Speaking of Sisterhood:
A Sociolinguistic Study of an Asian American Sorority

by

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_______________________________________
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PREFACE

This dissertation, like many from which I have taken inspiration, is a highly personal project. When I started my graduate career in linguistics at NYU, it had never occurred to me that Asian Americans might be a group “worth” studying from a sociolinguistic perspective. I had unwittingly absorbed the assumption that Asian Americans were linguistically uninteresting, compared to other ethnic minorities in the United States, an assumption which undoubtedly owes a great deal to the “model minority” image of Asian Americans as master assimilators, indeed “honorary Whites”.

Certainly, my own background gave me little reason to question that assumption. I was born to a Chinese mother who grew up in Taiwan and a white American father who grew up on Long Island and later in, Birmingham, Alabama. My parents met when my mother came to the United States for graduate school. They settled in a rural area of western Washington, as close to equidistant from both their roots as one could get while remaining within the continental U.S., and that’s where I (and my younger brother, who came along three years later) grew up. In retrospect, it was a mostly white area, but as a child I had little conception of race. Perhaps because there were so few people overall, ethnic divisions were never apparent to me. I knew that my family was special because my mother came from another country, because we ate rice and tofu as often as we ate spaghetti or burgers, and because our home was adorned with Chinese artwork and artifacts. Yet though I easily embraced my multicultural background and identity, it would be a long time before I came to see myself as “Asian American”—nor did it occur to me that others might see me that way.

The turning point for me was college. There, I began to interact with student groups organized specifically by and for young people of multiracial descent. As I explored a
multiracial—not just multicultural—identity, I became more aware of the experience of race and ethnicity in general. I began to understand that race was not only a matter of what I knew about myself, it was also a matter of how others saw and categorized me. It was something of a shock when I realized that the first thing people noticed about my race was not necessarily my multiraciality—what I thought of as my uniqueness—often, it was my Asianness they saw first and foremost. For long time, I had shied away from calling myself “Asian” or “Asian American”, unsure if I was “Asian enough” to merit the label. By the time I left college, I had embraced it. If I were inevitably going to be labeled “Asian” by others, I reasoned, why not claim the identity for myself?

It’s no coincidence, then, that in my dissertation I turned my gaze to Asian American college women. In them, I see my own journey of self-recognition and identity formation mirrored. In their stories, I see the commonalities that unite us, as well as the differences that make each of us unique. One of the most surprising findings of my research, to me, was the great diversity of experiences they shared with me. And I was surprised that I was surprised—after all, hadn’t I railed against homogenizing stereotypes about Asian Americans? Yet the conversations I had with sorority members made me realize the extent to which I had, in fact, expected a certain degree of sameness in their backgrounds—because they were Asian American, because they were college students, because they had chosen to join a sorority. The reality was far different. Some were first-generation college students; others had parents with advanced degrees for whom not going to college was unthinkable. Some had grown up overseas or in Asian enclaves in the U.S.; others described being the “only Asian” or one of a few in their schools and neighborhoods. I heard the expected stories of strong family ties and high expectations, but I also heard stories of unhappy marriages and parental abandonment. Several stories reflected the
“American Dream” of immigrant parents working long hours so their children could enjoy a middle-class lifestyle; yet at least one interviewee spoke of her strained relationship with her parents, due in part to the fact that they were always working during her childhood. If anything, these stories dispel the myth that Asian American college students are a homogeneous group with the same backgrounds, goals, and needs, a myth that often renders Asian Americans an “invisible minority” in higher education. As an example, a recent *New York Times* article on suicide by college students conspicuously fails to mention a single Asian American victim, even though a closer examination of the data reveals the disproportionate impact of on-campus depression and suicide on Asian American students.¹

This dissertation owes its existence to two women who paved the way for me, as scholars and as friends. Arriving at NYU, I had the great good fortune to meet Amy Wong as she was carrying out her research on the language of Chinese Americans in Manhattan’s Chinatown. Suddenly, the idea that Asian Americans might be a sociolinguistically viable group to study didn’t seem so outlandish. She also provided me with the initial idea for this dissertation, though probably neither of us realized it at the time (I certainly didn’t). When she first suggested I look at language in an Asian American sorority, I dismissed the idea as absurd. A sorority was about the last place I could imagine myself. (It turns out that many of my interviewees shared my suspicion of sororities before they joined one, as I discuss in Chapter 4.) Yet the idea took root in the back of my mind, and the more I considered it, the more appealing I found it. I realized that I was less interested in ethnicity as a demographic category than as an identity. I was interested in

those who, like myself, had made some conscious choice to claim the label of “Asian American”.
Where better to find such individuals than under the banner of an Asian American social club?

Around the same time I arrived at NYU, Lauren Hall-Lew was finishing her dissertation on phonetic variation among Asian Americans in San Francisco. I pounced on her work as more evidence that studying Asian Americans wasn’t merely a vanity project. Not only has her work been a tremendous resource for me, Lauren herself became a major source of encouragement and material help in this project. In true sociolinguistic fashion, it was Lauren’s introduction by e-mail to a friend of hers (who in turn introduced me to another friend, and so on...) that got my foot in the door to the sorority that is the subject of this dissertation. Without a doubt, the part of my research that involved reaching out to complete strangers and explaining myself was some of the hardest work I’ve done as a sociolinguist. Without that crucial first assist, I might be stuck here spinning my wheels to this day.

Of course, none of this would have gotten very far had the members of Alpha Zeta Nu sorority not agreed to speak with me. It has been a delight and a privilege to get to know these young women and hear their stories. I hope this dissertation does credit to their voices.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores language as a resource for the formation and expression of ethnic identity among the members of an Asian American college sorority. As a community of practice organized around ethnicity, the sorority provides an excellent site to examine the mutually constitutive relationship of language and ethnic identity. Two features of the sorority members’ speech are analyzed in detail: their pronunciation of the mid-back rounded GOAT vowel, and their prosodic rhythm. For both variables, the behavior of the sorority members is compared with that of college peers of both Asian and non-Asian descent. The results indicate that both segmental and suprasegmental features are available as markers of Asian American ethnicity, and that the association of linguistic features with ethnicity is mediated by group membership and region, among other factors.

The community of study is an Asian-interest sorority at a large public university in New Jersey. The data are drawn from two main sources: participant observation of sorority activities and one-on-one sociolinguistic interviews. The ethnographic observations allow the behaviors and beliefs of the sorority members to be situated in the local context of the school, the state, and the region. The interview data, meanwhile, provide high-quality spontaneous speech data for phonetic analysis. It is argued that it is only through an understanding of the particular social context in which speakers exist that their linguistic behavior can be understood; conversely, examining linguistic behavior can illuminate how identity categories such as “Asian American” are construed and enacted within a given social setting.

The segmental variable analyzed in this study is the realization of the mid-back rounded vowel in the GOAT class of words. A quantitative analysis shows that the sorority members produce a more backed and monophthongal GOAT vowel than their non-Asian peers. In
previous work, the fronting of GOAT has been noted as an ongoing change in certain regional dialects in the United States; however, the present analysis shows that sorority members tend to produce backer GOAT vowels than non-Asian speakers regardless of region.

The suprasegmental variable analyzed is prosodic rhythm, which refers to the relative length of adjacent syllables in speech. English is typically described as a stress-timed language, with stressed syllables being much longer than unstressed syllables. However, the sorority members’ speech shows characteristics of syllable timing, with stressed and unstressed syllables being of roughly equal length. This finding coincides with those for other varieties of English, including Hispanic English and Singapore English. It is argued that syllable timing in English is likely a substrate effect from syllable-timed heritage languages, including Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean. Individual differences in prosodic rhythm are also examined with respect to age of acquisition and other inter- and intraspeaker factors.

This dissertation draws on multiple research traditions in the study of language and identity: it is an ethnographic description of a community of practice as well as a sociophonetic study of regionally and ethnically linked variables. It is also a study of young women’s language at a critical stage of identity formation—the college years. Additionally, this dissertation is part of a growing body of sociolinguistic research on Asian Americans, a group that until recently has been drastically understudied. As a group with tremendous internal diversity, Asian Americans present both challenges and opportunities for the study of language and ethnicity. This dissertation thus advances sociolinguistic research in two ways: one, by shedding light on the language practices of this rapidly growing population, and two, by contributing to our overall understanding of how language interacts with various facets of identity, including ethnic identity.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This dissertation explores language as a resource for the formation and expression of ethnic identity among the members of an Asian American college sorority. As a community of practice organized around ethnicity, the sorority provides an excellent site to examine the mutually constitutive relationship of language and ethnic identity. Two features of the sorority members’ speech are analyzed in detail: their pronunciation of the mid-back rounded GOAT vowel, and their prosodic rhythm. For both variables, the behavior of the sorority members is compared with that of college peers of both Asian and non-Asian descent. The results indicate that both segmental and suprasegmental features are available as markers of Asian American ethnicity, and that the association of linguistic features with ethnicity is mediated by group membership and region, among other factors.

This project draws on multiple research traditions in the study of language and identity: it is an ethnographic description of a community of practice as well as a sociophonetic study of regionally and ethnically linked variables. It is also a study of young women’s language at a critical stage of identity formation—the college years. Additionally, this dissertation is part of a growing body of sociolinguistic research on Asian Americans, a group that until recently has been drastically understudied. As a group with tremendous internal diversity, Asian Americans present both challenges and opportunities for the study of language and ethnicity. The purpose of this dissertation is thus twofold: one, to shed light on the language practices of this rapidly growing population, and two, to contribute to our overall understanding of how language interacts with various facets of identity, including ethnic identity.
The dissertation is organized as follows: in the remainder of this chapter, I will provide some background on linguistic and ethnic characterizations of Asians in America, communities of practice, Asian American sororities and fraternities, and the sociolinguistic development of young adults. In Chapter 2, I describe my methods for entering the community, collecting data, and selecting variables for analysis. Chapter 3 sketches an ethnographic picture of the sorority and the university community in which it is embedded. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the GOAT vowel, and Chapter 5 presents an analysis of the sorority members’ prosodic rhythm. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses the conclusions and some questions for future research.

1.2 Race and (pan)ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are complex, contentious, and constantly shifting concepts, and the language used to talk about them both reflects and reinforces that reality. The terms “race” and “ethnicity” themselves have no clear, universally agreed upon meaning. In both academic and popular discourse, they are sometimes used interchangeably, sometimes in conjunction, and sometimes in opposition to each other. A full social theory of race and ethnicity is certainly beyond the scope of this dissertation, but in this section I will attempt to lay out some of the assumptions about race/ethnicity that inform this work, and to clarify the terminology that I will use throughout.

In doing so, I will make reference to observations from my fieldwork. In the usual scientific paradigm, this may seem like putting the cart before the horse; but when dealing with concepts as slippery as race and ethnicity, it is actually essential. A key tenet of ethnography is that the researcher should strive to uncover locally meaningful categories and practices, rather than applying a preconceived set of labels. Thus, the way I thought and wrote about race and
ethnicity when I started my fieldwork is not necessarily the same as the way I thought and wrote about race and ethnicity upon finishing my fieldwork. As Hall-Lew and Wong (2014:565) note, “key intra-group differentiations or the precise meaning of ‘Asian’ [or other terms] may only become apparent during fieldwork or after fieldwork has been completed.”

That the terms “race” and “ethnicity” are often used interchangeably reflects the common assumption that the two concepts are closely related. Even when race and ethnicity are differentiated, they are usually assumed to be linked. Bobo (2001:267) writes:

Common usage tends to associate “race” with biologically based differences between human groups, differences typically observable in skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and other physical attributes. “Ethnicity” tends to be associated with culture, pertaining to such factors as language, religion, and nationality.

Although not stated explicitly by Bobo, a close relationship between race and ethnicity is implicit in the common definitions he gives, since the physical differences corresponding to the concept of race are not random but rather the products of geographically bounded processes of human migration and adaptation—the same processes implicated in cultural/ethnic similarity and difference. In this framework, ethnicity is sometimes conceived of as a subcategory of race; for instance, Newlin-Łukowicz (2015:2) describes how Poles in America came to be classified as “White”, while still retaining a strong sense of a distinct ethnic identity.\(^2\) By analogy, “Asian”

\(^2\) Of course, this paradigm of race and ethnicity is not applied equally to everyone. For instance, Black Americans are assumed to be ethnically homogeneous (Blake 2014). Conversely, a White person is less likely to be quizzed about their “ethnicity” than someone who appears Asian or Hispanic, even though some White people may identify strongly with their Irish, Italian, Greek, Polish, etc., ethnicity.
can be considered primarily a racial category, comprised of ethnic subcategories of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Filipino, etc.³

In practice, I tended to use the term “ethnicity” when speaking to informants, even if my meaning was closer to that of “race”, as defined above. Partly, this was due to my sense that “ethnicity” is a less charged term than “race” for many Americans. Overall, I had the impression that informants shared my meaning. For example, rather than asking, “Have you ever experienced racism?” I asked, “Was there ever a time when you felt you were treated badly because of your ethnicity?” I did not expect, nor did I receive, answers that made reference to Chineseness or Koreanness. Instead, responses made reference to Asianness and the experience of being racialized as Asian:

**CB:** Has there ever been a time when you felt like you were treated badly because of your ethnicity?

**Peggy (Chinese):** Um...in high school, I guess...just a little, like, racist remarks, and how all Asians should know karate and kung fu, and just...“Ching chang cho” kinda things.

**Selene (Filipina):** I’ve had people like come at me with like ignorant comments...Like, there was this one time I went to Pennsylvania State University to visit some friends, and...I was just sitting outside near the elevator, and I was waiting for a friend to come out of the bathroom or whatever...and these guys came up to me because I was alone, and they were like...They said something

³ In practice, “Asian” is often construed to mean a specific subgroup of Asian ethnicities, i.e., East Asian or South Asian. These groups are themselves typically distinguished along perceived racial lines; see Section 3.3 for further discussion.
along the lines of, “I’ve always wanted to do an Asian girl, can you like, cross that off my bucket list for me?” kinda thing.

Omi and Winant define *racialization* as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (2015:111). A key component of the process through which racial meanings are ascribed to groups is visual—that is, people are grouped together because of physical characteristics (real or imagined) that are perceived to be racially significant. Chan and Hune (1995) describe the historical racialization of Asians in America. When Asian immigrants first started arriving in the U.S. in large numbers, they were separated from each other by language, nationality, and culture, yet they were treated as a single, inferior group for the purposes of immigration and exclusion from mainstream White society (see Section 1.3). Based on shared experiences of immigration, exclusion, and discrimination, and the fact that individual ethnic groups lacked the numbers to seize political power, second- and third-generation Americans of Asian descent banded together starting in the 1960s and claimed a new, panethnic Asian American identity. Thus, Chan and Hune write, the Asian American construct is “both a racial formation and a panethnic coalition to support and further political and social goals” (1995:217). I will use the term “Asian American” throughout this dissertation to reference both senses. I will also use the terms *race* and (pan)ethnicity somewhat interchangeably, not because I think the two concepts are identical, but because of the impossibility of maintaining a strict division between them in the lives of my informants.

Furthermore, I would argue that the concept of panethnicity has great potential importance to the study of linguistic variation, because it allows us to move beyond an essentializing, reflexive view of the relationship between language and ethnicity (Mendoza-Denton 2002:476-7). From a sociological perspective, Lopez and Espiritu (1990) argue that a
focus on panethnicity is key to understanding the changing dynamics of race and ethnicity in the United States. The development of panethnic organizations and identities pushes the structural and cultural factors behind the creation, maintenance, and change of ethnic categories in a diverse society to the forefront. Thus, the sociological study of panethnicity is very much in line with current lines of sociolinguistic research that attempt to bridge the study of sociodemographic and practice-based identities (Mendoza-Denton 2002:485-6). I will return to a discussion of practice-based identity, and the community of practice framework, in Section 1.6. In the following sections, I will give a brief history of perceptions of and attitudes toward Asians in America that provide the background for a study of present-day Asian American identities and linguistic practices.

1.3 Asians in America: Model Minority vs. Yellow Peril

As the title of Mia Tuan’s (1998) book, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?*, highlights, the stereotypes associated with Asians in America are highly polarized and often contradictory. Lippi-Green (1997) argues that American stereotypes about Asians are based in the history of U.S. relations with the Pacific and the Far East, and particularly nineteenth-century colonialism. She writes:

> We [the U.S.] have a history of dealing with the Asian world as a warehouse of persons and goods available to suit our own purpose and fill our own needs, a practice justified by the supposition that those people are inherently weaker. Because they are also cast as manipulative and wont to use natural wiles and treacherous means to achieve their own ends, we are able to rationalize aggressions toward them. (227)
The “Model Minority” stereotype, which arose in the 1960s and flourished in the ensuing decades, is probably the most salient stereotype of Asians in America today. Frank Wu, in his (2002) book *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White*, summarizes the stereotype as follows: “As a group, we [Asians in America] are said to be intelligent, gifted in math and science, polite, hard working, family oriented, law abiding, and successfully entrepreneurial” (40). The Asian immigrant who comes to this country with nothing and achieves success by dint of intelligence and hard work is the archetypal American success story, and “this miracle is the standard depiction of Asian Americans in fact and fiction, from the news media to scholarly books to Hollywood movies” (41). The corollary to this “positive” image of Asian Americans is that prejudice and injustice faced by Asian Americans tends to go unnoticed or to be dismissed—if Asian Americans are all doing as well as the Model Minority stereotype would have us believe, what could they possibly have to complain about?

Of course, the Model Minority stereotype ignores the long history of vicious and demeaning stereotypes of Asians in America, and the negative stereotypes that still co-exist with the Model Minority image. The most prominent images of Asian Americans have fluctuated along with their fortunes in this country. Wu argues that, in fact, the Model Minority stereotype has its origins in the earliest days of Asian immigration to the United States. In the nineteenth century, southern plantation owners and northern industrialists alike characterized Chinese laborers as preferable to newly freed blacks and Irish immigrants, stoking racial resentment especially among working-class whites. This resentment led to anti-Chinese political platforms and deadly attacks on Chinese immigrants all along the West Coast (61). The fear of a racial takeover by invading hordes of aliens gave rise to the “Yellow Peril” image, which portrayed Asian immigrants as a threat to white Western culture, and culminated in the Chinese Exclusion
Act of 1882. Not only were Asian immigrants ineligible to become naturalized citizens, but even native-born individuals of Asian ancestry had to fight for recognition as Americans, as shown by the citizenship case of Wong Kim Ark in 1895 (92-3).

