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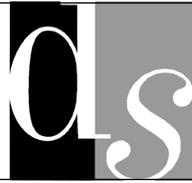
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# “Are you losing your culture?”: poetics, indexicality and Asian American identity



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**ABSTRACT** This article examines a school district conference panel discussion to illustrate how ‘culture’ is interactionally emergent and how ‘identity’ is performatively achieved through struggles to position the self and other in socially meaningful ways. Analyzing an interaction between a panel of Asian American teens and an audience of teachers, advisors and administrators, the author traces how the term ‘culture’ emerges as two constructs: ‘culture as historical transmission’ and ‘culture as emblem of ethnic differentiation’. 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. It is argued that these two schemas of culture are not merely static essences, but dynamically linked to distinct participation frameworks which achieve particular performative effects. These schemas, which are brought into circulation, reveal how metalevel constructs, such as ‘identity politics’ and ‘multiculturalism’, are played out rather vividly in microlevel interaction.

**KEY WORDS:** *Asian American, culture, discourse analysis, ethnicity, identity, identity politics, indexicality, multiculturalism, performance, poetics*

## 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 at such conferences 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 article addresses this question through a linguistic anthropological approach to discourse analysis, which investigates how presupposed cultural categories are mapped onto, or

transformed into, features that emerge distinctively through the details of the interaction. This illustrates the significance of the microsociological order of language use.

Through a detailed analysis of a school district conference discussion between a panel of Asian American teens with an audience of teachers, advisors and administrators, this article illustrates how 'culture' is interactionally emergent and how 'identity' is performatively achieved through struggles to position the self and other in socially meaningful ways. I trace the emergent poetic and indexical patterning which shape categories and trajectories of personae to which speech event participants are recruited. 'Culture', in effect, emerges as two constructs. 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. By exploring the denotational and interactional textualities of the conversation, I argue that these two schemas of culture are not merely static essences, but dynamically linked to distinct participation frameworks which achieve particular performative effects. As the interactants invoke evaluations of cultural value as well as categories of ethnic identity and differentiation, these schemas of culture are brought forth into circulation, and reveal how metalevel constructs, such as 'identity politics' and 'multiculturalism', are played out rather vividly in microlevel interaction.

### *The speech event*

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 2000. 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. During the conference workshop, the teen-produced video was screened and then followed by a discussion. This article analyzes discourse excerpts from this discussion.

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. Here are some brief descriptions of the speech event participants:<sup>1</sup>

#### *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 (Asian Arts Initiative staff)

- Rita (workshop facilitator and school district administrator)
- Sapna (school district administrator and member of Asian Arts Initiative)
- A, AF (female), AM (male) (other audience members comprised 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 icebreaker game facilitated by Anu and Cham. Tha introduced 'American Sroksrei' which was then screened and followed by a 30-minute moderated discussion. This panel discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed.

### *The after-school Asian American teen videomaking project*

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 'though subordinated and 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' (p. 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 20 Asian American teens – mostly Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Lao – from various districts of Philadelphia in a six-month process of scripting, shooting and editing their own group video which reflects their real-life experiences and perspectives. For over three years, I have been conducting ethnographic research on the videomaking project and have been involved as a volunteer facilitator, coordinator and researcher.

The 15-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. (10 November 1999)

'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 viewed,

leading to all different kinds of emergent and negotiated meanings as 'media audiences play an active role in the interpretation and appropriation of media texts' (Spitulnik, 1997: 165).

Previous research on audiences provides a starting point for investigating such consumption practices. In the 1980s, media studies witnessed a new growth in audience research, often referred to as *the new audience studies* (e.g. Morley, 1980). In this approach, the audience is seen 'as a discursive trope signifying the constantly shifting and radically heterogeneous ways in which meaning is constructed and contested in multiple everyday contexts of media use and consumption' (Ang, 1996: 4). Importantly, these studies move beyond simply understanding audiences as active meaning makers. They argue that meaning production must be understood in relation to the postmodernization of media, culture and society, and within the micro-politics of everyday life (Ang, 1996). This emphasis on the everyday has influenced audience researchers to embrace ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and interviews, to study the relationships between audiences, postmodernity and globalization (Miller, 1992; Ang, 1996).

