

Culture, Identity, and Asian American Teens: A School District Conference Panel Discussion

Angela Reyes

University of Pennsylvania

This paper analyzes a school district conference panel discussion to illustrate how “culture” is an interactionally emergent construct and “identity” is performatively achieved through struggles to position the self and other in socially meaningful ways. In the interaction between the panel of Asian American teens and the audience of teachers, advisors, and administrators, the term “culture” emerges as two distinct constructs. This is accomplished, in part, through emergent poetic and indexical patterning which shape categories and trajectories of personae to which speech event participants are recruited. The analysis shows how the first schema invokes culture as “historical transmission” and questions the positioning of the teen panel as authentic recipients of this transmittable essence. The second schema invokes culture as “emblem of ethnic differentiation” and allows teens to raise concerns about their own ethnic recognizability in American society. This paper argues that these two schemas of culture are not merely static essences, but dynamically linked to distinct participation frameworks which achieve particular performative effects.

Introduction

A school district conference constitutes a type of public sphere in which individuals customarily meet and engage in discussions of common interest. The workshops that take place therein provide fruitful sites for investigating how public sphere discourses “fashion specific personae and, by their very nature, bring these personae into circulation before a large audience” (Agha 1999:4). Indeed, these discourses potentially have great impact on an individual or group’s “culture” and “identity”. But how exactly do we go about investigating the inter-relations among discourse, culture and identity? This paper attempts to address this question through a linguistic anthropological approach to discourse analysis which investigates how presupposed cultural categories are mapped onto, or transformed into, that which emerges distinctively

through the details of the interaction. Thus, we must look to the microsociological order of language use.

This paper analyzes a school district conference panel discussion to illustrate how “culture” is an interactionally emergent construct and “identity” is performatively achieved through struggles to position the self and other in socially meaningful ways. In the interaction between the panel of Asian American teens and the audience of teachers, advisors, and administrators, the term “culture” emerges as two distinct constructs. This is accomplished, in part, through emergent poetic and indexical patterning which shape categories and trajectories of personae to which speech event participants are recruited. The analysis illustrates how these two schemas of culture – “culture as historical transmission” and “culture as emblem of ethnic differentiation” – are not merely static essences, but dynamically linked to distinct participation frameworks which achieve particular performative effects. Since this interactional event occurs within a public sphere, these schemas of culture and identity are brought forth into circulation, and reveal how metadiscursive macro-constructs such as “multiculturalism” and “identity politics” are played out rather vividly in micro-level interaction.

Background

The School District of Philadelphia invited a panel of Asian American teens to present a workshop at the “All Means All, Diversity and Equity Issues and Solutions in Education” school district conference in spring 2000¹. The panel was invited because the teens are engaged in an after-school videomaking project at the Asian Arts Initiative, a community arts organization in Philadelphia. For over two years, I have been conducting ethnographic research on the videomaking project and have been involved as a volunteer facilitator, coordinator and researcher. During the conference workshop, the teen-produced video was screened and then followed by a discussion. In this paper, I analyze discourse excerpts from this discussion. Although the chosen excerpts do not explicitly address videomaking nor the video itself, the screening of the video was important in that it provided the backdrop for the panel discussion. Thus, following are brief descriptions of the processes of production and consumption of the video created through the teen videomaking project.

Production

Like many other community arts organizations, the Asian Arts Initiative is grounded in the belief that political activism through the arts can lead to social change. Willis (1990) states that “[t]hrough subordinated and

¹I would like to thank the School District of Philadelphia for allowing me to identify them and the conference in this paper.

often marginalized, the many strands of the community arts movement ... share the continuing concern to democratize the arts and make them more a part of common experience" (1990:4). By fostering a sense that art belongs to everyday people and can help build a collective political and cultural voice for underrepresented populations such as Asian Americans, the Asian Arts Initiative engages teens in the art of videomaking. Each year, the after-school teen videomaking project engages a group of about twenty Asian American teens from throughout Philadelphia – mostly Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Lao – in a six-month process of scripting, shooting and editing their own group video which reflects their real-life experiences and perspectives.

The fifteen-minute video that was screened at the conference workshop is titled "American Sroksrei" ("rice paddy" or "countryside" in Khmer). The Asian Arts Initiative's video premiere postcard describes it as:

"Set against the lively backdrop of South Philadelphia, 'American Sroksrei' follows three fictional Asian high school students through their daily dilemmas: the dreams of first generation Asian American teenagers; the expectations of immigrant parents; and the pull towards gang culture and violence" (11/10/99).

