

# Appropriation of African American slang by Asian American youth<sup>1</sup>

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This article explores the ways in which Asian American teenagers creatively appropriated two African American slang terms: *aite* and *na mean*. While some teens racialized slang as belonging to African Americans, other teens authenticated identities as slang speakers. Through close analysis of slang-in-use and particularly of the metapragmatic discussions such uses inspired, this article examines how the teens specified relationships between language, race, age, region and class, while achieving multiple social purposes, such as identifying with African Americans, marking urban youth subcultural participation, and interactionally positioning themselves and others as teachers and students of slang. As slang emerged with local linguistic capital, the teens used slang to create social boundaries not only between teens and adults, but also between each other. The discursive salience of region implicitly indexed socio-economic status and proximity to African Americans as markers that teens drew on to authenticate themselves and others as slang speakers.

KEYWORDS: Slang, Asian American, youth, African American Vernacular English, metapragmatics, indexicality

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

African Americans have contributed enormously to American English slang over the past several decades (Eble 1996). Many scholars argue that slang terms rooted in African American culture, such as *cool*, *hip* and *gig*, are taken up by mainstream Americans because non-mainstream lifestyle and speech are seen as inventive, exciting and even alluringly dangerous (Chapman 1986; Eble 1996). Yet that non-African Americans benefit from appropriating the verbal dress of a group that has been the target of much discrimination and racism in the United States is a complex subject that deserves more attention from scholars of language and ethnicity. Eble (2004) notes, 'Adopting the vocabulary of a non-mainstream culture is a way of sharing vicariously in the plusses of that culture without having to experience the minuses associated with it' (2004: 383). While non-African Americans may gain local social

prestige through peppering their speech with African American slang terms, they do so without suffering the daily experiences with discrimination that plague the lives of many African Americans.

While there has been some work examining the use of African American slang by European Americans, studies of its use by Asian Americans are extremely scarce. Analyzing how Asian Americans adopt African American slang brings a fresh perspective to this body of research because unlike European Americans, Asian Americans share racial minority status with African Americans. Yet unlike other minority groups, Asian Americans are uniquely positioned by contradicting U.S. racial ideologies which, although still largely operating along a black–white racial dichotomy, have managed to carve out positions for Asian Americans as ‘forever foreigners’ and ‘honorary whites’ (Tuan 1998). A third stereotype has emerged that positions some Asian American groups – particularly South-east Asian refugee youth – as problem minorities who have fallen prey to stereotypes traditionally assigned to African Americans (e.g. Bucholtz 2004; Lee 2001; Reyes forthcoming). Unlike middle-class European American youth, low-income South-east Asian American teenagers – like those in this study – are often positioned more closely to the African American experience based on a shared socio-economic and minority status. Asian American cross-racial – though not cross-minority – use of African American slang offers new viewpoints on the various discursive practices available to non-whites as they establish their identities relative to African American linguistic styles.

Much research on African American linguistic styles is centered on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and its complex histories, structures, uses and politics (e.g. Baugh 1983; Labov 1972; Mufwene, Rickford, Bailey and Baugh 1998). The central argument of this work is that AAVE is not ‘bad’ English; rather, AAVE has its own rule-governed system comprised of phonological, morphological, syntactic and discourse features. While varieties of Latino English have also been widely studied along similar models of AAVE research (e.g. Fought 2003; Metcalf 1979; Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia 1985), the language practices of Asian Americans have only disrupted dominant sociolinguistic paradigms that presume a kind of one-to-one mapping between a linguistically distinct form of English and a racially distinct group (Reyes and Lo 2004). Although evidence for an ‘Asian American English’ akin to AAVE or Latino English has generally been inconclusive (e.g. Hanna 1997; Mendoza-Denton and Iwai 1993; Spencer 1950; Wolfram, Christian and Hatfield 1986), this does not prevent Asian Americans from drawing on available linguistic resources to construct their identities (Bucholtz 2004). Yet borrowing linguistic resources to do identity work inevitably raises sensitive issues, particularly when speakers cross racially-defined linguistic lines to do so.

The question of how Asian Americans use AAVE features in the construction of their identities may be a question of ‘styling the other’ (Rampton 1999; see also Rampton 1995a on ‘language crossing’), which is concerned with the

'ways in which people use language and dialect in discursive practice to appropriate, explore, reproduce or challenge influential images and stereotypes of groups that they don't themselves (straightforwardly) belong to' (Rampton 1999: 421). Many scholars argue that such styling practices across racial groups are bound up with complex tensions involving *racialization* and *appropriation* (e.g. Bucholtz 2001; Hewitt 1982; Rampton 1995a). If racialization involves linking a way of speaking to a distinct racial formation, appropriation entails crossing into the linguistic variety which has been formulated as that of the racial other, and exploiting it for new uses and effects. In seeming contrast, the concept of *authentication* (Bucholtz 2003; Coupland 2001) can be used to explore the ways in which linguistic styles are discursively constituted as one's own 'authentic' speech. As part of Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) 'tactics of intersubjectivity' model through which language and identity can be examined, authentication refers to the processes by which people actively construct an identity based on ideas of genuineness or credibility. The practices of cross-racial users of AAVE who formulate AAVE as their own variety, for example, exhibit this process of authentication. In this article I consider how processes of racialization, appropriation and authentication are integral in examining the ways in which speakers actively construct their identities through discursively constituted links between linguistic styles and categories of persons.

While there is a small body of work on European Americans crossing into AAVE (e.g. Bucholtz 1997, 1999; Cutler 1999; Hatala 1976; Labov 1980; Sweetland 2002), even less exists on AAVE use by Asian Americans (but see Bucholtz 2004; Chun 2001; Lo 1999; Reyes 2002). While some European American users of AAVE are met with suspicion because of their unsystematic performance of AAVE features (e.g. Bucholtz 1997, 1999; Cutler 1999), others can be authenticated as AAVE speakers within local speech communities (e.g. Sweetland 2002). Though authenticated use of AAVE by Asian Americans has yet to be documented, its occurrence is not altogether unlikely. However, instead of passing as fluent AAVE speakers or trying to 'act black', many Asian Americans use AAVE features to lay claim to participation in an urban youth style (e.g. Bucholtz 2004; Chun 2001), much like most European Americans do (e.g. Bucholtz 1997; Cutler 1999).