Building on this recent shift toward ethnographic approaches in audience research, I emphasize the need for ethnography also to be accompanied by close analysis of interaction during events of consumption. By using discourse analysis, this article reveals how social identities and relations among students, teachers, advisors and administrators are accomplished during the panel discussion. Close detailed analysis allows me to trace these emergent configurations as participants construct, challenge and negotiate identities through invocations of 'culture' in this event of media consumption.

### *Culture and identity*

The teen participants in the after-school videomaking project are producing Asian American grassroots media, which often privileges a particular meaning for 'culture'. Of course, culture has long been a contested term, connoting a range of historical definitions from 'civilization' to 'the everyday' to 'high art' (Williams, 1976). But one definition, suiting grassroots media in particular, traces its roots back to the 1960s. During the Civil Rights Movement, many Asian American cultural producers adhered to the idea of culture as inherently activist (Chin et al., 2000). That is, Asian American culture became a direct challenge to the prevalent images produced and consumed in the dominant mainstream. Although Eagleton (2000) criticizes the overpoliticization of culture by postmodernists, it is undeniable that 'culture as politics' still thrives today, particularly among 'community-centered scholars who prefer a more explicit and direct connection between art and activism' (Chin et al., 2000: 272).

But while culture can be political, this says little of what we mean by 'culture'. Although it may be tempting to view culture as a set of beliefs or meaning-encoded texts, we need a more nuanced definition to avoid such

oversimplification. In contemporary linguistic anthropology, there has been a move toward a circulatory notion of culture (Silverstein and Urban, 1996). If culture exists in circulation, we can escape the pitfalls of conceptualizing culture as monolithic, essentialized and bounded. This new conception embraces Peircean (1932) semiotics. It allows for a semiotic relationship to develop among microlevel and macrolevel discursive orders because once an amount of interaction becomes fixed, it contributes to the stability of a larger circulating pattern. Culture, then, becomes more dynamic and fragile as its endurance relies on its circulation.

Some recent studies on ethnic and cultural identity have also embraced a semiotic perspective (Rampton, 1995). Early conceptions of ethnicity risked the same pitfalls as those of culture. For example, some early 'mismatch' studies, which focus on differences in speech styles among particular communities and public institutions, risk a view of ethnicity as discrete, homogeneous and static (e.g. Philips, 1972; Heath, 1983). New approaches do not assume that ethnicity is always relevant (Heath and McLaughlin, 1993), nor do they see identities as fixed entities, but as 'situated identities that become interactionally relevant' (Rampton, 1995: 486). Thus, if we move toward a semiotic perspective, we need a theoretical grounding in language use, which can help analysts construe the emergence of culture and identity in interaction.

### *Poetics and indexicality*

Language use is a form of social action. 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 these two textualities depend on each other for their meaningfulness. For participants and analysts to construe this meaning, we must turn to work in 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 construction of denotational text. Poetics is 'a functional principle which motivates diagrammatic value within utterances' (Agha, 1997: 469) as linguistic forms are recurrently positioned and 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 signs, such as pronouns or gestures, 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 (Peirce, 1932; Benveniste, 1971 [1954]; Silverstein, 1976). 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 the panel discussion in this article, 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 groupings of people, including the panel and audience.

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 to the two schemas of culture. Moving on to the analysis, I now trace how these two schemas of culture emerge through poetics and indexicality, and systematically relate to participation frameworks.

