production of social difference (see also Irvine 2001). These relations differ from the notion of distinctiveness that has influenced traditional sociolinguistic scholarship, because what counts as difference (or sameness) is determined not by researchers but in the first instance by cultural members. The research cited above demonstrates how adequation and distinction emerge as the effects of deliberate identity performance; the present article focuses instead on how these identity relations may be produced through habitual linguistic practice, via the variety of English a speaker uses every day.

4. Local identities

The data for this article come from a year-long ethnographic sociolinguistic study of a multiracial high school in the San Francisco Bay Area, which I call Bay City High School. The school was a harbinger of California's shifting racial demographics in that at the time of the study (1995-96), as now, it had no racial majority; unlike the state as a whole, however, in which whites and Latinos are the largest populations, the two largest racialized groups at Bay City High were European Americans and African Americans. Asian Americans (excluding Pacific Islanders, who were a small group at the school) constituted 10% of the student body, a figure roughly equivalent to the number of Latinos in the school's population. Within this group, there was tremendous diversity based on country of heritage, immigrant generation, social class, and youth cultural style.

My research at this school concentrated on European Americans' linguistic practices in a context in which, unlike most other parts of the United States, they were not a racial majority. However, I had opportunities to study Asian American teenagers as well both in classrooms and on the school grounds where I was a participant-observer and as part of predominantly European American friendship groups. Most of the students in such groups were middle-class, native-born, and of East Asian backgrounds, while working-class Asian American students, who were largely immigrants of

Southeast Asian descent, tended to cluster in homogeneous groupings.[3] Unlike their middle-class counterparts, who were often the only Asian members of their friendship groups, these Southeast Asian American students were highly visible as a distinctive group in part because of their recognizable clothing styles, influenced by but usually slightly different from the baggy hip-hop style associated with African American youth fashion,[4] and in part because during lunch and before and after school they congregated around a low wall in the middle of the schoolyard, an area to which one European American student gave the racist (and geographically inaccurate) label "The Great Wall of China."

In light of the school's demographics, a robust racial ideology had developed within Bay City High whereby race was organized in binary terms of black and white, which were positioned as polar opposites. Students who belonged to neither of these racialized groupings were either ideologically invisible to the dominant groups or were perceived as more or less like one group or the other. Thus although many Latino, Native American, and Asian American students at the school operated largely outside of this dichotomy, outsiders often understood them as "acting black" or "acting white." The social archetypes of these two polar categories were the gangster on the one hand and the nerd on the other. The gangster was often invoked by middle-class European American (and some Asian American) students as a menacing, violent, but culturally authoritative (i.e., "cool") figure who was racially associated with blackness and linguistically associated with AAVE, and especially with the use of African American youth slang (Bucholtz 1999a). The nerd was invoked by students of all races as a hapless, uncool, but intelligent figure who was racially associated with whiteness and linguistically associated with Standard English, and especially with a formal-register, hyperarticulated, and structurally conservative superstandard English (Bucholtz 2001). These archetypes were also tied to social-class positioning, with the gangster understood as working-class and the nerd as middle-class (regardless of the varying socioeconomic statuses of particular individuals who claimed either of these identities).

Despite similar life experiences and socioeconomic backgrounds, the two Laotian American girls discussed in this article chose different routes through this racially polarized stylistic landscape. Nikki and Ada both came to California in childhood as refugees; both their families were working-class. Yet the differences in their identities are clear even from the choice each girl made regarding her pseudonym in this study.[5] Both girls had Laotian names but opted for non-Laotian pseudonyms for the study, but the girl who adopted a gangster style and identity selected the cute and trendy name *Nikki*, while the girl who affiliated with a nerdy friendship group asked to be called by the more old-fashioned name *Ada* (with the spelling pronunciation [ædə], a characteristic nerdy practice because of the privileging of written language among nerds; see Bucholtz 1996). The linguistic data for both girls come from informal interviews, although their linguistic practices were also confirmed through participant-observation of their interactions in class and among their friends.

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[3] South Asian American students were not a large population at the school; none were members of any of the friendship groups I studied.

[4] For example, many Southeast Asian American students wore baggier jeans than other students, and unlike other groups they ironed their pants and stapled or taped the cuffs under.

[5] In addition to the speakers' names, I have changed all other identifying names and details in the transcripts and ethnographic descriptions.

