(Un)Necessary Toughness?: Those "Loud Black Girls" and Those "Quiet Asian Boys"

JOY L. LEI
Vassar College

This article examines the process of identity construction and its relationship to discursive and representational acts in producing students as academic and social beings. Drawing on Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, I focus on two student populations—black females and Southeast Asian American males—and analyze the symbolic and material effects of the production of them as racialized, gendered Other through the repeated stylization of their bodies and behavior. The materialization of the students as "loud black girls" and "quiet Asian boys," however, opens up the potential for disrupting the hegemonic forces of regulatory norms.

Recent research on race and student identity in U.S. schools has revealed a complicated relationship between identities at the interpersonal level and discourses of knowledge at a structural level (e.g., Davidson 1996; Ferguson 2000; Fordham 1996; Lee 1996). It is within this relationship that the symbolic realm (in which histories, experiences, and people are represented) and material realities collide, interact, and coexist. It is also within this relationship that identities are created, imposed, appropriated, resisted, and embraced.

In the dominant U.S. racial discourse, which has evolved from a history of Eurocentric representations, people of color have been cast in monolithic characterizations that homogenize diverse populations into subordinate racial groups. This discursive system perpetuates the positioning of people of color as the Other, and the white, European American culture as the mainstream and the norm. These regulative representations serve as effective tools for maintaining the power and status of the dominant group (Hall 1997; Lee 1996; Prager 1982). Locked within confining stereotypes, many individuals of color, the model minorities, the noble savages, the black athletes and musicians, struggle between fulfilling roles that bring them "success" and rejecting them as oppressive mechanisms, finding it difficult to see other alternatives.

In this article, I examine the process of identity construction and its relationship to discursive and representational acts in producing students as academic and social beings. This analysis is part of a two-year ethnographic study I conducted at a public comprehensive high school I call Hope High. I focus on two student populations—black females and Southeast Asian American males—and discuss: (1) the ways their racialized

and gendered identities were constructed both for them and by them; (2) how others treated these students and made sense of their behavior based on the dominant discursive and representational systems of racialized and gendered normality; and (3) how the students, in constructing their own identity, responded with strategic acts, resistance, conformity, and disruption to the regulatory systems.

I concentrate on black females and Southeast Asian American males for two reasons. First, patterns emerged from my research that pointed to specific and prevailing representations of these two student groups in ways that did not occur for other groups. This suggested that it was important to pursue an in-depth examination of these representations and their implications for the two student populations, as well as for race relations and academic achievement at Hope High. Second, in mainstream culture, the images of black males and Asian/Asian American females have dominated the representation of blacks and Asian Americans respectively, so that there have been more popularized images of black males and Asian/Asian American females than there have been of black females and Asian American males. These stereotypical representations have hypermasculinized black males (e.g., as super athletes and physically aggressive) and hyperfeminized Asian/Asian American females (e.g., as docile and physically petite), overwhelming and shaping the representation of black females and Asian American males. My focus on these two student populations thus offers a relatively rare analysis of black females and Asian American males in the educational literature. I also examine the interplay between the representations of the two student groups, which is even less common in the existing literature.

The Work of Constructing Who We Are

Identity construction encompasses an active and dynamic process through which an individual identifies himself or herself in relation to how he or she is constituted as a subject by dominant discourses and representations. As Hall points out, we should think of identity as a "production," "which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1997:51). Thus, every time we label ourselves, it is a response to someone or some institution that insists that we do. With which population(s) we identify is a response to a particular history that has already identified us. Identity construction is a process laden with commonalities, loyalties, power struggles, and survival instincts. It is at once an instinctive process that occurs from the inside out, involving community, acceptance, and comfort, but also a forced process from the outside in, which imposes on us fixed categorizations and monolithic depictions. What we need to examine are the effects of and the struggles within the complex dimensions of representation. Specifically, what are the discourses of knowledge that we employ, and how do we employ them to make sense of who we are, who we are not, and who we can become (Britzman 1992)?
Identities as Performative

In analyzing the processes of identity construction for the black female and Southeast Asian American male students at Hope High, I find Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) work on the complex interactions between the subject, the body, and identity to provide useful theoretical guidance, because it not only takes into account the regulative power that discursive and representational systems have in the production of its subjects, it also emphasizes the necessity for repeated stylization of the body to materialize the normative ideal. This repetition of performative acts legitimates but also opens up possibilities for rearticulations of the assumed bodily norm. I briefly outline Butler’s theory here and elaborate on it throughout my analysis.

Focusing on the regulatory ideal of “sex” and its productive effects on gender and sexuality, Butler argues that “sex” not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs (1993:1). This suggests that “sex” is not “a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize ‘sex’ and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms” (1993:2). In other words, “woman” should not be taken as a stable gender identity from which various acts follow; “woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (1990:33).

Crucial to Butler’s theory is the understanding of gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990:33). Butler terms this stylized repetition of acts gender performativity, which she defines as “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (1993:2). Performativity, then, is productive by generating meaningful effects in materializing gender identities. For example, the production of the black female and Southeast Asian American male students as racialized, gendered Other was materialized through the meanings attributed to their bodily appearance and behaviors; that is, through “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1997:140). The significance and function of their identity construction required both repetition of racialized gendered performativity on the part of the black female and Southeast Asian American male students as well as others at Hope High, since the “appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler 1990:141). However, as a regulative ideal, gender is a norm that can never be fully achieved, “and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody” (1990:141).
It is important to distinguish “performance” from Butler’s (1997) notion of “performativity.” Whereas the former presumes a subject, the latter contests the very notion of the subject. That is, one does not perform one’s gender, which assumes the subject’s gender identity as stable, coherent, and based on an a priori notion of “sex;” rather, through repetition of performative acts, one materializes the effects of gender normality. Also as Butler (1993:2) points out, the fact that this reiteration is necessary is “a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled.” She goes on to argue that “it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law” (1993:2).

Indeed, the various rearticulations of the black female and Southeast Asian American male students’ racialized gender performativity by the students themselves, as well as by some of the teachers, revealed instabilities and possibilities for reconstituting the cultural norm that governs the materialization of the subjects’ bodies.