"American Sroksrei" has a unique history constituted through a series of realtime discursive events. However, the emphasis in this paper is not on the video itself because although there are interactional processes which lead to its creation, we cannot say that there is an intrinsic meaning encoded in the video alone (Silverstein & Urban 1996; Willis 1990). Rather, it is only as the video is contextualized in situated events of consumption, that meanings can be made. The emphasis, therefore, is on consumption.

Consumption

Willis (1990) states that "[i]t is pointless to judge artefacts alone, outside their social relations of consumption" (1990:21, emphasis in original). Rather, we must study how meanings emerge as "media audiences play an active role in the interpretation and appropriation of media texts" (Spitulnik 1997:165). "American Sroksrei" has been screened in several locations ranging from classrooms to museums to conferences. The teen producers are often present at these screenings so that audience members have the opportunity to ask questions about media production and the issues raised in the video. Setting, participants, and other contextual features influence the ways in which the video is consumed and interpreted, leading to all different kinds of emergent and negotiated meanings.

Consumption is production. That is, through the event of consuming (e.g., reading a newspaper, watching TV), audiences are constantly in a

process of creating meanings and relationships (de Certeau 1984; Willis 1990). Likewise, as audiences consume the teen-created video at screening discussions, they create relationships with the video itself, as well as with the teen producers. These situated discursive events of consumption involve spatial configurations, roles, rituals and performances that are produced with others. Not only do these conditions shape the organization of interaction, they are also resources to be discovered, explored and exploited (Willis 1990).

The speech event

The five Asian American teens who constitute the school district conference panel all live in South Philadelphia and attend various high schools throughout Philadelphia. Although a few of the teens are of mixed ethnic heritage, they all come from homes where Khmer is spoken as the primary language. Following are brief descriptions of the speech event participants:²

Panel participants (6):

- Cham, Heng, Phila, Phal, Tha (all males except Phila)
- Angie (panel moderator from Asian Arts Initiative)

Audience participants (27):

- Anu, Grace, Mai (from Asian Arts Initiative)
- Rita (workshop facilitator and school district administrator)
- Sapna (school district administrator and member of Asian Arts Initiative)
- A, AF (female), AM (male) (other audience member(s) comprised of school district teachers, advisors, and administrators)

The 90-minute conference workshop took place on a Saturday morning in April 2000. At the front of the room were a TV/VCR, a podium, and a long table with chairs for each of the teen panelists. The audience sat in rows of chairs facing the panel. At the beginning of the session, I introduced the workshop, panelists, and the after-school teen videomaking project. Next, Mai introduced the Asian Arts Initiative followed by an ice-breaker game facilitated by Anu and Cham. Tha introduced "American Sroksrei" which was then screened and followed by a 30-minute moderated discussion. The panel discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Role-inhabitations and identity

Within the borders of formal schooling, the everyday encounters between high school students and their teachers constitute ritualized

² All names used in this paper are pseudonyms except my own, "Angie."

spatiotemporal situated events (e.g., academic lessons in the classroom) with often clearly defined and hierarchical roles (e.g., teacher-student). However, in this conference setting, the discussion between the panel of Asian American teens and the audience of teachers, advisors, and administrators may bring into play new configurations of “role-inhabitanes” (Silverstein 1998). That is, the “status” and “role” (Cicourel 1974) of “teacher-student” may be renegotiated as new role-inhabitanes such as “audience-panel”, “questioner-answerer”, “knowledge seeker-knowledge bearer” (to name just a few) are made relevant in the interaction. As participants take up these ratified role-inhabitanes, we can derive the social identities invoked, contested, and transformed.

Through public performances of video screening discussions, then, the social hierarchy is always potentially up for renegotiation. Whether existing social relations are inadvertently perpetuated or radically challenged, conversation can never be neutral. It is always tied to issues of power and identity to varying degrees. Thus, in this panel discussion, social identities and interpersonal relationships among students, teachers, advisors, and administrators may be transformed or redefined. Prior configurations of role-inhabitanes (e.g., teacher-student, audience-panel), particularly ones repeatedly achieved, may serve as metadiscursive backdrops as participants project these alignments onto this panel discussion. Yet, in the realm of social identities and relations, there are always multiple possible configurations that can emerge as participants construct, challenge and negotiate their positionings in situated events.

So it is clear that, rather than being fixed, identities can be performed to position the self in creative ways (Bauman & Briggs 1990; Butler 1990; Wortham 1994, 2001). This cannot be accomplished alone as positioning is highly contingent on setting, participants, and ratification of interlocutors. As participants in the panel discussion performatively position themselves and each other, identities become inhabited and transformations of social relations and the self may be possible. In order to systematically analyze how these social identities emerge in situated interaction, we need a mediated account of language use.

