

Resistance, Consciousness, and Filipina Hip Hop Identity: A Phonological Analysis

Serene Tseng

University of Arizona

Introduction

One of Hip Hop's most salient characteristics is its language, which fuels the relationship of social awareness through Hip Hop. As Hip Hop Nation Language scholar H. Samy Alim states, there is a global Hip Hop Nation (Alim 2009 et al), and its influence reaches far beyond its historical origins in the Bronx and Jamaica in the late 1970s (Bischoff 2012). Notably, because of Hip Hop Language's ability to localize and racialize (Alim 2015), Hip Hop Language is a conduit of change and identity formation.

Starting in the early 20th century, the Filipinx military class, employed by US military branches, experienced a migration across the Pacific. Because of these migration contours, which went from the Philippines, to Guam, to Hawaii, and to the coastal US, there was contact and exchange of Hip Hop on these US military bases between the children of US-American and Filipinx military personnel (Villegas 2016). Thus, since Filipinx Americans have been in contact with Hip Hop since its early days, their understanding of their identity has likewise long been expressed through Hip Hop Language.

This paper examines the two strategies that Filipina American, San Francisco Bay Area rappers Ruby Ibarra and Rocky Rivera use Hip Hop Language in Ibarra's song "Us" to position their racial identities. Because music is sensory, I focus on the phonological features the two rappers use and how they shape identities of Asian American women, particularly Filipina American identity, as being complex, shifting, and challenging the model minority myth that is commonly associated with Asian Americans. The pointed focus on Ibarra and Rivera is to redress the absence of previous scholarly work on the linguistic practices of Filipina American emcees, as well as to highlight how their differing understandings of their racial identities contribute to their linguistic practices.

1 Asians in the Race Discourse in America

Race in the US is multi-dimensional, and the heterogeneity of Asian Americans' experiences with language, race, education, and other domains, complicate the often binaristic approach to discussions of race. To illustrate this, I draw on Reyes (2007)'s model, below in Figure 1, in which she situates "Asian American" as occupying the "Foreign" space opposite of "American."

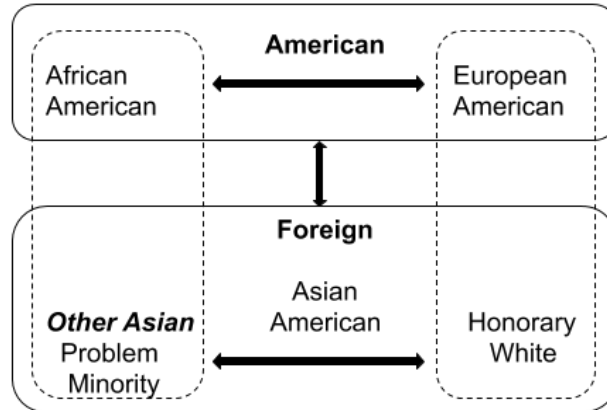


Figure 1: Asian Americans in US race discourse (Reyes 2007).

This model is a visual representation of how the Southeast Asian American youth that Angela Reyes worked with in Philadelphia saw themselves: The youth were neither African American nor European American, so they were not situated in the top space labeled "American." Thus, they had to occupy an oppositional position, which was the "Foreign" space. They also were not the Honorary Whites because they did not feel that their experiences in school, or their parents' career and professional experiences, matched up to the East Asians, who they saw as the model minority. Therefore, they saw themselves as the Other Asian (Reyes 2007).

Due to the history of the US's colonization and militarization of the Philippines, including its effects on the languages of the Philippines, along with their long-time contributions to Hip Hop, some Filipinx Americans see their identities situated closer to the American side in Reyes's model, with the Foreign side as its opposite (Bischoff 2012:70-71, Ocampo 2016). In the following analysis of Hip Hop Language, it is notable that the lyrics explicitly acknowledge themes of colonization and militarization and comment on language use.