Drawing on this theoretical framework, I now turn to an examination of how black female and Southeast Asian American male students were constructed as racialized gendered Other at Hope High through iterative acts of regulative discourses and representations in various contexts. These processes occurred with much disruption and discomfort as the students contested and appropriated conceptualizations of them as “failures” and “abject beings.”

(Un)Necessary Toughness at Hope High

Hope High School was situated in the medium-sized, midwestern city of Jackson. Jackson was similar to many cosmopolitan cities in that there was stark residential segregation by race and socioeconomic status, and significant academic and economic gaps between the white population and the populations of color (black/African Americans, Southeast Asian Americans, and Latino[a]s).

Since 1990, the student population at Hope High has shifted from being predominantly white to being increasingly diverse racially and ethnically, although it remained majority white. The change in the student demographics was attributed to transfer students from nearby large cities (bringing more black students), an influx of Southeast Asian refugees, and a steadily increasing Mexican and Latin American migrant population. At the beginning of the 1997–98 school year, of the 1,776 students at Hope High, 68.4 percent were white, 18.5 percent were black, 8.5 percent were Asian American, 4.3 percent were Hispanic, and 0.5 percent were American Indian. The wide socioeconomic differences in the surrounding community were reflected in the student population. Hope High students ranged from living in affluent, middle and working-class
neighborhoods to living in subsidized housing and group homes. Twenty-five percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches.

Data collection for my research began in November 1997 and ended in July 1999. My key informants included 65 students, 6 principals, 23 teachers, and 10 staff members (including counselors for minority students, resource specialists, family–school liaisons, a social worker, a support staff, and a security officer). I approached the individuals in my study with broad questions regarding the significance of race, their racial and ethnic identity, and race relations at Hope High.

Two of the patterns that emerged from the data point to the complex nature of identity construction and the effects of these constructions on students as academic and social beings. The patterns revealed specific and dramatic representations of two student populations. The black female students (commonly referred to as “black girls”) were portrayed as loud and tough, and the Southeast Asian American male students (commonly referred to as “Asian boys”) were characterized as quiet and clannish. The interplay of the two representations became apparent as I heard over and over again references to a physical fight, which occurred in the academic year before I began my study, that started between a black female student and a Hmong male student and escalated into a larger fight between black male and female students and Southeast Asian American male students.

Those “Loud Black Girls”

Loudness as a Stereotype: Look Who’s Yelling

Whereas most of the people I interviewed acknowledged individual differences, there was a prevailing image of the black girls at Hope High as “loud” and “visible.” The following description of black female students by Ms. Corwin (white, Jewish American female; English-as-a-second-language [ESL] teacher) exemplified the typical descriptions offered by teachers, administrators and students:

I think that they’re viewed as loud . . . large and loud. . . . I think the perception comes from, behavior in the hall. They are . . . so visible, by their behavior that it’s easy to generalize from a few kids to the group. And, it is true that there are a lot of very, very loud African American girls. But, obviously, they’re not, all. They are noticeable.

In addition to the image of being “large and loud,” the black female students were also characterized as aggressive and having a lot of “attitude.”

For example, teachers and students described (and I observed numerous times) how some black female students would stand as a group in the hallway between and sometimes during classes, talking to each other
loudly and blocking the hallway. Students and teachers found it difficult and frustrating to walk past the black female students. Julie (Cambodian female; junior) described an incident she observed the day of our interview:

It was like, this white dude was just walking, right, and then these two black girls they were just talking and, everybody just passed them because they were like in the center of the hallway and then just one dude, ... just walking, like normal, like anybody else. And the girl saw him and he like walked past her, and she got so mad, so she like, grabbed him behind the shirt saying, “You shouldn’t be walking in front of me, and thinking you are all [higher]” or something like that. She started snapping at him! I was like whoa! I was just walking on the other side, right? And I was like, he didn’t do nothing! I don’t know why she did that.

In this example, the “loud black girl” disrupted the racialized gender norm in confronting and “snapping” at a white male student and, in a sense, acquired a sense of power in this specific situation. However, as Julie’s comments revealed, this disruption was not understood as a challenge to the subordination of black females as racialized, gendered Other. Instead, as Butler states, “Inasmuch as ‘identity’ is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of intelligibility by which persons are defined” (1990:17).

This stylization of the black female student was a reiteration of sociohistorical representations of black women. As Jewell (1993) argues, the mass media has systematically portrayed cultural images of African American females based on myths and stereotypes that evolved during slavery, in which African American women represent the antithesis of white American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood. These cultural images (e.g., as mammy or Sapphire) have justified the limited access that African American females have to societal resources and institutions. “As such, some argue that the media’s efforts to masculinize African American women, assigning them physical attributes and emotional qualities traditionally attributed to males (who possess power and wealth) is directly related to the extent that African American women represent a threat to those in power” (Jewell 1993:36). Jewell notes that this threat to male prerogative is “a function of the African American women’s refusal to accept gender roles constructed by men in power and the related positions of subordination to which women, in general, have been consigned” (1993:36). Within this sociohistorical context, the construction of the black female students’ loudness as negative at Hope High was a reiteration of a history of regulative norms that repudiate African American females as racialized gendered Other.
Loudness as a Strategy

Ariel (African/black female; senior), who was very well known by the administrators, teachers, and students at Hope High for being loud, offered a thoughtful and complex explanation for being loud.

Joy Lei: Was it hard to make friends when you first came or did you already know people at Hope High?

Ariel: I knew most people at Hope High but it was easy for myself to make friends ‘cuz I would just, “Hi,” speak to them and, “What’s your name?” ask them. ‘Cuz I was always loud so, everybody like, “Okay, who is that girl making all that noise?”

JL: Well you know actually that is one thing that I have heard like, not just you, but I get a general description of the black girls at Hope High as being loud. . . . Do you hear that?