Ronald Takaki, in his (1989) history of Asian America, Strangers From a Different Shore, writes that from the beginning, the early Chinese immigrants were viewed as a temporary source of labor, not potential Americans. Unlike white European immigrants, Chinese immigrants were racially precluded from ever assimilating into American society. In this respect, they were viewed as similar to Blacks and Native Americans, against whom the ideology of white supremacy had already been deployed. The same stereotypes that had been applied to Black Americans were now deployed against Chinese immigrants: “the Chinese were described as heathen, morally inferior, savage, childlike, and lustful”, and both men and women were characterized as sexually depraved and physically degraded (101). However, Takaki argues that, in the white supremacist imagination, “the ‘strangers’ from Asia seemed to pose a greater threat than did Blacks and Indians. Unlike Blacks, the Chinese were seen as intelligent and competitive; unlike Indians, they represented an increasing rather than a decreasing population” (103). 4

Japanese immigrants came to the U.S. mainland later than the Chinese, but as their numbers swelled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “they inherited much of the resentment and prejudice that had been directed against the Chinese” (181). To the extent that

4 Today, this image of Asians as a particularly insidious threat to white Western supremacy is often the flipside of the “Model Minority” stereotype. It is precisely those stereotyped “good” qualities of Asians—their intelligence and work ethic—that make them a perceived threat to white Westerners. Frequently, when the Model Minority image is invoked in the media, particularly with respect to education, the implicit or explicit question being asked is, “Why are Asians doing better than whites?” A recent example is an article published in Maclean’s, a Canadian magazine, originally entitled “Too Asian”, which discusses how some white Canadian students are put off from attending universities that contain too high a proportion of Asian students. The article includes the following sentence: “Many white students simply believe that competing with Asians—both Asian Canadians and international students—requires a sacrifice of time and freedom they’re not willing to make.” The article attracted significant controversy, and a somewhat edited version was quickly posted to the magazine’s website, with the new title, “Too Asian?” (Findlay & Köhler 2010); see García (2010) for commentary.
white Americans viewed all Asian immigrants as belonging to a single racial group, the same stereotypes could be freely applied to all Asian groups, regardless of national origin. The image of the perpetual foreigner also applied to Japanese Americans, as made most painfully evident by the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Tuan (1998) writes that more than 110,000 Japanese Americans were removed from the states of California, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona, two-thirds of whom were American-born citizens. That all Japanese Americans, regardless of their generational status, were singled out as potential enemies—guilty until proven innocent—shows the significant role of racial prejudice in upholding the “forever foreigner” stereotype (15).6

1.4 Popular perceptions of Asian American language

The conflicting stereotypes of “Model Minority/honorary Whites” and “Yellow Peril/forever foreigner” are also reflected in popular conceptions of Asian American language: Asian Americans are assumed to be either completely linguistically assimilated, indistinguishable from Whites, or they are stereotyped as non-native speakers of broken English. In previous work (Bauman 2013), I reported on strongly negative attitudes toward Asian accented English among American listeners. In an online survey, listeners rated male and female Chinese and Korean

5 Ironically, in the anti-Japanese frenzy of World War II, the previously vilified Chinese (who were still excluded from immigration in large numbers until the 1965 Immigration Act) suddenly became the good Asian group in contrast. A Time magazine article from 1941 describes “how to tell our friends [the Chinese] from the Japs”, including the following hints: “some aristocratic Japanese have thin, aquiline noses, narrow faces and, except for their eyes, look like Caucasians”; “most Chinese avoid horn-rimmed spectacles”; the Japanese are “positive, dogmatic, arrogant”, while the Chinese are “more placid, kindly, open” (Wu 2002:83). Post-WWII, anti-communist fears once again made Chinese Americans a suspect group (415-6).
6 Koreans, who migrated to the U.S. mainland later and in smaller numbers than the Chinese and Japanese, faced much of the same racial prejudice and discrimination. Most of them settled in California, where they often found themselves conflated with “Japs” (Takaki 1989:271). This ethnic misidentification was especially galling for early Korean immigrants, many of whom harbored intense resentment toward Japanese, due to Japan’s occupation of Korea at the time (277).
accented voices as significantly less attractive, lower status, and less dynamic than Mainstream U.S. English (Lippi-Green 1997) male and female voices. Moreover, they also rated the Asian accented voices as significantly less attractive and less dynamic than Brazilian Portuguese accented male and female voices, showing that the effect of accent bias cannot merely be attributed to any foreign-sounding voice, but depends on the prestige or stigma attached to a particular accent or accents. I tied this negative evaluation of individual voices to the larger cultural context. Portrayals of Asian ways of speaking in American popular culture, including Asians speaking both English and Asian languages, are almost universally negative; two famous examples include the character of Mr. Yunioshi in the film Breakfast At Tiffany’s—a caricature of a Japanese man played by White actor Mickey Rooney—and Long Duk Dong in Sixteen Candles, a foreign exchange student from an unspecified Asian country who speaks in rhyming, pidgin-like phrases (e.g., “No more yanky my wanky”), and whose very name is a form of language mockery. Chun (2009) labels this stereotyped speech style, and the features that define it, “Mock Asian”—the term deliberately invoking the vagueness of “Asian” as a racial and linguistic label, viewed by the cultural mainstream as a homogeneous category of undifferentiated Others.

Crucially, although the focus of the current project is on Asian Americans who are native speakers of English, I argue that the above findings are still relevant to my research objectives. I have mentioned above the persistent “forever foreigner” image of Asian Americans. The fact is that language-based prejudice is frequently deployed against Asian Americans regardless of their actual language background. For evidence of this, one need only look at the day-to-day experiences of Americans of Asian descent, many of whom report frequently encountering reactions of surprise at “how good” their English is, or being greeted by strangers with ni hao or
konichiwa (Asian American women in particular are often “greeted” this way by men on the street). There are also examples of prominent Asian American individuals who have been subjected to language-based mockery, regardless of their status as native English speakers. During the O.J. Simpson trial, New York Senator Al D’Amato gave a radio interview in which he mocked Judge Lance Ito, a third-generation Japanese American from Los Angeles, using “singsong pidgin” (Tuan 1998:2). More recently, similar behavior was directed at NBA star Jeremy Lin (Torre 2010). Moreover, there is evidence that listeners can “hallucinate” a foreign accent where none exists, simply because they expect to hear one. Rubin (1992) conducted a study in which two groups of college undergraduates listened to identical recordings of a White female native speaker of American English, but while one group was shown a picture of a White woman’s face, the other group was shown a picture of an Asian woman’s face. The group which saw the Asian face not only reported perceiving a foreign accent, they actually performed worse on a test of comprehension. What these examples show is that language-based prejudice can be a factor in the life of any person of Asian descent, and is likely to be relevant to the lives of my study participants.

1.5 Sociolinguistic studies of Asian American language

Ethnicity has been an important variable in the study of linguistic variation, yet until recently Asian Americans have been largely left out of the picture. In an early study, Mendoza-Denton and Iwai (1993) examined the English of nisei (second-generation) and yonsei (fourth-generation) Japanese Americans in California. They found that the English of the nisei showed phonological influences from Japanese (namely, word-final t/d deletion and monophthongal realizations of the GOAT and FACE vowels), but that by the fourth generation, speakers had
converged to the matrix dialect. They attribute this generational change to the disruptive effect of relocation and internment during World War II on Japanese American social networks and identity.

For several years after Mendoza-Denton and Iwai’s study, little or no research emerged on the phonetic characteristics of English as spoken by Asian Americans, even as increasing numbers of second- and third-generation Asian Americans grew up speaking English natively. The overall assumption among both scholars and the general public seemed to be that, like Mendoza-Denton and Iwai’s yonsei speakers, Asian Americans by and large spoke like Whites in their respective dialect areas. However, it would be a mistake to interpret the lack of a distinctive “Asian American English” as indicating a lack of anything to study (Bucholtz 2009:25). As Bucholtz points out, a structurally distinctive ethnic variety is not the only linguistic resource available for constructing identity. Moreover, if Asian Americans are largely conforming to the norms of the White majority, more so than other ethnic minorities, the question of why and how they do so is an important one. Fortunately, recent years have seen an upsurge in sociolinguistic research on Asian Americans (e.g., Hall-Lew 2009; Wong 2015; Nguyen 2014, 2015), and the picture of Asian American language use is slowly starting to be filled in.

In an early study, Hanna (1997) explored whether listeners could discriminate between native-English-speaking White and Asian American voices, and found that both White and Asian listeners did so successfully at above-chance levels. Hanna also found that Asian speakers who reported socializing primarily with other Asians were more likely to be correctly identified, suggesting the possibility of shared features developing in Asian American social networks. Expanding on Hanna’s findings, Newman and Wu (2011) studied racial identification of native-English-speaking White, African American, Latino/a, and Asian American voices in New York
City. Again, they found that listeners were generally successful at identifying speakers’ race; on average, Asian speakers were accurately identified 54% of the time. However, there was actually a wide range—one female Chinese speakers was identified as Asian about 25% of the time, while a female Korean speaker was correctly identified almost 80% of the time. Overall, Newman and Wu concluded that “identifying Chinese and Korean Americans’ voices as Asian does not appear to be as perceptually robust for these judges as doing so for blacks and Latinos, although the range approximates that of whites” (162).

Newman and Wu also attempted to identify what linguistic cues contribute to a speaker sounding identifiably Asian. They looked at a several phonetic features, including phonation type, speech rhythm, and a variety of segmental features. They found that those Asian American speakers who were most successfully identified had a breathier phonation type (as indicated by a measure of spectral tilt) than non-Asian speakers and unsuccessfully identified Asian Americans, suggesting that “breathy voice” may be a salient marker of Asian ethnicity in native English speech. The results for the other features were less conclusive, with great diversity among the Asian speakers. As Newman and Wu note, “no Asian American speaker presents all the potential cues, and neither does any lack all” (170). Moreover, the relationship between the presence of certain cues and successful identification is unclear—some speakers who were most successfully identified presented fewer of the cues than less successfully identified speakers.

Overall, Newman and Wu conclude that while speakers may indeed sound identifiably Asian, “this differentiation does not rise to the level of a systematic racial dialect” (152). Instead,

7 In contrast, Yuasa (2010) found that creaky voice was a salient feature of young women’s English, including young Asian American women, setting them apart both from English-speaking males and Japanese-speaking females. Note that Newman and Wu’s study took place in New York City, while Yuasa’s took place in California, so that regional differences are one possible explanation for these different findings.
they suggest it should be characterized as an ethnolinguistic repertoire (Benor 2010). In her dissertation on Chinese Americans in New York City, Wong (2015) discusses extensively the concepts of ethnolects and ethnolinguistic repertoires, and explores some of the problems with both approaches as applied to Asian American language practices. Echoing Newman and Wu’s findings, she notes that “members of an ethnic group who use distinctive ethnolectal features often vary in the types and the rates of the ethnolectal features they use” (14). For this reason, “[s]cholars who seek to describe an ethnic variety often resort to confining the applicability of the variety to a subset of a given ethnic group [...] and/or make necessary qualifying statements about the variability within the ‘system’ they seek to describe” (15). The concept of an ethnolinguistic repertoire, defined as “the arsenal of distinctive resources used by a particular group” (Benor 2010:161), is still problematic in its reliance on distinctiveness at the group level. Wong instead advocates an approach that focuses on the repertoires of individual speakers, who at a given moment may wish to index multiple, overlapping, and shifting identities, including but not limited to ethnicity.

Among the resources available to Wong’s Chinese American speakers is raised THOUGHT, a highly salient local feature of New York City English. Among older speakers in her sample (those born in or before 1980), the height of THOUGHT was significantly correlated with speakers’ ethnic orientation. Speakers who showed a strong orientation toward Chinese identity/culture (e.g., speaking a Chinese language at home, socializing with other Chinese Americans, participating in Chinese American organizations, etc.) tended to produce a lower THOUGHT than speakers with a weaker ethnic orientation. In other words, for these speakers, indexing a Chinese ethnic identity involved avoiding a local linguistic variant.
Hall-Lew (2009) also investigated the interaction of ethnicity and local identity, albeit in a very different setting. Her study took place in a majority-Chinese neighborhood in San Francisco. San Francisco as a whole occupies a unique place in Chinese (and Asian) American history, being one of the earliest and most consistent entry points for Chinese migrants to the United States, and the site of the oldest Chinatown in North America. She also examines vocalic variables undergoing change, including the merger of LOT and THOUGHT and the fronting of GOAT and GOOSE. Her analysis demonstrates that speakers’ participation or non-participation in these changes correlates with their orientation to one of two competing linguistic markets which she terms the “Traditional Market” and the “Emergent Market”. Crucially, “localness” has value in both of these markets, although the meaning of “local” differs somewhat between the two (109). In particular, in the Emergent Market, Asianness is not opposed to localness, and may even be associated with it. As Hall-Lew writes, “the integral Asian American presence in the community necessarily problematizes the distinction between ‘ethnolect’ and ‘regional dialect’” (1). These studies and others, such as Nguyen’s (2014, 2015) work on Vietnamese American students in Minnesota, are advancing our understanding of ethnicity as deeply embedded in a geographical context.

1.6 Practice, identity, and the sorority

In this dissertation I approach ethnicity from the perspective that ethnic identity, including panethnic identity, is constructed through ongoing practices at the individual and group level. In a practice-based approach to sociolinguistic variation, the focus is on “the identities that speakers accrue not because they claim or are assigned category membership, but rather because identities are accomplished in the joint practice of particular activities” (Mendoza-Denton
Two frameworks that have been particularly influential in sociolinguistic studies of practice-based identity are *acts of identity* (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985) and *communities of practice* (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992).

The acts of identity framework holds that individuals agentively deploy variation to align themselves with or distance themselves from various social groups. These alliances and preferences are neither fixed nor unidimensional, but shift according to the moment-to-moment needs and desires of the speaker. Yet the behavior of the individual is not completely unconstrained or idiosyncratic. After all, for an act of identity to be successful, a speaker must not only *identify themselves* as belonging to a particular group, they must also be successfully *identified by others* as such. Group and individual identity are thus in a “symbiotic relationship”, each shaped and constrained by the other (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985:2).

Studies within the community of practice framework also focus on the relationship between individual and group identity, and between micro-level practices and macro-level social categories. The theory of the community of practice emerged from research in education (Lave 1988; Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), and was first introduced as a unit of sociolinguistic analysis by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), in their survey article of language and gender studies. Since then, several studies have applied the community of practice approach to the analysis of language and variation, often with an emphasis on gender (e.g., Bucholtz 1999; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Bakht 2010).

The community of practice approach differs from traditional variationist methods that take a geographically or demographically defined collection of individuals (e.g., New York City, middle-class African Americans) as the unit of analysis. Such methods are exemplified by Labov’s seminal work on New York City English (2006 [1966]), and much subsequent work in
that tradition. These methods have undoubtedly allowed linguists to uncover important, large-scale patterns of language variation, and to formulate principles of variation based on these patterns. However, while these methods are still undeniably useful, it has been argued that it is equally important to analyze language variation on a smaller scale. (Eckert 2000:1-2) argues that the broader, macro-level social meaning of variation cannot be understood without reference to the local, micro-level practices of individuals. She writes:

Ultimately, the social life of variation lies in the variety of individuals’ ways of participating in their communities—their ways of fitting in, and of making their mark—their ways of constructing meaning in their own lives. It lies in the day-to-day use and transformation of linguistic resources for local stylistic purposes, and its global significance lies in the articulation between these local purposes and larger patterns of ways of being in the world.

The community of practice approach allows for the discovery of locally meaningful categories—that is, rather than entering a community with a predetermined set of demographic groupings or linguistic variables for analysis, the researcher spends time observing the community in order to discover those social categories and linguistic features that are meaningful for local community members. A community of practice is defined by three criteria (Wenger 1998): mutual engagement, a jointly negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Of course, because of the emphasis on locally constructed meaning, some caution should be exercised in defining a community of practice a priori with respect to these criteria; for instance, the elements of a shared repertoire clearly cannot be known before research on the community is actually carried out. However, there are some general characteristics of sororities that make them very strong candidates for communities of practice. Many of these characteristics are described in
McLemore’s (1991) dissertation, which looked at intonation patterns among members of a Texas sorority. Although McLemore did her research before the framework was introduced to the field of sociolinguistics, her description of sorority practices nonetheless highlights many ways in which the sorority meets the criteria of a community of practice (bolded numbers added by the present author):

The sorority is a relatively well-bounded speech community (a dense, multiplex network in Milroy’s 1987 terms): (1) members coordinate meals, meetings, social events, fundraising events, and study sessions within the sorority context. (2) They share many of the goals toward which behaviors are directed, as well as expectations about appropriate strategies for achieving them; (3) this gives rise to shared, group-specific conventions in communicative behavior (McLemore 1991:12).

Clause (1) highlights the mutual engagement of sorority members in a number of activities. Clause (2) depicts members as having shared, sorority-related goals, i.e., engaging in a jointly negotiated enterprise. Clause (3) refers to elements of members’ shared repertoire; in this case, shared communicative conventions.

Note also that the sorority is a “dense, multiplex network”—meaning that (almost) all the members in the network know each other, and that members know each other in more than one capacity—which tends to function as a norm-enforcement mechanism (Milroy 1987). This is consistent with McLemore’s description of the sorority as a group which fosters conformity in behavior, including symbolic behavior such as ways of dressing and speaking.

1.7 “In Search of a Home and Place”: The Need for Asian American Sororities
Having established the sorority in general as a community of practice, I now turn to the specific role of the Asian American sorority as a community of ethnic practice. In considering Asian American sorority sisters, two interrelated questions immediately arise:

1) Why join a sorority?

2) Why join an Asian American sorority?

The answers to these questions are certainly as complex and numerous as the individuals who join these organizations, and yet, commonalities almost certainly exist as well. A great deal of research in the social sciences has focused on why college students join sororities and fraternities, including those oriented to a specific ethnic or religious group. The quote in the title of this section is from the title of a book chapter by Edith Wen-Chu Chen, “Asian Americans in Sororities and Fraternities: In Search of a Home and Place” (2009). This title clearly indicates that, at least for some Asian Americans, a sense of belonging is a key factor in their choice to join a sorority. If Asian Americans choose to form and join ethnic-specific sororities, that indicates that for some, being around sisters who share their ethnic background is important to that sense of belonging. The interaction between belonging and ethnicity plays out in more and less obvious ways in the setting of the American college campus.