4.1. *Nikki: "When you in a gang, … you have a little clique"*

Nikki was a fifteen-year-old sophomore from Laos who arrived in California around the age of five. At the time of the study she was a former member of a girl gang affiliated with the Crips, which along with the Bloods is one of the two major black gangs in California. Originally founded by African Americans in Los Angeles, both the Crips and the Bloods now have Latino, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other affiliate gangs, and both gangs have also spread to Northern California and other states. Nikki had recently chosen to be jumped out of her gang (that is, ritually beaten to symbolize the end of her membership) because of parental pressure but still hung out with her gangster friends and her boyfriend, who belonged to the male counterpart of her gang, and she maintained numerous gang practices, habitually wearing blue bandanas and clothing (the symbolic color of the Crips) and using her gang names (including "Tiny" for her small size and "Puff" for her heavy marijuana use). In other ways her baggy, oversized style of dress resembled that of many African American, Latino, and Asian American students at the high school (as well as a few European Americans; see Bucholtz 1997) who were influenced by hip hop, the dominant musical and cultural form for most students of color.

A fluent bilingual in English and Lao, Nikki was an outgoing student who readily joked with other students of many different ethnic groups and youth styles in the classroom. In fact, gang membership encouraged cross-racial friendship ties to an extent that was often rare for students who did not participate in gangs: Nikki was on friendly terms with members of Mexican American and African American Crips-affiliated youth gangs both within the school and outside of it, although she was sometimes teased by African American students for her gang identification. As an ex-gang member, she was also able to maintain friendly relations with members of the Bloods, the Crips' archrival gang.

I carried out part of my fieldwork in a yearlong health course in which Nikki was a student, and for this reason she frequently treated our interaction as a chance to display to an adult her good judgment about behaviors negatively sanctioned in the class, such as drinking, smoking, and stealing. Even so, her language did not mark the interview as formal but instead was very colloquial, with elements of nonstandard grammar and phonology throughout.

In example (1), Nikki responds to my question about whether there are any benefits associated with being in a gang; earlier in the interview she has described the problems with gang membership (see Appendix for transcription conventions):

(1)

```
1      … Nikki:      it's like,
2               when you in a gang,
3               right,
4               (.) you have a little clique,
5               your own clique,
6               right.
7      Mary:  Right.
8      Nikki: .h
```

9   And (.) let's say (.) \<voice creak\> I have funk with
             this Mexican girl,

10   (.) and she claim different colors,

11   I claim blue,

12   Mary: Um [hm.   ]

13   Nikki: [and she] claim red.

14   And that's Bloo:d and Crip.

15   (.) \<tongue click\> (.) So they're (.) against each
            other,

16   and then (.) she would try: to like have funk with me
            by .h bringing her partners <u>up</u>,

17   because she don't want to fight me,

18   like she's <u>afraid</u>,

19   or some[thing.]

20   Mary: [Ri:ght.]

21   Nikki: So: it's like backup,

22   your friend would back you up,

23   you know,

24   and be there for you.

In this example, Nikki makes clear the importance of gangs in guaranteeing support for their members in threatening situations; she noted in the same interaction that one of her gang friends had vowed to continue to look out for Nikki even though she had left the gang. Thus although Nikki was no longer an official member, she remained closely tied to her former gang both in her social networks and in her social identity.

Nikki's social identity was also evident in her speech style. As noted above, the stereotype of the gangster style at Bay City High School was closely associated with African American youth culture and language. It should be underscored, however, that this association rested on ideology rather than on any real connection between African Americans and gangs. While some black students at the school, like those of other ethnic groups, did belong to gangs, gang membership was by no means restricted to African Americans nor was it a major part of the school's black youth culture. Nevertheless, African American youth language and style heavily influenced the stylistic practices of youth gangs of all ethnicities at Bay City High, because of its cultural authority as an urban style and its close association with hip hop, an important cultural form for many urban-identified youth, including those in gangs.