A: Yeah, you do. Because, I don’t know, the black girls that I hang around with they just outspoken, it’s no reason to be, . . . I mean, make friends, be yourself, you gotta have fun and it’s stereotyped that way in school because people try to make school fun when it’s not, so therefore you gotta be loud and get attention from other people. In order to make it fun. And basically it comes from a lot of, you know African American females.

JL: Why?

A: I don’t know . . . Some do it to make boys like them. I do it ‘cuz it just me that’s what I grew up from, this is how I’m raised; you know, loud, my mom’s loud.

Ariel talked about being loud as being outspoken, a way of having fun, making friends, getting attention, and “being yourself.” She also recognized being loud as a trait shared by her mother and other African American females. It is crucial to develop a complex understanding of loudness as an act of resistance among some African American females. As Fordham suggests that, “those loud Black girls” is a metaphor of “African-American women’s existence, their collective denial of, and resistance to, their socially proclaimed powerlessness, or ‘nothingness’” (1993:25).

A few faculty members seemed to recognize that the behavior and attitudes attributed to black female gender performativity were more complicated than just the black females being obnoxious and “bad students.” Mr. Allen (white male; English teacher), for example, found the attitudes of those “loud black girls” to be extremely frustrating:

There’s, also a group [of black female students] that I think tries to achieve success by working their personal perceptions of what it means to be African American. As far as lot of attitude, willingness to scrap with anybody, not necessarily physically fight but “I don’t take no shit from nobody,” . . . that that’s the way they’re supposed to be.

Yet, at the same time, Mr. Allen saw this attitude as a survival strategy and defense mechanism:
I think a lot of it has to do with their social backgrounds... if you're coming from [a place] where, some basic sort of survival things are the ability to not let anybody give you any grief. And a lot of times that tends to get in the way of more substantial, standardized forms of success. On the other hand, I think a lot of times African American adolescent girls have a better self-image than a lot of people give them credit for. Which I think sometimes people get the wrong idea, about what that's all about. They think they're cockier or obnoxious or whatever, when really that's not what's being played. It's almost a defense mechanism.

Mr. Allen recognized the positive self-image reflected in the black girls' "attitude," but had difficulty reconciling it with the negative impact the same attitude can have on how the black females were constructed against "the more substantial, standardized forms of success."

Ms. Day (white female; social studies teacher) was another teacher who complicated the normative production of the "loud black girls":

But, if it is an African American girl who's got a little more attitude than the average girl... It means that she doesn't like to be told what to do. She has a strong sense of self... But, in some ways I think it can be a very positive quality. 'Cuz you don't see a lot of the negative self-esteem issues that you see with many other girls. They tend to be a lot more confident... and they don't back down. Now on the other hand that can get people in trouble sometimes when you're with a teacher who doesn't quite know how to deal with that and isn't used to that, or looks at it as a respect issue, and, it isn't necessarily! It all has to do with how you approach the person and how you speak to them. If you belittle them or embarrass them, they're gonna get angry. They're more likely to get a little in your face than a girl who's white might.

Here, Ms. Day challenged the normative formulation of the black female students as repudiated Other and recast the materialization of their racialized gender performativity as having a strong sense of self and resistance toward being belittled or embarrassed.

Ariel's reasoning for being loud and Mr. Allen's and Ms. Day's observations of the positive self-image of the black female students point to the instabilities that regularly occur with the repetition of performative acts. Within the institutional and cultural practices of Hope High, however, such disruption collided against the regulatory norms at the school.

Academic and Social Effects of Being Loud

For some of the teachers at Hope High, the "loud black girls" posed a threat to those in power and the male prerogative, not only symbolically but also in a literal sense. For example, I observed white male teachers walk away from loud black female students in the hallway during class time rather than approach them. Students witnessed this avoidance behavior by the teachers as well, which served to reinforce the image of the black girls as an aggressive threat. One student, Mei Mei (Chinese
Vietnamese female; junior), saw the teachers' avoidance of the black female students as an indication of fear:

You can feel like the teacher doesn’t want them to get away with it but then the teacher . . . is sometimes afraid. Especially if they turn it into a racial issue. And they’ll bring it up all the time. So the teacher won’t do anything about it.

When I mentioned the hallway interactions to faculty members, their responses supported Mei Mei’s observation that there was a fear that the black girls would get louder and more aggressive, thus escalating the situation, and also a fear that the black girls would accuse them of being racist.

During my interview with Charice (black female; senior), who was considered loud and tough by teachers and administrators, she described how teachers took her behavior, which she perceived to be traits of a leader, as threatening their authority and competing for control of the classroom:

Like, kids are just, “Charice.” I’m like man, sometimes I try to be quiet, and they’re like, “What’s wrong, you’re not talking today?” And like I don’t do it on purpose, but man teachers be getting all mad and stuff. Like, “She comes and just takes total control over my class.” And I’ll be like, [I] don’t do it on purpose.

Charice went on to describe the ritual of being sent to the principal’s office by teachers, whether it was her fault or not, and her active resistance to it, which, in the end, almost always put her at the principal’s office. Davidson describes this authoritative control of the teachers to remove the students as a form of disciplinary technology (defined as isolating, ordering, and systematic practices) and points out the "disciplinary system that gives unlimited authority to send students from the classroom to in-school suspension marks students as total subordinates and teaches that good students discern and conform to adult rules, arbitrary or not" (1996:4–5). Within this matrix of structuring social and institutional practices, “loud black girls” are marked as “bad students,” both to complete the production and to reinforce the normalcy of “good students” in contrast to the Otherness of “bad students.” As Fordham concludes, “‘those loud Black girls’ are doomed not necessarily because they cannot handle the academy’s subject matter, but because they resist ‘active participation in [their] own exclusion’ ” (1993:10).