Initially, of course, minority sororities and fraternities arose out of necessity, in response to formal barriers that prevented them from joining more established groups. The following quote from Shizue Morey Yoshina, a Chi Alpha Delta alumnus (Class of 1929) illustrates this:

Well, shucks, we were outsiders at the time. Awful lot of racism, prejudice, no one (in Panhellenic sororities) ever thought of including any Asians in their group, you know. They were strictly White. (Lim 1998, cited in Chen 2009)
Similarly, in 1949, the president of Alpha Phi Alpha (an African American fraternity) was quoted as saying:

If we are not permitted to join other fraternities, we must form a fraternity of our own. We have no other choice. (Whitman 1949, cited in Lee 1955)

Alfred McClung Lee’s (1955) book, *Fraternities Without Brotherhood*, documents the then-current struggle to remove discriminatory clauses and practices from fraternity and sorority admissions. However, as Chen (2009) points out, even with the elimination of formal racial barriers, the number of Asian American sororities and fraternities has increased dramatically in recent years. Moreover, the importance of minority sororities and fraternities in general has not declined, and has perhaps even increased, up to the present today. Chen’s discussion of Asian Americans is just one chapter in a book edited by Torbenson and Parks (2009), *Brothers and Sisters: Diversity in College Fraternities and Sororities*. Other chapters look at Black, Latino/a, and Native American Greek-letter organizations (GLOs), gay fraternities, and others. It is clear from these discussions that the elimination of formal barriers to membership—even the overt disavowal of discriminatory practices and principles—is not sufficient to create a sense of belonging within historically White, Christian, heteronormative organizations for many members of minority groups. That Asian American women continue to form and join ethnic-specific sororities, then, can be taken as an indication that they do not feel they belong in majority-White sororities.⁸

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⁸ Renee Blake (p.c.) points out that “lack of belonging” is not the only conceivable motivation for forming separate groups; the desire to differentiate oneself may be an equally important factor. Indeed, several of the sorority members I interviewed spoke of “Asian-awareness” and the importance of maintaining their cultural heritage as positive motivations for joining the sorority.
In contrast, Park (2008) interviewed Asian American women in majority-White sororities at a university in the Southeastern United States. Many of these women made comments downplaying the significance of race; yet, as Park argues:

…from a CRT [Critical Race Theory] perspective, comments that may downplay the relevance of race may actually be used as evidence that race is highly relevant to the situation at hand. (109)

Park goes on to say:

Although the sorority women in my study referred to circumstances in which race mattered in sorority life, such as feelings of racial otherness and a hierarchy in which women of color tended to be in less prestigious houses, they generally maintained that race was basically irrelevant to the system. (114)

The Asian American sorority women in Park’s study seemed invested in maintaining the image of their organizations as race-neutral, “colorblind” zones, sometimes to the point of expressing annoyance with “other minorities” who expressed an opposing viewpoint, such as in the following quote from a study participant:

I think a lot of the time the Greek system gets judged on diversity that’s unfair…if you looked at the demographics of who actually goes through the process of rush, the demographics of the house would make more sense. If Asian people don’t rush, then chapters can’t take Asian people because they never go through the process….that’s probably my biggest pet peeve about people judging the system about discrimination because people always go “oh well, I don’t think they’ll take
me.” “Well, did you go through rush?” “Well, no.” Well if you didn’t go through rush you didn’t give any house the chance to accept you or reject you, you know?

*If it is that way, it’s because minorities have made it that way.* (116-7, emphasis added)

Chen (1998, 2009) also surveyed Asian American women who had joined majority-White, Asian American, and African American sororities at a large public West Coast university. Among those who were members of majority-White sororities, Chen found that many “were careful to construct a non-Asian identity in front of their white sisters as a strategy of accommodation” (2009:92). Ironically, in attempting to avoid a racially marked image, many members drew on explicitly racial terms to explain why they joined a “mainstream” sorority instead of a specifically Asian American one, as illustrated by the following quotes from participants in Chen’s study:

“I was kind of trying not to be Asian”

“I didn’t want to be seen as just another Asian girl in an Asian sorority”

“Why separate yourself? You should just integrate”

“[Asian American sororities are] too FOBish” (92)

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9 FOB, an acronym meaning “fresh off the boat”, refers to newly arrived immigrants, and is usually used in a derogatory sense. Chen (1998:57, fn. 2) notes that while the Asian American sororities at the university she studied did have some “1.5 generation Asian Americans” (i.e., people who immigrated to the United States at a young age, in childhood or early adolescence), the “overwhelming majority” of members were American born. Hence, the perception of Asian American sororities as "FOBish" clearly has more to do with race and a perceived failure to assimilate to mainstream, White cultural norms than actual immigrant status.
Thus, regardless of whether Asian American sorority women join ethnic-specific organizations or White-majority organizations, whether they explicitly affirm or deny the role of race in sorority life or remain silent, the decision by an Asian American student to join a sorority is an inherently racialized one. Whether attempting to fit in with a majority-White sorority or build belonging in an Asian American sorority, language has an obvious part to play in creating and displaying similarity.

The existence of self-identified Asian American sororities also testifies to the importance of panethnicity in Asian American identity. Chen (2009), writing about the history of Asian American fraternities and sororities, notes that while most of the organizations established early on were specifically for Chinese or Japanese American students, today they are generally panethnic. This panethnic identification is made explicit in organizations’ self-descriptions. For example, the webpage of Sigma Phi Omega, originally established in 1949 at the University of Southern California as a Japanese American sorority, describes the organization as “the oldest Asian-American sorority at USC and third oldest in the United States” (Sigma Phi Omega Sorority 2009). Similarly, Lambda Phi Epsilon, founded at UCLA in 1981, describes itself as an “Asian interest fraternity”; the “History” section of the website states that the purpose of the founders was to “transcend the traditional boundaries of national origins [...] and bridge the gaps between those communities” (Lambda Phi Epsilon International Fraternity 2015). At the same time, Chen notes the rise of specifically South Asian and Filipino/a fraternities and sororities since the 1990s. In the same way that the presence of Asian American Greek-letter organizations speaks to the need for a sense of belonging among students of Asian descent, the rise of South Asian and Filipino/a organizations alongside existing “pan-Asian” organizations tells us quite a bit about who is and isn’t typically included in the “Asian American” label. Thus, “Asian
American” is simultaneously an inclusive and exclusive concept. In this research, I investigate how sorority members deal with this contradiction as they collaboratively construct what it means to be “Asian American”.

1.8 Sociolinguistic development of young adults

A further motive for studying this particular group is the dearth of sociolinguistic studies looking specifically at language development in young adults of college age. Traditional studies of language variation and change have tended to focus on adults, taking them as fully developed representatives of a particular slice of time, geography, social class, ethnicity, etc. More recent work, most notably that by Penny Eckert (1988, 1989, 2000), has examined adolescence as a crucial period of social development, in which language plays a key role. Recent work has also started to focus on the development and deployment of sociolinguistic competence in children and preadolescents (Eckert 1998; Bakht 2010; Wong 2010). However, relatively little attention has been paid to sociolinguistic development in late adolescence and early adulthood (McLemore 1991, Kiesling 1996, Wagner 2008, and Campbell-Kibler et al. 2014a,b are notable exceptions); this despite well-known research showing that speakers are capable of adjusting their usage in response to community change well into adulthood (Sankoff & Blondeau 2007 and sources cited therein). Moreover, it is widely acknowledged in other areas of social science that college is a formative time and place for identity building and ethnic formation for middle-class Americans,
with obvious implications for linguistic development. As Ruth Sidel (quoted in Kibria 1999) writes:

The traditional college years, the late teens through the mid-twenties, are years of extraordinary maturation and growth. These are the years when many young people leave home, often for the first time, meet very different kinds of people (also often for the first time), come upon previously unheard ideas, and have the opportunity, and indeed the task, of defining for themselves and others who they are—what they think, the values they hold, their place in a world beyond the one in which they grew up. (29)

At a very basic level, college is often a site where young people from different regional and dialectal backgrounds come together for the first time. The many personal anecdotes about “losing” or “dropping” a stigmatized regional accent during college attest to the importance of college as a crucial site of linguistic innovation and change at the individual and group level. Chen (1998:36) also discusses how studying racial dynamics in a middle-class milieu is important to an understanding of post-Civil Rights race relations, and specifically cites the sorority as a good site for studying the dynamics of integration and assimilation that have characterized most of the discourse around race in the post-Civil Rights era. As I have argued, the Asian American sorority is also a valuable site for the study of panethnicity, a topic that has important implications for ethnic change and the future of race relations in the United States (Lopez & Espiritu 1990).

1.9 Why study an Asian American sorority?

In this chapter, I have discussed the need for increased attention to the language practices of Asian Americans and the advantages of the ethnolinguistic repertoire and community of practice approaches to the study of language variation. I have also highlighted the characteristics of a sorority that make it an excellent fit for the community of practice framework. An Asian American sorority thus offers an excellent site to investigate the status and development of linguistic repertoires that may index Asian identities among young women at the age and in the social space where identity formation is most active. In the following chapter, I discuss how I selected the Alpha Zeta Nu sorority at New Jersey University for study, and how I eventually entered the community and carried out my research.
2. Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the methods I used to gain access to the community and collect data. The community in question is one chapter of a national Asian American sorority located at a large public university in New Jersey. Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to the school as New Jersey University (NJU) and the sorority as Alpha Zeta Nu (AZN).\(^{11}\) I also describe how I selected two linguistic variables—the GOAT vowel and prosodic rhythm—for analysis. The methods used for analyzing those variables will be discussed in the chapters devoted to each variable.

2.1 Entering the community

Every ethnographer faces challenges entering their community of study, ranging from the general to the specific. The sorority or fraternity presents some particular challenges, given the exclusive nature of the organization and the secrecy surrounding certain community practices. Other researchers who have worked on Greek-letter organizations (GLOs) have dealt with these challenges in a number of ways. In the case of Kiesling (1996:118), he was himself a member of the national organization, which greatly facilitated his access. He contacted the Executive Director and National Council directly, then the president of the local chapter he was interested in studying. Because of his in-group status, he was able to gain very broad access to fraternity functions and members. The same level of access would almost certainly not be given to a non-member; nonetheless, McLemore’s (1991) dissertation shows that it is possible to conduct an ethnographic sorority study without being a member. In her case, her entry was facilitated by

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\(^{11}\) These are, of course, pseudonyms. Calling the sorority "AZN" is also something of an in-joke, as "Azn/AZN/azn", as an alternative spelling of “Asian”, is a term of identification used by some Asian Americans. The names used for all participants in this study are also pseudonyms.
personal contact with an alumna of a different chapter of the same sorority, whom she was able to use as a personal reference when contacting the president of the local chapter she wished to study. She was given free access to the sorority house and allowed to attend and record most of the sorority’s activities, with the exception of “closed” meetings, executive meetings, and secret rituals (17).

Chen (1998) took a different approach, since her study was not based on an in-depth ethnography of a single sorority, but rather on one-on-one interviews with several alumnae of various different sororities at the same university. Chen obtained participants through a variety of means, including contacting chapter presidents and attending rush events, personal contacts with some sorority members, and “snowball” interviewing (39). Although Chen was not seeking personal access to the sororities themselves, she still encountered some challenges in recruiting willing participants. In particular, Chen notes that Asian American women who belonged to majority-White sororities were sometimes reluctant to participate, possibly because they did not want to be singled out for their “Asianness”. She also notes that “sorority women in general seem to be suspicious of researchers. Several of the women spoke of the negative images and press given to sorority women” (41).

In my case, I started as a complete stranger to the community, having no personal contacts with current or former members of any Asian American sororities or fraternities. I began by researching Asian American sororities online, identifying organizations with multiple chapters in the Northeast. From there, I took a many-pronged approach to making contact with a chapter that would work with me. For example, I contacted the president of the National Asian Pacific Islander Panhellenic Association (NAPA), an umbrella organization for Asian American sororities and fraternities, reasoning that such an organization would likely be open to scholarly
interest from an outsider and might be willing to put me in touch with individual chapters. In the end, through a combination of this top-down approach and talking to friends of friends, I made contact with Laura, who is one of the speakers in my study. Laura was an active alumna of one of the sororities I was interested in, serving as Governor of the Northeast region. At the time I contacted her, she was a Master’s student in Student Affairs at NJU, where a chapter of this sorority existed. Laura was particularly interested in my work because of her own studies and intention to embark on a career working with college students. Although she was not technically a member of the NJU chapter, she had a strong relationship with them, and was able to serve as a liaison. With her introduction, I began talking to the current chapter President, who invited me to come to one of the sorority’s events and talk to the members about my research.

In general, the members were very receptive to my project. Like other Asian American sororities I researched, AZN explicitly mentions promoting awareness of Asian (American) cultures and the well-being of Asian American women as part of their mission. More than one member told me they were happy I was doing this research and that they felt it was in line with the sorority’s mission. In explaining the linguistic focus of my research, I told the members that I was interested in how people use language to create and reflect their identity—that is, what does the way we speak say about who we are? I emphasized the dearth of linguistic research on Asian Americans, especially Asian American young women. Positioning my research goals in line with the goals of the sorority (visibility, awareness) helped me gain entry to the community. Moreover, the fact that these were young college women certainly facilitated my access, for in general they were academically minded and open to the idea of social science research. Several of the members expressed interest in post-graduate education and were curious about my experience as a doctoral student.
2.2 Status of the researcher

A central concern in sociolinguistics has always been the issue of the Observer’s Paradox (Labov 1972b), which, simply stated, is the problem that we generally want to observe how people speak when they are not being observed. Much of sociolinguistic methodology has been developed as an attempt to mitigate the problem of the Observer’s Paradox, such as the careful design of the sociolinguistic interview to elicit speech that is likely to be relatively unmonitored. Yet it must be acknowledged that the Observer’s Paradox can never be completely overcome. Increasingly in sociolinguistics and related fields there is an emphasis on the role of the researcher as an active participant in the construction of the very data they are collecting. As Modan (2007:286) says:

A fundamental tenet of ethnographic research is that there exists no neutral position for a researcher – if you are engaged in social interaction, you are part of that interaction, and who you are is going to affect the kind of data you have access to […] Different researchers have different kinds of access to different communities, and every researcher will have access to some aspects of a community that other researchers do not have access to.

Or, as Mendoza-Denton (2008:43) puts it, “It is a responsibility of anthropologists to explain ourselves, who we are and where we come from.”

Previous researchers on sororities and fraternities have indeed practiced this kind of self-reflection and self-disclosure. McLemore (1991:18-20) discusses how as she spent time in the sorority, her role necessarily shifted from that of strictly an observer to a participant (for example, by participating in compliment-giving, an important part of the sorority’s communicative norms).
She also discusses the aspects of personal identity that she shared with the sorority members—i.e., being white, female, Texan, and coming from an upper-middle-class Protestant background—and both the advantages and disadvantages this conferred. On the one hand, because of these shared social characteristics, she was able to integrate into the sorority and accommodate to community norms as necessary (e.g., in compliment-giving). On the other hand, as someone who might be described as a near-native ethnographer, she faced the challenge of “shedding [her own] interpretive categories in order to understand the relation between speech forms and their interpretation” (20).

Chen (1998:41) also discusses how her shared race, gender, and (often) class background with the Asian American women she interviewed positioned her as not “a complete outsider”. She cites Zinn (1979:212) who observes that minority researchers are less likely to encounter hostility, distrust, and exclusion in minority communities than are researchers who come from a dominant group. At the same time, Zinn points out that “insider” status does not solve all the problems of field research, and can even bring its own challenges (see also Maykovich 1977). Framed by a discussion of her own experience as a Chicana researcher studying Chicano families, she makes the following very important points: 1) entry into a community is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process, and 2) “insider/outsider” status is not binary, but gradient (214; see also Mendoza-Denton 2008:53-4). As an illustration of both points, she relates how she established relationships with two different groups in the local community education program that served as her point of entry. While the program staff members showed a great deal of interest in her research and an eagerness to help from the outset, the mothers participating in the program were more distant at first. However, when they discovered that Zinn could not sew, a skill they believed every proper Mexican woman ought to have, they teased her about her ignorance and
took it upon themselves to teach her, “each taking time from her own sewing and proudly displaying her knowledge of the craft” (214). As Zinn puts it, this “peculiarity” of the researcher effected a change in how community members perceived her, resulting in interactions that eventually led to friendships between herself and the women who became her informants.

This last anecdote also illustrates the potential usefulness of “semi-insider” (or “semi-outsider”) status for the researcher. As multiple researchers have pointed out, there are questions an outsider can ask that would be seen as odd or inappropriate for an insider to ask (e.g., Maykovich 1977:116-7; Modan 2007:286-7; Hall-Lew 2009:37). Moreover, members of a neighborhood or community of practice are often eager to display their local knowledge and skills—for example, McLemore (1991:18) says that once sorority members knew she was a linguist, they often volunteered information about “the way we talk”, particularly slang terms.

After the difficulty of gaining access to the community was surmounted, I do believe my “semi-insider/outsider” status was advantageous to my research: on the one hand, I am an Asian American woman of similar age, class, and educational background to most of the sorority members. In this sense, I was not a complete outsider, in that I shared certain experiences and cultural context with sorority members. Moreover, I shared the sorority members’ interest in Asian American identity and issues. At the same time, as someone who had never participated in any sorority, I was an outsider not just to the particular sorority under study, but to sorority culture in general. Because of this, it was both natural and necessary for me to ask many questions about sorority practices.

I never made any attempt to “pass” as a sorority member, nor to disguise my purpose for being at sorority events. I did not go out of my way to change my style to match sorority norms, but within the range of my personal style, I did make certain choices that I felt would help me
better fit in. I aimed for a middle ground, avoiding outfits that were either very casual or very
dressy (I didn’t wear fleece hoodies, but I didn’t wear blazers, either). I happened to have long,
straight hair at the beginning of fieldwork, a style which also predominated in the sorority, and I
kept that style throughout. As I will discuss in detail in the following section, the nature of my
fieldwork was such that most of my observations took place at events where sorority members
were interacting with the wider campus community. As such, my appearance mattered not just in
terms of how sorority members perceived me, but also in terms of how other students perceived
me and my association with the sorority. Like any ethnographer, I wanted my presence to be
minimally disruptive to the community I was studying. Early on in my fieldwork, more than one
person asked if I were a sister or alumna of AZN, but as time went on, people became familiar
with my relationship to the group. Looking like someone who could belong to the sorority was
clearly advantageous, in that it allowed me to be a participant observer without drawing too
much attention to myself as an outsider.

2.3 Participant observation

Previous researchers on sororities and fraternities, like McLemore (1991) and Kiesling
(1996), have focused on activity within the group, usually centered in the sorority or fraternity’s
house. As McLemore states, her fieldwork was “centered in and around the sorority house, and
primarily focused on the structured events that organize daily life” (11). At the time of her
research, the chapter had approximately 150 members, and slightly more than 30% lived in the
sorority house, which McLemore describes as “the center of activity for all members” (13). Her

12 One non-member whom I interviewed months later even commented that she remembered who I was from seeing
me at rush events.
speech data (25 hours of recordings) include several sorority meetings; a pledge education class; a social event, held at a local country club, at which sorority members, sorority advisors, and fraternity members were present; and various other social interactions and activities taking place in the sorority house. Her data also include five 30- to 45-minute interviews with groups of two or three sorority members.