Language use

Language use is a form of social action. That is, when we speak, we not only “say something”, we most necessarily “do something”. Put another way, language use not only refers and predicates in what Jakobson (1971 [1951]) calls the “narrated event”, it also functions to interactionally align those involved in the “narrating event”. Silverstein (1993) uses the parallel terms, “denotational text” and “interactional text”, to refer to these two types of coherence that discursive interaction can be taken to manifest. The denotational text is a coherent representation of content, the “what’s being talked about.” In the interactional text, a recognizable interaction coheres

as the speaker and audience are positioned in socially meaningful ways. In a dialogic approach to language, Bakhtin (1981 [1935]) claims that denotational text and interactional text depend on each other for their meaningfulness. But how do we construe this meaning? Poetics and indexicality can help us with this question.

Poetics and indexicality

The “poetic function” of language (Jakobson 1960) refers to the metered and recurrently positioned linguistic forms – such as phonological units, words, grammatical categories, and so on – in the structure of denotational text. Poetics is “a functional principle which motivates diagrammatic value within utterances” (Agha 1997:469). Simply put, poetic patternings are constructed as interactants repeatedly mark what’s relevant to the conversation. As these linguistic forms are recurrently positioned, metrical poetic patternings take shape. For example, in the panel discussion, the first schema of culture emerges as the poetic patterning constructs a particular movement through space that is plotted by categories to which the teens are recruited. These are both life trajectories from birthplace to current residence (e.g., “your countries” to “America”), and trajectories which link nation-states to cultural value (e.g., “Cambodian values”, “American society”). Audience members also use contrastive connectors – such as “or”, “and” and “versus” – to mark these categories in opposition to each other. Poetics, then, contributes both to the denotational text by identifying meaningful categories in the events being discussed, as well as to the interactional text by mapping speech event participants into these categories.

Poetics is also useful in mapping “indexicality” in discursive interaction. Indexicals are words, such as pronouns, which cue both text-internal “cotextual” relationships (what is said before and after) and text-external “contextual” relationships (aspects of the situation) (Silverstein 1998:270). Therefore, indexical forms rely on both surrounding cotext and context (“co(n)text”) for their meaningfulness, while making salient particular aspects of co(n)text (Benveniste 1971 [1954]; Hanks 1992; Peirce 1932; Sebeok 1990; Silverstein 1976). For example, a speaker may utter “we” to index a group that she belongs to, but how do participants know if “we” indexes a group that the interlocutor also belongs to (“inclusive-we”) or not (“exclusive-we”)? Participants can look to what is said before and after the utterance of “we” (cotext), or to groupings of participants based on gender, occupation, etc. (context). And depending on which meaning is made relevant, participants can construe the kinds of relationships being constructed among speech event participants.

This example roughly outlines the process participants undergo when making sense of indexical ambiguity. As such, indexical meaning can be achieved more easily in some conversations but not in others. This problem is only exacerbated by the indeterminacy of context (Silverstein 1992).

That is, context can potentially include almost anything in the universe – from the speaker’s ethnicity to the weather outside – as long as participants themselves orient to these aspects. Thus, a mediated account of language use which relies on indexical patterns to collectively identify the meaningful aspects of context (and cotext) can assist participants as they construe meaning in conversation.

In her study of teacher-student conversations about jail, Rymes (1996) emphasizes how indexical forms are important resources that participants draw on to establish momentary alignments in interaction. In particular, she looks at pronouns which, like other indexicals, draw on surrounding co(n)text to construct their meaning. In the analysis of this panel discussion, the second schema of culture emerges as participants use pronouns such as “us” and “them”, as well as non-pronominal indexicals such as “Cambodians” and “people” to create groups and draw boundaries between them. Speech event participants, then, are recruited to these indexically invoked categories. This process contributes to the interactional positionings among individuals and groups of people, including the panel and audience.

Participation frameworks

Both poetics and indexicality contribute to our construal of denotational and interactional textuality as the two schemas of culture emerge in the panel discussion. As it turns out, these schemas of culture are closely linked to “participation frameworks” (Goffman 1981). I use this term to include how participation is arranged in both the denotational text and interactional text. That is, who is interacting with whom in the events being discussed, as well as who is interacting with whom in the actual speech event, respectively. As the characters and events in the denotational text shift, so do the positionings of speech event participants in the interactional text. These shifts not only correspond to each other, but also with the two schemas of culture. Moving on to the analysis, we see how these two schemas of culture emerge through poetics and indexicality, and systematically relate to participation frameworks. In the conclusion, I will address why such shifts may occur.