Example (2) illustrates some of the linguistic practices that contributed to Nikki's style. In this example she describes to me how her parents confronted her about her gang membership during a discussion about whether she planned to attend college:

(2)

1   Nikki: \<creaky voice\> {I-} I was all telling them,

2   "I don't have much skills,"

3   you know,

4   and they was like,

5   "No:,

6   if you s<u>t</u>op whatever you <u>doing</u>,"

7		I was like,
8		"What am I <u>d</u>oing,"
9		and then she knows too.
10		.h It's like,
11		"I know what you be doing,"
12		you know,
13		"(.) bad things,"
14		right.
15		I was like,
16		"(.) O:<u>kay</u>!"
17	Mary:	hhh
18	Nikki:	And then,
19	Mary:	Wow.
20	Nikki:	Yeah,
21		and then I was like,
22		"All right Mom,
23		to make you happy,"
24		because (.) .h I could see like the expression,
25		in her face,
26	Mary:	Mm:.
27	Nikki:	Like she's <u>so</u> sad,
28	Mary:	Mm.
29	Nikki:	No,
30		I just felt like,
31		"Oh,
32		it's all my fault,"
33		.h you know,
34		

As both examples (1) and (2) indicate, Nikki's language was extensively influenced by AAVE grammar and phonology. However, like European American users of AAVE, Nikki could not be mistaken for a fluent AAVE speaker. Her speech included several grammatical characteristics of nonnative English not illustrated above, such as use of a singular verb form with a plural subject (*they goes to, um, Parkville*) and the use of idiosyncratic pluralization (*I told them, like, I have schools*). Neither of these structures is typical of AAVE as it is spoken in California. In addition, several aspects of her pronunciation were considerably different from AAVE phonology, particularly vowel quality.

But where European American teenagers who appropriate elements of AAVE in their everyday speech tend to adopt primarily phonological and lexical features and perhaps a few emblematic grammatical structures (Bucholtz 1999a; Cutler 1999), Nikki's use of AAVE features was much more far-ranging, encompassing a number of different aspects of the dialect's grammar. Some elements of her AAVE use were not distinctive to that variety but rather were general features of nonstandard American English, such as multiple negation, the use of *ain't*, and the regularization of third-person singular verbal morphology (example 1, line 17: *because she don't want to fight me*; example 2, lines 4-5: *And they was like, "No:"*). Yet in addition to these grammatical structures, Nikki made use of other patterns that have a far more restricted

distribution across varieties of American English, including some structures that have been said to be distinctive to AAVE among U.S. varieties of English, such as zero marking of the third-person singular in present-tense verbs (example 1, lines 11 and 13: *I claim blue, … and she claim red*), habitual *be* (example 2, lines 10-11: *It's like, "I know what you be doing*), and zero copula (example 1, lines 2 and 4: *When you in a gang, … you have a little <u>clique</u>*). Moreover, her pronunciation included phonological patterns that are characteristic of AAVE, such as consonant cluster simplification, postvocalic /r/ deletion, and fortition of voiced interdental fricatives; additionally, the pronunciation of *all right* as [aˑiʔt] (example 2, line 22) is typical of the speech of many African American teenagers. To be sure, Nikki's use of AAVE remained at the level of individual features rather than the acquisition of the complete linguistic system and hence would not count as fluency in the variety, yet her use of these features was much more deeply embedded into her everyday linguistic practice than for most European American users of AAVE.

Perhaps even more than her use of elements of AAVE phonology and grammar, it was Nikki's use of African American youth slang that marked her orientation to the local authority of African American youth culture. Many of the slang terms Nikki used had associations with gang life, due to the influence of African American youth culture on gang styles as well as on other youth styles, as noted above. Among the terms of this type that she used during our conversation are *partners* (pronounced [pɑʔtnəz]; see example 1, line 16) 'friends, fellow gang members', *jump out* 'ritually beat a gang member to symbolically end their gang affiliation', *dog* 'insult', *head* 'gang member', *box* 'fight', and *O.G.* (an abbreviation for *original gangster*) 'well-known or prototypical gang member'. However, many other terms came from African American youth language and culture more generally, such as *kick it* 'hang out', *player* 'sexually promiscuous person', *ride* 'car', and *clown* 'mock'. Nikki's linguistic style, coupled with her baggy style of dress, was thus clearly influenced by elements of African American youth culture.