Kiesling’s (1996) fieldwork was somewhat different: at the university where he conducted his research, most students commuted, and dormitory space was limited. There was no on-campus fraternity house, although there were a few locations—one apartment on campus and two houses off-campus—where multiple members lived together, and which served as centers of activity for the fraternity. Kiesling’s data consist of approximately 37 hours of recorded interaction, including eleven meetings, nine interviews and several hours of informal socializing among members.

As I began my fieldwork, I soon realized that my methods would have to be somewhat different from the above examples for practical reasons. The most obvious was the lack of a sorority house. With around twenty active members in a given semester, AZN is much smaller than “mainstream” sororities on campus. A lack of resources and historical patterns of housing discrimination mean that to this day most Asian American sororities and fraternities lack houses of their own (Chen 2009:87). While a few sisters did share a house near campus, most of the members I spoke to lived separately in dorms. Sorority meetings and events took place in vacant classrooms and communal campus spaces. Thus, most of my ethnographic observations were of sorority members interacting with the wider campus community, not only among themselves. There was also the fact that I was commuting between New York City and NJU—a two-hour trip by train or one-hour drive each way—so by necessity my observations were largely limited to
structured, scheduled events. Given these limitations, and my reliance on individual interviews, this dissertation may best be understood as a “semi-ethnography”, as described by Hall-Lew (2009:31-3).

The sorority activities I observed fell into three categories: 1) chapter meetings, at which only members were present, 2) campus events, such as fundraisers and student activity fairs, which were open to all students, and 3) Rush events, at which members, prospective members (“Rushees”) and members of affiliated fraternities were present.

Chapter meetings were generally devoted to the discussion of official sorority business, such as upcoming events, membership dues, board elections, and announcements from the national organization. At the time I was conducting my fieldwork, the chapter was in the process of applying to the national organization for recognition as a full-fledged chapter, so there was much talk of “going up for status”. In theory, chapter meetings followed a turn-based structure in which one speaker held the floor at a time, yet in practice, there were often overlapping turns and even multiple separate conversations taking place at once.

Campus events involved the sorority members interacting with the wider campus community. For example, one event I attended early on was a fundraiser for AZN’s central philanthropic cause, breast cancer awareness. Students were enticed to buy tickets with the promise of food, raffle prizes, and entertainment—the latter largely consisted of sorority members performing carefully rehearsed dance routines. I also attended a student involvement fair toward the beginning of the school year, where the sorority was just one organization among

13 There are three status levels for GLOs affiliated with a national organization. When a new chapter is initially recognized by the national organization, they are labeled a “Colony”. More established chapters move up to the “Associate” level. Finally, a chapter may apply for status as a full-fledged chapter. During my fieldwork, in the Spring of 2014, the NJU chapter successfully achieved full-fledged status.
many hoping to attract attention and interest. Sorority members took shifts staffing their table, which displayed AZN’s letters and colors as well as pictures from events past, offering information about the sorority to students who wandered by.

    Probably the most intense period of my fieldwork occurred during spring Rush, two weeks of nightly events at which current members (and occasionally alumnae) engaged one-on-one with potential new members (“Rushees”). Sorority members and Rushees whom I spoke to likened the process to “speed dating”, with each side trying to impress the other (indeed, one of the scheduled events was named “Speed Dating”, and consisted of current members and new members speaking one-on-one for a few minutes each). These events culminated in a dinner to which select Rushees were invited, after which the sisters decided on a small number of Rushees to whom they would offer membership. The Rush period I attended resulted in four new sisters joining the sorority, one of whom (Felicia) is included in my interview sample.

2.4 Interviews and informants

    The bulk of my data come from sociolinguistic interviews conducted with 31 participants. Of those 31, 19 are associated with the sorority. At the time of my fieldwork, there were 22 active sisters, of whom I was able to interview 18. Laura, the alumna who facilitated my entry into the community, had joined an AZN chapter at a different school. My fieldwork began in September 2013, and the first interviews with sorority members took place in January 2014. The following table provides some basic information on the sorority interviewees, namely their year
of birth, year at NJU, ethnicity, approximate age of acquisition of English, and other languages spoken.\textsuperscript{14}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Speaker} & \textbf{Year of birth} & \textbf{Year at NJU} & \textbf{Ethnicity} & \textbf{AoA (English)} & \textbf{Other languages} \\
\hline
Felicia & 1995 & Sophomore & Chinese & 0 & Cantonese, Mandarin \\
Selene & 1994 & Junior & Filipina & 4/5 & Tagalog \\
Peggy & 1993 & Junior & Chinese & 0 & none \\
Gertrude & 1993 & Junior & Chinese & 3 & Mandarin \\
Maria & 1993 & Junior & Vietnamese/French & 5 & Vietnamese \\
Wanda & 1993 & Junior & Chinese & 5/6 & Wenzhounese, Mandarin, Cantonese \\
Emma & 1993 & Junior & Vietnamese & 3/4 & Vietnamese \\
Molly & 1993 & Junior & Chinese & 0 & Mandarin \\
Shanna & 1993 & Junior & Chinese & 4 & Cantonese \\
Jubilee & 1993 & Junior & Vietnamese & 5 & Vietnamese \\
Nico & 1993 & Junior & Vietnamese & 9 & Vietnamese \\
Pepper & 1992 & Senior & Chinese & 5 & Fujianese, Cantonese, Mandarin \\
Jean & 1992 & Junior & Korean & 4 & Korean \\
Kitty & 1992 & Junior & Korean & 5 & Korean \\
Carol & 1992 & Senior & Chinese & 5/6 & Cantonese, Mandarin \\
Crystal & 1992 & Senior & Chinese & 7/8 & Mandarin, Shanghainese \\
Jeansun & 1992 & Senior & Korean & 0 & Korean \\
“The Lady in Black” (Lady) & 1991 & Senior & Chinese & 5/6 & Cantonese, Mandarin \\
Laura & 1990 & Grad & Chinese & 4 & Shanghainese, Mandarin \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Sorority speakers}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{14} Note that “Other languages” refers only to languages acquired natively or semi-natively at a young age, not any additional languages studied later in life. When multiple languages are listed, they are listed roughly in order of proficiency, as reported by the informant.
With the exception of Pepper, who was born in Hong Kong, and Nico, who was born in Vietnam, all of the sorority informants were born in the United States. However, a few US-born participants spent significant time in Asia during their childhood; I will discuss certain cases as they become relevant. All of the sorority members acquired English before the age of 10, within the timeframe usually posited for native-like language acquisition (Jia & Aaronson 2003; Lenneberg 1967). Based on this criterion, and on my own assessment from speaking with each member, I consider all the sorority members to be on roughly equal footing as native speakers of English. Nonetheless, differences between earlier and later learners might arise upon closer inspection; indeed, in Section 5.4 I consider age of acquisition as a possible factor in the realization of prosodic rhythm.

Reflecting the diversity of the Asian American population, the sorority members come from a variety of language backgrounds and have varying degrees of exposure to and proficiency in Asian heritage languages (HLs).15 At one extreme is Peggy, who is a third-generation Chinese-American and has only ever spoken English. Both of her parents were born in the United States, and she reports that her mother speaks some Cantonese, while her father speaks no Chinese. At the other end of the continuum is Nico, who only began learning English when she moved to the U.S. at age nine, and who still speaks almost exclusively Vietnamese with her parents. Most of the sorority members fell in between these two extremes. Many reported only passive competence in one or more of their HLs: “I can understand it but I can’t speak it very well” was a frequent comment about the parents’ or grandparents’ language. In general, those

15 Throughout, I will use “heritage language” as a loose term to refer to any language(s) associated with a speaker's ethnic background—usually, the language(s) spoken by the speaker's parents, grandparents, etc.
who acquired English later tended to maintain greater HL proficiency, usually because they lived with parents or other family members with limited English proficiency. Birth order also had an effect on HL use: older siblings were typically the most proficient, younger siblings the least proficient, and middle siblings fell in between. Regardless of their level of proficiency, or use with parents, almost all sorority members indicated that they strongly preferred to speak English with their siblings. One sorority member commented that even though both she and her sister learned Shanghainese as their first language, “it’d be weird” for them to speak it to each other.

The other 12 participants are female students at NJU who are not members of the sorority. I aimed to interview both students of Asian descent and other ethnicities, in order to be able to examine the effects of both group membership and ethnicity. These participants were largely recruited through posts to Facebook groups for NJU students. The interviews generally took about an hour, and participants were paid $20 each for their time. The following table presents information about these participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Year at NJU</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>AoA (English)</th>
<th>Other languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>Black/White</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Jane</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karima</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Gujarati, Hindi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doreen</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Marie</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Chinese/White</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elektra</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Greek</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With the exception of Lucy, who was born in Vietnam, all the non-sorority speakers were born in the United States and report learning English from birth. On average, the non-sorority participants were a little younger than the sorority participants, likely because younger students, especially first-years, were generally more active in the Facebook groups to which I posted advertisements. It should also be noted that first-year students are not permitted to join sororities or fraternities, so in retrospect, I could have excluded first-year students from the control group in order to obtain a more comparable sample. On the other hand, given time constraints, excluding first-years would have greatly reduced the number of informants I was able to interview. In any case, the age difference is very slight—in an apparent time study of change in progress, all of these speakers would be grouped together. Of course, given my focus on college as a crucial time for identity formation, the question of differences between students at different stages of college is relevant; recent research on long-term accommodation among college students has produced mixed results (Pardo et al. 2012; Campbell-Kibler et al. 2014a; Campbell-Kibler et al. 2014b). I must set aside such questions for future research.

Over the years, sociolinguists have developed various techniques for eliciting large amounts of natural, unmonitored speech, and the definition of a “sociolinguistic interview” has broadened considerably since Labov’s original (2006 [1966]) formulation. What all these techniques have in common is “the employment of semi-structured, conversation-like interview styles that proceed somewhat organically based on the responses of the interviewee” (Hall-Lew 2009:34). In particular, studies that involve ethnographic or semi-ethnographic work often depart from the traditional Labovian format in order to include questions that are culturally relevant and avoid topics that are deemed inappropriate. It must also be recognized that not every interviewer can ask every question (see also Section 2.2). While my relationship with the sorority members
perhaps gave me license to ask certain questions, it also constrained me from asking others (I did not, for instance, feel comfortable asking questions about sex, or the “danger of death”). I also avoided the use of reading passages and word lists.\textsuperscript{16}

I aimed to collect around one hour of speech at a minimum from each interviewee. My shortest interview with a sorority member was 45 minutes; my longest was nearly two hours. The interviews focused on several topics related to family, growing up, college life, etc., which I varied somewhat depending on the interviewee. With AZN members, I spent much time talking about sorority life. With other interviewees, I asked about their perceptions of sororities and fraternities and whether they had ever considered joining one.\textsuperscript{17} With all interviewees, I asked about ethnic identity, diversity on campus and elsewhere, and experiences with racism. I saved questions about language for the end, in accordance with Labov (1972a). A sample interview schedule is included in the Appendix.

The interviews took place in different locations around campus, often in a location suggested by the interviewee. I always suggested that the location be quiet and private, but conditions were not always ideal. The best interviews, in terms of sound quality, were those that took place in a private residence, office, or empty classroom. Other interviews took place in communal student spaces, such as dining areas, lounges, and the campus bookstore, with varying levels of background noise. For the interviews with non-sorority members, which I conducted at a later date, I was fortunate to have the cooperation of an NJU faculty member, who gave me the use of his office. Early interviews were conducted with a Zoom Handy H1 portable recorder and

\textsuperscript{16} Reading passages and word lists are most useful when the researcher is interested in a specific set of well-established variables; thus, I did not feel they would much enhance my interview data. I also felt they would threaten the casual atmosphere of the interviews, especially if it became common knowledge among the sorority members that the reading of an odd story or list of words was part of the interview process.

\textsuperscript{17} Two of the “non-sorority” participants were in fact members of a GLO: Anna Marie and Elektra were members of a newly formed chapter of a mainstream sorority.
a Radio Shack lavalier microphone, which led to overall lower recording quality. Later interviews were conducted with professional-quality Audio Technica lavalier microphones and either a Zoom Handy H1 or H4n recorder. All interviews were recorded in WAV format at a sample rate of 44 kHz.

2.5 Linguistic variables

In the early stages of this research, I had identified several potential variables of interest, including phonation type, prosodic rhythm, and high rising intonation, or “uptalk”, yet I also allowed for the likely event that my fieldwork would uncover different or additional variables. In the end, I chose two phonetic variables to analyze: the realization of the mid back rounded vowel (i.e., /o/ or GOAT), and prosodic rhythm.

The GOAT vowel was not a variable I had considered before beginning my fieldwork, but almost as soon as I began interacting with sorority members, I was struck by their strongly backed pronunciation of this vowel in words like so and go. This pronunciation stood out to me because it stood in contrast to the general tendency among many younger speakers of American English to front the nucleus of GOAT (see, e.g., Hall-Lew 2009). At the same time, I could not find any existing research indicating that backed (or non-fronted) GOAT was associated with Asian Americans, although Chun (2009) does mention backed, monophthongal /o/ as a feature of “Mock Asian” English. Based on my initial observations, I hypothesized that the sorority members were producing a backer GOAT vowel than their age-mates, and that this pronunciation was somehow linked to Asian American ethnic identity. In Chapter 4 I present normalized acoustic analyses that provide evidence to support this hypothesis.
As for prosodic rhythm, much previous research has demonstrated dialectal differences in rhythm (e.g., Thomas & Carter 2006; Coggshall 2008; Lim 2010), usually attributed to substrate influence from a non-English language. While previous research looking at rhythm in Asian American English is lacking, metalinguistic descriptions of Asian American speech as “choppy” or “staccato-like” are common (e.g., Hanna 1997:151; Hall-Lew 2009:75). Many Asian languages are syllable-timed, in contrast to the stress-timed rhythm of English, so the likelihood of a substrate influence on Asian American English is high. In Chapter 6, I analyze the prosodic rhythm of the sorority members’ speech using the Pairwise Variability Index (Thomas & Carter 2006) and show that it is indeed different from other varieties of English.
3. The Sorority in Context

In this chapter, I will provide some ethnographic background of the sorority and its environment, drawn from my observations in the field, as well as interviews with sorority members and other students.

3.1 The members

The sorority members came from a range of backgrounds and defied any easy generalizations about Asian Americans. Some were the first generation in their family to go to college, while others had parents with PhDs. Most of the sisters I interviewed grew up in a household with both parents, but a few had parents who were separated, and more than one recounted an experience of near-total abandonment by a father or mother. Some had parents who worked as engineers; others as casino dealers or nail technicians. They grew up in cities and suburbs. Some reported hanging out almost exclusively with other Asian Americans in high school; others reported being one of only a few Asians in a predominantly White area.

Contrary to the perception of sororities as homogenizing environments, several members expressed a sense of pride that their chapter attracted young women with diverse personalities and interests. One member described the chapter as “quirky”. AZN members were pursuing a range of majors, including pharmacy, psychology, human resources, and exercise science. Their hobbies outside of school included playing music (guitar, flute, piano), arts and crafts (drawing, cross-stitch, baking), and sports (Ultimate Frisbee, tennis). A few expressed a desire to pursue graduate school; others were pursuing internships with hospitals or media companies. While most sisters commented that the sorority kept them too busy to pursue many other extracurricular activities, a few were involved in groups focused on volunteering, academic interests, or religion.
3.2 The university

As I have described earlier, my fieldwork took place at a large public university in New Jersey, which I refer to as New Jersey University (NJU). NJU was an ideal research site for several reasons. First, the campus has a diverse student body, with a strong Asian American presence (nearly a quarter of the student population). Second, the campus has an active Greek community, with over 80 fraternities and sororities, including several multicultural and ethnic-oriented organizations. Among the latter are three nationally recognized Asian American sororities, including AZN. According to a 2013 report, about 12% of undergraduates at NJU participated in a Greek-letter organization (GLO). As a point of comparison, New York University has about 40 GLOs, with roughly 5-7% of undergraduates participating.¹⁸ I take this comparison as evidence of a robust Greek culture at NJU, an assessment which was supported by the students I interviewed.

One only has to step onto campus—or visit NJU’s website—to notice the diversity of the student body. The university actively promotes this diversity as a positive feature. According to NJU’s website, the ethnic breakdown of the student body is as follows:

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### Table 3. Ethnic makeup of NJU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International(^{19})</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiethnic</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>&lt; 1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, all the students I interviewed agreed that NJU was a diverse campus, and that that diversity was a good thing. Nevertheless, there was occasionally some tension between the university’s promotion of its diversity and students’ experiences. Several students said that while it was true the campus was diverse in the sense that one could see students of all different ethnicities, different ethnic groups nevertheless tended not to intermix. As Selene put it:

**CB:** Do you agree that NJU is a diverse environment?

**Selene:** In a way I do, because there are a lot of different cultures and backgrounds that come to NJU? But in another way, I don’t, because I feel as though all these cultures and backgrounds stick to their cultures and backgrounds. So it’s difficult for things to be truly, like, a melting pot.

Early in my fieldwork, I went with a few sorority sisters to a trivia event hosted by another Asian student group. The event took place at the Asian American Cultural Center, a space shared by various Asian student groups. The Center is located in one of many portable

\(^{19}\) According to NJU’s factbook, the top countries of origin for international students are China, India, South Korea, Turkey, and Taiwan. This no doubt contributes to the image of “Asians and Indians everywhere” at NJU.
buildings on campus, next to a daycare center. At the time of my visit, a large banner hung on the wall that read, “We need a NEW Asian American Cultural Center because....” Many messages complained that the space was too small, too cold/too hot, and not “professional” looking. Some of the messages revealed tension between students and the administration:

“We are not invisible.”

“NJU ‘CLAIMS’ to be diverse!”

“THERE ARE 10,000+ STUDENTS AT NJU WITH AN ASIAN BACKGROUND AND THEIR CULTURAL CENTER IS IN A BROKEN-DOWN WAREHOUSE TUCKED AWAY IN THE CORNER OF [CAMPUS] BY A CHILDREN’S DAYCARE CENTER...”

These messages not only reveal a rift between student experiences and the university’s official message of diversity, they also belie the image of Asian American students as a “model minority” group that excels in higher education without difficulty or conflict.