Culture as “historical transmission”: The first schema of culture

About fifteen minutes into the panel discussion, the first schema of culture emerges. Prior to this excerpt, teens were describing how boys and girls in their families are treated differently, and how the video addresses these concerns. Notice, then, that before the following excerpt, the participation framework in the denotational text involved teens interacting with family, home, parents and siblings.³

³ Transcript conventions are located in Appendix A.

- 346 AF3: what happens to families as- if- if you're in Americ- a- are y- w-
all of y- were born- in-
347 your countries? or

Both spatial and temporal dimensions are laid out as a frame by AF3. That is, we have the present tense "you're in America" (you are) and the past tense "y- were born- in- your countries," along with the spatial distinctions between "America" and "your countries." Thus, the spatiotemporal dimensions of current residence in "America" and past birthplace in "your countries" emerge as meaningful distinctions in the question of "what happens to families." It is not yet clear what kind of transformation AF3 may be constructing. It is possible that she is invoking a cultural, rather than biological, notion of family which may be concerned with the consequences of transnational migration on cultural transmission. This vertical transmission along familial lineage may be called into question, but we do not have adequate evidence to make this claim yet.

In addition, AF3 utters somewhat of an oxymoron, "born in your countries," which presupposes that even if the teens were born in America, it is not their country. This resonates with the "permanent alien" construction of Asian Americans regardless of birthplace (Lowe 1996; Takaki 1989). This issue of birthplace, then, emerges as a meaningful category in the question of "what happens to families." It also creates a boundary between a category of "your countries" and a category of "not your countries," namely the United States. The contrastive connector, "or" (line 347), provided in the text contributes to this dichotomy. Already, in such a brief utterance, we see dichotomous categories emerging which position "America" in opposition to "your countries." Next, positionings along these trajectories become inhabited as teens are recruited to these categories in their reply to AF3's question:

- 348 Cham: I was born in Thailand
349 AF3: how about you?
350 Tha: I was born here
351 Heng: I was born here
352 Phila: I was born in Cambodia but I came here when I was young so
I don't know anything
353 much (.) if I came here older I would have experienced more?
but I don't even
354 Angie: Phal?
355 Phal: born here
356 Angie: okay

Cham, who was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, was neither born in "his country" nor in America. He doesn't seem to fit within the categories of nation-statehood in the emergent schema. The other teens, however, fit neatly into these categories: Tha, Heng and Phal were born in the United States, not "[their] countries," and Phila was born in "[her] countr[y]," Cambodia.

Thus far, denotationally explicit and implicit categories, such as family, birthplace, and current residence, have emerged to interactionally position speech event participants, namely the teens, within binary categories of nation-statehood. As the interaction continues, AM1 proceeds to fill out this schema introduced by AF3:

- 357 AM1: how much- how much of what you're saying is a cultural value
of Cambodia. that girls
358 are protected more are sheltered more and uh expected to (?)
and how much of that i::s
359 (1.0) the American society where it's pushing (0.6) um::: (0.8)
you guys are out there so
360 you know "hey I gotta play it a certain way" (0.7) a::nd maybe
tell your little sister "I
361 don't wanna see you hanging around this (?) but we're- doing
this (?)"
362 Heng: 'cau[se
363 AM1: [how much of it is the socialization of the American
rendition of Cambodian values
364 versus (.) Cambodian values
365 Heng: 'cause here in America? you see more bad people than in
Cambodia so: if y- if you- if
366 you gonna leave your sister out and stuff? y'know in- in America
y- you might be scared
367 for her you mi- no one will protect her. you scared she might
get hurt or somethin'? get
368 raped or somethin'? but for a guy? he- he know how to protect
himself 'cause he's
369 stronger than a girl an- and your parents- parents this- this-
this is what your parents think
370 though. but. I don't really know though
371 A?: ((two or three audience members laugh))
372 Tha: he(hh)h
373 Heng: that's my point of view though

Added to the spatiotemporal frame laid out by AF3 is the introduction that each country has a culture (i.e., one country, one culture). Cultural values are distinctively linked to countries: "cultural value of Cambodia" (line 357), "the American society" (line 359), "the socialization of the American rendition of Cambodian values" (line 363), and "Cambodian values" (line 364). The contrastive connectors provided in the text – "and" (line 358) and "versus" (line 364) – continue the poetic structure of oppositional categories within this schema. In addition, notions of "(cultural) value" (lines 357, 363, 364), "society" (line 359), and "socialization" (line 363) emerge and contextualize AF3's utterance about "what happens to families" (line 346) within a more explicit discussion involving "culture." Thus, the schema is gaining more denotational and interactional weight as it collectively identifies familial categories ("family" (line 346), "parents" (line 369), "sister" (lines 360, 366)) as well as nation-states ("Cambodia" (lines 357, 363, 364, 365) "America" (lines 359, 363, 365, 366)), and interactionally positions teens as torn between oppositional cultural values as they move

along life trajectories. Next, the distinct division between the teens and their families becomes pivotal in this emergent schema:

374	AF3:	do you all stick with your families?	
375	Tha:	what do you mean by that? (2.2) [(yeah)	
276	AF3:		[are you all (.) <u>involved</u> with
		your families (.) in their	
377		culture	
378	Tha:	yeah	
379	Heng:	yea:h	
380	Cham:	°yeah°	
381	Phila:	°yeah° °h(hh)°	
382	Tha:	°h(hh)° (1.1)	
383	AM1:	I- I- I guess- I guess my concern is are you <u>lo:sing</u> your culture	

AF3 creates a division between “you” and “your families” (line 376) which differentiates “culture” into two emergent constructs: “your culture” (line 383), that of the teens, and “their culture” (lines 376-377), that of their parents or families. The teens, then, are constructed as having a “culture” distinct from others both in this (American) society, as well as in their (Cambodian) families. The question, “are you losing your culture” (line 383), seems to ask whether or not the teens themselves are holding onto this transmitted essence, namely their parents’ culture.

It seems likely, then, that culture is emerging as a matter of authenticity, achieved only in “your countries,” and either lost or mediated when a group migrates to a new country and becomes immersed in another culture. I argue that this first schema attempts to accomplish two things: 1) define culture as a matter of spatiotemporal, authentic and transmittable values occurring within families; and 2) deconstruct the authenticity of the panel – as if the hybrid “American rendition of Cambodian values” is somehow not the authentic “Cambodian values” and may lead the teens toward losing their culture as defined.

Notice that the audience members are positioned as the creators of this schema while the teens, their parents, sisters, and families – and not the audience members – are positioned as the inhabitants of its categories. These categories involve several distinctions: 1) a distinction between being born in a country and residing in a country; 2) a distinction between people who possess culture and those who lose it; and 3) a distinction between first-generation immigrants (the teens’ parents) and the 1.5- or second-generation (the teens themselves).

What we have revealed, then, is that certain aspects of culture and identity are being indexed in interactional realtime. The mechanism of this indexing is the denotational poetics which builds up oppositional categories inhabitable by the teen panelists, but not the audience members. Categories such as these often essentialize the Asian American experience and oversimplify complex phenomena (Lowe 1996). They characterize identity issues as merely intergenerational tensions or conflicts between nation-states

and cultural value. Next, we will explore the second emergent schema which moves beyond this paradigm.

**Culture as “emblem of ethnic differentiation”:
The second schema of culture**

The second schema of culture begins where we left off – when AM1 asks, “are you losing your culture.” Notice that this utterance is introduced by a member of the audience and, thus, is one to which the panelists are recruited by having to respond. This second schema emerges primarily through the poetic patterning of indexicals which comes to collectively presuppose certain co(n)textual features as meaningful to participants.

383	AM1:	I- I- I guess- I guess my concern is are you <u>l</u> osing your culture
384	AF?:	yeah
385	Heng:	not really though [(.) not- not really
386	AM1:	[naw:: not really because “All Means All” means that- that your <u>c</u> ulture is <u>v</u> alued
387		
388	Heng:	well we try to bring our culture up because er- most people don’t really know about our culture so we try and bring it up
389		
390	AF?:	mm hmm (0.7)
391	Heng:	try and let everyone know about it [y’know
392	Tha:	[we tryin’ to put Cambos out there (1.0) [y’know (?]

After AM1 asks “are you losing your culture” (line 383), AF? utters “yeah” (line 384) which may display that she ratifies or shares AM1’s question or concern. After Heng replies that he is “not really” losing his culture (line 385), AM1 invokes the title of the conference “All Means All” to metapragmatically frame that “your culture is valued” (lines 385-387).