As for Asians in the diaspora outside of the United States crossing into black speech styles, Rampton's (1995a) work remains a seminal account of the social meanings achieved when Asian immigrants cross into Creole, which is spoken primarily by Afro-Caribbean immigrants in England. Since youth admired Creole, which 'stood for an excitement and excellence in vernacular youth culture' (Rampton 1995b: 506), Rampton (1995a) argues that such practices closely intertwined the speakers (Punjabi youth) with what they spoke (Creole), signaling favorable evaluations of Creole. Though Asian immigrants are not the main focus of Hewitt (1986), he similarly finds that because of the prestige of British Jamaican Creole, 'Asian teenage boys were occasionally members of black friendship groups and used creole with their black friends.

Black youth culture was apparently felt to be so attractive an option for some Asian boys that they even artificially curled their hair, wore Rasta colours and attempted to “pass” for black’ (1986: 195). As is also common in the United States, both Hewitt (1986) and Rampton (1995a) find that many Asian immigrants associate with black youth culture, creating closer ties between Asian and black identities through language and other semiotic means.

Drawing on four years of ethnographic and video data at an Asian American teen video-making project, this article takes a linguistic anthropological approach to discourse analysis to explore the ways in which South-east Asian American teenagers creatively appropriated two African American slang terms: *aite* (‘all right’) and *na mean* (‘do you know what I mean?’).<sup>2</sup> These two slang expressions, discussed in further detail below, were chosen as the focus of this study because they were frequently used and discussed by the teens, and because they are commonly perceived as emerging from African American culture. Yet while some teens racialized slang as belonging to African Americans, other teens authenticated identities as slang speakers. Through close analysis of slang-in-use and particularly of the metapragmatic discussions such uses inspired, this article examines how the teens specified relationships between language, race, age, region and class, while achieving multiple social purposes, such as identifying with African Americans, marking urban youth subcultural participation, and interactionally positioning themselves and others as teachers and students of slang. As slang emerged with local linguistic capital, the teens used slang to create boundaries not only between teens and adults, but also between each other. Furthermore, the discursive salience of region implicitly indexed socio-economic status and proximity to African Americans as markers that teens drew on to authenticate themselves and others as slang speakers. By examining the ways in which Asian American youth appropriated African American slang, this article offers new perspectives on the discursive practices available to non-black yet also non-white speakers as they construct their identities relative to African American styles.

## 2. METAPRAGMATICS AND INDEXICALITY OF SLANG-IN-USE

Eble (1996) describes slang as ‘an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large’ (1996: 11). Since non-mainstream culture and music are particularly influential in setting trends, young people, especially, adopt slang created by African Americans who dominate the entertainment world (Chapman 1986). As slang is associated with signaling coolness and engagement in youth culture, it has also been viewed as signifying resistance to established structures of power. Sledd (1965), for example, states that ‘to use slang is to *deny allegiance* to the

existing order' (1965: 699). Yet slang does not always mark resistance nor does such resistance always manifest itself in a binary division between 'society' and 'anti-society' (Halliday 1976). Using slang to divide youth identities is oftentimes more important to adolescents than using slang to separate youth subcultures from the dominant mainstream (Bucholtz 2001).

While slang is commonly understood as ephemeral and informal vocabulary, researchers have focused more on identifying slang by its effects, rather than by its form or meanings (Eble 2004). Given this focus on communicative effect, which is contingent on multiple contextual factors in any interactional instance of slang use, there is no precise formula for knowing if a particular term or phrase qualifies as slang. Thus rather than marking a clear lexical territory, slang describes a fluid range of words and expressions that locates its users within some social terrain. Similar to how the concept of 'style' has been approached by many sociolinguists (e.g. Bell 1984; Coupland 1985, 2001; Eckert and Rickford 2001), slang should not be defined by its internal inventory, but by how principles of differentiation organize the relationships and distinctiveness between slang and its alternatives (cf. Irvine 2001). This article is thus primarily concerned with how slang emerges within a contrastive system of discursive options and produces various social meanings and effects linked to issues of race, appropriation, and authentication.

Although work on slang has emerged over the past few decades, only a small number of studies have moved beyond methodological approaches that rely almost exclusively on questionnaires and elicited definitions of slang terms. Yet the process of construing the effects of slang should be less interested in the actual slang terms themselves, and more interested in how slang emerges in interaction. By relying on reports of slang usage rather than analyzing slang use, researchers may be accessing *ideologies* of slang but not the *practices* of slang (Bucholtz 2001). As researchers move slang-in-use to the center of inquiry, they may discover implicit discursive strategies that construct additional meanings and functions of slang that are missed by more traditional approaches that rely solely on slang definitions at face value.

Such examinations of how slang emerges in interaction can access native metapragmatic stereotypes about slang (Agha 1998, 2001). That is, researchers can examine the details of interaction to discover the stereotypes that are invoked and linked to the use of slang in particular interactional contexts. These stereotypes emerge through denotationally explicit and implicit metapragmatic evaluations (Silverstein 1976, 1993). That is, sometimes the stereotypes are stated explicitly by interactants and sometimes they are accomplished implicitly through linguistic patterns that reveal the subtle meanings and evaluations that participants construct for slang.

To decipher the metapragmatics of slang, researchers can analyze indexical patterns in interaction. Although the literal meaning of a slang term is somewhat stable, its indexical value is not nearly as fixed. One referential value of

the slang term *cool*, for example, is basically 'good', an adjective that indicates a positive assessment of some entity or practice. How the use of *cool* is indexical of a type of personhood that is set in social and cultural relation to the speaker and audience, however, is indecipherable without appeal to the situation of utterance. Like pronominal indexicals, such as 'they' and 'we', whose meanings are reliant on their occasion of use, slang terms also rely partly on surrounding context for their meaningfulness, while making salient particular aspects of context (Benveniste 1971[1954]; Peirce 1932; Silverstein 1976). For example, while uttering *cool* can signal participation in youth culture when used casually by a teenager, it can conversely signal exclusion from youth culture when used awkwardly by an adult.