3.3 Defining “Asian”

The terms “Asian” and “Asian American” have long been contentious ones. As Reyes and Lo (2009:4) discuss, such terms obscure a great deal of ethnic, linguistic, and national diversity. Reyes describes “Asian American” as a “unifying, yet homogenizing, label” (2009:48). More recently, terms such as “Asian/Pacific American” (APA) or “Asian/Pacific Islander American” (APIA) have become popular in political and academic contexts, yet these labels merely create a diversity, even though such diversity may not actually be present. As Reyes and Lo write, “the very language that we use to talk about who is APA or not reveals culturally
salient ideologies about who is a prototypical ‘Asian American’ and who is not” (2009:4). They add:

The normative “Asian American” subject, who is marked in terms of ethnicity, class, and generation, is revealed through the ways that the term appears in conjunction with or in contrast to other terms (e.g., Asian and Pacific Islander American, South Asian American vs. [East] Asian American, etc.). (2009:12, fn. 2)

This “normative Asian American subject” also varies by local context. For instance, as (Hall-Lew 2009:38) notes of her fieldwork in San Francisco’s Sunset District, 52% of the population identifies as Asian, and of those, 77% identify as Chinese. Residents of this neighborhood often use the terms “Asian” and “Chinese” interchangeably. A different local meaning of “Asian” became apparent in my interview with Selene, the only Filipina in the group. When talking about her hometown of Toms River, NJ, she described how “mainly Asians would stick with Asians, African Americans would stick with African Americans”, and so on. When I asked her more specifically about the Asian population of Toms River, she revealed that it was mostly Filipino/as, with a small number of Vietnamese. In fact, she said, “I never met a Chinese person before I came to college!”

The language used by the university and by students to talk about race and ethnicity also reveals a divide. As seen above, the university’s official figures of the student population group all Asian ethnicities together, and there is no explanation of what the term “Asian” encompasses (e.g., are students of Middle Eastern descent classified as “Asian”? as “White”?). In popular use, the term “Asian” in the United States typically refers to people of East and Southeast Asian
descent,\textsuperscript{20} and typically does not include South or Central Asians, Pacific Islanders, or other groups, unless specified. This differs from academic and political discourse, where “Asian” is often construed to be broadly inclusive and/or used in conjunction with other terms. For example, the US Census currently recognizes the racial categories “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander”, which are defined as follows:\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Asian} – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

\textbf{Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander} – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.\textsuperscript{22}

This broader definition of “Asian” also often prevails in institutional contexts. The umbrella organization to which AZN belongs is named NAPA, which stands for “National APIA Panhellenic Organization”, APIA itself being an acronym for “Asian/Pacific Islander American”. Among the 13 organizations belonging to NAPA, self-descriptors include “Asian interest”, “Asian American interest”, “South Asian interest”, and “multicultural”. The fact that “Asian interest” and “South Asian interest” GLOs exist side-by-side within an umbrella “Asian”

\textsuperscript{20} As just one example, at the time of writing, searching for “Asian” food on a popular food delivery site brings up almost exclusively Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese restaurants, while Indian restaurants form their own category.

\textsuperscript{21} Source: \url{http://census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html}.

\textsuperscript{22} In this schema, persons of Middle Eastern or North African descent are classified as White.
organization shows that members recognize the value of panethnic organizing at the same time as they find value in forming more specific subgroups at the local level.

Within academia as well, the place of Asians is literally and figuratively contested. For example, NJU has a “Department of Asian Languages and Cultures” and a “Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages and Literatures”. By comparison, NYU has “Africana Studies” and “A/P/A Studies” programs, an “East Asian Studies” department, and a “Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies” department. These differing systems of classification show that racial categories, far from being fixed and universally agreed upon, are constantly shifting and being contested. As the American Anthropological Society writes, “Today’s ethnicities are yesterday’s races.”

At the level of individual student organizations at NJU, the popular, narrower meaning of “Asian” clearly prevails, leading to a distinction between “Asian” student organizations largely comprised of Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese students, and others. This distinction is upheld through self-identification of groups on both sides of the divide. For example, while AZN names “Asian Awareness” as part of its mission, other GLOs on campus name “South Asian Awareness”. During my fieldwork, I observed very little crossover between “Asian” and “South Asian” groups. One member joked during a chapter meeting that “We’re not down with the brown”, meaning that the sorority did not generally participate in events hosted by South Asian student groups.

This distinction is also clear when speaking to students. Many of my interviewees made a distinction between “Asian” and “Indian” when talking about their hometowns, schools, and friend groups. For instance:

23 Source: [http://www.aaanet.org/gvt/ombdraft.htm](http://www.aaanet.org/gvt/ombdraft.htm)
Shanna (Chinese): Um, a lot of my friends were white, Asian American, or like Indian?

Lady in Black (Chinese): Our school consisted of a lot of like Asian Americans, a lot of like Indians, as well? So then a lot of times growing up, I hung out with like, other Asians, or I hung out with like…Indians.

Natasha (Chinese): I have like, one Asian friend? [...] And then my best friend’s White, and like a couple of my closer friends are actually Black, and, I think I have an Indian friend. I have one Indian friend. (laugh)

Anna Marie (Chinese/White): [When they come to NJU] all like the white kids go like, “Oh my god, there’s so many Asians and Indians everywhere!” And then, as an Asian, I was like, “Oh my god, there’s so many Asians and Indians everywhere!” Like, it was the same thing.

3.4 Comments on pan-Asian identity and ethnic difference

Within the sorority, there was evidence of a pan-Asian, racialized identity, such as when the chapter president described a multi-GLO conference as an opportunity to network with “White sororities and fraternities”. On my first visit, more than one sister told me about “Asian American awareness” as part of the sorority’s mission, and the sorority frequently collaborated with other Asian American student groups in organizing and attending events.

Yet sorority members also made comments highlighting ethnic differences. For instance, when introduced to a group of sorority sisters, they asked about my “nationality” and commented that I looked mixed. This was hardly the first time that I had been asked by other Asians about
my specific ethnicity. In my experience, this type of in-group discourse among Asian Americans is not intended to create or highlight divisions; in fact, it often has the opposite effect. Answering gives the asker the chance to either confirm a shared background or reciprocate by revealing their own ethnicity. In any case, the very act of being queried about one’s ethnicity or national origin is an experience shared by most Asian Americans, so when used between group members it has the function of highlighting similarity and building solidarity.

There were also times when a specific ethnic identity was called upon to index expertise—for example, during a trivia game, in response to a question about a popular Korean music group, one member asserted that her answer should be trusted as the correct one because she was Korean. Members were also aware of the gaps in their panethnic group, for instance, noting that there had been very few Japanese American members in the chapter’s history, or Selene commenting on her awareness of being “the lone Filipina” in the group. Altogether, sorority members’ discourse revealed a keen awareness of ethnic specificity that nonetheless coexisted with a strong sense of panethnic unity.

3.5 Attitudes toward sororities

My interviewees displayed a range of attitudes toward GLOs. Those who were not members often expressed skeptical attitudes toward GLOs at NJU, though there were usually hesitant to make broadly negative statements. Their comments often reflected an image of social GLOs (as opposed to, say, business or engineering fraternities) as obsessed with parties and alcohol, and a distraction from more important academic concerns. A typical comment comes from Barbara, a first-year student:

**CB:** Have you ever thought about joining a sorority?
Barbara: Not really. (laugh) Um. I know there’re a lot of misconceptions about them, so I don’t wanna start spewing things that are untrue, cuz I don’t really know a lot about them firsthand? But there’s like, a lot of partying and binge drinking and wild things going on. (laugh) I don’t think I’m ready for all that.

Students who expressed positive attitudes about GLOs often mentioned having friends, older siblings, or cousins who were involved in a GLO. In general, students agreed that joining a sorority was a good way to make friends, and they also recognized the philanthropic work that sororities and fraternities did.

Interestingly, many AZN members revealed that they had negative attitudes about sororities before joining. Many cited stereotypes of sorority girls as superficial, “fake”, airheaded, and interested only in partying. Although race was rarely mentioned explicitly, it was clear that the stereotypical image of the sorority is a white one, which may be part of the reason many participants did not see themselves fitting into such an environment.

Jean: I honestly thought of sororities as- as like, the things you see in movies. All they do is party...people don’t respect them that much...I honestly just thought of like that mainstream, like, a bunch of blondes living in a house.

While a few AZN members had been interested in joining a sorority before coming to college, the majority indicated either negative or neutral attitudes. Some specifically expressed negative attitudes about Asian sororities. When I asked them what changed their minds and led them to join AZN, they gave varied responses, but a common theme was that the sorority and its members were not what they had expected.
Jean: I forgot how I found out about [the sorority], I think I saw like a flyer at a restaurant, and um, one of my high school friends, she became a sister with me, she’s in my class...cuz she wanted to meet more Asian people. (laugh) And she was like, “Oh, let’s go out to this, or whatever”, and like, at first we honestly just went out as a joke, cuz we- we could not see ourselves in a sorority. But then we actually, like- we started hanging out with them, we actually ended up liking it.

Selene: I came to college, and I’m like, “Ew, like, Asian sororities? They all hang out with each other.” And um my ex-boyfriend at the time was friends with a few dancers...and it just so happened one of those friends were dating a sister [...] And she was like, “Oh, come out, check out my sorority!” and I’m like, “I don’t know.” But she convinced me, and I just went to check it out [...] And right when I sat at the table and started talking to sisters it seemed like they actually wanted to get to know me, they were actually interested about like who I was and where I came from, and it was something that I wasn’t expecting. It definitely caught me off guard. And the sisters were really nice, and they showed me a side of them that I wasn’t expecting. Cuz they were like, “Oh yeah, like, WE never thought we’d be in an Asian-interest sorority either.” Like, “Back in my hometown, I only hung out with Spanish and like African American people.” And uh they would say things like that, and I’m like, “Oh my gosh, I thought I was the only one.” So we just started talking more and I started coming out more. And I’m like, “These girls are really great.” And they also- not only were they really great to speak to, they also provided role models for me. They were the girls who I was like, “Oh
my gosh, they’re so PRETTY, they’re so SMART, they have internships, they know what they’re doing in life...And like, they know how to have fun.”

Regardless of their future plans, members generally agreed that participating in the sorority was professionally beneficial to them. Most cited the wide alumnae network, as well as the professional skills acquired through the sorority. One member compared the sorority to running a small business, and another commented, “I thought it would all be social, but it’s actually a lot of work!”

3.6 Stylistic resources for constructing an ethnic identity

In general, sororities and fraternities are heavily invested with ritual and symbolism, exemplified by the Greek letters they use to name their organizations. In addition to its letters, each GLO typically has its own motto, colors, and hand signs. Members show their allegiance by wearing clothing with the organization’s colors and letters, and displaying their hand signs at gatherings and in photographs. Upon joining, members are given a nickname which becomes part of their identity. In addition, there is a Greek-specific lexicon that is often baffling to the outsider. Many words are kinship terms, (e.g., sister, mama, big/little) reflecting the family structure of the organization. Others relate to Greek-specific activities such as Rushing, pledging, or crossing. At least one sister confessed that she had felt overwhelmed by all the unfamiliar terms at first, but had quickly adopted them into her own vocabulary as she became more comfortable in her status in the organization.

Also included in the symbolic repertoire of AZN, and Asian-interest GLOs in general, are many elements of African American/hip-hop culture. Laura, the AZN alumna who had served as Northeast Governor, confirmed that this was due to the fact that much of Asian Greek culture is
modeled on Black GLOs. For example, dance routines typically feature hip-hop music and “stepping”, a style of group dance that originated in Black fraternities and sororities. This overall hip-hop aesthetic was even stronger among the Asian-interest fraternities with which AZN frequently collaborated. This occasionally extended to the use of AAVE features in speech and, more frequently, in writing. From following sorority members on social media (particularly Facebook and Instagram), I observed the frequent use of spellings such as “doe” (for “though”), “liddo” (for “little”), and “sho” (for “sure”). What’s interesting about these spellings is that they represent phonological features (th-stopping, l-vocalization, r-lessness) which are features of AAVE, but which may also be features of an “Asian accent”. Yet while Asian accented English is universally derided as uncool (Bauman 2013), AAVE has a great deal of cultural capital among young people of all ethnicities. Thus, the use of these spellings may be an example of what Woolard (1998) terms “bivalency” (cf. Bucholtz 2009:37). A thorough exploration of the role AAVE plays in constructing Asian American identity is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I will briefly return to this phenomenon and its place in the concept of “ethnolinguistic repertoires” in Chapter 6.

3.7 Talking about language

In my interviews, and more occasionally in casual conversations with sorority members, I attempted to solicit metalinguistic commentary, with mixed success. Ever conscious of the Observer’s Paradox (Labov 1972a), I was hesitant to get too specific in my questions, which may have contributed to the vague responses I sometimes got. When asked about language

24 Interestingly, I also noted that the membership of Asian-interest fraternities was more diverse: I observed at least one white brother and one or two Black and South Asian Rushees.
differences, speakers tended to focus on lexical items or general linguistic mannerisms such as speech rate and style (e.g., “New Yorkers talk fast and get to the point”). Some speakers commented on regional differences between North and South Jersey:

**Shanna:** Mostly everyone’s from Jersey. Like, the weirdest people that I’ve met that are like from Jersey are like from South Jersey, and they call like, sandwiches “hoagies”. (laugh)

When I asked whether there was a way of “sounding Asian”, speakers were divided. Many denied that they could tell if a person was Asian American just from hearing them speak. Some conflated “sounding Asian” with having a non-native accent, similar to Hall-Lew’s (2009:73-4) speakers. Laura, the alumna who worked in the Student Affairs Office at NJU, was unique in stating confidently that she could identify someone as Asian American from hearing their speech, though she confessed to being completely unaware of how:

**CB:** Do you feel like you can tell someone is Asian American from hearing them speak?

**Laura:** Yes. I can’t put my finger on why, but I can ALWAYS tell. [...] I always play this game, um- I don’t know if you noticed, but there is a wall that doesn’t connect to the ceiling [in the office]. So when you’re standing on the other side and I’m like hanging out with my other coworker, and we hear a student come in and they’re asking the receptionist, “What should I do, what should I do?” I- we play this game, and I’m always like, “Oh...he’s Asian American”, walk around to
see, he is Asian American. (laugh) And they’re always like, “How do you do that?” and I really don’t know.

Given this ambivalence about “sounding Asian”, many speakers gravitated toward terminology that reflected a Black/White dichotomy. Their comments often reflected some discomfort or self-consciousness when it came to talking about race, and the use of racially coded terms like “ghetto” or “urban” was common.

**CB:** Have you ever gotten comments about the way that you speak?

**Shanna:** I have. [...] A lot of my voice, like at the end of every sentence goes up a lot, and they’re like, “You definitely grew up in the Whitest town ever!”

**Jean:** Sometimes I do find myself talking a little... How do I say this so it doesn’t sound racist? (laugh) They said I sound like I’m black sometimes like when I say certain things. [...] That’s how Bergen [County] people talk, like we say like “Yo”, and like... Like when they say “No,” they say like “Nah”... (laugh) People make fun of us for that, but it’s because [...] they’re not from that area.

**CB:** So to you [...] it doesn’t have anything to do with your ethnicity, necessarily?

**Jean:** Mm-hm.

Laura, who went to a college much less ethnically diverse than NJU, specifically drew a link between “coolness” and the use of hip-hop-influenced language, as well as other Black cultural practices:
CB: Is there anything about the way people speak here at NJU that strikes you?

Laura: Some of the students—I dunno, maybe this is just a college student thing, but—they use very like, urban terms.

CB: Such as?

Laura: Like [...] “ratchet”, or like, “Ooh kill em!” [...] I know specifically one girl who says like “ratchet” every five seconds. Maybe it’s just cuz like the popularity of songs [...] I feel like, um... This chapter here is much cooler than my chapter. Because they like stroll, they like do all that cool stuff. We did it, we just did it really badly. (laugh)

Speakers’ hesitance or inability to point to specific features of Asian American English suggests that the uncertainty about an Asian American ethnolect is not primarily about a lack of research or documentation. There seems to be real ambiguity about the sociolinguistic characteristics of this group. At the same time, there is consistent evidence that at least for some speakers and/or listeners, there are perceptible characteristics of “sounding Asian”. Speakers also show an awareness of the racialized nature of language, even as they contest it—as in Jean’s comments about “sounding Black” to others, when she speaks in a way she considers typical of her hometown.25 It’s also notable that speakers generally placed the most emphasis on the local nature of language—“That’s just how we talk where I’m from”—demonstrating that local context cannot be ignored in

25 It should be noted that Bergen County, where Jean is from, has a large Korean population, though Jean stated that her non-Korean friends spoke “exactly the same”.
the study of ethnicity. In the next chapter, I will examine one such locally conditioned variable, the pronunciation of the mid-back rounded (GOAT) vowel.
4. The GOAT vowel

In this chapter I report on the status of the GOAT vowel among the sorority members. Two distinctive features of this vowel are discussed: 1) the relative backness of the nucleus, and 2) its relatively monophthongal quality. The backness of this vowel contrasts with a general trend toward GOAT-fronting in many dialects of American English, while its monophthongal quality contrasts with the typical American English diphthongal realization of GOAT as [ʊʊ] (with the Upper Midwest being a notable exception). Together, these features lead to a distinctive pronunciation of GOAT words which may serve as a marker of Asian American identity. While Chun (2009) describes backed, monophthongal /o/ as a feature of “Mock Asian” English, so far this vowel has not been explored as an ethnic identity marker among native English-speaking Asian Americans of varied descent.

4.1 Background

As reported by The Atlas of North American English, the fronting of GOAT is a widespread change in progress throughout contemporary American English, with the Mid-Atlantic region the most advanced, and the North and Canada maintaining a conservative, back position (Labov et al. 2006:157; Thomas 2001:29). Fronted GOAT has been well documented as a feature of Philadelphia English (Labov 1980, 2001; Labov et al. 2013), and more recently, as part of the California or Western Vowel Shift (Hinton et al. 1987; Eckert 2008; Hall-Lew 2009). In the west, together with fronted GOOSE, fronted GOAT is part of the “surfer” and “Valley Girl” linguistic stereotypes (Hall-Lew 2009:166). Within the Northeastern United States, the Atlas’s isogloss for fronted GOAT divides New Jersey roughly through the center, with Philadelphia (fronted) on the southern side and New York City (non-fronted) on the northern side, as shown
in Figure 1 (Labov et al. 2006:158). Blue dots (light and dark) indicate speakers with non-fronted GOAT, while red and orange dots indicate speakers with fronted GOAT.

As with any other sound change reported primarily in White communities, the question arises whether ethnic minorities in contact with the majority also participate in the change (see, e.g., Fought 1999). Previous sociolinguistic research has often led to very different conclusions depending on the variables and groups studied, and the case of GOAT-fronting is no different. For example, Hall-Lew (2009) reports that Asian Americans in San Francisco show change in apparent time toward GOAT-fronting, while European Americans don’t. In Pittsburgh, Eberhardt (2009) reports that African Americans front GOAT at similar rates to Whites, while in Houston,
Niedzielski (2013) reports that White speakers front GOAT, but Chinese and African Americans don’t. Thus, it is not clear in advance what ethnic association, if any, to expect in New Jersey.