Nikki's use of the linguistic and other stylistic resources of African American youth, however, did not index her membership in a specifically African American youth culture, but rather functioned as across-racial and cross-ethnic urban youth style that was relevant to her identity as a gang member. In this way Nikki's habitual identity practices established a relation of adequation with black youth that allowed her to interact successfully with other urban-identified teenagers of diverse races and ethnicities and to align herself with the generalized authority of African American youth culture while maintaining her own gang-affiliated identity separate from them. Indeed, her primary friendships were not with African Americans but with other Laotian Americans, particularly gang members, who did not attend Bay City High School and lived in surrounding urban working-class communities.

In addition to her friendship with these urban-oriented teenagers, Nikki also had other Laotian American friends at Bay City High who did not share her orientation to African American youth culture. These she called her "goodie friends." In describing one such friend, Pouy, to me, she remarked, "She's nice, you know, even though she's a little boring." In example (3) I ask Nikki why Pouy is boring, and she responds:

(3)

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1      Mary:  Why is she boring?
2      Nikki: Huh?
3             .h I- I mean,
4             she's like st̲udy gi:rl,
5      Mary:  [Uh huh.]
6      Nikki: [all she] do is like st̲udy,
7             talk abou-
8             .h like every time I talk to her,
9             she like,
10            (.) <tongue click> (.) <smiling quality> {"let's go}
              study,"
11            and sometime I'm sick and tired,
12            but then (.) I try not to,
13            [you know?]
14     Mary:  [Mhm.    ]
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Pouy was, in a word, nerdy: She was more interested in school than in participating in the activities of youth culture. Throughout the conversation, Nikki made clear the tension she experienced between hanging out with her cool gangster friends and with her boring but well-behaved school friends. As she remarked, a bit wistfully, of Pouy, "She could make me be a good girl, you know?" Yet her own allegiance, as displayed symbolically in her language and other semiotic resources, was to coolness as transmitted through African American youth culture.

4.2. *Ada: "And that's when we start to split"*

Like Nikki, Ada perceived gang participation and orientation to school as mutually exclusive pursuits, and like Nikki's "goodie friend" Pouy, she decided in favor of school. For Ada, the perpetuation of the model-minority stereotype was far less harmful than the very immediate dangers of gang culture. She was seventeen and a junior at the time of the study. She had been in the United States since the age of nine, having lived in a Thai refugee camp for two years and in the Philippines before immigrating to the United States. During this period she experienced a great deal of physical and emotional hardship, falling seriously ill twice and being exposed to the hazards of refugee camp life, from fire to murder.

Ada's best friend since her arrival in the United States was Bob, a middle-class European American girl who at the time of my study was a member of a small friendship network of nerdy girls (see Bucholtz 1999b). These girls embraced nerdiness as an alternative to the coolness and trendiness of the various forms of youth culture at the school. Instead of coolness, they placed high value on intelligence and humor, and they marked their rejection of coolness in many ways, including by avoiding the slang and colloquial or nonstandard English used by their cooler peers. Ada was a peripheral member of this group, largely via her friendship with Bob. She deliberately chose not to befriend other Laotian American students, whom she considered "negative" in part because of their interest in joining gangs. She had several Asian American friends, whom she had met in English as a Second Language class, but they were of Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds.

Although Ada was peripheral to Bob's friendship group at the time of the study, she had been affiliated with the group since elementary school, when she and Bob befriended two of the other members after being abandoned by their close friend Tina for a trendier set of friends. In example (4) Ada recounts the story of Tina's departure from her and Bob's group (a version of which I also heard from Bob):

(4)

1	Ada:	But then from then on me: Bob and Tina always be in s- same class,
2		till: fourth grade.
3	Mary:	Mm.
4	Ada:	And that's when we start to <u>split</u>. (1.3)
5		A:nd like Tina went hang around with like .h (0.6) uh: cool friend I guess,
6		I don't know how to say it,

When I asked Ada to explain why Tina left her and Bob, she elaborated (example 5):

(5)

1	Ada:	Our personality is like (.) totally different from Tina's.=
2		=Tina like to dress like those fancy clo:thes,
3		expensive stuff,