Thus, slang can achieve multiple meanings and effects depending on contextual factors, such as who utters it, who is listening, in what situations, for what purposes, and so on. In this article I analyze how the Asian American teens used African American slang, a practice through which indexical links may run wild, possibly functioning to reproduce, challenge or redefine the social and interactional effects of slang. Coupling ethnographic data of participant perspectives with the close analysis of indexical patterns in interaction, I examine the implicit meanings and effects that are most likely achieved through the use of slang.

### 3. SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

This article is part of a four-year (1999–2002) ethnographic and discourse analytic study of an Asian American teen video-making project at the Asian Arts Initiative, a community arts organization located near Philadelphia's Chinatown.<sup>3</sup> This project, which engaged a new group of about 15 teenagers each year, met weekly from February to June. Teens, with the help of adult artists and volunteers, critically discussed issues relevant to their lives and communities, created a script based out of these discussions, then filmed and edited a 15-minute video that reflected their real-life experiences and perspectives. These videos were then screened at conferences, film festivals, community organizations, and schools. Over the years I was a volunteer and coordinator of the video-making project, and also a staff member of the Asian Arts Initiative. Data collection methods included participant observation, fieldnotes, interviews, and audio and video recording of interactions at project sessions and video screenings.

Most of the teens and their families immigrated from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to poor urban neighborhoods in Philadelphia. While the majority of teens were second generation, meaning they were American-born to foreign-born parents, the rest of the teens would be considered '1.5 generation' (Rumbaut and Ima 1988), as they were born in South-east Asian countries or in refugee camps or processing centers in Thailand or the Philippines then

immigrated to the United States before adolescence, and in most cases before the age of five. According to the 'segmented assimilation' model by Portes and Zhou (1993), rather than assimilating to the dominant white majority in the United States, several teens in this study were traveling the second trajectory: acculturation to socially and economically marginalized minority communities. Like many immigrant minorities settling in poor urban areas across the United States, most of the teens at the video-making project identified more with the experiences of low-income African Americans than with those of the white mainstream. Since their neighborhoods and schools were multi-ethnic though predominantly African American, the Asian American teens had more contact with African Americans than European Americans. Participating heavily in hip hop culture, the vast majority of teens wore clothing, accessories, make-up and hair styles popular among African American youth, and many of the male teens practiced breakdancing, graffiti art, spinning records, rapping and R&B singing at the video-making project and in their neighborhoods.

Not only did several teens embrace social practices linked to African Americans in the formation of their identities, they also incorporated linguistic features linked to African Americans in their speech. In discourse excerpts taken from Reyes (2002, 2004) and from this article, the teens produced the following linguistic features often said to be restricted to AAVE: copula ellipsis (e.g. 'yo yo he Cambó', 'it like', 'you still Philly', 'they coming up'); absence of third person present tense (e.g. 'he know how to protect himself', 'he try to come', 'she look kinda *aite*'); and negative concord (e.g., 'they don't know nothing', 'you don't got no problem'). Although it may be the case that a few teens spoke AAVE systematically, it is more accurate to characterize the speech of the majority of the teens as a hybrid variety that frequently incorporated features of AAVE as well as features of Mainstream American English (MAE) and of Vietnamese, Khmer (Cambodian), Lao or other home languages of the teens.

The teens who did not take on lifestyles and speech practices associated with African American urban youth culture tended to be those not residing in poor neighborhoods, but in working-class or middle-class areas predominated by European Americans. These teens were also the ones who tended to be ridiculed – or at the very least socially marked – for their self- or other-identified incompetence in slang.

#### 4. AITE AND NA MEAN

Through morphological processes of word formation, the phrases 'all right' and 'do you know what I mean?' produce, respectively, the slang expressions, *aite* and *na mean*. In conjunction with phonological modifications, word blending forms *aite* [a'i?t] (also spelled, for example, 'aight', 'aiight', the latter iconically orthographizing vowel lengthening), and word blending and clipping form *na mean* [naʔmi?n] or [njaʔmi?n] (also spelled, for example, 'nya mean', 'nameen'). Similar to the various functions of the expressions 'all right' and 'do you know

what I mean?' in MAE, *aite* was often used by the teens as an adjective (e.g. 'she look kinda *aite*'), while both *aite* and *na mean* were frequently used as discourse markers drawing interactants into seemingly shared meanings and stances by, for example, seeking agreement, comprehension or attention (for example: 'I got this idea, *aite*?'; 'it's just run down, *na mean*?') (cf. Schiffrin 1987). *Aite* and *na mean* are commonly recognized as having emerged from African American culture in the past decade or so, and are often still considered to be spoken primarily by African Americans. Yet any potential racial marking of these slang expressions relies less on their pragmatic function and more on their phonetic contour and contextual placement, as will be shown below.

I argue that *aite* and *na mean* are slang terms – and not simply phonological variants or pragmatic particles – since they constitute alternatives to the conventional expressions 'all right' and 'do you know what I mean?'. That is, *aite* and *na mean* are often deliberately chosen to send social signals: for example, to convey an informal or flippant attitude or to identify with a trend or social group. A similar logic supports the view of *diss* 'disrespect' as a slang expression as well: though some might argue that *diss* – as well as *aite* and *na mean* – are merely clipped words, Eble (2004) recognizes *diss* as a slang term because of its social force.

Over all four years of the video-making project, several teens frequently used *aite* and *na mean*, among other African American slang expressions. Anh (Vietnamese-Cambodian-Chinese American female), Sokla and Bao (Cambodian American males) for example, regularly said *aite* and *na mean* in everyday interaction.<sup>4</sup> There were some teens, however, who rarely used these slang terms. These teens typically lived in predominantly white, middle-class neighborhoods on the outskirts of urban Philadelphia. Anh, Sokla, Bao and several others who habitually used *aite* and *na mean* resided in poor neighborhoods in South Philadelphia with large African American populations.