What of possible substrate effects? The discussion is complicated by the varied language backgrounds of the speakers. (Hall-Lew 2009:170) discusses possible outcomes of heritage language influence on back vowel fronting for several Asian languages including Cantonese, Mandarin, Shanghainese, and Tagalog. In brief, only Tagalog might be expected to inhibit back vowel fronting, and Tagalog is a heritage language for only one of the speakers in my sample.

Besides the aforementioned Chinese varieties, the other heritage languages represented by multiple speakers in my sample are Vietnamese and Korean. Vietnamese contrasts close-mid front, central, and back vowels /e, ə, o/ (Emerich 2012). Korean also has the mid front, central, and back vowels /e, ə, o/. In some descriptions, there is a mid front rounded vowel /ø/, but this vowel is reported to be disappearing among younger generations of Korean speakers (Ahn & Iverson 2007), and would therefore not be expected to exert an influence on the English of my Korean American speakers. Assuming a relatively conservative, back pronunciation of /o/ in both Vietnamese and Korean, we might expect any heritage language influence to manifest as an inhibition of fronting. This would be consistent with Chun’s (2009) description of backed /o/ as a feature of “Mock Asian”; though without a comparison of actual vowel productions in Vietnamese, Korean, and English, any such predictions must be extremely tentative.

There are several other heritage languages represented in my sample, but it would be impractical to provide vowel inventories for all of them, and difficult to detect any patterns given the diversity of the sample. Importantly, Hall-Lew did not find any consistent effect of heritage language on GOAT-fronting. Hall-Lew also notes that heritage language is not expected to be particularly strong for simultaneous early bilinguals (those who are exposed to their L2 by age 4
or earlier), which many of my speakers are. For these reasons, I do not consider heritage language background as a likely influence on the realization of GOAT, and I set it aside for the remainder of this chapter.

Last, a note on terminology: I will be discussing “GOAT-backing” and “GOAT-fronting” in this chapter. As discussed above, GOAT-fronting is a well-documented change in progress, with younger generations showing higher F2 values than older generations. In contrast, I have no apparent or real time evidence for a reverse process of GOAT-backing, since my data come from a one-time sample of a single age cohort. Likewise, I cannot compare my formant values directly to those in the Atlas because of the different normalization techniques used (see Section 4.2 for further discussion). For lack of a better term, however, I will use “GOAT-backing” and “backed GOAT” to refer to productions of GOAT that are backer than the baseline for the current sample. I will also provide some evidence, based on a regional comparison, that the sorority members are not just resisting GOAT-fronting, but are in fact moving in the opposite direction and producing an objectively backed GOAT.

4.2 Data/Methodology

I analyzed the GOAT vowels of the 31 speakers (19 sorority and 12 non-sorority) introduced in Chapter 2. For convenience, their names, ages, and ethnicities are repeated in the two tables below. Because geography is potentially an important factor, their hometowns are also included. Almost all speakers reported growing up in the same town or general area most of their lives. A few of the sorority members spent significant time in Asia during their childhoods, but since I am concerned here with acquisition of local English phonology, I consider only their
hometowns once they moved permanently to the U.S. I also indicate whether their hometowns lie within a fronting or non-fronting region, according to previous research.

Table 4. Sorority members’ ethnicities and hometowns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Fronting?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Manchester, NH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitty</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>St. Paul, MN(^{26})</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepper</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Fort Lee, NJ</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gertrude</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Fairfield, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Piscataway, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanna</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Marlboro Township, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nico</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Bridgewater, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Parsippany, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Holmdel, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Holmdel, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selene</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Filipina</td>
<td>Tom’s River, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Egg Harbor Township, NJ</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jubilee</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Egg Harbor Township, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeansun</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Egg Harbor Township, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Hockessin, DE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{26}\) Kitty grew up in St. Paul, but at the time I interviewed her, she had been living in northern New Jersey for nearly five years.
Table 5. Non-sorority members’ ethnicities and hometowns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Fronting?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Vernon, NJ</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Palisades Park, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doreen</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Fair Lawn, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Marie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Chinese/White</td>
<td>Denville, NJ</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Jane</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Dunellen, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Hillsborough, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Morganville, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>African American/White</td>
<td>Long Branch, NJ</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elektra</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mt Holly, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karima</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Galloway, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Egg Harbor Township, NJ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Orange County, CA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 plots the speakers’ hometowns in relation to the *Atlas* isogloss. Purple stars indicate sorority members, while red diamonds indicate non-sorority members. The dots above the line indicate speakers who are from a non-fronting region, according to the Atlas, while the dots below the line indicate speakers from a fronting region. Not shown are those whose hometowns fall outside the Mid-Atlantic region (Peggy, Kitty, and Karla). Peggy is from New Hampshire, a non-fronting region. Kitty is from Minnesota, also a non-fronting region. Karla is from southern California, where fronting is reported.
For the acoustic analysis, tokens of GOAT were identified and extracted using Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2014). Formant measurements were taken at 25%, 50% and 75% into the vowel; the reported mean values are based on the 25% measurements, to account for the potential diphthongal quality of this vowel. Previous research has shown that a following /l/ has a strongly inhibiting effect on GOAT-fronting; thus, in the following I report separately on /o/ tokens not before /l/ (GOAT) and before /l/ (GOAL). Although other phonological conditioning
has been reported for this variable, the effects are relatively slight, and I follow the *Atlas* in grouping all tokens of /o/ not before /l/ together (Labov et al. 2006:157).

At least 50 tokens of GOAT (excluding GOAL) were identified for each speaker. Tokens in the first five minutes of each interview were excluded, as were very short tokens (under 40 ms). Formant values were normalized using the “vowels” package in R (Kendall & Thomas 2010), and the results were plotted with the “ggplot2” package (Wickham 2009).

The particular normalization method used here is the Bark Difference metric, which first converts formant values to Bark values, i.e., F1, F2, and F3 are converted to Z1, Z2, and Z3. The dimensions of height and backness are then represented by the differences Z3-Z1 and Z3-Z2, respectively. In the following discussion, a lower Z3-Z2 value represents a fronter production of GOAT, and a higher Z3-Z2 value represents a backer production. Essentially, the Bark Difference metric uses F3 (which depends mostly on an individual speaker’s physical characteristics) as a point of reference for F1 and F2, which carry most of the information about vowel quality. Other normalization methods, such as that used in the *Atlas*, require either measurements of each speaker’s entire vowel space and/or a very large number of speakers, neither of which was available for this study. Therefore, the Bark Difference metric was chosen as the most appropriate normalization method.

4.3 Results: GOAT-backing

The following image shows mean normalized values of GOAT and GOAL for all speakers. The purple dots indicate sorority members and the red dots non-sorority members. The ellipses represent the 95% confidence region for each group. The plot has the same orientation as a typical plot of F1-F2 vowel space: the y-axis represents height, and the x-axis represents the front-back dimension.
The means for the two groups are summarized in the following table; the relevant dimension of backness is highlighted.

Table 6. Mean Bark values of GOAT and GOAL for sorority vs. non-sorority speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Vowel</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Z3-Z1 (height)</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Z3-Z2 (backness)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorority</td>
<td>GOAL</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>10.21</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GOAT</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>9.06</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-sorority</td>
<td>GOAL</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10.27</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>7.64</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GOAT</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>8.98</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, the sorority members show a backer GOAT (M=5.11) than the non-sorority members (M=4.43). For GOAL, this pattern is reversed, although the difference is slight. One possible explanation for this pattern is the presence of /l/-vocalization in some of the sorority members’ speech, which would effectively remove the inhibiting effect of a following /l/ on
fronting. There is also greater variance in the distribution of GOAL, likely due in part to the relatively few tokens. In the amount of speech I analyzed (generally 10-15 minutes per speaker), some speakers produced only a few tokens of GOAL, and others none at all. From here on, I will confine my discussion to instances of GOAT not followed by /l/.

The following plot shows speaker means for GOAT, with individual speakers labeled. Purple triangles indicate sorority members; red triangles, non-sorority members.

Figure 4. Mean Bark values of GOAT (excluding GOAL) for all speakers

Two observations can be made: first, the distribution for sorority members’ GOAT is further back than the non-sorority members’. Second, the non-sorority members are much more widely dispersed. This is unsurprising, since the non-sorority members are an ethnically heterogeneous group and do not form a tightly knit community of practice.
Of the non-sorority members who fall within the sorority distribution, Lucy, Janet, and Mary Jane are all of Asian descent. Of the other non-sorority members who fall within the sorority distribution, Maya is half Black and half White, so it is possible that ethnicity also plays a role in her relatively backed pronunciation. Gwen is White, from a non-fronting region, so her relatively back pronunciation is not necessarily surprising; given the relatively few White speakers in my sample, it is unclear whether she is representative of White speakers from her area. In any case, her pronunciation is considerably fronter than the sorority average. Finally, Elektra, who is White, falls just on the border of the sorority distribution, but is nonetheless fronter than any individual sorority member. Overall, there is a strong association of backed GOAT with Asian ethnicity. Is backed GOAT, then, simply a feature of Asian speakers? The following plot again shows speaker means, this time with speakers coded according to whether they reported Asian ethnicity or not.

Karima, who is of Indian descent, is not included in the “Asian” group, in keeping with the community definitions discussed in Chapter 3. Had she been included in the Asian group, the distribution in Figure 5 would be even more diffuse.
Figure 5. Mean Bark values of GOAT for Asian vs. non-Asian speakers

This plot indeed shows most Asian speakers grouping together, but the distribution also includes most of the non-Asian speakers in my sample, obscuring the effect of ethnicity. One interpretation is that backed GOAT is generally an indicator of Asian ethnicity in this population, and that it is for precisely this reason that sorority members display this feature most strongly. That is, being in the sorority and producing backed GOAT are both components of sorority members’ practice of ethnicity. I will return to this point in the discussion in Section 4.5.

To further test the effects of sorority membership and ethnicity on GOAT backing, I ran a linear mixed-effects regression in R using the “lme4” package (Bates et al. 2015). The model included the fixed effects of Group (sorority or non-sorority) and Ethnicity (Asian or other), as well as an additional effect of Hometown (from a fronting or non-fronting region). The model
also included a random effect of Speaker, to account for the inherent variation among different speakers. The estimated coefficients for the fixed effects are shown below:

Table 7. Results of a linear mixed-effects regression testing for effects of group membership, ethnicity, and region on GOAT-backing

|                | Estimate | Std. Error | df   | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|----------------|----------|------------|------|---------|----------|
| (Intercept)    | 4.46725  | 0.31669    | 27.00004 | 14.10590 | 0.00000 |
| GroupS         | 0.62831  | 0.27625    | 27.00004 | 2.27443 | 0.03110* |
| EthnicityA     | 0.14268  | 0.36687    | 27.00004 | 0.38890 | 0.70040 |
| Hometownnf     | -0.17436 | 0.24862    | 27.00004 | -0.70130 | 0.48912 |

*Effect is significant at the .05 level.

Here, the estimate for the intercept represents the predicted Z3-Z2 value of GOAT if all the independent variables are set to the “default” level—in this case, if the speaker is not a sorority member, not Asian, and from a fronting region. Recall that with the Bark difference metric, a lower Z3-Z2 value indicates a fronter vowel. The coefficients for “GroupS”, “EthnicityA”, and “Hometownnf” then represent the estimated change in the Z3-Z2 value if the speaker is a sorority member, of Asian ethnicity, or from a non-fronting region. A positive coefficient means that factor predicts a higher Z3-Z2 value, i.e., a backer GOAT. A negative coefficient means that factor predicts a fronter GOAT. The coefficient for “GroupS” is 0.628, indicating that the effect of sorority membership on Z3-Z2 is a higher value, i.e., a backer GOAT. This effect is significant (p < 0.05), while the effects of ethnicity and hometown are not.

A potential problem for this model is the fact that group membership and ethnicity are highly collinear, in that all sorority members are Asian. To separately test the effects of group membership and ethnicity, I fitted two additional models, one that included only group membership and hometown, and one that included only ethnicity and hometown. The following tables show the estimates for each model.
Table 8. Results of a linear mixed-effects regression testing for effects of group membership and region on GOAT-backing

|                  | Estimate | Std. Error | df    | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|------------------|----------|------------|-------|---------|----------|
| (Intercept)      | 4.54548  | 0.24086    | 28.00004 | 18.87219 | 0.00000  |
| GroupS           | 0.68723  | 0.22746    | 28.00004 | 3.02127  | 0.00533**|
| Hometownnf       | -0.16687 | 0.24409    | 28.00004 | -0.68364 | 0.49982  |

**Effect is significant at the .01 level.

Table 9. Results of a linear mixed-effects regression testing for effects of ethnicity and region on GOAT-backing

|                  | Estimate | Std. Error | df    | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|------------------|----------|------------|-------|---------|----------|
| (Intercept)      | 4.46036  | 0.33946    | 27.99997 | 13.13964 | 0.00000  |
| EthnicityA       | 0.60032  | 0.32883    | 27.99997 | 1.82561  | 0.07859  |
| Hometownnf       | -0.16288 | 0.26645    | 27.99997 | -0.61129 | 0.54594  |

In the first model, group membership remains a significant predictor (p < 0.01), while in the second model, ethnicity fails to reach significance (p = 0.08). A likelihood ratio test indicates that adding Group to the model significantly improved model fit ($\chi^2 = 5.434$, df = 1, p = 0.02), while adding Ethnicity to the model did not significantly improve fit ($\chi^2 = 0.173$, df = 1, p = 0.68). Thus, while Asian ethnicity may correlate with GOAT-backing, it is not as strong a predictor as sorority membership.

Interestingly, the effect of region does not emerge as significant in any of the models. This finding is unexpected in light of the sharp regional divide found for GOAT-fronting in the Atlas (see Figure 1), yet it is consistent with the hypothesis that Asian Americans are resisting a White-led sound change, and that regional differences are limited to White speakers. Because I have many more Asian speakers in my sample than White speakers, any effect of region may be obscured by the overwhelming tendency toward backed GOAT. In fact, there is some evidence
that the Asian Americans in my sample are not merely resisting a trend toward fronting, but are in fact backing their GOAT relative to White speakers. Consider the following table, which compares the average Z3-Z2 value of GOAT for Asian Americans from fronting regions with those for non-Asian speakers from non-fronting regions. Sorority members are shaded.

**Table 10. Asian American speakers from fronting regions vs. non-Asian speakers from non-fronting regions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Hometown</th>
<th>Z3-Z2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Egg Harbor Township, NJ</td>
<td>5.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jubilee</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Egg Harbor Township, NJ</td>
<td>5.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeansun</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Egg Harbor Township, NJ</td>
<td>5.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Hockessin, DE</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Egg Harbor Township, NJ</td>
<td>5.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selene</td>
<td>Filipina</td>
<td>Tom’s River, NJ</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Orange County, CA</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Black/White</td>
<td>Long Branch, NJ</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doreen</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Fair Lawn, NJ</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Vernon, NJ</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to the two White speakers from North Jersey, the Asian American speakers from South Jersey (and Hockessin, which is across the Delaware River from South Jersey) exhibit backed GOAT. Furthermore, Maya, the non-Asian speaker who exhibits the most conservative pronunciation of GOAT, is still fronter than four of the seven Asian speakers from fronting regions. In other words, the GOAT vowels of Asian speakers from fronting regions are even backer than the GOAT vowels of non-Asian speakers from non-fronting regions. This suggests that Asian Americans are not simply failing to participate in a White-led change, but that they are actively backing GOAT as an index of Asian identity.
As the one exception to this generalization, Karla is particularly illustrative. Karla is from Southern California, a fronting region, and indeed her GOAT is strongly fronted. This is consistent with prior descriptions of GOAT (and GOOSE) fronting as characteristic of White and Asian speakers in California (Hinton et al. 1987:121; Hall-Lew 2009). In other words, the indexical relationship between fronted or backed GOAT and Asian ethnicity is reversed from West to East Coast. If GOAT-backing were a simple substrate effect, we would not expect this disparity. Rather, the interaction between place and ethnicity highlights the need for a close study of how linguistic variables become associated with social meanings in particular contexts.

4.4 Results: GOAT monophthongization

Next, I turn to the nature of the offglide in the GOAT vowel. In most dialects of American English, GOAT is realized as a diphthong [oʊ], with movement from a mid back nucleus to a high back offglide. One exception is the Upper Midwest, where monophthongal GOAT is characteristic of the local dialect (Nguyen 2011). Monophthongization of GOAT has also been reported as a characteristic of Asian varieties of English, including Japanese English (Mendoza-Denton & Iwai 1993; D’Onofrio & Van Hofwegen 2015), Vietnamese English (Christian et al. 1983:153), and Korean immigrant English (Chun 2009).

Impressionistically, I found that the sorority members often produced a somewhat monophthongal GOAT. To verify this impression, I compared normalized formant values at 25% and 75% into the vowel, to calculate the amount of movement. The following figure shows group means for the sorority and non-sorority speakers. The circles indicate the mean position at 25% into the vowel; the arrows, the mean position at 75% into the vowel. On average, the sorority members’ GOAT starts backer and shows less movement in both height and backness.
Next, I calculated the Euclidean distance between vowel onset and offset for individual tokens, using the following formula, where $x_{ons}$ and $y_{ons}$ represent the Bark-normalized vowel coordinates at the 25% measurement point and $x_{off}$ and $y_{off}$ at the 75% measurement point:

$$D = \sqrt{(x_{off} - x_{ons})^2 + (y_{off} - y_{ons})^2}$$

I then divided by the token’s duration (in seconds), to account for the fact that shorter vowels generally exhibit less movement than longer vowels. On average, the sorority members’ GOAT tokens moved by 11.376 Barks/s (N = 950, SD = 9.380), while the non-sorority speakers’ GOAT tokens moved by 11.702 Barks/s (N = 600, SD = 8.874). The following chart shows the average rate of movement by speaker; the error bars represent one standard deviation.
While the group average for the sorority members does indeed indicate a more monophthongal GOAT, the individual averages show considerable variation. The large standard deviations also indicate much intra-speaker variability. Nonetheless, the cluster toward the left side of graph indicates that at least several sorority members are very monophthongal compared to the larger population.  