Most of the nerdy girls I spoke to date their dawning recognition of social hierarchy to the period around fourth grade, a time when the heterosexual marketplace emerges as the structuring force of preadolescent life (Eckert 2002). Nerd girls deliberately rejected the sharp gender differentiation that began to take place as part of the shift to adolescence, developing an alternative femininity that allowed them to be disinterested in the trappings of coolness, from fashion to language (Bucholtz 1996, 1999a, 2001, 2003). All the girls in Ada's group, including Ada, wore loose T-shirts and jeans, eschewing both the form-fitting style of popular European American girls and the extremely baggy style of girls who participated in urban-oriented youth styles originating in hip hop. Also like the other girls in her group, Ada avoided slang, producing not a single slang term throughout our entire interview. Ada's nonuse of slang could have been due less to conscious avoidance than to her relative lack of access to this symbolic resource, both as a nonnative speaker and as a participant in friendship groups in which slang was not used. In either case, in not pursuing slang as a desirable stylistic commodity as cool teenagers did, Ada signaled her nonparticipation in trendy youth culture. In this way she clearly distinguished herself from cool teenagers like Nikki.

Ada likewise aimed at a different variety of English than did Nikki. Having arrived in the United States more recently, Ada spoke a much less nativelike English, both in phonology and in grammar. Like Nikki, her phonology included pronunciations, such as extensive consonant cluster simplification and the deletion of final consonants, that are also found in AAVE (as well as many that are not). Also like Nikki, she used a number of grammatical forms that at least superficially are structurally similar to

features of AAVE, such as zero copula and habitual *be* (example 4, line 1: *But then from then on me: Bob and Tina always be in s- same class*). But while Nikki's linguistic practices were associated with AAVE due to her engagement in cultural practices influenced by African American youth culture, Ada's divergent cultural practices pointed to a different interpretation of very similar linguistic forms. With little contact with AAVE speakers (even indirectly through other Southeast Asian Americans like Nikki who did have such contact), it is unlikely that Ada's use of these forms was due to the influence of AAVE. Moreover, her grammar was strikingly nonnative, rather than nonstandard like Nikki's. In line 1 of example (4) above, she omits the determiner, a frequent pattern among nonnative speakers but rare in nonstandard varieties of English. Ada also had less than full control of complex English grammatical structures such as the conditional, as illustrated by (6), in which she discusses her best friend in Laos, whom she has not kept in touch with because she is not literate in Lao:

(6)

1	Ada:	That could have be,
2		because if I know it,
3		then I would have write and communicate with her still.
4		But I can't.

Yet this is not to say that Ada, as a less fluent speaker of English, was unable to use language semiotically as part of her speech style. For example, not all of her phonological patterns can be attributed solely to her status as a nonnative speaker. Postvocalic /r/ deletion was one of the most salient characteristics of AAVE at Bay City High School, even among nonspeakers of the variety and thus was often adopted by students like Nikki who claimed some affiliation to African American youth culture. By contrast, postvocalic /l/ deletion, which is also characteristic of AAVE, was much less salient as a social marker, and was less often and less systematically taken up by non-African American students. Like many nonnative speakers who shared her linguistic background, Ada frequently deleted postvocalic /l/; however, she tended not to delete postvocalic /r/ as often, despite the fact that postvocalic /r/ deletion is likewise characteristic of the nonnative English spoken by many Southeast Asian Americans. This practice that aligned her linguistically with the /r/-ful pronunciation of her European American friendship group and against the /r/-less pronunciation of many urban-identified cool students, while she retained deletion of postvocalic /l/, a less socially marked pronunciation. Indeed, simply by aiming for Standard English rather than another variety as a language learner, Ada semiotically marked her social identity as different from students like Nikki.

Ada's nonnative use of English made her a frequent target of humor in her friendship group of nerdy European American girls, all of whom were native speakers of Standard English. She noted in our interview that her eating style too was a source of humor for these girls, ranging from how she peeled an orange to how she used a fork. In these and other ways Ada felt alienated from the rest of the group despite her friendship with them. In particular, her commitment to school and to her responsibilities at home separated her from these middle-class girls, who were equally serious students but whose educational advantages as native speakers and economic advantages as the

children of professional parents meant that they could spend more time in leisure activities rather than studying or doing chores (examples 7 and 8):

(7)

1	Ada:	Okay,
2		I don't like to talk that much?
3	Mary:	Mm.
4	Ada:	I like to be on my own mostly,
5		when we eat lunch.
6		They just keep on talking or giggling,
7		but I'm still eating and reading and doing my other homework,

(8)

1	Ada:	Usually they watch like (.) those s- show,
2		like television show,
3		they a:ll watch together,
4		like and they talk about it the next day,
5		and I didn't have time watching the show,
6		because I was doing dishes,
7		baby sit,
8		and doing homework,
9		so (1.1) {I:} <creaky> guess I feel left out <u>that</u> part,
10	Mary:	[Mhm.]
11	Ada:	[because] I didn't watch the show,
12		I can't [comm<u>u</u>nicate]
13	Mary:	[Right.]
14	Ada:	with them that much.