Yet often Anh, Sokla and Bao's performances of slang were linguistically marked. For example, as Sokla was preparing to appear on camera moments before a video shoot, he repeated *na mean* numerous times before the camera rolled, as if he needed to practice his delivery of this slang phrase. Likewise, Anh sometimes paused before she said *na mean*; and a few times Anh said 'all right, *aite*' as if repairing 'all right' by immediately following it with *aite*. These teens may have been deliberately trying to speak African American slang, and thus deliberately trying to display a self-image that linked themselves more closely to African American culture or urban youth identity (cf. Eble 2004). Thus African American-inspired youth culture emerged with local prestige as many teens admired and aspired to it through their linguistic choices, as well as through their music, clothing and other lifestyle practices. Yet by rehearsing African American slang and hesitating before speaking it, some teens constructed slang as a more forced aspect of their speech repertoires.

## 5. RACIALIZATION OF SLANG

These next few sections analyze how the teens racialized slang or authenticated identities as slang speakers. This first discourse excerpt from a project session of the video-making project in 2002 reveals how the Asian American teens directly linked 'slang' to 'ghettoness', and later racialized the use of slang as 'black' speech. In this interaction, Macy (Vietnamese American female) is trying to teach Will (Chinese American male) how to speak slang, specifically the phrase *na mean*. Anh (Vietnamese-Cambodian-Chinese American female) and Van (Vietnamese American female) also enter the conversation.

### Excerpt 1<sup>5</sup>

- 1 Macy: say na mean (.)Will [come on  
 2 Van: [I can't talk slang  
 3 Macy: you can't?  
 4 Will: what's slang  
 5 Anh: [slang  
 6 Macy: [sla::ng  
 7 Will: oh what's slang oh- oh sla::ng  
 8 Van: except if I'm really mad  
 9 Will: [na mean (.) na mean  
 10 Macy: [hmm hmm hmm the ghettoness comes out  
 11 Van: heh heh yes heh heh

In this interaction slang becomes metapragmatically equated with anger and ghettoness while a social boundary based on slang competency is constructed to set Van and Will apart from Macy and Anh. Van, who 'can't talk slang' (line 2), and Will, who asks 'what's slang?' (line 4) stand in contrast to both Macy, who models *na mean* for Will (line 1), and Anh, who responds in unison with Macy by repeating the word 'slang' (lines 5 and 6) as if in disbelief that Will does not even know the term. Van goes on to say that she can talk slang but only if she is 'really mad' (line 8). Macy, then, explicitly links speaking slang to 'ghettoness' (line 10), which like *na mean*, is another slang term popularized by African American culture.<sup>6</sup>

### 5.1 Dual indexicality

Two weeks later, I asked Van what she meant when she said that she only speaks slang when she is angry. Van said that when she is angry, she wants to be more 'scary' or 'mean'. She then said:

### Excerpt 2

- 12 Van: it makes me feel °black°, or at least South Philly

Taking excerpts (1) and (2) together, 'slang' becomes discursively linked to being 'mad', 'ghetto', 'black' and 'South Philly'. Van lowered her voice to a whisper when she said the word 'black' to me (line 12), which might indicate

that Van did not want to be overheard, as if it was embarrassing or wrong to say. Yet not only does Van racialize slang as belonging to African Americans, she also regionalizes it as South Philadelphia speech. Van, who did not live in South Philadelphia, located slang as a dialect of this area, which was largely African American. Her explicit reference to South Philadelphia elucidates that it was place of residence – but also class and race – that distinguishes the two groups of teens: slang incompetent Van and Will, who lived in middle-class neighborhoods on the outskirts of Philadelphia, and slang competent Macy and Anh, who lived in poor neighborhoods in South Philadelphia.

That slang makes Van ‘feel black’ reveals how her racialization and appropriation of slang relied on ‘dual indexicality’ (Hill 1995; Ochs 1990). By using slang to directly index herself as tough, Van reaped the benefits of the stereotype of the aggressive African American portrayed in popular culture as violent, criminal and deviant (Ronkin and Karn 1999; van Dijk 1987). Although Van may draw on the stereotype of violence out of admiration, she also indirectly indexed African Americans negatively by reproducing the stereotype. Van profited from the effects of her racialized linguistic resource as she appropriated the local social capital linked to an imagined formidable African American from South Philadelphia. Yet while the linguistic appropriation allowed her to construct a tough identity for herself, it did not require Van to experience any other aspects of being African American that are lived every day (Smitherman 2000). Although such language crossing practices allow speakers to transgress fluid linguistic, ethnic and cultural boundaries, Van revealed how these practices can also reinforce social hierarchies and racial ideologies in everyday interaction (Rampton 1999).

## 5.2 *Triple indexicality*

Through racializing and appropriating slang, Van relied on dual indexicality while other teens, I argue, relied on *triple indexicality* not only to reflect positively on the borrower and negatively on the borrowee, but also to construct alliances between Asian Americans and African Americans. Chun (2001), in her study of Jin, a Korean American male who uses imagined AAVE and African American slang terms, finds three such effects. First, Jin reproduces stereotypes of hyper-heterosexual African American masculinity through his use of AAVE slang terms, such as *booty*, which emphasizes the objectification of female bodies. Second, through his appropriation of African American maleness, Jin uses AAVE to negotiate his Korean American male identity by challenging stereotypes of Asian American men as passive and sexless. Third, Jin appropriates AAVE slang terms, such as *whitey*, to criticize European American domination. This last indexical effect creates an alliance between Asian Americans and African Americans based on shared discrimination as people of color.

Like Jin, Sokla (Cambodian American male) metapragmatically constructed an explicit alliance between African Americans and Asian Americans but,

unlike Jin, the alliance only worked with a certain kind of Asian American: the Other Asian. Sokla often distinguished between what he called 'Asian Americans', such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean Americans (like Jin), and what he called the 'Other Asian', post-1975 South-east Asian refugees (like himself). Sokla identified as the Other Asian because he claimed he shared little with Asian Americans (and European Americans) because of their different political, class and immigrant histories in the United States. Rather, Sokla saw the Other Asian in a similar position as African Americans because they both struggled socio-economically and 'against white power'. He argued: 'we don't identify with Asians so we identify with blacks'. So while Jin as a Korean American was able to forge a third indexical link that allowed him to create an alliance with African Americans in certain contexts, Sokla excluded middle-class East Asian Americans, like Jin, from this right because African Americans shared a political and socio-economic history with the Other Asian, not with other Asian Americans.