### *Culture as historical transmission*

About 15 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 (transcription conventions are described in the Appendix):

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 Americ- a-” (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 that 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 to the teens somewhat of an oxymoron, “born in your countries”, which presupposes that their countries are not this country. Thus, even if the teens were born in America, it cannot be their country. This resonates with the ‘permanent alien’ construction of Asian Americans regardless of birthplace (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

Within the oppositional categories of “your countries” and “America” laid out by AF3, Cham, who was born in a refugee camp in Thailand, was neither born in “[his] countr[y]” nor in “America”. He doesn’t seem to fit within the divisions of nation-statehood in the emergent schema. The other teens, however, fit neatly into these categories: Tha, Heng and Phal were born in “America”, 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" in line 346; "parents" in line 369; "sister" in lines 360, 366) as well as nation-states ("Cambodia" in lines 357, 363, 364, 365; "America" in 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?  
 374 Tha: what do you mean by that? (2.2) [(yeah)  
 376 AF3: [are you all (.) involved 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 lo;sing 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.

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

### *Identity politics*

The politics of identity, which legitimizes unity based on ethnic and cultural authenticity (Heller, 1999), is invoked throughout this first schema of culture. Here, culture is emerging as a matter of authenticity, achieved only in “your countries”, and either lost or mediated when a group immigrates to a new country and becomes immersed in another culture. This first schema attempts to define culture as a matter of spatiotemporal, authentic and transmittable values occurring within families. At the same time, it attempts to deconstruct the authenticity of the teen 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. Categories such as these essentialize the Asian American experience and oversimplify complex phenomena. They often reduce identity issues to intergenerational tensions or conflicts between nation-states and cultural value (Lowe, 1996).

The politics of identity, according to Heller (1999), is shifting from a model rooted in ethnic and linguistic unity to a new model characterized by pluralism and the expansion of capitalism in a globalized economy. As we explore the second emergent schema, we detect a hint of movement in this direction. In addition to engaging in grassroots video production, which reaches audiences like the one here at the school district conference, Tha reveals another aspiration to

be a cultural producer in a capitalist industry, “I’m tryin’ to like put out a CD so um like people know that . . . Asian people can do this” (lines 401–4). This desire for inclusion in a global economy, which is presumed to allow Asian participation, suggests a movement toward the new model, but not without an investment in the old politics of identity. That is, the old politics of identity, which legitimizes the “Asian” category invoked by Tha, also fought to establish the right to self-determination for disenfranchised groups (Heller, 1999). But this discourse has also changed the conditions of their existence, namely by creating hope that inclusiveness is achievable in a more pluralist society. Tha and others draw on this hope as the discourse continues.

### *Culture as emblem of ethnic differentiation*

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 losing 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 culture  
 387 is valued  
 388 Heng: well we try to bring our culture up because er- most people don’t really know about our  
 389 culture so we try and bring it up  
 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 385–7).

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”<sup>2</sup> (line 392). It is from this point on that possessive pronouns completely drop off, suggesting that we are no longer working strictly within the

first schema of transmittable and possessable values; rather, a new schema of ethnic categorization and division is emerging in its place. These categories are made denotationally explicit as the discourse continues:

- 393 Heng: [ 'cause most  
 394 people 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" in lines 394, 396; "I" in lines 398, 401), but also others ("(most) people" in lines 393, 396; "a Black guy" in line 398; "anybody" in 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 that speakers indexically presuppose 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, namely that 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<sup>3</sup> 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.

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.

### *Multiculturalism*

Multiculturalist discourses of inter-group relations and cultural value are invoked throughout this second schema. Culture becomes 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 at least 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.