The representation of “those loud black girls” may have derived from actual actions of some of the black female students; however, the constitutive meanings enacted and attached to the representation served to materialize and sustain a white hegemonic masculinity that shaped the regulative system of racialized gender normality. These meanings and effects were generalized to all black female students, which made becoming a “good student” for them impossible, or with costs. Lisette, a
high-achieving black senior, discussed how the representation affected her relationship with teachers and other black female students:

I think that the teachers and students also see the black girls in the negative stereotypes. Because there are a lot of girls here that... portray themselves as that negative, loud-talking, pregnant. And just not keeping themselves well groomed. I think they [teachers and students] tend to see that negative view more than they see the positive. And it's really... very unfair to like people like myself and my friends that aren't like that at all... There are wars between the black girls too. I mean, they've always called me "stuck up" and until like, this year when they got to know me, but because I'm not loud, and like I do my hair all the time, most of the time [laughs]. Like, I mean I dress nice and I have on proper fitting bras and everything. I'm not, wearing things... that aren't like appropriate. And I think that's what comes across to the teachers and most of the students... it's what they focus on. Because they see... me, they see my friends, and they see that we're not all like that, but they... tend to focus in on them.

The conflict within Lisette—internalizing the negative stereotype and wanting to distance herself from it but also wanting to challenge it—was exacerbated by the tensions she felt from other black female students and the focus she believed teachers and other students put on the "loud black girls," filtering out contradictions to the dominant image.

Lisette's narrative is filled with stylization of the body, each act reiterating an image of a repudiated Other within academic and social relations. That is, the performative effects of the "loud black girls" necessitated the repetitive citation of "negative, loud-talking, pregnant" (along with the implied lack of moral ethics) and inappropriate dress.

In addition to academic consequences, the representation of "those loud black girls" had social consequences as well. Attractiveness and heterosexual desirability were attributed positively to black males but negatively to black females at Hope High. Although one of the reasons Ariel offered for why some of the black girls were loud was "to make boys like them," some of the black males suggested that the loudness and "attitude" of black females were reasons for not dating them. For example, Dom, who was a popular black basketball player, spoke about some of the black females within the context of him being criticized for dating white females:

It's not because I like somebody because they white, it's just, that was the person I like, this person came and talked to me, and then when I try to talk, you all wanted to like, act crazy and stuff and, you hear people before they coming and stuff... when you hear somebody's voice from around the corner and you don't see them for like thirty seconds later you're like, why would I want to talk to somebody who I hear from the other end of the school, always getting into trouble and stuff like that?

Dom's comments, as well as Lisette's, reflect the ways that white and black females are often contrasted in mainstream society. As Fordham
points out, white womanhood is often defined as a cultural universal; “In striking contrast, black womanhood is often presented as the antithesis of white woman’s lives, the slur or ‘the nothingness’... that men and other women use to perpetuate and control the image of the ‘good girl’ and by extension the good woman” (1993:4). Earl (black/white male; senior) offered this opinion on black female students at Hope High:

Most of the black girls here are not very attractive, and that’s what me and my friends have conceded but, I mean, I’m not to say all black women are ugly because, there are, undoubtedly many, many, many beautiful black women but at Hope High School in our little society no there’s not! I mean, and there’s lots of good looking white girls but there’s more whites so that’s to be expected.

The oppositional performativity of black and white femininity and womanhood served to uphold the production of the “good girl” and the “good woman” and to render black female students as unattractive within the racist, sexist, and heterosexist discourses of high school dating culture.

Regulating Loudness

Earlier, I discussed, through Charice’s example, how disciplinary technology worked to define what is “normal” in relation to the meaning of “good student,” by producing and repudiating the “bad student,” that is, the “loud black girls.” Davidson (1996) describes another institutional practice—serious speech acts—that serves a similar function. Serious speech acts are truth claims asserted by an expert in an area. In schools, “because students may view certain adults (e.g., guidance counselors, teachers, etc.) as privileged authorities with specific knowledge about higher education, life chances, and so on, their assertions may be viewed as serious speech acts—knowledge to be studied, repeated, and passed on to friends” (1996:5). At Hope High, black female students were disciplined for their behaviors by the negative meanings attached to their loudness and visibility. These regulatory practices governed their racialized gendered identity and their self-identity construction.

Ariel: And when I was just loud. ... I have had teachers or Mr. Dixon [the principal] talk to me saying that, sometimes being loud is OK and sometimes it’s not, there’s a time and a place for it. So I had to kind of mature over the years, and kind of know that, it looks stupid. ‘Cuz, now I look at them it’s like they just so dang ol’ loud. And I don’t know the reason for it but it just don’t look right, it’s not cute. It’s like you trying to draw attention and, I’d be loud and I’m having fun or when I’m like really talking to somebody or I’m just having fun. But... just to do it... there’s no sense, it’s ignorant.

Joy Lei: [W]hen you think about it, when is there a right place for and when is there a wrong place for it?

A: Um, especially in school? It, they saying it’s the wrong place for it by the fact we [black people] are being stereotyped each moment on
whatever we do. And that’s one of the biggest things and, I look at it now and say yeah, and when is the right place, well... if you out with your friends depends on where you are, then okay, be yourself. But, it might be certain people walking through the building, anybody that’ll be... looking up to you. And then you not setting up a good role model.

According to Davidson, “A network of serious speech acts may come to constitute a discursive system; that is, a system that works to control both what is said and how others are conceptualized” (1996:5). For Hope High, numerous in-school and out-of-school speech acts produced a schoolwide and societal discursive system to disavow “those loud black girls” as desirable academic and social beings.

As a result, Ariel learned to manage her “selves” at school by becoming quieter and “calming down” so that she was given respect and people would speak to her. However, she had mixed feelings toward how she learned to “code switch” her loudness:

Yeah, so it’s like I really have kept it on down. And even I have had students come up to me and they’re like, “You are so much quieter now.” And I laugh at it because I’d be like, dang, she’s right, you know? It’s kinda funny but then, again it’s not funny, it’s sad. But... at least I’ve made myself a little bit more positive in that perspective? Rather than, “Oh that just that loud, black girl,” “that’s just that loud girl.” And I go well, you did calm down so they give me more respect, they speak to me. I wouldn’t really wanna talk or hang around anybody that’s real loud. That’s kinda embarrassing.