Although explicitly affiliating with African Americans, Sokla had an ambiguous linguistic identification with African Americans. Sokla, like several other teens, often equated AAVE with slang, among other terms such as 'ghetto' and 'Ebonics' (cf. Sweetland 2002), which served to reduce AAVE to merely slang, while simultaneously racializing slang as African American speech. Sokla claimed that if he was not speaking Khmer, he was speaking a 'borrowed language', which to him was an AAVE-influenced American English variety. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), who assert that our folk notions create imagined links between a single language and a single identity, claim that, '[m]any communities hold stereotypes based on the idea of strict correlation between monolingual language use and univocal identity' (1985: 243). Sokla complicated this notion with his hybrid sense of identity as the Other Asian: although being Cambodian was correlated to speaking Khmer, his identification with African Americans was correlated to speaking AAVE. Yet while Sokla embraced African American social and linguistic practices, he also distanced himself through his use of words such as 'borrow'. Morgan (2001) argues that '[o]ne can be sustained within their group and represent that group, but they may have to borrow from other groups to embellish their notion of membership and coolness across groups' (2001: 2). Morgan's (2001) point about borrowing while sustaining is illustrated by Sokla, who complexified relationships between language and identity by borrowing from African Americans both to identify with African Americans and to construct and sustain his identity as the Other Asian.

Since Sokla racialized his borrowing of slang as African American speech yet affiliated with African Americans, he achieved triple indexical effects when he spoke slang. Below are three excerpts from the 1999 teen-created video in which Sokla says *na mean* as he plays a fictional character modeled largely on himself. The video, *American Sroksrei* ('sroksrei' is Khmer for 'rice paddy'), centers on the lives of three fictional South-east Asian American

teenagers: 'Roc', who recently left his gang and stopped using drugs to focus on his graffiti artwork and relationship with his straight-laced girlfriend; 'Buffy', Roc's girlfriend and aspiring poet who does not like the fact that Roc is still friends with his old gang members; and 'Azeil', an independent spirit after Buffy's heart, who sees gangs as unnecessary and finds strength instead in hip hop and breakdancing. In each excerpt below, in which Sokla is speaking as the character Azeil, is a token of *na mean* or *nya* [nja] (the shortened version of *na mean*), which are the only three instances of this slang phrase in the entire 15-minute video:

#### Excerpt 3

13 Sokla: I came from the Asian ghetto, seventh street . . . it's just,  
14 y'know, the same thing in Cambodia. it's just run down, na  
15 mean?

#### Excerpt 4

16 Sokla: it's like only a few people, the kids y'know, just like y'know  
17 just wanna try to make it, go to school in order they can get a  
18 education, and there's the other kids, those who don't want to  
19 do that, nya? they just want to get the fast money, y'know, sell  
20 drugs, stole, y'know, just hung out, did nothin'

#### Excerpt 5

21 Sokla: he try to come on to me like he's somethin', y'know, and  
22 y'know him and his crew, wha:, cause I'm just by myself you  
23 gonna try and pick on me? na mean y'know like I'll s- s-  
24 y'know I don't care to get rolled on, teach these people  
25 somethin'

Sokla uses *na mean* and *nya* when speaking of ghetto areas (lines 13–15), drug dealers (lines 19–20), thieves (line 20), laziness (line 20) and violence (lines 21–25). His use of African American slang directly indexes himself as urban, hip, cool and tough, while indirectly indexing African Americans as associated with deviant behaviors. But in addition, a third indexical effect constructs an alliance between Sokla and African Americans because by using slang, which he racialized as belonging to African Americans, Sokla revealed aspects of his life that were affiliated with African American struggles in terms of class (Sokla lived in a poor neighborhood in South Philadelphia), education (Sokla used to be suspicious of the promises of education), and life-style (Sokla used to affiliate with a gang). Choosing to bare this image in a video for public consumption, Sokla told me that he wanted to connect his life as a South-east Asian refugee to that of many African Americans in order to educate wider audiences about the struggles of growing up as a young person of color in a poor urban area.

## 6. AUTHENTICATION OF THE SLANG SPEAKER

Whereas Van and Sokla explicitly racialized slang as belonging to African Americans for dual or triple indexical effects, there were some teens who did not 'other' slang, but authenticated themselves as slang speakers. For both types of youth, slang emerged with local linguistic capital. Bourdieu (1991) argues that competence in the legitimate language functions as linguistic capital. Unlike in Bourdieu (1991), however, the legitimate language within the local setting of the video-making project emerged as slang and not as a codified, institutionalized and normalized dominant language – namely Standard English – in formal markets. But Bourdieu's (1991) concept of a legitimate language is adaptable to local linguistic markets as similar issues arise, such as the imposition of slang as the legitimate language, its unequal distribution, and the devaluation of other modes of expression (cf. Eckert 2000; Woolard 1985 on alternative markets).

### 6.1 Youth–adult divider

The adult program staff at the video-making project aimed to organize a learning space that respected and valued the local knowledge of youth (cf. Heath and McLaughlin 1993). In many ways, the adults tried to avoid replicating a teacher-centered, school-like space, and instead tried to organize cooperative learning, where small groups of teens interacted to collectively achieve instructional goals. As the curriculum was designed around what the teens themselves identified as important, youth were involved in several aspects of program development and decision-making processes. In the Asian Arts Initiative space, adults generally respected the multiple ways in which teens expressed themselves, including non-verbal activity, such as clothing and breakdancing, as well as verbal activity, such as cursing and slang.

Despite – or perhaps enabled by – the overall accepting attitude toward slang, youth often used slang to mark divisions between youth and adult identities. In these cases, instead of racializing slang as belonging to African Americans, some teens authenticated identities as slang speakers through foregrounding the function of slang as a marker of urban youth subcultural affiliation in which the teens claimed participation. This is exemplified in the following interaction, which took place during a scriptwriting session for the 2001 video, *Ba. Bay. Three*. ('ba' is Vietnamese for 'three', and 'bay' is Khmer for 'three'). The fictional story focuses on the forbidden inter-ethnic relationship between 'Moi', a Cambodian American teenage girl, and 'Hoa', a Vietnamese American teenage boy. During the scriptwriting session, the adult scriptwriting artist, Didi (Indian American female), encounters the slang word *aite* for the first time. Didi and the teen scriptwriters, Jill (Haitian-Cuban American female), Enoy (Cambodian-Chinese American female), Cindy (Chinese-Burmese American female) and Rod (Laotian American male) are writing the dialogue for Hoa, who expresses to his friend (who turns out to be Moi's brother)

that he likes Moi as she walks by. Didi's dialogue suggestion, 'she's kind of cute', is rejected by the teens who prefer that the character speak slang: 'she look kinda *aite*'.

