Asian American Girls Who Speak African American English: A Subcultural Language Identity

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Abstract

This study focuses on language attitudes and practices of three Asian American adolescent girls who incorporate elements of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) into everyday speech. Data obtained in group interviews are analyzed for AAVE features and sociolinguistic variables to examine the connection between the subjects' language code choice and identity construction. Subjects express affinity for AAVE despite awareness of its stigma and a varying ability to codeswitch between AAVE and Standard American English. The consciously orchestrated mismatch between these girls' visible ethnic and anticipated social identities allows them to break out of the boundaries of the ascribed identity and reap the benefits of hipness, popularity, and crosscultural socialization. In this process, code choice serves as a means to gain the subcultural capital and access the desired personal power and prestige among peers.

1. Introduction

"The age of identity is upon us," wrote Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall in their seminal study of identity from the sociocultural linguistic perspective (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 608). The last 20 years have indeed seen a flourishing of studies of identity and its relationship to language. First, a *communication* perspective views identity as a performance of attitudes and beliefs recognized by a community (Lemke, 2002), one that emerges and exists only through linguistic interaction (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Discourse thus provokes, conditions, and activates various sides of an individual's social identity. Children learn to recognize linguistic markers of actions and attitudes of those around them and use these markers "to instantiate certain social activities and identities" (Ochs 2002: 113). Meanwhile, *social psychological* perspectives view identity as an individual's self-image, which combines personal and social components (group membership) with the mental capacity to categorize the other (Haarmann 1999; Liebkind 1999). Finally, the *sociological* viewpoint emphasizes the connection between the ethnicity and language within a person's social identity. If ethnicity[1] (including race in the U.S. context) offers the most common framework for constructing social identity, "language provides the most elementary means for fulfilling the task" (Haarmann 1999: 63). As such, in an ethnic group, language ensures the continuity of the group's history and culture, and reinforces the group's boundaries.

To a minority speaker of a majority language, the formation of a self-image is a challenging process layered with references to his or her ethnic background, beliefs, attitudes, and aspirations. In this process, language plays a double function of being a means of acquisition of a social identity and its outward representation. Living in a multiethnic and multidialectal society like the United States, young people are invariably exposed through their communities of practice to a variety of dialects within the dominant language. Can there be a connection between a minority teenager's choice of a particular linguistic code and his/her emerging identity?

Rampton (1995) brought to light the phenomenon of *crossing*, i.e., the temporary use of a linguistic code not traditionally associated with the speaker's community. His study of multiracial adolescents in a British working-class community showed that crossing was often emblematic of the

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[1] *Ethnicity* refers to "an individual's membership in a social group that shares a common ancestral heritage [including] the biological, cultural, social, and psychological domains of life" (Padilla 1999: 115).

development of social identity, in particular, an identity that contested racial borders and racist ideologies. One of the crossing varieties noted by Rampton was the use of elements of Creole, an Afro-Caribbean dialect of English, by non-black teenagers as a prestigious minority code, which endowed the speaker with the symbolic qualities of opposition to dominant social norms and lent power and emphasis to the speaker's message.

Illustrating the crossing phenomenon on this side of the Atlantic, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a constitutive component of African-American heritage and culture, has, at times, been adopted by members of other ethnic groups and speakers of other languages. To be exact, what passes for AAVE most of the time is not the entire AAVE dialect, but only some of its grammatical and vocabulary components. Nonetheless, this reduced version of AAVE has been appropriated by the global youth culture, making it a cross-racial and cross-ethnic linguistic marker of contemporary youth identity[2] (Alim 2009; Bucholtz 2004). Such use of AAVE has, for example, been demonstrated by Ibrahim (1999) who studied crossing among French-speaking immigrant high school boys of African descent in Canada.

Similarly, some Asian American teenagers choose to construct their identity by adopting AAVE and other elements of African American-derived hip-hop culture, including music choices, mannerisms, hairstyles, and clothes. The use of AAVE lends their public image a markedly American flavor along with the opportunity to join a distinctive teenage subculture in which class and race lines are blurred. Aligning themselves properly with the tastes of a subcultural peer group earns substantial social capital (Thornton 2005; Bourdieu 1984). In addition, in a subcultural setting, AAVE can also offer a unique linguistic voice to criticize the privileges afforded to dominant communities (Chun 2001).

