



2007

Book Review - Reyes, A. (2006) Language, Identity, and Stereotype Among Southeast Asian American Youth: The Other Asian

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Recommended Citation

Chea, Keo (2007) "Book Review - Reyes, A. (2006) Language, Identity, and Stereotype Among Southeast Asian American Youth: The Other Asian," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1088

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Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement

A peer-reviewed
scholarly journal
published by the
National Association
for the Education &
Advancement of
Cambodian, Laotian,
and Vietnamese
Americans (NAFEA)

Volume 2

www.JSAAEA.org

Book Review

Reyes, Angela (2007). *Language, Identity, and Stereotype Among Southeast Asian American Youth: The Other Asian*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

192 pp.

Pb. \$69.95 ISBN-10: 0805855394 ISBN-13: 978-0805855395

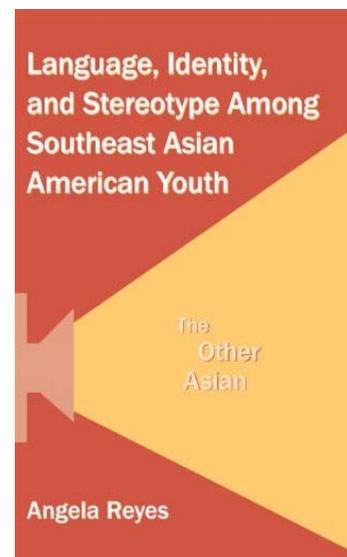
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While members of the Asian American population currently constitute only about 5% of the United States' population, they make up one of the fastest growing racial/ethnic groups in terms of percentage growth (Le, 2006). As a consequence, Asian American youth—including poor, inner-city Southeast Asian American youth—are quickly growing into their own subculture and carving out their own linguistic-cultural identities in the United States, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Philadelphia. Despite the percentage growth, characterizations of Southeast Asian Americans are often erroneously subsumed within prevailing monolithic socio-cultural and academic stereotypes of Asian Americans (e.g. the model minority myth), contributing to a biased and limited perspective of Asian Americans, and rendering both the needs (academic, linguistic, socio-economical, political) and particular youth subculture(s) invisible. Reyes' *Language, Identity, and Stereotype Among Southeast Asian American Youth: The Other Asian* is a response to the growth/invisibility paradox of Southeast Asian American teenagers, providing readers with a more recent view of some of their language and identity issues and cultures.

Given the dearth of critical examinations on Asian American identity—particularly Southeast Asian American identity—Reyes' four-year study (1999-2002) of Southeast Asian American youth is a welcome addition to, and departure from, other literature on language and identity, enhancing our understanding of this American subculture. Reyes employs ethnographic research and discourse analysis to examine how 1.5- and second-



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generation Southeast Asian American youth at an after-school video-making program reappropriate and disrupt circulating stereotypes of the self and other in their speech: They do this by transforming their cultural and personal identities in response and in relation to these circulating stereotypes. Interestingly, while the title suggests a study of Southeast Asian Americans, the analysis is based almost exclusively on discourse provided by Asian Americans of Cambodian descent, a program enrollment issue evidently outside Reyes' control (e.g. there were no Hmong, Vietnamese, or Lao youth enrolled). Through critically and closely examining language practices in the activity of discussing film and creating videos at a program which specifically targeted underserved Southeast Asian refugee youth, Reyes' provocative and tightly studied work reveals the complex intersection of language, identity, and stereotype, as suggested by the title of her book.

Chapter 1 sets out to place Reyes' research within the larger discussion of Asian American identity and stereotypes, giving readers a thorough overview of relevant literature. In particular, the section on stereotypes provides an excellent snapshot



Angela Reyes

depicting the extent and complexity of Asian American representation in social, political and academic discourses, and Asian American image and status in U.S. racial discourses. Often viewed as racially different and alien, Asian Americans are regarded as inassimilable and non-American, thereby nurturing the *circulation* and *emergence* of stereotypes such as the “forever foreigner”—the belief that all Asians are foreigners who are marginal to the mainstream culture of the United States. Reyes examines how in contending with these numerous stereotypes, teens often invoked such stereotypes to both explore and produce their identities (p. 17).

Chapter 2 explores the influences of the forever foreigner stereotype, namely how the teens constructed their identities in relation to the ongoing representational practices of Hollywood films that (re)produce this stereotype. As depicted by the films which the teens evaluated (as well as by the teenagers' portrayals in their own videos), the linguistic dimension of the stereotypical *Asian newcomer* represents Asian characters as nonnative speakers of English with limited language proficiency. As suggested by film discussions and scenes from the teen-created videos, the teenagers derisively and pejoratively labeled other immigrants, namely first generation Asian immigrants, *Fresh off the Boat (F.O.B.)*—“a common slang used to brand unassimilated Asian immigrants” (p. 35)—to distance themselves from other Asians, or to avoid being labeled *F.O.B.* themselves. Uses of such labels, particularly by Asian Americans themselves, mark more than just immigrant status; Reyes asserts that the use of appropriated labels “[creates] a division of Asian American identity” (p. 36) and can also result in negative effects, including “[endorsing] discriminatory treatment toward immigrants and foreigners” (p. 36).