#### Excerpt 6

- 26 Didi: ok so he- so Hoa says [she's- she's kind of cute? and then =  
 27 Jill: [ $\langle$ writing $\rangle$  still watching  
 28 Didi: =yeah still wa-  
 29 Enoy: nobody (gonna) use the word cute, it like i- i- she look kinda  
 30 aite  
 31 Didi: yeah but what word will you use  
 32 Enoy: she look kinda aite  
 33 Jill:  $\langle$ writing $\rangle$  she (.) look (.) kinda (.) aite (.) I can't spell (?)  
 34 Cindy: [hmm hmm  
 35 Enoy: [hmm hmm  
 36 Jill: that's all right (they're not gonna like this)  
 37 Rod:  $\langle$ pointing to the word 'look' that Jill wrote $\rangle$  erase this  
 38 Jill:  $\langle$ writing $\rangle$  still (walking)  
 39 Rod: she's kinda aite  
 40 Didi: she's [kinda what? (1.1)  $\langle$ leaning in to read what Jill wrote $\rangle$ =  
 41 Jill: [she look kinda aite  
 42 Didi: =aite  
 43 Enoy: [aite  
 44 Jill: [aite  
 45 Didi: oh [I ge(hh)t i(hh)t heh heh  
 46 Jill: [heh heh  
 47 Cindy: [heh heh  
 48 Jill:  $\langle$ pointing to her left with thumb, palm facing her and fingers  
 49 closed $\rangle$  they'll know what we're talking about heh heh

In this interaction, slang emerges with local linguistic capital, as Didi is set in opposition to a shared youth identity. After Didi suggests that Hoa could say the word 'cute' (line 26), Enoy explicitly rejects Didi's contribution, 'nobody (gonna) use the word cute' (line 29), then proposes that he should say *aite* instead (line 30), which is subsequently taken up by the other teens. While slang is established as the legitimate language as *aite* replaces 'cute' – an MAE word suggested by an adult – an in-group of teens against which Didi is positioned is constituted. Didi is further removed from this group of teens when she displays that she does not know the word *aite* and the teens do not facilitate her comprehension. Didi asks, 'but what word will you use' (line 31), then has to ask again, 'she's kinda what?' (line 40), as Enoy and Jill just simply repeat *aite* (lines 32, 43, 44) when they could have enunciated 'all right' to help Didi understand.<sup>7</sup>

#### 6.2 Pronominal indexicals

Accompanied by pronominal indexicals, such as 'they' and 'we', slang functions to further solidify a distinct boundary between the adult out-group and

the youth in-group. Referring to the sentence uttered by Jill, 'they'll know what we're talking about' (line 49), I argue below that 'we' indexes a group that includes only the teens in the immediate interaction, and not the adult, while 'they' indexes a group that includes only the other teens, and no adults. Thus both 'they' and 'we' constitute two groups that consist of only teens, while adults are excluded from the indexical field.

First, although 'they' has some indexical ambiguity, it becomes solidified as an index of a group that consists of only teens outside of the immediate interaction. This is because Jill accompanies the indexical 'they' with a gesture that is partly decipherable with appeal to both cotext (what is said before and after) and context (aspects of the interaction). In terms of cotext, Jill said 'they' earlier in the interaction in 'they're not going to like this' (line 36) to most likely refer to the other teens since they, not the adult staff, are in the highest position to evaluate the development of the script. In terms of context, since adult staff and other teen participants are outside of the room and in the direction in which Jill is pointing, it is possible that she is referring to both teens and adults with 'they'. However if 'they'll know what we're talking about', then 'they' must also be a group of people who understands slang. Since Didi had so much trouble understanding *aite*, she and perhaps the other adults are not included in 'they', further establishing adults as the out-group and teens as the in-group.

Moreover, I argue that Jill's use of exclusive 'we' in 'they'll know what we're talking about' (line 49) serves to further constitute a teen in-group that is set apart from an adult out-group. Although 'we' could potentially include everyone in the immediate interaction (Jill, Enoy, Cindy, Rod, Didi), it is more likely that 'we' indexes only the teens because Didi's membership in an out-group has been established through several indexical cues. Displays of incomprehension by Didi while teens engage in the production, comprehension, writing and negotiation of slang, suggest that Didi is not included in Jill's 'we'. Rather, Jill's utterance serves to further distance Didi from the group of teens. While both 'they' and 'we' assign teens to a group of authenticated users of slang, adults are constantly pushed into an out-group that lacks familiarity with youth slang, the interactionally emergent legitimate language.

### 6.3 Youth–youth divider

Not only can slang unify youth against adults like Didi, it can also create divisions of identity among youth. While many researchers note that slang can mark youth subcultural participation and resistance to power structures, few studies consider how slang can be used to divide youth identities. Yet the divisions among different groups of youth are often more relevant and meaningful to teenagers than the divisions among youth and adults (Bucholtz 2001).

Thus, I turn to a discussion of the ways in which some teens interactionally positioned themselves in opposition to other teens based on authenticated identities as slang speakers. In these interactions, slang competency was

measured less by linguistic accuracy, and more by other aspects of social identity that emerged through the interactional details of talk. That is, the teens who were authenticated and authenticated themselves as slang speakers emerged with local authority and prestige based on a poor South Philadelphia identity with close ties to African Americans. These same teens positioned themselves as slang teachers and others as their students.