Within the regulatory system at Hope High and in the larger U.S. society, “loud black girls” were/are disciplined to contain and manage themselves so as not to threaten white supremacy and dominant masculinility. However, as Jewell argues, “The paradox is that as long as African American women must assume responsibilities for themselves and their families, due to a social and economic system that limits opportunities for African American males and females, they will continue to possess the qualities that threaten patriarchy” (1993:65). Jewell points out that if those in power want African American women to reject the threatening characteristics they possess, then those in power must eliminate the need for such qualities. To do so, however, “would mean that those who are socially and economically privileged would no longer... maintain their advantaged status by limiting the opportunities of others, including African American women” (1993:65). In this sense, the very image of “those loud black girls,” which was/is reiterated to maintain the regulatory ideals of raced and gendered norms, may be the one most powerful challenge to those ideals.
Those Quiet Asian Boys

Quietness as a Stereotype: Look Who's (Not) Talking

The Southeast Asian American male students at Hope High were almost all from a refugee background. Most were born in Laos, Cambodia, and refugee camps in Thailand, and the majority were Hmong, with a much smaller number of Cambodian, Lao, and an even smaller number of Vietnamese, Thai, and ethnic Chinese students. Also, a significant number of the Southeast Asian American male students were in ESL classes. Whereas the loudness and visibility of the black female students rendered them as the Other, it was the quietness and inconspicuousness of the Southeast Asian American male students that constructed them as the Other. Ms. Day gave the following description:

Well the Southeast Asian males I've had in class are generally very quiet people. Now whether or not they're like that when they get home, I don't know... When I see some of them in the hallway with their friends, ... they don't seem quiet at all because they're together. But when they're in a classroom where they are in the minority, I see, generally, pretty quiet people. Although, you always sort of wonder what's stirring underneath, because sometimes, you pass a kid his paper, and he'll have something written across his knuckles. Or something where you're sort of wondering, what in the world is this kid up to when he leaves the classroom? You know, it makes you very curious about what else is going on his life, is he, in... I hate the word "gang," it's just, a silly name but, in some kind of a group, that identifies themselves a certain way and that acts tougher and... it's a little bit of a mystery what they're like when they leave because... the Asian students won't come up, and just talk to me, like a lot of other students will. Like kids will come, just that, for the heck of it, stop in to say "hi," and say, "I'm doing this and this and this this weekend." I don't think I've ever had an Asian student do that. Unless it's an Asian student that has a family that's been very... "Americanized." You know, whereas [the "Americanized" Asian students] don't even associate really with, any other Asian kids. ... It seems like they're very rarely treated as one of the guys.

Several attributes in Ms. Day's narrative are worth noting: the Southeast Asian American males' quietness and lack of talk, their "curious" and "mysterious" behavior outside the classrooms, their possible association with gangs or groups that "act tough," their Asian/foreign-ness, and their marginal masculinity.

The Southeast Asian American male students' quietness seemed both understandable and unsettling for the non-Asian students and teachers. It was understandable because the Southeast Asian American males may have felt uncomfortable speaking in class due to their limited English proficiency or because they were shy. For example, Alisa (Cuban/white female; freshman) described what she observed of one Southeast Asian American male student in her class:
I have a friend, who's in my history class and, he's really shy. And, then when my teacher talks to him his face gets all red because he gets nervous. And then, he goes and hangs with his friends then he acts just fine. But when he's around other kids, he doesn’t feel right. It’s probably because, he like, knows different language and a different way.

For some students, the quietness of the Southeast Asian American male students made them unnoticeable, almost invisible. Ariel, for example, stated:

I don’t pay no attention to the Asian boys, I really don’t. But I do pay attention to the Asian girls, you know? ’Cuz they do show themselves more or they talk more, you just see them more. . . . I guess [Asian boys] just been stereotyped in different ways since they . . . seem like they look at it as they don’t count.

At the same time, the quietness of the Southeast Asian American male students was unsettling because they offered little to no information about themselves. It was a “mystery” to Ms. Day what they were like outside her classroom. She linked the quietness to Asian culture by juxtaposing it with the behavior of “Americanized” Asian students. Mr. Bailey (black male; grade-level principal) was also perplexed by the quietness of the Southeast Asian American males and rationalized their behavior as being “torn” between the “old country” and being “Americanized”:

But it’s really hard to figure out Asian males. Asian females a little bit easier, they’ll talk openly a little bit more. They probably be, two of the groups that don’t bare any of their real feelings. . . . By far they’ve got to be the most complex group within the school. Because of the fact that the language, [and they’re] torn between whether or not they gonna adhere to the customs from the old country. Or, they wanna do things, become more Americanized.

These performative speech acts set up “Asian-ness,” specifically Southeast Asian-ness, as diametrically opposed to “American-ness,” thus reiterating the normative assumption of Asian as foreign and “not-American.” This oppositional dichotomy constituted the Southeast Asian American males’ characteristics and behavior as either “Asian” or trying to “become more Americanized,” which precluded more complicated and multilayered understandings of their identity construction.

When I spoke with Southeast Asian American students regarding their experiences at school and the representation of them as being quiet, both male and female students cited language as being a major reason. For example, Sonya, an outgoing and loquacious Hmong female student, told me about being teased by non-Asian students when she spoke in non-ESL classes. Andy (Hmong male; sophomore), talked about having difficulty expressing himself in English in non-ESL classes, even though he knew the answer to a question, and therefore not raising his hand to speak. Andy also discussed links between limited English proficiency and the potential for miscommunication, misunderstanding and
physical violence. Andy spoke more about this in his interview, which I hand-recorded because he did not want to be tape-recorded.

Andy says the white students like to say something bad about Asians. Even when they’re saying something good, the Asians may not know that [because of language difficulty]. So the Asians tell them to stop but they won’t, they’ll just keep saying the same thing so Asians fight them.

Andy says that if you know the language, then it’s easier to talk to different people, you can trust them more. When Asians talk to each other and joke, they know it’s a joke. But sometimes you joke with white people and they don’t know it’s a joke and they get mad and may start a fight. And people are always joking.

Here, Andy linked language to verbal and physical conflicts as well as trust, an important component to developing friendships and feeling comfortable in a school environment.