Also, in the analysis to follow, I will use this model to explain how Ruby Ibarra and Rocky Rivera construct their identity with their Hip Hop Language use. Although the

ends of each continuum have identity labels, it is also important to note that there is space within each rectangle that can be occupied by heterogenous Asian American identities.

2 Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth is the notion that Asians and Pacific Islanders are successful Americans and are the racial minority that, through meritocracy, are able to overcome discrimination and achieve the American Dream (Ngo & Lee 2007). Believing the myth is a common thing to do, for Asians and non-Asians alike, but it is a myth for many reasons, two of which are relevant here to expand on.

First, Asians are not monolithic (Museus & Kiang 2009:7). There are numerous ethnicities that fall under the pan-ethnic label “Asian,” such as Cambodian, Filipinx, Indian, Korean, and Malaysian, among others. By aggregating their data and categorizing them simply as “Asian,” the groups’ unique experiences in the US, whether it is educational attainment, income, experiences with racial discrimination, coupled with the effects of contemporary history and recent events in Asia such as war and displacement, are erased. In addition, Pacific Islanders are often grouped together with Asians under the “Asian and Pacific Islander” label. This erases their experiences, which are largely different than that of Asian Americans and which are quite understudied in comparison.

Second, the existence of a “model minority” relies on the implication that there is a “problem minority.” In the context of the US, the aggregated data on Asian American success, and thus their embodiment of the “model minority,” positions African Americans to embody the “problem minority.” This is racist. As Ngo and Lee (2007:415-416) state, with reference to Osajima (1987), “This discourse asserts that the “failure” of African Americans and other minorities is due to a lack of industry and values and not due to the fact that America is a fundamentally racist society.”

3 Hip Hop Language Features

Hip Hop Language is not African American Language. Rather, Hip Hop Language features can be comprised of linguistic features, including lexical items, syntactic structures, and phonological realizations, found in African American Language, but also in White Mainstream English and other varieties in each. For example, the zero (\emptyset) postvocalic /r/ is a well-documented African American English phonological feature (Smitherman 1996); the “urr” variable, which is a centralization of vowels before /r/, is particular to the African American English spoken in St. Louis, Missouri (Alim 2015); and

the nasalization of /e/ is local to the San Francisco Bay Area African American English (Alim 2015). These three examples are localizing features, in that they locate the speaker to a specific geographic region in the US.

However, Hip Hop Language can also be comprised of linguistic features found in other languages (Alim 2015). This arises when other languages are relevant, such as when the Hip Hop artist is bilingual, is from another country, and so on. In the case of this paper and the Filipina American artists discussed, Tagalog, a language spoken in the Philippines, and Philippine English (Tayao 2004) are relevant.

Features from the phonology of Tagalog that may be found in Hip Hop Language can include the shorter voice onset times of voiceless stops or the pre-voicing of voiced stops. In addition, Tayao (2004, 2008) has found variation in the realization of /r/ at the lectal level (Llamzon 1997, quoted in Tayao 2004:80-81). For example, in the acrolect group, made up of prominent individuals in media and education, their /r/ is realized with a plus (+) postvocalic /r/ feature as a retroflex liquid (Tayao 2004:84). In the mesolect group, comprised of individuals in mass media, academia, and the government, the /r/ is realized as a tap (Tayao 2004:84).

4 Rivera and Ibarra's Hip Hop Language

Ruby Ibarra and Rocky Rivera are both Filipina American rappers who were born in the Philippines and grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, but their similarities end there. While Ibarra raps in both Tagalog and English, Rivera only raps in English. This style difference is further highlighted in the contrasting Hip Hop Language features they respectively use in Ibarra's well-known song "Us," which Rivera is one of the featured artists on. Although there are two other Filipina American artists, Klassy and Faith Santilla, who are featured on the song, I do not examine their verses in this paper. Instead, the data examined only come from Rivera and Ibarra's verses in "Us." This is because Klassy, like Ibarra, also raps in Tagalog and English, and Santilla is a spoken word artist and does not rap in the song.