The following interaction, which took place during a project session in 2002, reveals the function of slang as a divider of youth identities. Anh (Vietnamese-Cambodian-Chinese American female), Will (Chinese American male), Macy (Vietnamese American female), Chea (Cambodian-Vietnamese-Chinese American male) and Van (Vietnamese American female) are in a small group, working on the script for the 2002 video, *These Are the Days*, which is a fictional story about a teenage couple, 'JJ' and 'Nara', who break up because of pressures from friends and from JJ's past with his ex-girlfriend, 'Ling'. The following interaction begins with Anh and Will reading the parts of JJ's friends in the script. Will's performance of *na mean* invites ridicule and coaching by other teens:

#### Excerpt 7

- 50 Anh: <reading script> there's something about Ling that Nara can't  
51 be  
52 Will: <reading script> she's missing something na mean heh heh heh  
53 Anh: mm na mean? na na  
54 Will: na  
55 Anh: na mean  
56 Will: na mean  
57 Macy: na mean [you gotta say that  
58 Will: [na mean  
59 Will: na [mean  
60 Macy: [na:::  
61 Anh: na mean  
62 Will: na::: mean  
63 Van: ha ha ha ha you said na::: mean  
64 Macy: <tapping Anh on her shoulder> do you know Jen? do you  
65 know Jen Morgan?  
66 Anh: no  
67 Macy: she's so::: like- (0.8) her English is perfect, (like) really perfect  
68 and you try to teach her slang and stuff and it is so cute (1.8)  
69 <smiles>  
70 Anh: <frowning> na mean it's like trying to teach Miss Carter how  
71 to speak slang

An interactionally emergent division positions Anh, Macy and Van in one group and Will in another group based on authoritative stances toward slang. After Will reads the line in the script (line 56), Anh and then Macy start modeling *na mean* for Will and coaching him on how to say it. Macy points out the

vowel elongation that Will needs to focus on, 'na:::' (line 60). After Will tries to elongate the vowel, Van laughs and mocks Will's performance (line 63). Anh, Macy and Van emerge as slang authorities, able to judge and ridicule Will's performance of slang. Anh and Macy, in particular, emerge as authenticated slang speakers, trying to teach their student, Will, how to speak slang.

#### *6.4 Parallel denotational texts with conflicting metapragmatic commentary*

Functioning to further solidify Will as slang incompetent, Macy and Anh introduce denotational texts that run parallel to the denotational and interactional texts at hand. Denotational text is the coherent representation of content in an interaction, while interactants are positioned in socially meaningful ways in the interactional text (Silverstein 1993). Before Macy and Anh begin discussing teaching slang to other people (lines 64–71), the denotational text is emerging as a slang lesson for Will, while the interactional text is emerging with Will positioned as the student, Macy and Anh as his teachers, and Van as someone who is able to evaluate Will's progress.

But when Macy and Anh begin discussing teaching slang to Jen Morgan and Miss Carter in the middle of Will's lesson, the denotational text shifts from a slang lesson for Will to slang lessons for Jen Morgan and Miss Carter. Macy explains that her friend Jen Morgan's 'English is perfect' (line 67), and when Macy teaches her slang it is 'so cute' (line 68). As this story emerges in the middle of her slang lesson with Will, Macy may be drawing a parallel between Macy teaching Jen slang and Macy teaching Will slang. Through parallel textuality, Macy may be grouping Will with Jen as people who speak Standard English and are cute when they try to speak slang.

Anh offers another parallel denotational text but with a conflicting metapragmatic commentary. When Anh says, 'it's like trying to teach Miss Carter how to speak slang' (lines 70–71), she frowns, which suggests that the act of teaching Miss Carter slang or that Miss Carter herself is unpleasant. Miss Carter, who is a teacher at their school, may not be 'cute' like Jen. Also, Miss Carter, who is an adult like Didi and outside their social group, may present a hopeless situation where no matter how hard they try to teach her slang, she simply cannot speak it. Though Anh, like Macy, produces a denotational parallel between Anh teaching Miss Carter slang and Anh teaching Will slang, she provides a metapragmatic commentary that contradicts Macy's. That is, instead of grouping Will with cute Jen, Anh may be grouping Will with hopeless Miss Carter.

Macy and Anh, thus, produce two different denotational texts which accomplish two different interactional positions for Will. Although Anh and Macy are both teaching Will slang and both constructing and positioning Will as incompetent in slang, they draw different kinds of boundaries between youth identities. Macy's story of Jen Morgan interactionally positions Will as a Standard English speaker who is cute when he learns slang. Anh's story of

Miss Carter interactionally positions Will as a hopeless outsider of Anh's social group of slang speakers.

### 6.5 *Place as implicit index of class and race*

After the two parallel denotational texts are introduced by Macy and Anh, Will draws attention back to himself as he softly attempts to produce slang again:

#### Excerpt 8

- 72 Will: °na mean°  
 73 Anh: all right say aite  
 74 Will: aite (0.8)  
 75 Macy: aite  
 76 Anh: aite  
 77 Will: aite  
 78 Macy: you gotta say it with some pi[zzazz  
 79 Anh: [ <gazing at Chea> na mean  
 80 Chea: na mean (0.9)  
 81 Anh: <smiling and extending and bouncing left hand palm up toward  
 82 Chea while gazing at Macy then Will>  
 83 Macy: good job Chea  
 84 Anh: Chea's from South Philly of course  
 85 Will: heh I'm from North-east  
 86 Macy: yeah  
 87 Will: I'm from the suburb  
 88 Anh: I know  
 89 Will: I'm from the suburb  
 90 Macy: us South people  
 91 Will: I'm from the suburb man

As Anh and Macy continue to teach Will slang, they draw on ideologies that link slang to region which authenticates themselves and Chea as slang speakers. Considering the parallel denotational text of hopeless, out-grouped Miss Carter, Anh might be signaling her frustration with hopeless, out-grouped Will and his performance of *na mean* by moving on to *aite* (line 73). Just as they did with *na mean*, Macy and Anh provide corrective feedback to Will through modeling and coaching. Then, Anh pulls Chea into the lesson as she asks him to model *na mean* for Will (line 79). Chea complies (line 80) and receives praise from Macy (line 83) and Anh, who extends her hand proudly toward Chea (lines 81–82). Then, the connection between slang and region is made denotationally explicit. Chea is regarded as an authenticated slang speaker since he lives in 'South Philly' (line 84), which is where Anh and Macy also live (line 90), while Will lives in the North-eastern suburbs of Philadelphia (lines 85, 87, 89 and 91).