In the first schema of culture, we noted how culture emerged as a construct of internal values transmitted within families, but Heng introduces culture as something to bring out into mainstream society: “we try to bring our culture up” (line 388). Culture, then, is emerging as some form of external display involving people other than their families. Heng indexes an exophoric category, “most people” (line 388), who are unaware of his culture and, therefore, the reason why his culture needs to be more visible and known to “everyone” (line 391). Tha ratifies this position and replaces the notion of “our culture” with an ethnic category “Cambos”⁴ (line 392). It is from this point on that possessive pronouns completely drop off suggesting that we are no longer working within the first schema of transmittable and possessable values; rather, a new schema of ethnic categorization and

⁴“Cambos” is short for “Cambodians”. “Cambo” and “Khmer” are the ethnic labels most often used by the teens when they discuss Cambodian ethnicity. According to a few of the teens, “Cambos” is used only by young people who are either Cambodian themselves or are “cool with” Cambodians.

division is emerging in its place. These categories are made explicit as the discourse continues:

- 393 Heng: ['cause most people
394 really know about Japanese Chinese and stuff we tryin' know
abo- tryin' to know about
395 Cambodia and how they [was
396 Tha: [yeah (.) we want to let people know
that y'know like- this- thi-
397 it's not like all Chinese- not Asian people is all Chinese y'know
like put like Cambos out
398 there. I wanna- I wanna walk down the street and then like (.)
a Black guy be like (.) like-
399 well anybody could say "yo yo he Cambo" y'know?
400 Heng: yeah not- not like (.) "are you Chinese"? y'know (1.0) not like
that (1.4)
401 Tha: [right now I'm tryin' to do somethin' to put Cambos out there.
I'm tryin' to like- put out=
402 A?: [(some audience members are talking among themselves))
403 Tha: =a CD (0.6) so um like people know that y'know Cambos can
do this too y'know? like
404 Asian people can do this (9.5)

Indexed throughout the above excerpt are categories of ethnicity, "Japanese" (line 394), "Chinese" (lines 394, 397, 400) and "Cambo(dia(n))(s)" (lines 395, 397, 399, 401, 403), as well as categories of race, "Asian" (lines 397, 404) and "Black" (line 398). This indexical patterning of race and ethnicity emerges to collectively presuppose these categories as meaningful to participants and central to this schema. Teens construct "culture" to involve not only themselves ("we" (lines 394, 396), "I" (lines 398, 401)), but also others ("(most) people" (lines 393, 396), "a Black guy" (line 398), "anybody" (line 399)).

"Most people" are constructed as unable to recognize and distinguish among ethnic groups within the Asian racial category. This is accomplished, in part, through the "voicing" of characters in the denotational text (Bakhtin 1981 [1935]). A "voice" is an identifiable social position. Speakers indexically presuppose particular recognizable voices for their characters in the denotational text. Speakers also take evaluative stances when voicing their characters. For example, when Tha voices "anybody" in a fictional world where Cambodians are recognizable, "yo yo he Cambo" (line 399), he is taking an evaluative stance on his own ethnic recognizability in American society (i.e., Cambodians are not recognizable). At the same time, through quoted speech, he makes recognizable the type of person he is voicing. This is accomplished by the linguistic utterances "yo" and "Cambo" accompanied by copula ellipsis in "he Cambo". These features collectively

mark African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or an “AAVE-influenced variety”⁵ spoken by young people who are “cool with” Cambodians. Next, Heng voices the everyman in the current state-of-affairs, “are you Chinese” (line 400), which supports Tha’s stance that Cambodians are not recognizable. Through patterns of indexical forms, the everyman of mainstream America emerges as a separate group apart from the teens, unable to ethnically recognize Cambodians or distinguish among Asian ethnic groups.

After Sapna gives names and phone numbers of school district officials to the audience, AF2 enters the discussion:

- 414 AF2: I just had (to feel sorry) about what you just said y’know
(having) somebody being able
415 to walk up to you and say “well you’re from Cambodia” but
um: (0.6) yeah I just think
416 that- I just (?) culture? can’t just walk up to somebody and
decide where they’re from?
417 Tha: [no I’m not saying that [I’m not saying (?) no at least- at- at least
they- I just want them=
418 Heng: [no:: no
419 Cham: [no:: no
420 AF2: [I’m not just saying you can’t (?)
421 Tha: =to know that [y’know
422 Heng: [no at least they can know about us y’know (.)
but most people you ask
423 them I bet you they- they say they don’t know nothin’ about
Cambodian. I bet you they
424 say they know a whole lot about Chinese, Japanese and stuff
but you ask them about
425 Cambodians they be like “who’s that what’s that”
426 Sapna: h(hh)mh(hh)m

Beginning with a metapragmatic evaluation “I just had (to feel sorry) about what you just said” (line 414), AF2 challenges this emergent schema. She reframes Tha’s voicing of “them” from “yo yo he Cambo” (line 399) to “well you’re from Cambodia” (line 415) to support her argument that one “can’t just walk up to somebody and decide where they’re from” (line 416). Three teens loudly proclaim “no” (lines 417, 418, 419) in response, and Tha and Heng defend the paradigm by making it a matter of “them/people” (lines 417, 422, 423, 424, 425) knowing about “us/Cambodians” (lines 422, 423, 425). Heng illustrates this by voicing “them” as saying, “who’s that what’s that” (line 425) when they are asked about Cambodians. Sapna, who is also Asian, responds with laughter (line 426) which may indicate ratification of Heng’s predication or the comic effect of his voicing.