Thus Ada, though associated with this group of white middle-class nerd girls, did not wholly enter into their community of practice, which was structured around verbal play and the display of intelligence, both arenas in which she was at a disadvantage as a nonfluent speaker of English. Rather, she entered into an alliance of convenience, partly because of her ties to Bob and partly as a defense against the pressure to join a gang that she would be likely to experience if she hung out with other Laotian Americans at Bay City High. Relationally, Ada's linguistic and stylistic practices did not so much establish her similarity to the nerd girls in this group as create distance between herself and other Laotian Americans who participated in gangs. That is, Ada's language use established a relation of distinction from girls like Nikki more than one of adequation with Bob and her friends.

5. Divergent styles of Laotian American identity practice

While Nikki's and Ada's ways of speaking frequently contained structural similarities, the two speech styles did not have the same semiotic value. Both girls used linguistic forms that on their face could be interpreted either as features of AAVE or as

characteristics of nonnative English. In contrast with Ada, Nikki's use of AAVE-like structures was extensive and also included general nonstandard English structures such as multiple negation, which Ada's speech lacked. In addition, Nikki's use of clearly nonnative forms was rare, while Ada regularly produced nonnative phonological and grammatical structures.

The fact that some aspects of Nikki's phonology and grammar were also characteristic of nonnative English, especially among first-generation Southeast Asian Americans, may argue against the claim that her speech was influenced by AAVE. The resemblance between structures produced by nonnative speakers and some parts of the AAVE grammatical system may be a matter of simple coincidence. However, it is precisely the ambiguity of the linguistic status of such forms that makes them available for different semiotic effects. Such ambiguity of linguistic forms shared by more than one language or variety has been termed *bivalency* by Woolard, which she defines as the "simultaneous membership of an element in more than one linguistic system" (1998: 6; see also Errington 1998). Drawing on bilinguals' use of the closely related and structurally similar languages Castilian and Catalan, Woolard demonstrates that bivalent forms may be strategically exploited for particular rhetorical effects. Although her emphasis is on the highlighting of bivalency as part of identity performances, she notes that bivalent forms may not always be used strategically. That is, when a speaker of language A uses to other speakers of language A a form that is bivalent between languages A and B, it is often heard as unambiguously A, not B, because the social distinctions indexed by these two languages are not at issue. In such situations these forms may be part of identity work, but as part of habitual identity practices rather than deliberate performances.

The same is likely to be true even when, as here, what is at issue is not the exploitation of two linguistic systems but the use of certain elements of the larger grammatical system of AAVE on the one hand and definitionally unsystematic nonnative English on the other. In Nikki's case, her fluency in English and her cultural affiliation with African American-influenced forms of youth culture together suggest that bivalent forms in her speech were heard as borrowed from AAVE. Ada's speech also contained some AAVE-like elements, but her nonfluency in English, coupled with her rejection of gang culture and her association with European American nerds, rendered these forms hearable as nonnative rather than AAVE-influenced. This analysis is supported by the fact that while other students teased Nikki for her alignment with gang style, they teased Ada for her nonnative speech and behavior. Thus members of the school were more likely to hear similar linguistic structures as the nonstandard English associated with cool and culturally authoritative youth in one instance and as the nonnative English associated with uncool and socially marginalized teenagers in the other.

The styles that Nikki and Ada aligned and disaligned with simultaneously engaged and negotiated the ethnic stereotypes imposed on Asian Americans. Both girls felt the force of the model-minority stereotype, and both experienced the pull of gang membership that is widely experienced by Southeast Asian American youth. Their stylistic choices partly acquiesced to and partly refuted the stereotypes directed at them as Laotian Americans, but they did so in contrasting ways. At the same time, participation in nerdy social networks on the one hand and in youth gangs on the other offered a significant challenge to normative gender ideologies. While both girls chose different routes through gender, they each rejected hegemonic American femininity.