Although region is explicitly identified as the main marker dividing youth identities, socio-economic status and proximity to African Americans are implicitly indexed as additional, if not more precise, social markers of an

authenticated slang speaker (cf. Sweetland 2002). Anh, Macy and Chea live in poor neighborhoods in South Philadelphia with large African American populations, while Will lives in a suburb in North-east Philadelphia populated primarily by middle-class European Americans. Although class and race are not explicitly mentioned, they are the unmarked social factors that are implicitly linked to the salience of place in the authentication of a slang speaker. After all, it is largely socio-economic status that determines place of residence, rather than place of residence determining socio-economic status. The intricate links between place, race and class create the implicit formula that teens invoke to authenticate themselves or others as slang speakers.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This article reveals the multiple ways in which South-east Asian American teenagers invoked stereotypes linked to African American slang in the construction of their own identities. While some of the teens racialized African American slang, others authenticated identities as slang speakers. The precarious position of Asian Americans – particularly South-east Asian refugees – in U.S. ideologies of race allowed the South-east Asian American teens in this study to establish various identities in relation to African Americans and urban youth culture. As the Other Asian identity disrupted the binary positioning of Asian Americans as honorary whites or forever foreigners, the problem minority stereotype of South-east Asian refugees allowed the teens to align themselves more closely to the location of African Americans in U.S. racial discourses. Van and Sokla's slang use relied on stereotypes of African Americans in order to construct their own identities as tough, threatening and violent. Drawing on these stereotypes simultaneously aligned Van and Sokla with the problem minority stereotype of Asian Americans. Thus, rather than trying to 'act black', I argue that in these instances the teens used African American slang as a resource to fashion their own identities as the Other Asian.

Teens also used slang to signal urban youth subcultural participation by constructing divisions of identity between youth and adults and between each other. Rather than explicitly racializing *na mean* and *aite* as African American slang terms as Van and Sokla did, other teens authenticated themselves as slang speakers based on an explicit indexical link they created between slang and residence, namely South Philadelphia. Though region emerged with discursive salience, I argue that it implicitly indexed other aspects of identity – including proximity to African Americans – as markers of an authenticated slang speaker. Although accomplished more implicitly than was the case with Van and Sokla, Anh and Macy nonetheless proved that African American slang was once again critical in constructing their own Asian American urban youth identities.

By closely examining both metapragmatic discussions of slang and the emergence of slang in interaction, this article reveals the various ways in which teenagers both talked about and used slang in the making of youth identity. Traditional approaches to slang research that rely on quantitative measures to elicit definitions and ideologies of slang fail to capture how identities are constituted through often subtle and intricate discursive practices, such as dual, triple and pronominal indexicality, parallel denotational texts and implicit metapragmatic commentary. The social meanings and effects of slang are not rigidly fixed, but interactionally achieved: closely analyzing linguistic patterns revealed how slang use could be indexical of various racial, age, regional, social and class positionings depending on conversational context. Although racialization and authentication emerged as two possible orientations toward slang that allowed the Asian American teens to creatively establish affiliations with African Americans and participation in urban youth subcultural styles, slang research – as it continues to take a discourse approach – will be able to discover more ways in which slang is used in the articulation of youth identities.

## NOTES

1. This article has benefited from thoughtful comments and insights from Asif Agha, Angelica Beissel, Allan Bell, Meghan Best, Mary Bucholtz, Nikolas Coupland, Nancy Hornberger, Adrienne Lo, Pitchayapol Pongpamorn, Stanton Wortham, and two anonymous reviewers. All remaining weaknesses are my own. This work was supported in part by a Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship, a small grant from the Language in Education Division at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, and the City University of New York PSC-CUNY Research Award Program.
2. The lexicalization of these two slang terms conforms to how the teens themselves spelled them in the scripted dialogue of the videos. That teens wrote slang to represent direct speech is consistent with Eble's (1996) claim that slang 'belongs to the spoken part of language and is rarely written except in direct quotation of speech' (1996: 20).
3. The Asian Arts Initiative has requested that the name of the organization not be changed in publications resulting from this research.
4. All names used for participants in this article are pseudonyms.
5. Transcription conventions are adapted from Goodwin (1990):
 

<u>word</u>	(underline) utterance stress
word?	(question mark) rising intonation
word,	(comma) falling-rising intonation
word-	(dash) abrupt breaks or stops
word:rd	(colon) elongated vowel or consonant
°word°	(circles around word) utterance is quieter than surrounding talk
wo(hh)rd	(hh) laughter breaking into utterance
(.)	(period in parentheses) a pause of less than 0.5 seconds
(0.5)	(number in parentheses) a silence measured of 0.5 seconds or more

- [word (brackets) simultaneous talk by two or more speakers  
 [word  
 word= (equal sign) continuous talk  
 = word  
 (word) (parentheses) doubtful transcription or conjecture  
 (?) (question mark in parentheses) inaudible utterance(s)  
 ... (ellipsis) break in transcript; omitted lines  
 <word> (arrows around word) transcriber comment

6. Although *ghetto* is believed to have been derived from the Italian word 'borghetto' and used in the 17th century to indicate parts of cities where Jewish people were restricted, in the late 19th century it was appropriated in the United States to indicate crowded urban areas populated by ethnic minorities. Today, it has become redefined again by African American culture to indicate lifestyle, places, speech, dress, people and other entities that possess a quality akin to an urban, lower socio-economic and generally tacky sensibility. For example, some teens note that there are 'ghetto schools', 'ghetto friends', and 'ghetto neighborhoods'.
7. Bucholtz (1997) similarly finds that the non-African American students in her study do not facilitate their teachers' comprehension of AAVE or slang terms, while the African American students generally do. She argues that this is the case because African Americans, as racial minorities, are used to accommodating mainstream English speakers. Thus, the European American students were able to appropriate AAVE without appropriating the obligation to accommodate. The teens in this study complicate a black-white racial paradigm as Asian Americans are minorities too. Yet at least some of the teens in this study may be more like Bucholtz' European American youth considering that AAVE styles are constructed as 'borrowed' by some teens such as Van and Sokla. Moreover, in contrast to Bucholtz' school setting, the informality of the video-making project and of Didi's role as 'artist' instead of 'teacher' may have produced a lesser power differential making the teens more comfortable not accommodating.

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