⁵ “AAVE-influenced variety” is a provisional term I use to label language varieties which incorporate systematic linguistic features often attributed to AAVE. Although the variety spoken by these teens includes some of these features, such as copula ellipsis and distributive “be”, there are other features which distinguish them apart (e.g., Khmer phonological influences). See Bucholtz (1999), Labov (1980), and Zentella (1997) for further discussion of AAVE influences on speech varieties.

From this configuration of denotational categories emerges an interactional text anchored in deictics. Speech event participants can be positioned in clearly defined groups of “we/us” and “they/them”. The “we/us” category includes the Asian Americans in the room; that is, the teen panel, Asian Arts Initiative staff, and Sapna. The “they/them” category has recruited the rest of the audience. They are lumped together with the people who recognize Asians as only “Chinese” or “Japanese,” an undesirable state-of-affairs that renders Cambodians an invisible ethnic category.

This second schema of culture, then, is more about inter-group relations among racial categories (“Asians,” “Blacks,” and “Whites” (invoked later in line 436)) and ethnic categories (“Cambodian,” “Chinese,” and “Japanese”), rather than about cultural transmission occurring within immigrant families. Unlike the first schema of culture, the second one has been constructed primarily by the teens themselves. The teen panel seems to have deconstructed the first schema asserting that they not only have “culture,” but are also able to redefine it. Culture is not (or more than) a matter of authentic transmittable values, it is indexical of ethnic group membership and differentiation. This reformulation is accompanied by shifts in participation frameworks – both in the characters and categories in the denotational text, and in the participation and positioning of speech event participants in the interactional text.

Conclusion

The analysis of this panel discussion reveals that the conversation between the Asian American teens and the audience of teachers, advisors, and administrators both discursively invoked and established links between the following three categories:

- a) Nation-states as places of birth and places of residence
- b) Each (Asian) culture as an historically transmitted authentic essence
- c) Cultural difference as emblematic of ethnic differentiation of people in (American) society

The transition from (b) “culture as historical transmission” to (c) “culture as emblem of ethnic differentiation” seemed to have been created by the question from the audience member, AM1: “are you losing your culture?” The question itself simply radicalized the tension between (a) spatiotemporal movements between nation-states and (b) their implications for the issue of authentic “historical transmission” occurring within families. The question asked, in effect, whether the last link in this chain of transmission, the teens themselves, are authentic recipients of this transmitted essence given their new conditions of socialization in America. Following the question “are you losing your culture,” the second schema of culture,

that of (c) “emblem of ethnic differentiation”, is then formulated by the panelists, mainly Tha and Heng, in response to AM1’s question. Notice that this new schema involved a change in participation framework. That is, Heng and Tha located themselves – both denotationally and interactionally – in participation frameworks involving interaction with mainstream Americans; that is, denotationally with figures such as “most people”, and interactionally with AM1, AF2 and other audience members.

The important issue to emphasize is that the two schemas of culture in (b) “historical transmission” and (c) “emblem of ethnic differentiation” are revealed to be not merely static essences, but dynamically linked to distinct participation frameworks. “Culture as historical transmission” involved interaction with families whereas “culture as emblem of ethnic differentiation” involved interaction with mainstream Americans, including the audience. Thus, individuals may be able to shift between schemas depending on the participation frameworks in play or the interactional exigencies at issue.

We have also seen how metadiscursive macro-essences such as “multiculturalism” and “identity politics” are locatable at the micro-level. Schemas of inner- and inter-group relations, cultural value, and ethnic and racial identity were discursively invoked and inhabited in this situated interaction. Rather than being nebulous constructs removed from daily conversation; to the contrary, they are very much experienced by virtue of being indexically invoked under the conditions derived from the interaction itself. Thus, notions of “culture” and “identity” are revealed to have two distinct properties: 1) their values are emergent in conversation, interactionally negotiated and, in fact, a performed reality; and 2) they are relational phenomena – that is, their characteristics are not inherent, but discernible only in relation to the denotational and interactional details in the conversation.