Through her informal gang affiliation, Nikki could display a physical and emotional toughness that was not part of dominant feminine youth styles at the school (see also Mendoza-Denton 1996), and through nerdy styles of dress and talk Ada could avoid the cuteness and sexualization that trendy girls embraced (Bucholtz 1999b). At the same time, in navigating the stereotypes directed at them as Southeast Asian Americans, both Nikki and Ada took up identity positions that in some ways reinforced the black/white racial divide of Bay City High School, by using language and other resources to develop cultural styles that were locally racialized as prototypically black or white. Thus Asian Americans at the school could not wholly transcend the ideology of a black/white dichotomy even as their identity practices and performances challenged the binary terms in which race was cast.

6. Conclusion

This article provides one example of the diversity of Asian American language and identity despite the sharp ideological constraints imposed by the dominant racial and ethnic stereotypes of Southeast Asian Americans as either model-minority nerds or threatening gangsters. The two Laotian American girls whose language and identities are the focus of the analysis here appear on the surface to be very similar in background, yet their stylistic identity practices display their different choices in relation to these stereotypes, with Nikki positioning herself primarily within the first and Ada positioning herself primarily within the second. To be sure, such choices are not the only ones available to working-class immigrant Asian American students, but it is extremely difficult for young people to circumvent stereotypes completely; even students like Ada, who are less interested in embracing a nerd identity than in avoiding a gangster identity, cannot avoid being classified by others as nerdy, by virtue of their nonparticipation in urban youth culture. This forced choice may be less of a problem for many middle-class Asian Americans, who may adopt youth cultural styles that are not directly associated with African American youth culture but may nevertheless be considered cool. Such styles are often less accessible to working-class immigrant Asian Americans, due to their linguistic and social marginalization from the typically middle-class, U.S.-born groups that embrace these styles.

Together with other semiotic resources, differences in the two girls' language, such as use or nonuse of youth slang or of individual features of AAVE, clearly signaled their different youth cultural styles. Likewise, the structural bivalency of certain elements of their speech was disambiguated in the context of their wider cultural practices. Forms that might bear some resemblance both to features of AAVE and to structures characteristic of nonnative English functioned semiotically as unambiguous indexes of affiliation with urban youth culture (and gang culture as influenced by this broader cultural style) on the one hand or as disaffiliation with such youth culture on the other hand. While Nikki's habitual language use constituted an identity practice that aligned or adequated her with the urban youth culture in which African Americans held the highest cultural authority, Ada's own linguistic identity practices served primarily to disalign her from trendy youth culture and especially to create distinction between her and participants in gang culture such as Nikki. Although neither girl was a native speaker of English, both girls' identities were linguistically produced neither in their native language nor in an ethnically distinctive "Asian American English." Instead, both

girls positioned themselves in relation to locally available and semiotically powerful linguistic resources such as AAVE and youth slang to negotiate their identities.

Research on Asian Americans' language has often called attention to linguistic appropriation as a strategy for identity construction, perhaps because a distinctive linguistic variety is not available to Asian Americans in the same way as for African Americans or Latinos. It is for this reason that research on Asian Americans is likely to continue the ongoing challenge to traditional thinking about the relationship between language and identity, moving research away from the assumption that those who are classified as members of the same group will have a common language and a common identity. Despite the ideological force of stereotypes such as "model minorities" and "Asian gangsters," the vast diversity of Asian Americans as a panethnic category (and of ethnic subcategories such as Southeast Asian Americans and Laotian Americans) along every axis of comparison renders impossible the goal of mapping language onto groups without closely examining the social meanings of both in local contexts. The complexity of Asian Americans' identity practices and performances demand richer and more contextually nuanced theorizing of the relationship between language and identity.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

Each line represents a single intonation unit.

.	end of intonation unit; falling intonation
,	end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation
?	end of intonation unit; rising intonation
!	raised pitch throughout the intonation unit
--	self-interruption; break in the intonational unit

-	self-interruption; break in the word, sound abruptly cut off
:	length
<u>underline</u>	emphatic stress; increased amplitude; careful articulation of a segment
(.)	pause of 0.5 seconds or less
(n.n)	pause of greater than 0.5 seconds, length indicated numerically
h	exhalation (e.g., laughter, sigh); each token marks one pulse
.h	inhalation
( )	uncertain transcription
< >	transcriber comment; nonvocal noise
" "	reported speech or thought