The issue of language proficiency as an academic and social barrier is common to immigrant students, as is the assumption that once they learn English the barriers will be lifted. I would argue that the silence and isolation of the Southeast Asian American students did not result solely from limited English proficiency. Harassment, discrimination, and intolerance were likely to continue even after students acquire English proficiency, mostly because of the nativist and anti-Asian racism that exist in U.S. society, where any sign of “foreign-ness” is not tolerated (Ancheta 1998; Lei 1998; Lowe 1996; Tuan 1998).

The Southeast Asian American male students’ quietness and “clannish” behavior were largely a response to and defense against the nativism and racism they faced in school. As Ms. Day and Alisa noted, and as I observed, the Southeast Asian American students in general, and the Southeast Asian American males students with limited English proficiency in particular, presented themselves in public spaces at school differently than when they were with each other in ESL classrooms or at the “Asian tables” in the cafeteria.

Smallness as a Stereotype: Body Politics

Another iteration of the racialized gender performativity of the Southeast Asian American male students was one based on their physique. At Hope High, the average height of most of the Southeast Asian American male students was around five feet two or three inches and they were usually slender in build. (There was, of course, a range and there were a few obvious exceptions.) It is important to note that this average physique of the Southeast Asian American male students is the “masculine norm” in Laos, Cambodia, and the refugee camps in Thailand. However, transplanted to the United States, where hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1996) is based on the normative ideal of the white, European American, abled, and athletic male body, which demands a higher height (the average being around five feet eleven inches) and stockier build, the
average physique of the Southeast Asian American male students was constituted as small and weak. The marginalization of Southeast Asian American masculinity was hinted at in Ms. Day’s comments about the exclusion of Southeast Asian American male students from “typical” boys’ activities in the classroom. Also, some of the Southeast Asian American female students described them as “puny” and “less attractive.” When I asked some of the Southeast Asian American male students whether they thought the perceptions toward their physical size affected their experiences at Hope High, responses were mixed.

**Davuth:** I think it [the perception of Asian guys as smaller and shorter] affects like how we get along with people. Because, I’m always hearing about “Awh man! the girls like,” “Awh man they getting tall man,” all this stuff you know they like the tall guys? Us Asian dudes are like, “Man we’re all like short and everything!” They’re like, “Man I want to be tall!” and all this stuff. I think that’s why.

**Joy Lei:** So like, what do you do?
**D:** I don’t do nothing I’m tall enough. I think . . . they just want to be taller because they don’t want to feel so short and look like. . . . Everybody comes up to them, “How old are you?” “Cuz, they look all short. “How old are you?” and . . . they’re like, “I’m seventeen.” They’re like, “You don’t look seventeen, you look like you’re like twelve” or something.

Whereas Davuth recognized the collective representation of the Southeast Asian American male students as small and perceived it as having supplemental effects (such as female students’ attraction toward them and being mistaken as children rather than as young adults), Andy maintained that Southeast Asian American males did not see themselves as short. Below are excerpts from my notes of our interview:

**Andy:** Even though they’re short, they don’t consider themselves short. This country [United States] has better food so they grow much more. The Americans are a couple of steps ahead of us but there’s no difference. In fact, Andy smiles and says, in Thailand, they’re usually scared of the shorter guys because they’re quicker.

I ask if that’s a reason why Asian guys are usually in groups. Andy says no, that it’s because they’re friends. But he does agree that non-Asians may think that Asians are easier to beat up because they’re bigger than Asians but that’s not always true. Asians usually aren’t alone.

Although Andy saw a logical explanation for the difference in physical size between Southeast Asian males and “Americans” and denied, at first, that Southeast Asian American male students walked around in groups due to their physique, his comments, when taken together, revealed a multilayered narrative that wove together the various dimensions of the Southeast Asian American male identity. That is, they were Southeast Asian males, with the “appropriate” and “normal” physique; they were racial minorities in the U.S. context that constructed them as...
Some staff and faculty noted the majority of Southeast Asian American males did not participate in school sports, which is a criterion for hegemonic masculinity in the United States. Mr. Sparks (white male; coach and physical education teacher) thought it might have to do with their smaller physical stature. He listed some school sports, such as wrestling and tennis, which did not require a larger and taller build and in which he thought Asian American males could do well. Yet, I knew that a number of Southeast Asian American male students went regularly to the gym during lunch and played basketball, and that there was a Hmong soccer league in the local community that competed with other Hmong soccer teams across the state. When I asked some of the Southeast Asian American male students why they did not participate in school sports and extracurricular activities, they cited parental constraints on their participation in any nonacademic school activities and family and employment obligations. They also pointed to racial tension with black students as a reason why they were not more involved in school sports. In this case, the regulative practice of hegemonic masculinity, which led to reiterations of the Southeast Asian American male body as lacking, prevented the faculty and staff from considering other social and racial factors that served to alienate the Southeast Asian American male students from extracurricular activities such as school sports.

The representation of Southeast Asian American males as small and weak translated into perceptions of them as "emasculated" (Eng 2001; Kumashiro 1999; Ling 1997) and easy targets for verbal and physical attack. When I asked Destiny (Hmong female; senior) why she thought there were tensions between the Asian students and the black students, she discussed the issue of control and its association with physical size:

Maybe it's 'cuz, the control, like we were talking about before. . . . Like my husband said right? They were here [at Hope High a few years ago as students], him and . . . all his Asian friends, . . . They're like, five-seven, five-eight, they were all taller, bigger, than the ones here [laughs], and . . . they're all seniors, there's like probably 10 of them. They had the control because, they're all together and that made the difference. Now it's like, all the Asian guys leaving, some of them are gone, dropped out, the ones that are here are like, little, small, short. They can't do anything. So I guess, like the black people probably looks down on them like, now you get control a little.

The performative effect of the racialized gendered construction of the Southeast Asian American male students as Other was repeated and internalized both outside of and within the Southeast Asian American communities. In Destiny's eyes, the Southeast Asian American male students at Hope High were "little, small, short," whereas the same Southeast Asian American males would be seen as of average height in Southeast
Asia. Both Destiny’s and Davuth’s comments about Southeast Asian American male students’ physical size reflected the stylization of the body in relation to power, control, and desirability.