Finally, we must ask why this shift occurred. At the time AM1 asked “are you losing your culture,” the teens were being positioned by the audience members in a paradigm which questioned their authenticity. AM1 then told the teens that their “culture is valued” (lines 386-387). Following that moment, an extended discussion of the politics of recognition unfolded. But why? We know that in this second half of the discussion, ethnic and racial categories divided groups into those that are recognized and those that are unrecognized by mainstream Americans. The teens also took up identities that positioned themselves as not only holding on to their unrecognized culture, but also actively bringing it out into mainstream society. Thus, the teens asserted that “losing culture” is not *their* problem, but the problem of mainstream Americans, because in order for their culture to be “valued” – a claim that AM1 made – it must first be recognized. This, I argue, is precisely the problem the teens identified: *How can their culture be valued if it’s not even recognized?*

References

- Agha, A. (1997). Tropic aggression in the Clinton-Dole presidential debate. *Pragmatics*, 7(4):461-497.
- Agha, A. (1999). *The social life of cultural value*. Paper presented at the Ethnohistory Workshop, University of Pennsylvania.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981 [1935]). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Bauman, R. and C. Briggs (1990). Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life. *Annual review of Anthropology*, 19, 59-88.
- Benveniste, E. (1971 [1954]). *Problems in general linguistics*. University of Miami Press.
- Bucholtz, M. (1999). You da man: Narrating the racial other in the production of white masculinity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 3, 443-460.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. University of California Press.
- Cicourel, A. (1974). *Cognitive sociology: Language and meaning in social interaction*. New York: The Free Press.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Hanks, W. (1992). The indexical ground of deictic reference. In A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jakobson, R. (1960). Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics. In T. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in language* (pp. 350-377). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Jakobson, R. (1971 [1951]). *Selected writings*, Vol. 2. The Hague: Mouton.
- Labov, W. (1980). Is there a creole speech community? In A. Valdman, and A. Highfield (Eds.) *Theoretical orientations in creole studies* (pp. 369-388). New York: Academic Press.
- Lowe, L. (1996) *Immigrant acts: On Asian American cultural politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Peirce, C. (1932). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 2. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rymes, B. (1996). Rights to advise: Advice as an emergent phenomenon in student-teacher talk. *Linguistics & Education*, 8, 409-437.
- Sebeok, T. (1990). Indexicality. *The American Journal of Semiotics*, 7(4), 7-28.
- Silverstein, M. (1976). Shifters, linguistic categories, and cultural description. In K. Basso & H. Selby (Eds.), *Meaning in anthropology* (pp. 11-55). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Silverstein, M. (1992). The indeterminacy of contextualization: When is enough enough? In P. Auer and A. DiLuzio (Eds.), *The contextualization of language* (pp. 55-76). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Silverstein, M. (1993). Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function. In Lucy, J. (Ed.) *Reflexive Language*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Silverstein, M. (1998). The improvisational performance of culture in realtime discursive practice. In R. Sawyer (Ed.), *Creativity in performance* (pp. 265-312). Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Silverstein, M. and G. Urban (1996). The natural history of discourse. In M. Silverstein and G. Urban (Eds.), *Natural histories of discourse* (pp. 1-17). Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Spitulnik, D. (1997). The social circulation of media discourse and the mediation of communities. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 6(2):161-187.
- Takaki, R. (1989). *Strangers from a different shore: A history of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Willis, P. (1990). *Common culture: Symbolic work at play in the everyday cultures of the young*. Boulder & San Francisco: Westview Press.
- Wortham, S. (1994). *Acting out participant examples in the classroom*. Philadelphia:

CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND ASIAN AMERICAN TEENS

John Benjamins.

Worham, S. (2001). *Narratives in action*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Zentella, A. (1997). *Expanding Repertoires*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

<u>word</u>	(underline) indicates utterance stress
word?	(question mark) indicates rising intonation
word.	(period) indicates falling intonation
word,	(comma) indicates falling-rising intonation
word-	(dash) indicates abrupt breaks or stops
wo:rd	(colon) indicates elongated vowel or consonant
°word°	(circles around utterance) indicates utterance is quieter than surrounding talk
wo(hh)rd	(hh) indicates laughter breaking into utterance
(.)	(period in parentheses) indicates a pause under 0.5 seconds
(0.5)	(number in parentheses) indicates a silence measured 0.5 seconds and above
[word [word	(brackets) indicates simultaneous talk by two or more speakers
word= =word	(equal sign) indicates continuous talk
(word)	(parentheses) indicates doubtful transcription or conjecture
(?)	(question mark in parentheses) indicates inaudible utterance(s)
((word))	(double parentheses) indicates transcriber comment

Angela Reyes is a doctoral student in Educational Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, second language acquisition, and out-of-school educational sites for Asian American youth.