Asian American youth, however, face a possibly higher challenge than any other racial minority in the U.S. in constructing a socially acceptable identity of their own. First of all, few exceptions aside, there is no distinctive Asian American dialect within the English language (Bucholtz 2004). Second, because of Asian Americans' position in the collective conscience as a 'model' minority who are given a 'surrogate white' (Park 1996) or a 'forever foreigner' (Reyes 2007) status, the very presence of AAVE in Asian American teenagers' speech may be shocking, particularly to the outsiders, i.e., Asian and non-Asian adults. Often stereotyped as "mild-mannered and socially incompetent nerds (…) [whose] intelligence and industriousness is counterbalanced by social ineptitude" (Bucholtz 2004: 128), the socially mobile Asian American high schooler is expected to speak Standard American English (SAE) or even its superstandard, overformal variety(Bucholtz 2001). In fact, a recent study of two Laotian American teenage girls (Bucholtz 2004) showed that building linguistic practices in relation to the SAE/AAVE dichotomy resulted in the construction of two widely opposing Asian American identities. The presence of contradictory elements in the formation of the Asian American identity also came to the fore in an ethnographic study of Southeast Asian American youth engaged in an afterschool video project in Philadelphia (Reyes 2007). These teens' language practices exhibited the constantly shifting reappropriation, alignment, and disassociation with the stereotypes of themselves: the traditional Asian (represented by parents and mocked through stylized use), the newly arrived immigrant, and the new, pan-ethnic Asian; as well as the African Americans among whom they lived – the latter through the use of AAVE.

High school itself is by no means a neutral linguistic environment. Adolescents are less "anchored in their social place as those younger and older than themselves" (Thornton 2005: 189). Generally free from responsibilities and identities of the work world, they choose to invest their attention, time, and available finances in leisure and play activities. At this stage of life, young people develop active memberships in peer groups acting no longer as individuals but as carriers of common characteristics of their social groups (Liebkind 1999). The development of a 'right' social identity, properly aligned with the peer group, is thereby of paramount importance. High school thus becomes not only a place to learn academic content, but also the primary setting for "accumulation of identity

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[2] Rampton himself reported a 1980s' shift to North American, rather than Caribbean cultural orientations among urban British youth of all races. Black performers' preeminence notwithstanding, "hip-hop' frame of reference was also urban American […] and it was more open to Hispanic, white and Asian participation" (Rampton 1995: 39).

resources that can instantiate larger-scale social stereotypes for gender-, class-, age-, and culture-specific identities" (Lemke 2002: 76). Proper code alignment helps achieve identification with a peer community's prestige status, values, and lifestyle; granting, at least, acceptance, and at best, popularity.

Gender differences add another variable to the teenager's choice of linguistic codes. Eckert (1997) noted that "girls in high school are more socially constrained than boys" (219). While boys obtain prestige through achievements, girls gain it through constructing and displaying the socially acceptable persona, utilizing language as a means. Eckert illustrated this phenomenon by correlating phonological variation among suburban American adolescents to gender and peer groups. Identification with desired groups' values and lifestyles, correlated to specific language practices, helped her female, rather than male, subjects to achieve the prestige status among peers.

Contemporary high school culture presents a diverse tapestry of subcultures. Engagement in this culture is signified by adoption of particular choices in, for example, lifestyle, music, and clothes, at times including, as in Eckert's study above, language practices. Teenagers of the same demographic background may join different subcultures which, in turn, will require them to speak different dialects, like the AAVE-employing gangster Nikki and the SAE-oriented nerd Ada in Bucholtz's (2004) study. Cultural sociologists Sarah Thornton, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jock Young, have provided a current framework for the study of subcultures. In analyzing adolescents' acquisition of mainstream and sub cultures, Bourdieu (1984) described *power* in society as made up of 'symbolic capital', which comes with social position and affords prestige, status, honor, respect, decision-making and other markers of distinction in social hierarchies. This symbolic capital includes two important components: *social capital*, which consists of connections between and within social networks, and *cultural capital*, i.e., knowledge and skills amassed through upbringing and education such as verbal facility, aesthetic tastes, and academic credentials. Thus, knowledge of the right culture grants acceptance in the right social in-groups.

What can familiarity with a subculture do for an adolescent? Using Thornton's (2005) terms, *subcultural capital* through the knowledge of popular tastes, styles, ritual, activity, music, etc., "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder" (186) allowing social connections with the peers who share the same tastes. 'Hipness' or 'coolness' is a form of this type of capital. Moreover, speaking the elements of a code associated with a subculture *embodies* being in the know of the subculture.