Averages may not be particularly illuminating here, as even one or two tokens of monophthongal GOAT may be highly salient, especially when used in high-frequency words. To test for such an effect, I divided the data into two categories: tokens of the frequently

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28 It should be noted that Kitty, who is one of the more monophthongal speakers, grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota, where monophthongal GOAT is a feature of the regional dialect. However, recent research has reported that this feature is on the decline among younger female speakers in the region (Nguyen 2011), so it is unclear how large a role regional background plays in Kitty’s pronunciation of GOAT. When I asked Kitty about regional accent differences between Minnesota and New Jersey, she did not mention monophthongal GOAT, although she did mention raised BAG as a feature of her accent that people had commented on.
occurring words *oh* and *so*, and tokens of all other words. The following table and graph compare the mean movement scores for all tokens by word type and group.

**Table 11. Mean movement scores for tokens of *oh*/*so* vs. other words**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Word type</th>
<th>Mean movement (Barks/s)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorority</td>
<td><em>oh</em>/<em>so</em></td>
<td>8.63</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>7.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>other</td>
<td>12.68</td>
<td>644</td>
<td>9.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-sorority</td>
<td><em>oh</em>/<em>so</em></td>
<td>10.35</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>7.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>other</td>
<td>12.48</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>9.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 8. Mean movement scores by word type and group**

Error bars: 95% CI
Two separate one-way ANOVAs reveal that the oh/so category is significantly more monophthongal than other words for both the sorority members (F(1, 948) = 40.287, p < .001) and non-sorority speakers (F(1, 198) = 8.133, p < .005). However, the difference is much larger for the sorority members, suggesting that monophthongal GOAT may indeed be more salient in their speech. Further analysis that combines perceptual data with more fine-grained analysis of word frequency is needed.

4.5 Discussion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that sorority members’ GOAT vowels are significantly backer than that of their peers, regardless of whether they are from region where GOAT is generally fronting or not. Furthermore, while backed GOAT does seem to be used more by Asian speakers in general, ethnicity is not as strong a predictor of backed GOAT as sorority membership. The sorority members also show a tendency to produce more monophthongal GOAT, especially in certain high-frequency words.

I argue that for sorority members, backed, monophthongal GOAT indexes both Asian ethnicity and participation in a community of practice, which is itself part of their practice of ethnicity. How did these multiple indexical links arise? Perhaps speakers who strongly back and monophthongize GOAT as an indicator of Asian ethnicity are more likely to join an Asian American sorority, or perhaps members of an Asian American sorority wishing to express their Asian identity turn to backed, monophthongal GOAT as a symbolic resource. Most likely, the answer is a combination of both factors. Further research on the perception of backed GOAT in the wider speech community, as well as data over real or apparent time, may shed light on the “day-to-day use and transformation of linguistic resources for local stylistic purposes” that is at
the heart of sociolinguistic variation (Eckert 2000:1). Given the robust link between GOAT- and GOOSE-fronting that has been found across multiple studies (Hall-Lew 2009:169), future work should also look at GOOSE as a potential site of ethnolinguistic meaning (see also Wong 2015).

Overall, there is little evidence for overt awareness or evaluation of GOAT, either with respect to its backness or its monophthongal quality. Only one speaker offered any commentary on the quality of this vowel: Jeansun, from Egg Harbor Township, which is near Atlantic City in southern New Jersey (a GOAT-fronting region). Speaking about her younger brother, in contrast to herself and her older sister, Jeansun says this:

And um, he kinda talks like...I’m tryin to think- Do you know what a South Jersey accent is? Like, uh me and my sister we don’t have any sort of South Jersey accent or anything like that. And then like, we would just like pronounce words the way...it’s supposed to be pronounced, I dunno know how to explain it, but my brother’s like very into slang, all that stuff. Or- so the /o/s in, I guess like, in South Jersey accent’s VERY...I guess, exaggerated? So...if I say, “Oh, I’m gonna row a boat,” he’d say, “Oh, ROW a BOAT.” (laugh) or “Hel-LO,” that kinda thing.

On average, Jeansun’s F2 for GOAT is 1216 Hz. When she imitates her brother, she produces three tokens (“row”, “boat”, “hello”) with F2s of 1538 Hz, 1598 Hz, and 1750 Hz, respectively. Jeansun accurately identifies fronted GOAT as a feature of a local “South Jersey” accent, one which her brother has but which she does not, an impression confirmed by her actual productions. While she does not offer an overt evaluation of fronted GOAT, her overall evaluation of her brother’s way of speaking is strongly negative, and her assessment of her own pronunciation as the way “it’s supposed to be” suggests that does not view fronted GOAT
positively. Finally, while Jeansun’s description of her brother suggests that his pronunciation of GOAT is in line with local norms, she also mentions that he’s “very into slang” and hip-hop culture. This suggests that he is not necessarily oriented to local White norms. I will return to this point briefly in Chapter 6.

That the Asian speakers in this study not only resist GOAT-fronting, but actually back their GOAT vowel, contrasts with Hall-Lew (2009), who finds that Asian Americans in a San Francisco neighborhood show change in apparent time toward fronted GOAT, while European Americans don’t. Clearly, neither fronted GOAT nor backed GOAT, by itself, is indexical of Asian ethnicity—rather, Hall-Lew writes, “phonetic variables may index local meanings of ethnicity through connections to indexical fields of meaning” (1). Other recent studies on ethnicity and language (e.g., Wong 2015; Newlin-Łukowicz 2015; Nguyen 2014, 2015) have also drawn attention to the use or avoidance of specific local features as an index of ethnic identity. Together, these findings suggest that research on regional sound change needs to take into account the interrelationship of place and ethnicity.
5. Prosodic Rhythm

In this chapter I report on one aspect of the prosody of the sorority members’ speech, namely, their prosodic rhythm as measured by the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI). While there is considerable variation in the sorority members’ prosodic rhythm, they show a tendency to speak in a more syllable-timed rhythm than mainstream American English, a likely substrate effect that marks their speech as distinctly Asian American.

5.1 Background

Prosodic rhythm refers to the relative length of syllables in connected speech. Starting with Pike (1945), linguists have often classified languages as “stress-timed” or “syllable-timed”. In stress-timed languages, like English and Dutch, syllables vary in length depending on stress, with stressed syllables being longer than unstressed syllables; this rhythm is sometimes described as “Morse code”-like. In syllable-timed languages, like Spanish or Mandarin Chinese, adjacent syllables are roughly equal in duration; these languages are often described as having a “staccato” or “machine gun”-like rhythm. A third rhythm type, mora-timing, has also been proposed to characterize languages such as Japanese (see Ramus et al. 1999 for more on the history of rhythm classes in linguistics). The idea that all languages demonstrate consistent timing of some phonological unit—whether it be syllables, morae, or inter-stress intervals—is known as isochrony.

While the concept of rhythmic classes has remained popular with many linguists, it has also come under critique (Arvaniti 2009, 2012; Harris & Gries 2011). Much research has been devoted to finding empirical support (or lack thereof) for the idea that languages can be classified into a few basic categories, and to finding the acoustic measures that would best
correlate with such categories. Dasher and Bolinger (1982) argued that perceived isochrony in English was reducible to other phonological properties of the phrase; namely, presence or absence of reduced syllables and placement of stress. Dauer (1983, 1987) proposed eight phonological parameters according to which languages could be placed on a continuum from most stress-timed at one end to least stress-timed at the other. One of these parameters is syllable structure: stress-timed languages tend to allow a wider range of syllable shapes, including complex onsets and codas, which syllable-timed languages disallow. Another parameter is vowel reduction: stress-timed languages tend to undergo much more vowel reduction in unstressed syllables than syllable-timed languages. Several quantitative metrics have also been proposed for classifying languages according to their rhythmic properties: these include ΔC and %V (Ramus et al. 1999), and the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) (Low & Grabe 1995; Low et al. 2000), which computes the absolute durational difference between adjacent vocalic intervals, divided by their average duration. (Arvaniti 2009, 2012) notes that while these metrics are generally successful at classifying “prototypical” stress- and syllable-timed languages, they produce inconsistent results when applied to non-prototypical languages such as Polish and Catalan.

Where rhythm metrics have had more success is in the comparison of different language varieties. Regardless of the phonological status of rhythm, there are clear phonetic differences between languages, and the effect of these differences on non-native speech is well documented (Thomas & Carter 2006:5). In some contact varieties of English, substrate effects of rhythm have persisted even as subsequent generations have acquired English as a first language, resulting in ethnolects with distinct rhythmic properties. In studies using the PVI metric, Singapore English

29 ΔC refers to the standard deviation of the duration of consonantal intervals in a sentence, while %V refers to the proportion of vocalic intervals in a sentence, i.e., how much of the total duration of a sentence consists of vowels.
(Low et al. 2000; Lim 2010), Hispanic English (Thomas & Carter 2006; Shousterman 2015), and American Indian English (Coggshall 2008) have all been found to be more syllable-timed than standard British or American English. The perceptual salience of these rhythmic differences is illustrated by quotes such as the following:

[W]here an RP [Received Pronunciation] pronunciation gives a single firm stress, as in a word like specification, ESM [English of Singapore and Malaysia] will tend to give the stressed syllable somewhat less stress and an unstressed syllable somewhat more—specification—or even approximately equal stress in a two-syllable word like cab-bage. (Tongue 1979: 31, cited in Lim 2010:148)

While describing a particularly tense situation, Butchie [a Puerto Rican English speaker] imitates his brother’s reaction to being told to “quiet down”, saying (in an angry tone), “I don’t give a hoot and pa pa pla, you know?” The pa pa pla in this instance (used to denote meaningless chatter, like the more mainstream blah blah blah) is produced with an evenly timed, staccato-like execution. (Shousterman 2015:158, emphasis added)

Given that many Asian Americans have exposure to heritage languages that are relatively syllable-timed, we might expect their English to show a similar prosodic influence, but as yet, no systematic study of prosodic rhythm in Asian American English has been published (though see Newman & Wu 2011 for some discussion). The following quote from (Hall-Lew 2009:75) also suggests that the speech of some Asian Americans might be relatively syllable-timed:
“There was a friend of mine ... we used to work together. He spoke with an accent ... as though he was an immigrant. But he was born and raised I think pretty much in Chinatown. ... So when you start talking, what, **staccato and choppy**? He kind of fit that.”– Sal (male, age 45, Chinese American) [emphasis added]

Beyond direct substrate influence, there is also the possibility of substrate effects evolving into ethnonlinguistic markers—precisely this implementation of prosodic rhythm has been suggested for Latino English (Carter 2005) and Lumbee Indian English (Coggshall 2008)\(^{30}\). The Lumbee case is especially interesting, since the Lumbee have long been a monolingual English community; and, indeed, Coggshall finds the older Lumbee speakers in her study have PVI scores similar to European American and African American speakers. However, the younger Lumbee (born after 1970) have PVI scores closer to those of Cherokee English speakers, indicating more syllable-timed speech. Coggshall ties this generational difference to the rise of the Red Power movement and pan-Indianness, suggesting that for the younger Lumbee, adopting a more syllable-timed rhythm in English may be a way of “sounding Indian”. This suggests that what originated as a substrate effect can be successfully deployed even by speakers far removed from the substrate language(s) in question, if there is sufficient motivation and opportunity to construct a shared ethnonlinguistic identity. An Asian American sorority, with its emphasis on

\(^{30}\) See also (Newlin-Łukowicz 2012) for a different type of substrate effect (th-stopping), which she suggests may have developed into an ethnonlinguistic marker among second-generation Polish Americans in New York City.
stylistic conformity and pan-Asian identity, may be an ideal site for such ethnolinguistic evolution to take place.

5.2 Possible influences on prosodic rhythm

Given the role of substrate influence on prosodic rhythm, it is necessary to review the speakers’ language backgrounds (previously summarized in Table 4 and Table 5). The sorority members’ heritage languages include several varieties of Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese, Fujianese, Wenzhounese), Vietnamese, Korean, and Tagalog. Chinese and Vietnamese are both consistently described as syllable-timed (e.g., Nguyen 2004; Lim 2010; Mok 2008). The status of stress in Korean is rather controversial (see Arvaniti 2012 for discussion), but recent studies have tended to conclude that Korean is more likely syllable- or mora-timed than stress-timed (Jeon 2006; Kim et al. 2008; Mok & Lee 2008; Moon-Hwan 2004). Comparatively little has been written about Tagalog prosody, but it has also been argued to be syllable-timed (Montanari 2006:44; Santos & Guevara 2011).

Several of the non-sorority speakers also had exposure to relatively syllable-timed heritage languages, including Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean. Additionally, Karima reports speaking Gujarati and Hindi, and Karla reports speaking Spanish, all of which have also been classified as syllable-timed (Crystal 1995; Joshi 2014; Ramus et al. 1999; Thomas & Carter 2006). The other heritage languages represented are Russian and Greek. Russian is considered, like English, to be stress-timed (Ramus et al. 1999). The status of rhythm in Greek is controversial: it has alternately been reported as stress-timed, syllable-timed, and neither (Arvaniti 2012:8). In any case, given that Elektra reports relatively limited exposure to Greek, it seems unlikely that it would exert a strong influence on her English.
5.3 Methodology

Following the above-cited studies of ethnolects, I will use the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) to measure the rhythm of speakers. PVI is calculated by taking the difference in duration of two adjacent syllables and dividing by the mean duration of the pair. Following the modified methodology of Thomas and Carter (2006) for spontaneous speech, 200 such measurements are calculated for a stretch of speech, and then the median PVI value is taken. A higher PVI score indicates a relatively more stress-timed variety, while a lower PVI score indicates a relatively more syllable-timed variety.

For each of the 31 speakers, 200 pairs of adjacent syllables were identified and the vocalic portions segmented in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2014). Their durations were measured and a PVI score calculated for each pair, using the following formula (where $A$ represents the duration of the first syllable in the pair and $B$ the duration of the second syllable):

$$PVI = \frac{|B - A|}{(A + B)/2}$$

This formula results in a score between 0 and 2 for each pair of syllables (though, in practice, a score of 2 is impossible, since a syllable cannot have a duration of zero). In a hypothetical situation where syllable $B$ is twice as long as syllable $A$, this would result in a PVI of 0.67. If $A$ and $B$ are exactly the same length, their PVI will be 0. PVI is a relative measure—there is no absolute cut-off at which speech is considered “syllable-timed” or “stress-timed”. Rather, a lower PVI (closer to 0) indicates speech in which all syllables are of roughly equal duration (i.e., a more syllable-timed variety), while a higher PVI indicates speech in which there is greater variability in syllable length (i.e., a more stress-timed variety).
5.4 Results

Table 12 shows the median PVI scores and standard deviations for the sorority members. (Following Thomas and Carter, I use median values for the individual speakers rather than means because they are less susceptible to skewing from outliers.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>PVI (median)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>0.332</td>
<td>0.291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>0.368</td>
<td>0.343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>0.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>0.373</td>
<td>0.294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitty</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>0.383</td>
<td>0.356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selene</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>0.385</td>
<td>0.314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepper</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>0.415</td>
<td>0.357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jubilee</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>0.417</td>
<td>0.341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanna</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>0.428</td>
<td>0.331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>0.436</td>
<td>0.372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>0.440</td>
<td>0.342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td>0.352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>0.451</td>
<td>0.360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeansun</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>0.462</td>
<td>0.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>0.467</td>
<td>0.340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gertrude</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>0.377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>0.507</td>
<td>0.361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>0.519</td>
<td>0.424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nico</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>0.528</td>
<td>0.355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group mean</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>0.433</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.347</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The PVI scores of these speakers range from 0.33 to 0.53, with an average of 0.43. These values are somewhat higher than those reported for Hispanic English: for example, Shousterman (2015) found that young Puerto Ricans in NYC had PVI scores ranging from 0.29 to 0.50, with an average of 0.45, while Thomas and Carter (2006) found that Hispanic English speakers in North Carolina had scores ranging from about 0.30 to 0.43, with an average of about 0.37. They
are also higher than what Coggshall (2008) found for her Cherokee and younger Lumbee
speakers, who had average scores of 0.38 and 0.40, respectively. However, they are considerably
lower than the average values reported by Thomas and Carter for European American (0.52) and
African American (0.53) speakers. An average PVI of 0.43 is also comparable to Lim’s (2010)
findings for Singapore English (0.46 for informal topics in interviews and 0.47 for formal topics).

The following tables show the results for the non-sorority speakers. Note that here,
speakers are grouped into “Asian” and “non-Asian” strictly on the basis of their heritage
languages; hence, Karima is included in the “Asian” group, in contrast to the previous chapter.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>PVI (median)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td>0.324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elektra</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>0.391</td>
<td>0.355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doreen</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>0.448</td>
<td>0.343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>0.483</td>
<td>0.345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>0.426</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.342</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>PVI (median)</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>0.384</td>
<td>0.318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natasha</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>0.394</td>
<td>0.336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karima</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Jane</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>0.414</td>
<td>0.359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>0.336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Marie</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>0.429</td>
<td>0.323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>0.431</td>
<td>0.332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>0.409</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.331</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

31 Even if Karima were to be grouped with the “non-Asian” speakers, however, the overall group means would change very little.
Surprisingly, the non-Asian speakers actually have a slightly lower mean PVI than the sorority members, and a much lower mean than one would expect for European and African American speakers, based on Thomas and Carter’s (2006) results. However, this could be due to the very small sample size. Among the three groups, the sorority members (N=19) have the largest range in PVI, the Asian non-sorority speakers (N=8) the second largest range, and the non-Asian speakers (N=4) the smallest. The distribution of individual speakers, from lowest to highest PVI, is shown in the following graph. Purple bars indicate sorority members, blue bars Asian non-sorority speakers, and red bars non-Asian speakers.

![Graph showing individual median PVIs](image)

**Figure 9. Individual median PVIs**

Within this data, the sorority speakers define the upper and lower bounds of variation. The Asian non-sorority speakers fall toward the lower end of the range defined by the sorority speakers, while the non-Asian speakers are evenly split between the lower and upper ends. It may be that Gwen and Elektra, the two European American speakers with lower PVIs, would turn out to be outliers in a larger sample. In fact, Thomas and Carter (2006) reported one such
outlier in their data: a young European American female with a PVI of 0.3316. They speculated that “her speech may reflect a style adopted by some adolescent girls [...] characterized by an unusually small degree of temporal reduction of unstressed syllables as well as by intonational patterns that can strike listeners as disdainful” (344). If their outlier indeed represented a speech style associated with adolescent or young adult women, then it is not surprising to find it among my speakers.

Another possible explanation for the non-Asian speakers’ relatively low PVI relates to formality. Because of my ethnographic work with the sorority members, they were already somewhat familiar with me by the time of the interview. The non-sorority speakers, in contrast, were recruited through social media and did not know me before the interview. This may have led them to speak more carefully overall, with less vowel reduction, which would have led to lower PVI scores (as demonstrated by Low et al. 2000 for British English).