Why So Tough? Redefining Masculinity

Ironically, a third representation of the Southeast Asian American males that Ms. Day alluded to was that they were in gangs of some sort, or in a group that “acts tougher.” Gangs are generally linked to violence, crime, and academic failure, and gang members are often seen as threatening. Whether the Southeast Asian American male students were in gangs or not, Ms. Day’s speculation implied a need of the students to be in a group that “acts tough.” In fact, the themes of Southeast Asian American male students defending themselves, watching out for each other’s back, acting “tough” or “hard,” and being in groups were consistent in my interviews with Southeast Asian American female and male students.

Although the gang image seems in conflict with the quiet and invisible representation, it is not unusual that there are two opposing representations of a subordinated group, with one “good” image and one “bad” image. Elsewhere I discussed two dominant representations of Asian Americans as the model minority and as the perpetual foreigner (Lei 1998). Although the two representations are contradictory to each other, they play off of one another to shape the positioning and experiences of Asian Americans in the U.S. racial order. Asian Americans are the model minority, the foreigner or both, depending on what the context needs us to be. That is, the powerful function of representations is their readiness to be used in the manner that will maintain the ideology that created them. At Hope High, the model minority representation was imposed on the quiet Southeast Asian American students who came to school everyday (whether they were succeeding academically or not), and the production of the gang representation, which served to define the “bad Asian,” was imposed on Southeast Asian American students (mostly the males but a few females) who were often seen in groups together and who did not always come to school.

The Southeast Asian American males’ sense of a need to protect themselves from the threat of physical and verbal harassment, particularly from black students, became a part of their daily life at Hope High after the fight between the black female student and the Hmong male student escalated into more fights and increased the negative tensions between the black students and the Asian American students. Davuth described what the school environment was like for him immediately after the fights between black and Southeast Asian American students.

Joy Lei: So around that time did you feel kind of unsafe coming to school?
Davuth: Yeah. Everybody’s all, I know I did.
JL: Did people harass you more?
D: No, not that much. But, more than usual. But, they just call and then, you walk past they start talking about you. And then you hear about it and you just want to say something back and then, and then it kept going on for a while. And they kept on saying that thing and I started getting mad and started saying something stuff back at lunchtime. . . . 'Cuz you know how Asian guys just sit at one table? And then, some black girls do like, throwing food at us. And then we got mad and . . . one of our Asian guys stood up and started yelling at her and . . . swearing at her . . . and they kept swearing back and forth . . . then the other guys got mad and started throwing food.

Symon (Hmong male; junior), talked about his take on the prevailing image of Southeast Asian American males in groups:

Walking in a group, it’s not that they’re not going to mess with you, it’s just that, you are more comfortable. I mean, if you’re by yourself in a group of kids that is different, they all stare at you. Which would be like looking down and say, “Please don’t say anything to me.” . . . But if you’re in a group, and they got a group, they just look at you and they look away. So then you’re just like, you can go on what you’re doing.

Symon’s response suggested that being in a group was more to discourage being messed with so that he could feel more comfortable. Other Southeast Asian American males confirmed that most of them were in groups but not in gangs. They told me that most of the students who were actually in gangs had left or never really went to school anyway.

Mr. Thao, a Hmong intern in the counseling department, shared with me what was discussed in relation to this issue in a support group he organized for Southeast Asian American freshman males who were identified as “at risk” of not being promoted to their sophomore year:

One of the sections I explore . . . with the group is how the different size between all the students, and . . . one of the point that they emphasize is that, because they small, a lot of time they have to be in a certain group . . . to have somebody back them up. You know even though they small but they have the brain and . . . they have a heart too, so they have to fight back no matter how small they are . . . A lot of kids, they believe that the more people they have in a group, they have more power. That’s how violence gets started. And it’s like, they have more support from their friends too . . . just by joining a certain group.

By being in a group, the Southeast Asian American males created a defense barrier that protected them from potential harassment. The same barrier, however, served to maintain a lack of communication and understanding between the Southeast Asian American male students and the rest of the school.
A few of the staff and faculty noted changes in some of the Southeast Asian American male students, which was often explained as the effects of "Americanization." It is interesting that the behaviors labeled "Americanized" were the same behaviors that were characterized as "deviant": for example, wearing baggy pants and other types of clothing that were described as an urban hip-hop style, fighting, skipping, gang activity, low academic achievement, and dropping out of school. Besides the urban hip-hop clothing, some of the Southeast Asian American males also adopted gestures and ways of speaking and walking that were stereotypically depicted as "ghetto" and "acting black." Some of the Southeast Asian American males were into breakdancing and a few drove very pumped up sports cars and sport utility vehicles. This adoption of presumed markers of masculinity and African American culture could be seen as acculturation. I would argue that these behaviors also reflected performative acts of achieving "toughness" to counteract the construction of them as masculine Other. By choosing to adopt markers associated with black masculinity, which has been stereotyped as hypermasculine and a threat to white male prerogative (Ferguson 2000), the Southeast Asian American male students gained a tougher image. However, this tougher image also materialized them as deviant academic and social beings.

As "newcomers" to preestablished gender and racial hierarchies in the United States, the Southeast Asian American males’ choices to be silent and invisible, to acculturate and adopt certain styles and behaviors, to physically resist the harassment they faced, were all acts of resistance to the negative production of them as abject beings. Mr. Thao poignantly explained this to me in his interview:

I think that the Asian kids, they try and establish their identity? ... A sense of who they are. And I... by doing that, they have to fight, if that’s what it takes for them to do?

However, within the context of schooling that reflects discursive systems that regulate racialized and gendered normality, many of the ways that the Southeast Asian American males chose to fight back led to further marginalization from school and academic achievement.