4.1 Rivera's Hip Hop Language

Much of Rivera's Hip Hop Language draws on phonological features of African American English (Rickford 1999). For example, one distinctive feature of Rivera's Hip Hop Language is /ai/ realizing as a monophthong [a]. The following is a transcription of Rivera's verse in "Us," published on Ibarra's *Bandcamp* page (Ibarra 2017).

Coyote Papers, Volume 22, 2019

- 1 We *pullin'* up in a Jeepney
- 2 All of my **soldiers** greet me/
- 3 Hand me bandanas and pull back my **hammer**, it's **warfare**, when you see me/
- 4 Skin you alive **for** my country, I live and die **for** my country/
- 5 I kill a pig in a white hooded suit on the low...**for** my country/
- 6 They got evil plans in the devil's hands, but I don't pray cuz I **organize**/
- 7 They got new ways to impose strength, but I teach mine how to mobilize/
- 8 We don't fight **for** the money, **for** the greedy, **for** the white man/
- 9 All we want is **our** freedom, and the right to live on **our** motherland/

Example 1: Rivera's verse in "Us" (Ibarra 2017). /ai/ tokens are underlined, postvocalic /r/ tokens are bolded, /ŋ/ tokens are italicized.

Rivera realizes /ai/ as a monophthong throughout her verse, and her postvocalic /r/ has a zero (∅) feature, which results in *soldiers* as "souljas" and *for* as "fo." A final phonological observation is the fronting of the coda /ŋ/ to [n], as in "pullin'," italicized above. These features of Rivera's Hip Hop Language are striking because Rivera draws on the phonology of African American English, yet she does not identify herself as African American but rather as Filipina American in her verse through her usage of the lexical item "Jeepney," which refers to a public transportation vehicle used in the Philippines, and her narrative of the militarization of the Philippines.

4.2 Ibarra's Hip Hop Language

In contrast to Rivera's Hip Hop Language features, Ibarra's /ai/ is realized as a diphthong, her postvocalic /r/ has a plus (+) feature, and her coda /ŋ/ is not fronted. In fact, the entire rhyme scheme in the following example is made up of the /ai/ phoneme.

- 1 I got that, Filipino phenotype: kayumanggi, mestizo-white/
- 2 But give me that moreno like that Rufio or Keno type/
- 3 My lolas they be *speaking* like, those *balisongs* or bolo knife/
- 4 I breathe the **ether** need no hype, two tongues that's **sharper** with a mic/
- 5 Anino in my history like from a land where greed is weaved in tight/
- 6 They thief until one piso might just turn to C-Notes, see no light/
- 7 Hacienda like Aquino, right? Rodrigo vigilante type--/

8 They kill my titos left and right, when smoke and **mirrors** fill the night/

Example 2: Ibarra's verse in "Us" (Ibarra 2017). /ai/ tokens are underlined, postvocalic /r/ tokens are bolded, /ŋ/ tokens are italicized.

Noticeably, in Ibarra's Hip Hop Language, /ai/ is realized as a diphthong, despite the delivery of her verse being faster when compared to Rivera's slower, more laid-back delivery. In addition, while Rivera's postvocalic /r/ has a zero (\emptyset) feature, Ibarra's postvocalic /r/ has a plus (+) feature. For example, *ether* is pronounced as [iθə] with the retroflex present in the second syllable, which draws from the phonology of Philippine English (Tayao 2004, Tayao 2008) or Mainstream American English. In addition, Ibarra does not front coda /ŋ/ to [n] in line 3, *they be speaking like*, likely because much of her rhyme is repeating the phoneme /i/, such as the /i/ in *balisongs*. If she did front to [n], then the /i/ preceding it would be realized as a lax [ɪ], which would alter her rhyme.