Instrumental benefits aside, the *play* element looms large in the teenagers' use of dialectal crossing. Rampton (1995) reported on jocular use of crossing of the Afro-Caribbean Creole by South Asian British youth. Bailey (2000) also offers a great example of a social identity joke played out by two Dominican-American teenagers on their classmate, a joke derived from the contrast between their being black and speaking Spanish.

Despite the flourishing of sociolinguistic research of linguistic crossing, little light has been shed on the adoption of a non-traditional code for consistent use. Furthermore, with few exceptions like Bucholtz (2004), studies of AAVE use by non-African American youth have so far focused largely on male teenagers. Additional studies in the triangle of linguistics, psychology, and sociology highlighted the interaction between socioethnic identity and language use, though often from the language policy and macro-scale sociolinguistic perspectives. This study investigates language practices and attitudes of three Asian American teenage girls who use elements of African American Vernacular English in their daily speech. Focusing on language practices at the individual level, we seek to clarify the role of linguistic code choice in the construction of social identity.

2. Study development and methodology

In recent years, a friend of the researcher, a white English teacher at a suburban Southern California high school, noticed extensive use of AAVE by her students in communicating with one another. This came as

a surprise since African Americans comprised only 14 percent of the school's student body.[3] Furthermore, African Americans constituted only 7 percent of the area population.[4]

In December 2003, the teacher helped put together a focus group of three first-generation Asian American female students from her class whose speech markedly incorporated AAVE features and who represented different levels of academic achievement. For all three informants, English was their primary language while they also spoke Khmer and Tagalog with their families. Born in the U.S., these girls attended mainstream English classes and were not part of the school's English Language Learner track.

The informant group included:
- Andrea, a 17-year-old Cambodian-American senior, high academic achievement[5]
- Lisa, a 14-year-old Filipino-American[6] freshman, medium academic achievement
- Tina, a 14-year-old freshman who identified as a Filipino-American[7], low academic achievement

We tape-recorded three group interviews with these subjects and later collected additional information individually from them to support the study.

3. Data findings

3.1. Non-standard language features of the subjects' speech

Overall, the subjects showed the adoption of a wide variety of phonological, morphosyntactic and lexical features of AAVE including those that correspond to Rickford's (1996) classification of the AAVE features.

Examples of phonological features found in the subjects' speech (Appendix 1) include (1)[8] simplification of a word-final or medial consonant cluster *e.g., girlfriend* [gɚfrɛn] or *first* [fɚ]; (2) realization of final 'ng' as 'n' *e.g., Thanksgiving* [θæŋsgivɪn]; (3a) realization of voiceless 'th' as 't' *e.g., with* [wɪt]; and (4) vocalization of 'l' after vowels *e.g., jail* [dʒɛ].

Examples of morphosyntactic AAVE features (Appendix 2) included (8a) missing/invariant copula verbs e.g., "he crazy" or "they be staring at you"; (8b) absence of third single present tense morpheme e.g., "it really depend" or "she make fun of me"; (8c) use of invariant 'be' to express habitual aspect e.g., "he be sitting there and he be acting like….."; and (10c) pleonastic pronoun e.g., "that girl, she was with him."

There was a certain inconsistency in the use of these features,[9] especially in the use of the forms of the 'be' verb (8 a/b/c). Lisa, for example, corrected herself in the same sentence, "She say I be, I'm talking ghetto." Tina, who at one point omitted the copula verb in "He crazy," in another instance kept it, "I think Kobe is innocent."[10]

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[3] The school's student population at the time was 39.3% Latino, 31.5% white, 14.3% African American, 13.4% Asian, and 1% Pacific Islander (LBUSD 2003).

[4] The city's racial makeup was 62.67% White, 7.34% Black or African American, 0.60% Native American, 13.51% Asian, 0.62% Pacific Islander, 10.10% from other races, and 5.17% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race were 22.78% of the population (U.S. Census 2000)

[5] Academic achievement of each participant was summarized by the teacher who set up the interviews and later corroborated by the students themselves.

[6] Following the U.S. Census guidelines on race, Filipino-Americans are part of the Asian American community (Barnes and Bennett 2002).

[7] Tina's mother is Filipino; her (absent) father is of African-American, Native American and Irish heritage.

[8] The feature number is per Rickford's (1996) classification table.