Caught between a Rock and a Hard Place

According to the students, teachers, and administrators in my study, there were two obvious changes since the fight between the black female student and the Hmong male student, and the ensuing mediation process. First, a number of black students told me that they learned that not all Asians were Chinese, that chink was a derogatory term, and that the Asian students at Hope High had different ethnic backgrounds such as Hmong, Lao, and Cambodian. For the Southeast Asian American students, an
effect was that a significant number of Southeast Asian American male students left the school either on their own or due to being expelled. There were symbolic and other material effects to the fight as well. The representation of black female students as loud and tough was both illuminated and further instituted into the dominant discourse at the school. Also, the quiet and inconspicuous image of the remaining Southeast Asian American male students gained a layer of mystique and toughness. Surrounding the two exacerbated representations was an increase in tension between the black students and the Southeast Asian American students.

As Mr. Bailey’s comments suggest, the fight was an indication that the Southeast Asian American students (specifically the males), were fed up with being pushed to the bottom of the racialized and gendered hierarchy:

I think the Asian kids are trying to establish a place for themselves... in the last three years I’ve seen them get more aggressive... When that fight happened with [a black girl], it was about a year and a half ago. When she and this Asian kid got into a fight and... we end up doing some mediation stuff [and] he had been called names for almost a year... Names like [“chink”], “rice cake” and, just a whole bunch of crap! And I’m sitting there, why do you take this stuff?! I don’t know it was something, probably culture he just kept it inside... until that day. He just said, “I couldn’t take it anymore.” He knocked the crap out of her. He picked her up and dumped her. And he should have. ‘Cuz... no kid should have to go through that kind of abuse and keep it all inside. And he just exploded. That day on, I think the Asian kids said, “Screw it! We ain’t taking no more crap.” That was a turning point, up until that time they were, they had been... fairly, humble and they didn’t do a whole lot of stuff but from that point on, the shit hit the fan... and then the kids were saying, if this one kid can fight for what I mean it was a girl!... But, she had been calling him names forever!... From that point on, the Asian kids just said, “We are not taking it. We are part of the school and we can be as tough as you are.”

This fight was a consequence of both groups being forced to reclaim their voices as marginalized and excluded Others within a dominant, racialized gendered discursive system. Believing that the only way one can rise within the hierarchy was to push someone else down, they fought one another and, in so doing, reinforced each other’s stereotypes and representation as racialized gendered Other.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented ways that racialized gender performativity was enacted through complex and multilayered processes of negotiation, accommodation, and resistance by the black female and Southeast Asian American male students at Hope High. A major purpose of this article is to challenge and reformulate the current materialization of the “loud black girls” and the “quiet Asian boys.” A risk of this task, however, is furthering the harmful reiterations simply by writing about and discussing them. Recognizing this risk, I want to emphasize that we
must be critical of any production of subordinate and marginalized populations as deviant, foreign, or racialized gendered Other, and understand processes of identity construction as laden with the effects of regulative norms and power dynamics.

As Davidson (1996) suggests, power should not be conceptualized as a system of domination that leaves no room for resistance, but rather as practices and discourse that define normality in advance. “Because schools participate in negotiating the meanings students attach to identity, the ways in which teachers and schools handle power and convey ethnically and racially meanings become relevant to the conceptualization of students’ behaviors” (Davidson 1996:5).

I have pointed to ways that disciplinary technologies and serious speech acts at Hope High constituted racialized gendered Others, and instituted normative notions of the “good student,” the “good/desirable girl/woman,” and the “good/desirable boy/man” based on the privileging of white hegemonic masculinity. I have also described how students and teachers regularly resisted and disrupted these regulatory practices, revealing the instabilities of these norms. Butler argues that we need “to consider this threat and disruption not as a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (1993:3).

The ways in which those in authoritative and powerful positions formulate and react to the behavior and bodies of the students have consequences for students’ identity construction and academic achievement. Through those in power and through institutional and cultural practices, schools need to recognize that stylization of bodies based on regulative norms such as “race,” “sex,” “gender,” and “sexuality” are not natural but artificially imposed. How do we privilege certain identifications and foreclose or disavow others so that a student’s success is based more on the materialization of his or her body than his or her humanity? By becoming conscious of how schooling participates in the performative effects of regulative regimes, we can, as Butler (1993) urges us to, spawn rearticulations that question the hegemonic force of the very regulatory law that repeatedly imposes on us limited definitions of who we are, who we are not, and who we can become.

Joy L. Lei is an assistant professor in the Department of Education and the Program in American Culture at Vassar College (jolei@vassar.edu).

Notes

Acknowledgments. I deeply appreciate the constructive and insightful comments I received from the anonymous reviewers and AEQ’s editor, Dr. Teresa McCarty. I also want to thank AEQ’s editorial assistant, Margaret Mortensen.
Vaughan, for her patience and supportive guidance, as well as her meticulous editing.

1. Pseudonyms for individuals, the school, and the city are used in this article to preserve confidentiality. I created the pseudonyms for the school and the city, whereas the informants created their own pseudonyms.

2. For a sociohistorical chronicle of the origins and refugee experience of Hmong, Lao, and Cambodian populations, refer to recent publications on Southeast Asian refugees (e.g., Chan 1994; Faderman 1998; Hones and Cha 1999; Walker-Moffat 1995).

3. These racial categories were the ones used by the school district.

4. The racial and ethnic descriptors attached to the informants were used by them during our interview(s).

References Cited

Ancheta, Angelo N.

Britzman, Deborah P.

Butler, Judith

Chan, Sucheng, ed.

Connell, Robert W.

Davidson, Ann Locke
1996 Making and Molding Identity in Schools: Student Narratives on Race, Gender, and Academic Achievement. Albany: SUNY Press.

Eng, David L.

Faderman, Lillian, with Ghia Xiong

Ferguson, Ann Arnett

Fordham, Signithia

Hall, Stuart

Hones, Donald F., and Cher Shou Cha

Jewell, K. Sue

Kumashiro, Kevin K.

Lee, Stacey J.

Lei, Joy L.

Lingjinqi

Lowe, Lisa

Prager, Jeffrey

Tuan, Mia

Walker-Moffat, Wendy