5 Discussion

The following table sums up the Hip Hop Language features found in each rapper's verse in "Us," and it also shows under which variety of English the rapper draws the feature from. In the sample of Rivera's Hip Hop Language that I analyzed, Rivera's Hip Hop Language draws on many features found in African American English, such as her /ai/ realizing as a monophthong (Smitherman 1996, Rickford 1999). This act shows that she aligns herself more with African American English, or as "American," in Reyes (2007)'s model.

HHL feature	Rivera	aligns	Ibarra	aligns
/ai/	[a], monophthong	AAE	[ai], diphthong	MAE
postvocalic /r/	zero (\emptyset)	AAE	plus (+)	MAE/PE
coda /ŋ/	[n], fronted	AAE	[ŋ], not fronted	MAE

Table 3: Hip Hop Language (HHL) features in Rivera and Ibarra's verses. African American English (AAE), Mainstream American English (MAE), and Philippine English (PE) are the language varieties whose phonologies the artists draw on.

On the other hand, because Ibarra's Hip Hop Language draws on more features found in Mainstream American English and Philippine English (Tayao 2004, Tayao 2008),

Coyote Papers, Volume 22, 2019

such as /ai/ realizing as a diphthong and the plus (+) postvocalic /t/, she situates herself closer to “Foreign” in Reyes’s model, but also, not within the lines of “Foreign.”

Figure 2 illustrates the location where Rivera and Ibarra have identified themselves in Reyes (2007)’s model.

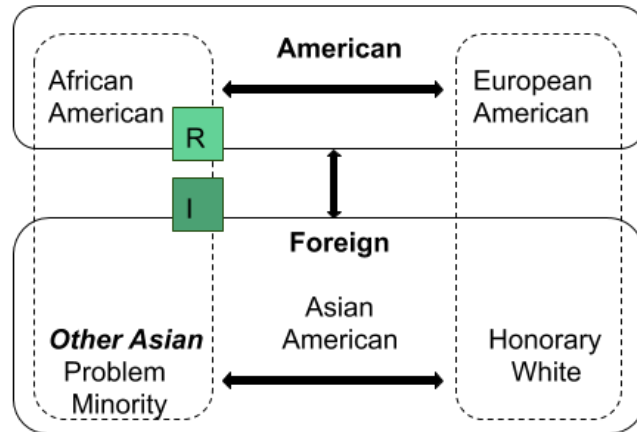


Figure 2: Rivera’s and Ibarra’s Filipina American rapper identity, model adapted from Reyes (2007).

Rivera is represented by the lighter green square in Figure 2. Because of the phonological features drawn from African American English in her Hip Hop Language, her identity falls within the lines of American, African American, and Other Asian, although she is much more on the side of American than Foreign. Rivera’s identity is situated here because her Hip Hop Language is monolingual and in opposition to Ibarra’s multilingual Hip Hop Language. In other words, Rivera only raps in one language, English. Because of this, she does not racialize herself in the direction of “foreign” or “Asian,” but as Black.

Ibarra’s identity space, represented by the darker green square, is between American and Foreign due to her Hip Hop Language being comprised of Tagalog and features from Philippine English and Mainstream American English. She uses these three languages and varieties that are culturally relevant to her to racialize herself in the direction of “other” and “Asian,” in opposition to “American” and only English-speaking. Thus, Ibarra’s multilingual and multivarietal Hip Hop Language challenges the boundaries of the spaces in the model that her identity is situated in.

Rivera and Ibarra’s identities bring forth complications to the boundaries in Reyes’s (2007) model. On the one hand, Rivera’s Hip Hop Language is comprised of

African American English phonological features, and she uses these linguistic features to racialize herself as more Black. Ibarra, on the other hand, racializes herself as more Asian because her Hip Hop Language is comprised of Tagalog, a language spoken in the Philippines, as well as phonological features from Philippine English and Mainstream American English.