[9] See more in the "Codeswitching" section

[10] Also see the Codeswitching section of this article for more discussion of the individual consistency of the use of AAVE during the interviews. Since this is primarily a qualitative study of attitudes and practices, we did not quantify the use of standard vs. non-standard features in the subjects' speech.

Lastly, the girls' speech contained a few lexical borrowings from AAVE as well as ample use of the response tokens "Mmm-hmm" and "Yeah."

3.2. The role of academic achievement

Summarizing studies of urban black youth who speak AAVE, Wardhaugh (2002: 345) concluded that "the less standard [is] the variety of English spoken, the more successfully formal education appears to have been resisted." Our subjects, however, seem to show no clear correlation between academic performance and the use of AAVE. From the limited information we have from the girls' teachers, the three girls fell all along the academic spectrum: Andrea was an honors student taking Advanced Placement classes, while Lisa averaged a D, and Tina was a middle-of-the-road (B-C) student.

Andrea and Lisa stated they cared about their academic success, counter to what some people expect from girls aspiring to be popular. Andrea who was taking pre-calculus and AP English noted she planned to attend a UC next year and major in biology in preparation for medical school. Lisa, who did not know Andrea prior to the interviews, stated she wanted to follow the same example, thus also indicating her intent to be academically successful and pursue a challenging career. She also expressed concern about her grades.

Tina, on the other hand, did not seem interested in the academics. She found ninth grade to have "too much homework" and added, "It's easy. I just don't want to do it."

3.3. Patterns of socialization

Two of the subjects were elected to student government: Andrea was her class president for three years running, and Lisa was her homeroom class liaison to the student council. Their electability suggests a high degree of their acceptance and popularity among other students.

Andrea preferred to socialize among many peer groups and, despite being popular, did not see herself as part of a particular clique: "I don't really have, like, a group of friends 'cause I'm always doing something for school, like running a program. Or anything that goes on, I'm in charge of pretty much. So I don't limit myself to one group; I go around."

Lisa preferred to socialize with African American and Latino students. She brought to the interviews Monica, an African American girl with whom she had been friends since middle school[11]. Interestingly, in a parent-teacher conference, Lisa's mother confirmed that Lisa did not associate with Asian American girls because she found them "too flirty. She prefers blacks or Hispanics."

Tina's friendship networks were mostly among Filipino-American and African-American students.

Within the focus group itself, only Lisa and Tina socialized with each other.

3.4. Code choice evaluation

All three girls used elements of AAVE. At the same time, they reported their awareness that their variety of English was not considered standard and appeared to have internalized the stigma attached to it. This is not unusual: research shows that "AAVE is often equated with or called 'bad' English – even by those who strongly identify with AAVE" (Lanehart 1999: 214).

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[11] Though Monica contributed to some of the conversations, for the purposes of this study, her speech was not analyzed.

Lisa seemed confused when asked if she associated her speech with 'sounding African American', and Tina found this term too scholarly, stating, "We just kinda use the term ghetto." In Lisa's view, "I don't think that I talk ghetto, but people be saying I talk ghetto."

In fact, *ghetto* and *slang* were the words used most often by the subjects to describe their code. The meaning of the word *ghetto* in their context was double-edged, both a recognition of its negative connotation, but also a source of common bond within the group.

(1)
Interviewer:	What were you saying?
Lisa:	Oh, like it sounds ghetto.
Interviewer:	What? The slang does?
Andrea:	Mmm-hmm.
Interviewer:	Do you guys use a lot of slang?
	(Andrea, Tina and Lisa laugh)
Interviewer:	Do you think it sounds ghetto when you use slang?
Lisa:	I don't know.
Tina:	Yeah. I think it sounds just normal. That's just something I use every day. But I know how to turn it off and on. When I'm around adults, I think I speak properly.

Tina stated her admiration of the phonological features in the speech of her friend Monica that are markedly AAVE: "I love how the way she talk 'cause she say '*every*' [əri]. She doesn't say '*every*' [ɛvri]."

Furthermore, in their view, AAVE was the language of the young; it was part of being young. It seemed natural to them to incorporate it as part of their identity to project the acceptable teenage persona.

(2)
Interviewer:	What do you consider to be *normal* English for people your age?
Lisa:	How we talk.
Tina:	For me, it's however they talk. It doesn't have to be any way at all. You can just like tell if somebody's comfortable. (…) I see [language] as a way to just express yourself. You're not trying to rebel, you know? It's just you. You're just trying to live, like, in your younger days. (…) You just be you. But I don't think it's like any way to rebel or like that.
Lisa:	I think it's just normal, for like a teenager, 'cause like, it's just normal. Teenagers!