Invoking the motto of liberal multiculturalism, “your culture is *valued*” (lines 386–7), marks a pivotal moment in this schema. Prior to this utterance, the audience members were positioning the teens in a paradigm which questioned their authenticity. But following this utterance, an extended discussion of the politics of recognition unfolds. But why? We know that in this second half of the discussion, ethnic and racial categories divide groups into those that are recognized and those that are unrecognized by mainstream Americans. The teens also take up identities that position themselves as not only holding on to their unrecognized culture, but also actively bringing it out into mainstream society. Thus, the teens assert that “losing culture” is not *their* problem, but the problem of mainstream Americans. That is, before mainstream Americans can “value” cultural diversity – a claim that AM1 makes – they must first recognize it. This critique is a step toward a more critical multiculturalism, which not only confronts the social inequalities that liberal multiculturalism can be accused of ignoring, but also mobilizes toward structural transformation and social justice (McLaren, 1997). The teens, thus, formulate an insightful criticism of liberal multiculturalism: *How can “their culture” be valued if it’s not even recognized?*

## Conclusion

By tracing the poetic and indexical patterning, 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 the United States. Following the question “are you losing your culture” and the statement “your culture is valued”, the second schema of

culture, that of (c) 'emblem of ethnic differentiation', is then formulated by the panelists, mainly Tha and Heng. This schema involved an unfolding discussion of the politics of recognition, rooted in the hope that Cambodians could become recognizable in pluralist American society. But how these two schemas are alike or distinct from each other is not a major concern in this article; rather, the ways in which these two schemas emerge, and to what effect, are the more interesting questions.

In terms of emergence, an 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. In short, shifting schemas also involved shifting participation frameworks. By tracing the poetic patterning of the first schema, the analysis shows how 'culture as historical transmission' involved teens interacting with their families in the denotational text. Both the teens and the audience members invoked familial categories, such as 'parents'. On the other hand, by tracing the indexical patterning in the second schema, the analysis shows how 'culture as emblem of ethnic differentiation' involved teens interacting with mainstream Americans in both the denotational text and interactional text. In this second schema, Heng and Tha located themselves denotationally with figures such as "most people", and interactionally with AM1, AF2 and other audience members. Thus, individuals may be able to move between schemas depending on the participation frameworks in play or the interactional exigencies at issue.

This article also illustrates how metalevel constructs such as 'identity politics' and 'multiculturalism' are not only locatable at the microlevel, but also creatively used as performative resources. Using a more circulatory notion of culture, the analysis traces how schemas of inner- and inter-group relations, cultural value and ethnic and racial identity were brought forth into circulation, inhabited and critiqued in this interaction. Rather than being nebulous constructs removed from daily conversation, on the contrary, they are very much experienced by virtue of being indexically invoked under the conditions derived from the interaction itself. The politics of identity was invoked by the audience to position teens as unauthentic recipients of Cambodian culture. The teens challenged liberal multiculturalism by asserting that recognizing cultural difference must precede valuing cultural difference. Thus, notions of 'culture' and 'identity' are revealed to have two distinct properties. First, as has been argued by much previous work on culture and identity, their values are emergent in conversation, interactionally negotiated and a performed reality. But also, importantly, 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.

#### NOTES

1. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms except my own, 'Angie'.

2. “Cambos” is short for “Cambodians”. “Cambo” and “Khmer” are ethnic labels 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.
3. Although the variety spoken by some of the teens incorporates linguistic features of AAVE, such as copula ellipsis and distributive ‘be’, there are other features that distinguish them (e.g. Khmer phonological influences). See Labov (1980), Zentella (1997) and Bucholtz (1999) for further discussion of AAVE influences on speech varieties.

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## APPENDIX

## Transcription conventions:

<u>word</u>	(underline) utterance stress
word?	(question mark) rising intonation
word.	(period) falling intonation
word,	(comma) falling–rising intonation
word-	(dash) abrupt breaks or stops
wo:rd	(colon) elongated vowel or consonant
°word°	(circles around utterance) utterance is quieter than surrounding talk

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wo(hh)rd	(hh) laughter breaking into utterance
(.)	(period in parentheses) a pause under 0.5 seconds
(0.5)	(number in parentheses) a silence measured 0.5 seconds and above
[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)
((word))	(double parentheses) transcriber comment



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