The acts of these two rappers' self-racialization is enough to also complicate the model minority stereotype. Neither Ibarra nor Rivera choose to use their Hip Hop Language to racialize themselves as white or strive towards the "Honorary White" space, which is where the model minority myth situates Asian Americans. Instead, because they racialize themselves in diverging directions from white, as well as from each other, their understanding of their identities shows that Asian American identity is neither monolithic nor stagnant.

6 Conclusion

The two distinct ways Ruby Ibarra and Rocky Rivera use Hip Hop Language in "Us" to assert their racial positions as Asian Americans, and in particular, as Filipina Americans, is rich with intention. Ibarra draws phonological features from Mainstream American English, Philippine English, and Tagalog, three culturally relevant languages to her, as part of her Hip Hop Language. Rivera, in contrast, largely draws phonological features from African American English. These two strategies the rappers use are intentioned acts of self-racialization in the direction of more Asian and more Black, respectively. They also reflect the importance of recognizing the Asian American experience as heterogenous, influenced also by events in the last century.

In addition, Ruby Ibarra and Rocky Rivera's Hip Hop Languages represent a re-centering of two kinds of marginalized voices, the monolingual(ized) Asian American, in the case of Rivera, and the bi- or multilingual Asian American, in the case of Ibarra. Because the two rappers' experience with language is reflected in their two Hip Hop Languages, it is also apparent that their Filipina American identity, and their distinct understandings of said identity, is a challenge to the model minority myth, especially the notion that all Asians have the same experience in the US.

References

- Alim, H.S., A. Ibrahim, and A. Pennycook. (2009). *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*. Routledge.
- Alim, H. S. (2015). Hip Hop Nation Language: Localization and Globalization. In J. Bloomquist, L. J. Green, & S. L. Lanehart (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795390.013.49>
- Bischoff, S. A. (2012). *Expressions of Resistance: Intersections of Filipino American Identity, Hip Hop Culture, and Social Justice* (Dissertation). Washington State University.
- Ibarra, R. (2017). *CIRCA91* [Digital]. Retrieved from <https://rubyibarra.bandcamp.com>
- Llamzon, Teodoro A. (1997) The phonology of Philippine English. In *English Is an Asian Language: The Philippine context*. Edited by Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista. Sydney: The Macquarie Library Pty. Ltd, pp. 41-48.
- Museus, S. D., & Kiang, P. N. (2009). Deconstructing the model minority myth and how it contributes to the invisible minority reality in higher education research. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2009(142), 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.292>
- Ngo, B. and S. Lee. (2007). Complicating the Image of Model Minority Success: A Review of Southeast Asian American Education. *Review of Educational Research*. December 2007, Vol. 77, No. 4, pp. 415–453 DOI: 10.3102/0034654307309918
- Ocampo, A. C. (2016). *The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Osajima, K. (1987). Asian Americans as the model minority: An analysis of the popular press image in the 1960s and 1980s. In G. Y. Okihiro, S. Hune, A. A. Hansen, & J. M. Lie (Eds.), *Reflections on shattered windows: Promises and prospects for Asian Americans studies* (pp. 166–174). Pullman: Washington State University Press.
- Reyes, A. (2007). *Language, identity, and stereotype among Southeast Asian American youth : the other Asian*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rickford, J. (1999). *African American Vernacular English*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Smitherman, G., University of Minnesota, Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing, & Conference. (1996). *African-American English: from the hood to the amen corner*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

- Tayao, Ma. L. G. (2004). The evolving study of Philippine English phonology. *World Englishes*, 23(1), 77–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2004.00336.x>
- Tayao, M. (2008). A lectal description of the phonological features of Philippine English. In *Philippine English* (p. Philippine English, Chapter 9). Hong Kong University Press.
- Villegas, M. R. (2016). Currents of Militarization, Flows of Hip-Hop: Expanding the Geographies of Filipino American Culture. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 19(1), 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2016.0010>

©Serene Tseng

University of Arizona

stseng@email.arizona.edu

Coyote Papers Volume 22 (2019)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>