The girls agreed that conversations with adults called for a different linguistic style. Tina indicated that she valued an ability to "turn [AAVE] on and off." She added, "You could find adults also who speak just as bad English as we do. But, like we know when it's time to say, 'OK, you know, this is the time to be serious and speak proper English.'"

Tina also criticized Lisa for using the code most of the time, even in her academic writing. The girls repeatedly pointed to SAE spoken by the teachers as the normative, non-stigmatized English dialect.

(3)
Interviewer:	Who do you think speaks English very well?
Andrea:	My AP teacher. He knows a lot about the background of English, pretty much. He goes into depth with, like, Shakespeare and how that evolved into our language now. This and that.
Lisa:	You [the interviewer]. It seems like you know English well.

Thornton (2005: 186) observed nothing depletes the participant's status in a subculture more than "trying too hard" or overdoing it. Similarly, the girls we studied were watchful of the artificial use of AAVE.

(4)
Interviewer: What do you think when you hear a white person talking like they're black?
Tina: You could really tell the difference. 'Cause just like, right now, it's all just like comfortable talk. But you know, you find another person, it's like, what can you see? They be trying to talk like, 'Oh, yeah, my homies.' You know, they try to do like ... (laughter)
Lisa: Yeah!
Tina: ... really hard, it's like really obvious.

By criticizing the improper use of AAVE, they indirectly legitimized their own, bringing to mind what Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 598) define as the *relationality* principle of identity construction in discourse done through the references to genuineness and artifice. In Rampton's crossing study (1995: 129), Asian and white youths too sometimes commented on the inappropriacy of adults borrowing words from the Afro-Caribbean Creole English, a prestigious minority code, saying, "It's just not on, is it, [when my mum says 'wicked', 'hard']."

Tina also indicated their cultural sensitivity in using, more specifically, pronouncing the 'n-word': "We never pronounce 'nigg-*er*'. We say '*ah*'. And it's funny."

3.5. Cultural context of code acquisition

We asked subjects where they thought they had acquired their way of speaking. Tina commented, "I think it's mostly the environment that you grow up in. (…) I know a lot of people that are Caucasian, and they talk really black as if they're mixed with something, and it's really the environment that they're around."

It is likely they acquired some features of AAVE at school through other peers, both black and non-black. This assumption comes from the girls' self-reported socialization patterns, and supported, for example, Lisa's observed friendship with the AAVE-speaking Monica. Racially, however, their school environment was primarily white and Asian at school and Asian at home. Since African Americans constituted a small minority at their school, the African American culture could hardly be presumed dominant at the school based on the enrollment numbers alone. Then where else could these girls have learned AAVE besides their peers?

Following Cutler's (2002) finding that white hip-hoppers' exposure to AAVE "takes place principally through electronic media, such as MTV, rap music CDs and Black Entertainment Television (BET), rather than through direct face-to-face contact with native speakers," we assume that pop culture, and television in particular, provided significant input into these girls' appropriation of AAVE. In today's world, media is no longer simply a source of information and entertainment but "a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge" (Thornton 2005: 187). The importance of media consumption in the life of a contemporary teenager cannot be underestimated: "American children aged 2–17 watch an average of 25 hours of TV each week. Almost one in five (19%) watch more than 35 hours of TV each week," (Gentile & Walsh (2002: 168).

When asked specific questions about their TV preferences, the girls confirmed their exposure to the African-American culture, and, by extension, AAVE, by citing a few black entertainers and celebrities like Kobe Bryant. Of the 21 celebrities that the girls cited in their interviews, 17 were African American. Also, of the 11 shows the girls mentioned during interviews, six featured black actors, including all-black shows "The Parkers" and "The Steve Harvey Show" which use authentic AAVE, and two reality shows had ethnically diverse participants.

3.6. Codeswitching

The three girls showed variation in their codeswitching practices.

Andrea spoke Khmer at home and AAVE with her friends. Moreover, addressing an auditorium of ninth graders during a freshman orientation meeting, as witnessed by the study's host teacher, she used exclusively AAVE. Yet during Interview 1[12], Andrea spoke almost exclusively SAE. One possible interpretation might be that she used codeswitching to suit the occasion of speaking directly with a teacher and outside of her regular peer setting. Her academic success may also indicate that she is adept at accommodating teachers' expectations.