Reyes continues her examination of discourse to unearth ideologies related to slang practice in Chapter 3, moving from the youths' use of Asian-accented speech to their appropriations of the African American Vernacular English (AAVE)-influenced speech of socio-economically marginalized, urban-minority communities. Based on her analysis of the occurrence of the slang words *aite* (all right) and *nahmean* (know what I

mean), she suggests that these slang terms were appropriated by the teenagers to serve multiple purposes, including intentionally adopting slang to authentically identify themselves with African Americans and/or “[creating] boundaries not only between teens and adults but also between each other” (p. 65). In both chapters 2 and 3, Reyes ultimately shows that identity and stereotype are far from static, and that these are constantly negotiated and created through experiences and relationships.

While Chapter 4 discusses the production and accomplishment of an Asian American panethnicity through the reappropriation of stereotypes such as the *Asian storeowner* stereotype, Chapter 5 problematizes the invention of “Asian American.” In the latter chapter, the teenage participants dismantled the “Asian American” panethnic construction in its limitless tendency toward suppressing historical, political, and socioeconomic issues pertinent to the *Other Asian*. For instance, Southeast Asian youth like Enoy, a Cambodian Chinese American female, who hopes for public space designation for Southeast Asian Americans—proposes that Southeast Asian Americans be recognized as distinctly different from other Asian ethnic groups: “We got Chinatown. Where the Cambo-town? Laos-town?” (2001). The teenage participants were acutely aware that despite the diversity of Asian Americans, they are often perceived as a single, monolithic group by other Americans.

This book is at its strongest when, in Chapter 5, Reyes analyzes a speech event at a conference panel discussion and shows how non-Asian audience members inadvertently positioned these teens as “forever foreign,” by asking, for instance, “Are you losing your culture?” The students argue for a redefinition of culture, asserting that the “culture” of *Other Asian* be “brought out” (p. 138) or propelled into the mainstream society. Largely resenting the stereotypes that “all Asians are Chinese,” the teenagers also actively engaged in disrupting and dismantling Asian American panethnicity in a fight to be recognized. The result of this analysis is powerful in elucidating the internalization of certain racialized characteristics by non-Southeast Asian Americans, as well as reminding readers of the power of language in bringing certain worldviews into being.

The final chapter addresses the practical dimension—both the benefits and challenges—of building alternative educational communities and grassroots video-making programs for minority youth. While Reyes ultimately shows the importance of reorganizing out-of-school, “informal” learning structures to create a safe space for teens to explore sensitive topics and issues, she does not provide concrete guidelines for identifying the best possible solutions for maximizing video-making projects with limited resources and under the prevailing social and political conditions. This would have made Reyes’ book more informative and valuable for educators involved in alternative education planning efforts.

Together however, these six chapters add texture and nuance to the studies of Southeast Asian American language and stereotypes. The topic of this book is a fascinating one, and the discourses described are as variegated as they are illustrative. By deftly integrating and opening each chapter with a single quote or a summary quote from the teenage participants, Reyes avoids indulging in a militant researcher-centered approach, and instead gives voice to the unique experiences of Southeast Asian Americans who presently live as outsiders in the United States.

Audiences for this book are potentially quite diverse. The book will appeal especially to newcomers to the field of Asian American studies and/or

language/linguistics and identity research, be they advanced undergraduates/graduate students or established scholars. More specifically, the findings presented in this book are relevant to anyone interested in stereotypes from an ethnographic/linguistic/discourse-analytic point of view. In- and out-of-school ethnographers and discourse analysts will find a brief, explicit, well-documented methodology and research design. This book is a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary fields of research at the interface between linguistics/discourse and social sciences/anthropology/education.

References

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About the Reviewer

A 1.5 generation Cambodian American, Keo Chea is a Gates Millennium Scholar and a 2nd year doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education in Reading/Writing/Literacy. She holds a master's degree in Language and Literacy and a Reading Specialist Certification from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. After completing her undergraduate degree at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, she returned to her old neighborhood in inner-city North Philadelphia to teach bilingual (Khmer/English) K-2 students. She is currently a part-time literacy coach for *Youth Education for Tomorrow* (YET), an after-school K-12 literacy program (operated by various community-based organizations) for children experiencing reading difficulties. Keo also serves as a member of the Doctoral Student Editorial Board for the *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*.



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Volume 2

Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement

A peer-reviewed scholarly journal published by the National Association & Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans (NAFEA)

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