While Tina used mostly AAVE during the interviews and made no attempts to codeswitch from her everyday speech to accommodate the adult present during the interviews, she claimed to be aware and capable of codeswitching with adults. She stated that AAVE is "just something I use every day. But I know how to turn it off and on. When I'm around adults, I think I speak properly." In addition, raised by her Filipino mother, she spoke Tagalog at home.

Lisa spoke Tagalog at home as well. At school, she codeswitched between SAE and AAVE, preferring to use more SAE with teachers and AAVE with her peers when, for example, she reported to the class (taught by the host teacher) the items discussed at a student council meeting she had just attended. During the interviews, Lisa showed most variation between SAE and AAVE, possibly due to her discomfort with the context and uncertain achievement status in the company of a class president (Andrea). Also, as mentioned above, Lisa had also trouble codeswitching in writing, which she explained by saying, "I get confused."

For example, in telling a story about school, she used the expression "No, you didn't!", an AAVE variation of "How dare you!" usually told with a dramatized volume and pitch contour. Lisa, however, delivered it in a quiet voice. However, in the next sentence, her use of the expression "What?" [wə:] correctly reflected its idiomatic delivery in AAVE, both in the omission of word-final consonant and the dramatized intonation, rising sharply over the extended [ə] vowel.

4. Discussion: Identity formation and language use

The surveyed Asian American girls' incorporation of AAVE features in their speech differs from the crossing practice observed by Rampton (1995) and others in that these girls used AAVE on a daily basis and characterized such use as 'normal'.

Furthermore, unlike the Asian American teenagers in the previous studies (Reyes 2007; Bucholtz 2004; Chun 2001), these high schoolers did not use AAVE in a proto-political fashion to criticize racial privileges and ideologies through code choice. They made it clear they did not seek 'to rebel'. This important distinction is probably due to the fact that the African American presence at the high school in which this study took place was relatively small. The black-white binary obvious in the other studies' schools was replaced here by a more complex system of relationships between various racial and ethnic groups, none of which was a majority. Set in this environment, our subjects' appropriation of AAVE, just like the code choices of teenage girls in Eckert's (1997) study, appeared to be driven principally by their personal quest for power within their peer group, rather than for the purposes of the advancement of their racial or ethnic communities.

In lieu of ethnic belonging discussed below, their linguistic choice was closely interrelated with socialization and followed some typical practices through which children acquire social identities such as *modeling* which "consists of observational learning through identification with and imitation of significant others" and *feedback* which delivers "rewards and punishments that indicate the

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[12] Andrea was not present during Interviews 2 and 3.

appropriateness of various behavioral alternatives" (Padilla 1999: 115). Andrea, Lisa, and Tina appear to have modeled their use of AAVE on mass media and friendship networks, and the feedback they received from their peers was encouraging (e.g., Andrea's class presidency). Media's active role as a transmitter of a subcultural code is hardly surprising. Contemporary subculturalists note that in the post-industrial Western world, subcultures (including hip-hop) are losing their dissident edge, turning early into marketable commodities encouraged, served, and popularized by mass media.

The normative correlation of an ethnic group to an ethnic language (Haarmann 1999: 63) did not apply to our subjects. Andrea, Lisa, and Tina were neither African American nor tried to pass for being one, yet their speech could suggest the speakers' racial background. Moreover, as Asian American youth, they were expected to speak Standard American English. The resulting conflict between the ethnic component and other parts of social identity created tension – and, surprisingly, benefits. Had their social and ethnic identities matched, they would have stayed within the ascribed and limiting social boundaries, "Smart, but uncool," to borrow Bucholtz's (2004: 128) description. However, the extreme mismatch observed here allowed the subjects to break through the constraints of the racial stereotypes. Rejecting in certain situations the marginalizing use of the ascribed linguistic code (SAE) and replacing it with a code associated with the hip-hop subculture provided them with the symbolic capital necessary for affiliation with the crossracial peer community that used it (Thornton 2005; Bourdieu 1984). The linguistic capital they acquired was similar to the one accessed by the Asian American youth in Reyes's 2007 study in that it helped them disassociate themselves from other Asian American teenagers and adults (in particular, teachers).

The girls' code choice was also unconventional because AAVE, more than any other dialect of American English, has been stigmatized as a socially unacceptable code – something, we learned, the girls were well aware of. It appears that the surveyed Asian American girls felt safe in using it because of:

1. AAVE's new function as the code of a crosscultural subculture, hip-hop
2. girls' ethnic appearances as evidence of their use of AAVE as a matter of choice, not birth
3. their ability, albeit varying, to codeswitch to SAE

Tina, Lisa, and Andrea clearly enjoyed playing their linguistic game. Their interviews were punctuated with fits of laughter. Even the potentially explosive use of the 'n'-word was diffused by treating it as being 'funny'. This reminds us of the research on the role of play in a subculture and code choice cited in the introduction (Bailey 2000; Rampton 1995).

In studying language use in classroom settings, researchers have often looked for the relationship between code choice and academic success. In this study, we too attempted to look at the academic achievements and aspirations of our subjects; however, those attitudes seemed to take a back seat to how the girls' code choice fit into their concepts of socialization. Echoing Lemke's (2002) ideas, school, to our subjects, seemed to serve primarily as an arena of identity development and performance, rather than a place of formal learning and upward mobility.

Identity is a fluid, dynamic phenomenon. Our subjects developed multiple social identities using language in sophisticated ways to instantiate and distinguish them. Even in the brief encounters with these girls, we could see how their code choice indexed their social identities as family members (home languages), students confirming to the school's academic code standard (SAE), and young adults seeking to socialize cross-culturally in their peer setting (AAVE). Consistent with previous research in social psychology, the study subjects used the code not only to communicate with the members of their preferred social in-group, but also as a boundary to exclude the out-group members.

5. Conclusions

The surveyed Asian American girls' use of AAVE features in their speech originated primarily in the social processes surrounding the identity formation in adolescence. Like other teenagers, these girls developed their social personae through adding new elements to their identities, not simply rearranging the old ones. Concerned with power and status within their peer community, they appropriated the

linguistic code that helped them to index their membership in the subculture of their choice. The advantages of using AAVE as a subcultural lingua franca appeared to outweigh the stigma attached to it. In addition, these girls retained other linguistic codes, such as SAE and their home languages, and codeswitched between them depending on the social context. It must be noted though that both the patterns of appropriation of AAVE features as well as the ability to codeswitch varied widely among the subjects.

Contrary to a public stereotype, AAVE is not the language of the outsiders in the high school culture: the two subjects' participation in student government points to the code's acceptability among a wide range of peers, and suggests the code's 'coolness' and 'popularity' – concepts treasured in the high school culture. These girls' markedly crosscultural socialization within the school also appeared to support their linguistic code choice. Moreover, access to crosscultural socialization via AAVE outweighed the cost of the abandonment of the ascribed Asian American identity.

To sum up, our subjects' unconventional code choice contributed to their identity construction as a means to enrich their social personae with the valuable qualities it represented and a vehicle to display them.

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Appendix 1. Examples of phonological AAVE features in the subjects' speech

Non-standard feature	#[13]	Subj.	Data
Simplification of a word-final or medial consonant cluster.	1	Andrea	*The administrators would, like, not let me have it out [of] the district at all* [ə o].
		Lisa	*She was his girlfriend* [gərfrɛn]
		Lisa	*He was talking to the blond girl first* [fər]
Realization of final 'ng' as 'n'.	2	Lisa	*They spent Thanksgiving* [θæŋsgivɪn] *together.*
Realization of voiceless 'th' as 't'	3a	Lisa	*Why won't you go with* [wɪt] *Anna?*
Vocalization of 'l' after vowels	4	Lisa	*Jail* [dʒɛ]

Appendix 2. Examples of morphosyntactic AAVE features in the subjects' speech

Feature	#	Subj.	Data
Absence of copula or auxiliary in present tense	8a	Tina	*He crazy.* *Now he being Governor.*
Absence of third person present tense morpheme 's'	8b	Tina	*It really <u>get</u> all mixed up.* *It really <u>depend</u>, 'cause…* *She <u>make</u> fun of me 'cause she <u>say</u>…* *I be any extra [in a video] that <u>have</u> to do with any fine guy.*
Use of invariant 'be' to express habitual aspect	8c	Tina	*He <u>be sitting</u> there and he <u>be acting</u> like he has a job.*
		Lisa	*She say I <u>be</u>, I'm talking ghetto.*
Pleonastic pronoun	10c	Lisa	*<u>That girl</u>, <u>she</u> was with him.*

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[13] The feature number in Rickford's (1996) "Main features of AAVE and their SE equivalents" table.