Additionally, Thomas and Carter (2006), Coggshall (2008) and Lim (2010) all considered a possible effect of speech rate on PVI. Thomas and Carter (2006:247-8) found that for Spanish and Hispanic English speakers, PVI increased with increased syllable duration, but for European and African American speakers there was no correlation. Likewise, Coggshall (2008:5-7) did not find a correlation between speech rate and PVI for Lumbee or Cherokee English speakers. Lim (2010:243-5) found a positive correlation between syllable duration and PVI in informal interview topics, but no correlation for formal topics or reading style. Lim argues that this difference reflects two different grammars for Singapore English speakers, with different phonological targets for rhythm. In a stress-timed grammar, the relative duration of syllables is encoded in the phonology, such that differences in speech rate do not affect PVI. In a syllable-timed grammar, on the other hand, duration is not a phonological component of stress, but purely
the effect of phonetic factors. Thus, in slower speech, “vocalic elements with more elastic components such as diphthongs and tense and low vowels may ‘expand’ phonetically more than others” (251), leading to greater variance in duration, and higher PVIs.

Figure 10 plots median syllable duration by median PVI for the 31 speakers in the present study. Longer syllable durations indicate a slower speech rate. There is no overall correlation, although Nico is notable for having both a high median PVI and slow speech rate. Perhaps, like Lim’s Singapore English speakers, Nico has an underlying syllable-timed grammar, as a result of her relatively late acquisition of English. If so, her high PVI might be an artifact of speech rate. I will return to a discussion of Nico’s case later, with respect to age of acquisition and PVI.

![Graph showing median PVI plotted against median syllable length](image)

**Figure 10.** Median PVI plotted against median syllable length

Overall, then, the results suggest that Asian American speakers are more syllable-timed than what has been reported for European and African American English. Put another way, Asian American English is rhythmically similar to other ethnolects (particularly Hispanic and
Singapore English) that have been described as syllable-timed. On the other hand, the non-Asian speakers in my study also appear to be relatively syllable-timed, but the sample is too small to be considered representative. In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus just on the behavior of the sorority members.

Figure 11 compares the sorority members side by side with several groups from previous studies. For each group, the minimum, maximum, and mean PVI score is shown.

![Figure 11. Minimum, mean, and maximum PVI for several ethnolects](image)

Looking at just the American groups, the sorority members are closest to Shousterman’s young NYC Puerto Rican speakers, both in terms of group average and overall spread. It should be noted that Shousterman’s young Puerto Ricans show a somewhat higher PVI than her older Puerto Ricans, as well as Thomas and Carter’s Mexican English speakers in North Carolina (who are intermediate in age between Shousterman’s older and younger speakers). Shousterman posits
that a change is taking place in NYC Puerto Rican English, with speakers moving toward a more stress-timed rhythm, possibly due to increased contact with European and African Americans among the younger generation, among other factors. It would be interesting to see if a similar change occurs across multiple generations of Asian Americans, but at present I have no data from older Asian Americans with which to make such a comparison.

The substrate influence on prosodic rhythm is made evident in the following charts. The left, from Thomas and Carter (2006:345), shows the relative PVIs of Spanish, Hispanic English, and non-Hispanic varieties of English. The right, from Coggshall (2008:6), shows the median PVI of one monolingual Cherokee speaker compared to Cherokee English, Lumbee English, and non-Indian varieties.

In both cases, the non-English language shows the lowest PVI, while the substrate-influenced varieties show a PVI intermediate between the substrate language and neighboring varieties of English. Unfortunately, directly comparable data is not available for Chinese or any
of the other heritage languages of my speakers, though Mok (2008) has used a similar measure to compare English, Cantonese and Mandarin. In the following figure, \(nPVI_V\) (labeled on the y-axis) corresponds most closely to the PVI measure used in this and other sociolinguistic studies. We can see that Mandarin and Cantonese indeed show a lower PVI than English, though not so low as the Romance languages (\(Man_n\) and \(Can_n\) refer to reading style, while \(Man_t\) and \(Can_t\) refer to semi-spontaneous narrative).

![Figure 13. Comparison of rhythm of several languages; figure from Mok (2008:3)](image)

Looking back at Figure 11 and considering all the groups, it is notable that the sorority members most closely resemble Lim’s Singapore English speakers in their informal interview style. This could be a coincidence; on the other hand, considering the evidence from the studies cited above, it could point to a particularly significant role for substrate influence, given that Singapore English as a variety is strongly influenced by Chinese and Malay, among other Asian languages. However, to support such a hypothesis, further data that directly compares PVI in Spanish versus Chinese and other languages would be needed.

Finally, Figure 14 shows individual speakers’ median PVI plotted by their approximate age of acquisition of English. The red horizontal line represents the mean PVI (0.43), while the
red vertical line represents the median age of acquisition (4.5). I use age of acquisition here as an easily quantifiable stand-in for several correlated factors having to do with the degree of expected substrate influence in a speaker’s English. These include degree of exposure to a language other than English (LOTE) in childhood, and current use of/proficiency in a LOTE. For instance, a speaker like Peggy who grew up with exclusively English-speaking parents obviously continues to speak only English with her family to the present day and has little to no exposure to a heritage language. In contrast, speakers with a later age of acquisition often have parents with limited proficiency in English, meaning they must maintain the use of their heritage language. If syllable timing in English indeed represents a substrate effect, we would expect a later age of acquisition to correlate with a lower (more syllable-timed) PVI.

Figure 14. Median PVI by age of English acquisition.
Given the relative sparseness of the data, and the presence of outliers (such as Felicia, Lady, and Nico), there is not a clear correlation between age of acquisition and PVI. However, the overall tendency is as predicted. The majority of the speakers fall into the upper left quadrant (above-average PVI, earlier age of acquisition) or the lower right quadrant (below-average PVI, later age of acquisition). But what to make of the outliers?

Felicia, who has the lowest median PVI, presents an interesting case. Although she reports learning English concurrently with Mandarin and Cantonese, it is significant that she acquired all these languages while living in Hong Kong for the majority of her childhood. Therefore, she not only had a very high degree of exposure to LOTEs, but the English she was exposed to also differed from native American or British English. Felicia also reports that she still speaks Cantonese on a regular basis, consistent with the idea that greater exposure to a syllable-timed substrate language correlates with lower PVI.

What about Lady and Nico, who have some of the highest median PVIs despite later acquisition of English? One possibility is that their median scores do not really represent their overall pattern of production. Recall that the median PVI score is taken from a set of 200+ pairs, each with its own PVI. A speaker who shifts between a very low PVI and a much higher PVI in two distinct styles, such as Lim’s Singapore English speakers, would have a bimodal distribution, something a single median value would not capture. I did not control for style in the stretches of speech from which I took PVI tokens, but we can still look at the speakers’ distributions to see if there might be any such patterns.
Figure 15 compares the distributions of Carol (median PVI = 0.33) and Peggy (median PVI = 0.47). Overall, their distributions are fairly close to normal, with the bulk of Carol’s distribution further to the left than Peggy’s, as we would expect. Now let us turn to Lady and Nico:
Figure 16. Distribution of PVI scores for Lady and Nico

Their distributions are more spread out than Carol and Peggy’s, and Nico shows something like a bimodal pattern. While firm conclusions cannot be drawn without a detailed stylistic analysis, like Lim’s, these speakers’ flatter distributions may represent a greater degree of style-shifting in their data, and/or greater use of rhythmic variation in style-shifting. In Nico’s case, she arrived in the United States at the age of nine, and feels that she still has a slight accent in English. In contrast, Lady was born to immigrant parents in the U.S., but spent a significant portion of her childhood in China, and returns there often; her father currently spends much of his time in China doing business. Arguably, both of these young women have a strongly bicultural (and bilingual) identity. Their variable use of rhythm may reflect their comfort in shifting between languages and identities.
5.5 Discussion

In this chapter I have provided evidence for syllable-timing as a feature of Asian American English. This finding is similar to what has been reported for Hispanic varieties of English, and is also consistent with metalinguistic descriptions of Asian American English as “choppy” or “staccato-like” (see Chapter 2). The language backgrounds of my speakers strongly suggest a role for substrate influence, as does the relationship between age of English acquisition and PVI.

Several questions remain open. Some of the non-Asian speakers in this study also showed quite low PVIs compared to Thomas and Carter’s (2006) findings for European and African Americans. While the present sample is very small (four speakers), these results highlight how little we actually know about how prosodic rhythm in American English might be affected by any number of factors, including style, region, and age.

Another question is how well PVI actually correlates with perceived rhythm, something that to my knowledge has not been tested. PVI was originally developed as a measure to quantify impressionistic differences between stress- and syllable-timed language varieties, but since Thomas and Carter (2006) many studies (including this one) have used PVI itself as evidence that a variety is relatively stress-timed or syllable-timed. My own impressions of speakers’ prosody were not always reflected in their PVI scores—some speakers who sounded quite “staccato” to me turned out to have relatively high PVIs. While PVI is a convenient and powerful metric, it discards all information in the speech signal besides vowel durations, which listeners almost certainly do not do. Future work should investigate what other prosodic variables may contribute to the perception of rhythm, and how salient these rhythmic differences are to listeners.
6. Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the language practices of Asian Americans, a group that until recently has gone largely unstudied in sociolinguistics. Today, Asian Americans represent one of the fastest-growing segments of the population; no picture of English as spoken in the United States can be complete without taking this large and diverse group into account. Together with other recent research on Asian American language, this study represents an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship of language and ethnicity.

6.1 Summary of findings

In Chapter 1, I reviewed previous research on Asian Americans and communities of practice, and discussed why an Asian American sorority was a productive site for a study of language and ethnicity. In Chapter 2, I described the methods I used to enter the community and collect data. In Chapter 3, I discussed some of my ethnographic observations of the sorority, its members, and its context within the university. In Chapter 4, I presented an acoustic analysis of the GOAT vowel and found that sorority members produced a GOAT that was significantly backer than their peers. Sorority members also showed a tendency toward more monophthongal GOAT. In Chapter 5, I presented an analysis of the sorority members’ prosodic rhythm using the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI). The sorority members’ speech was more syllable-timed than mainstream varieties of English, reflecting a likely substrate influence from syllable-timed Asian languages. In what remains, I will discuss some implications of this work, as well as directions for future research.
6.2 Asian American English

As I discussed earlier, the linguistic image of Asian Americans—among both scholars and the general public—has often been an oversimplified dichotomy of “forever foreigner” (i.e., non-native, foreign-accented English) or “honorary White” (i.e., completely assimilated to mainstream standards of English). This dissertation adds to the growing body of research that complicates that picture. Following Wong (2015), I argue that rather than trying to identity a single, cohesive Asian American “ethnolect”, a repertoire approach is more fruitful. Furthermore, the ethnolinguistic repertoire that my speakers make use of is neither fixed nor universal. For example, comparing my speakers’ production of GOAT vowels to Hall-Lew’s (2009) speakers in San Francisco, it’s clear that neither backed nor fronted GOAT by itself indexes “Asian American”. Rather, phonetic variables like GOAT-backing or fronting indirectly index ethnicity in locally specific ways.

On the other hand, prosodic rhythm is more likely to be a suprasegmental feature, derived from a historical substrate effect. The use of these two features, drawn from very different sources, highlights the process of *bricolage* through which speakers “[appropriate] local and extra-local linguistic resources in the production not just of a pre-existing persona but of new twists on an old persona” (Eckert 2000:214). Particularly in the absence of a well-defined model of “sounding Asian”, young Asian Americans have the opportunity to create new, locally and contextually dependent modes of being and sounding Asian.

Wong (2015) further argues that the notion of a group repertoire is less useful than an approach that centers the individual. As Newman and Wu (2011) show, even speakers who are reliably heard as “Asian” do not all use the same features, nor is there any one particular feature
or set of features that guarantee a speaker will be heard as Asian. Within my sample, not all
speakers have access to or make use of exactly the same repertoire of linguistic resources. What
we think of as an “ethnolinguistic repertoire” may be best thought of as a cluster of individual,
partially overlapping repertoires. Where many individuals’ repertoires overlap, an association of
that variable with that social group arises. Of course, repertoires may also be expanded through
social contact, so that, for instance, members of an ethnic group who work, live, and socialize
together may come to share more and more features over time.

This conception of ethnolinguistic repertoires also allows us to account for the fact that
individual features rarely have a single, fixed meaning. As I discussed in Chapter 3, many of the
sorority members make use of features variably associated with Asian-accented English, AAVE,
or NYC English. To say that features of AAVE are part of the ethnolinguistic repertoire of some
Asian Americans is not to divorce those features from their origins or to claim that they are
bleached of their ethnoracial association with African Americans. Rather, individual speakers
may use features of AAVE to index a number of meanings, chief among them being non-
Whiteness. Again, if enough Asian American individuals within a community adopt a feature
into their repertoire, it may become associated with “sounding Asian”, without necessarily losing
its original ethnolinguistic association(s).

6.3 Communities of practice

This dissertation has further highlighted the utility of the community of practice approach.
In Chapter 4, I showed that membership in the sorority was a better predictor of backed GOAT
than ethnicity alone. At the same time, if one looked only within the bounds of this community
of practice, the larger social meaning of backed GOAT would be unintelligible. This is the
inverse to Eckert’s statement (quoted in Chapter 2) that the macro-level social meaning of variation cannot be understood without reference to the micro-level practices of individuals. Within the ethnolinguistic repertoire approach outlined above, these different levels of analysis are easily understood as complementary rather than clashing.

Finally, by using the community of practice approach, and studying a group of people who have voluntarily come together under the label of “Asian American”, this project has accomplished two major goals. One, it has circumvented the problem of defining who is and is not Asian American, by approaching “Asian American” as a primarily self-selected, rather than externally imposed, category. Second, it has avoided a reflexive view of language and ethnicity—by viewing “Asian American” as an agentively constructed category, rather than a simple racial or ethnic classification, the mutually constitutive relationship of language and ethnicity is brought to the forefront.

6.4 Looking forward

The scope of this dissertation has necessarily been limited by time and other practical constraints, and there are many remaining questions. Perhaps the most obvious limitation is that I have looked only at women, and have little to say about the language of Asian American men. My choice to focus on a group of young women was practical as well as ideological. Often in sociolinguistics and elsewhere, “language” has meant men’s language, and “women’s language” has meant those oddities of women’s talk that set them apart from the male standard (Lakoff 2004 [1975]; Kiesling 1996:34-5). In the study of ethnic varieties, in particular, women have sometimes been left out entirely, as gender is seen as secondary to race or ethnicity (Morgan 1994). My purpose in this dissertation is not to claim that I have adequately described “Asian
American English”—which I obviously have not done, even if we restrict our gaze to the campus of NJU!—but rather to claim that if we wish to understand Asian American language in general, the language of these Asian American young women is as valid a starting point as any.

Undoubtedly, gender and ethnicity interact in complex ways, and I expect that had I been able to study a similar group of Asian American men (such as AZN’s brother fraternity), I would find both similarities and differences in their ethnolinguistic behavior. In particular, while Asian American women are often sexualized and stereotyped as hyperfeminine by a patriarchal White culture, Asian American men are often cast as unmasculine, asexual, and uncool. Some react to this stereotyping with hypermasculine behavior, particularly through symbolically aligning themselves with hip-hop culture/Blackness (e.g., Chun 2001). Jeansun’s description of her brother’s fronted GOAT vowel (Chapter 4), while only one anecdote, suggests another possible gender difference in the construction of Asian American ethnic identity. In contrast to herself and her sister, who “don’t have any sort of South Jersey accent”, her brother does. Evidently, her brother attaches a different value to sounding local than Jeansun and her sister do. Future work in sociolinguistics should examine the complex intersection(s) of gender, place, and ethnicity. For example, is there greater value in localness (perhaps tied to “authenticity”) for men versus women? Perhaps there is some covert prestige in sounding like a South Jersey local that is available to Jeansun’s brother, but not to her or her sister.

On the other hand, the difference between the siblings may simply be one of age, given that Jeansun’s brother is the youngest and speaks little to no Korean. Over and over again in my interviews, I heard a similar pattern, regardless of whether the interviewee was the oldest, youngest, or middle sibling: older siblings retained the most proficiency in the heritage language. Middle siblings were slightly less proficient, and younger siblings had the least knowledge of a
heritage language. These anecdotes reflect rapid language shift, even within generations. As increasing numbers of Asian Americans grow up speaking English natively, with less and less connection to their heritage languages, what will happen to Asian American language as a whole? Will we see, in fact, the complete assimilation that has already (erroneously) been reported? Will we see substrate features, such as prosodic rhythm, retained as ethnolinguistic markers? What will “sounding Asian” sound like in the future?

The sorority members in this study present one possible answer (or, in fact, several answers): a repertoire of features, drawn from various sources, that index Asian ethnicity primarily by differing from local, White norms. Jeansun’s brother may represent another possibility: sounding local yet non-White, his own pattern of bricolage. Of course, the meaning of “local”, the relevance of (non-)Whiteness, and the linguistic resources available to speakers are never fixed, as (Hall-Lew 2009) and (Wong 2015), among others, have shown. I predict that future research will show there are as many ways to sound Asian as there ways to be Asian.
7. Appendix

7.1 Sample Interview Questions

1. Personal background

1.1 To start, can you state your full name and year of birth?

1.2 What year are you in school?

1.3 Where were you born?

1.4 Where do you live now?

2. Immigration

2.1 Where were your parents born?

2.2 When did they come to the U.S.?

2.3 Have you ever been to [country of origin]?

2.4 Where are your extended family? Do you have much contact with them?

3. Family & childhood

3.1 Do you have any siblings?

3.1.1 How old are they?

3.1.2 How did you get along with them when you were younger?

3.2 Was there anyone else besides your parents who helped raise you?

3.3 Did you ever get in trouble as a kid? What for?

3.3.1 Who was stricter, your mom or your dad?

3.4 What language(s) did you speak at home?

3.5 How far in school did your parents want you to go? What did they want you to be?

3.6 How often do you talk to your family these days?

4. School/College
4.1 Where’d you go to school?
   4.1.1 How did you like it?
4.2 What was your favorite subject? Least favorite?
4.3 What were the major social groups in your high school? What group(s) did you belong to?
4.4 What’s your major?
4.5 Why did you come to NJU?
4.6 What do you think the biggest difference between high school and college is?
4.7 Which do you think is more important in college: studying hard, or making friends?
4.8 What do you like to do when you’re not in class or studying? Do you participate in any student clubs or groups?
4.9 What are your plans after college?

5. (For sorority members) Greek life
   5.1 When did you join AZN?
   5.2 Why’d you join?
   5.3 Did you know you wanted to join a sorority before you came to college?
   5.4 What do you think is the most important thing a sorority does?
   5.5 What was Rush like for you?

6. (For non-members) Campus life
   6.1 Have you ever thought about joining a sorority? Why?
   6.2 What’s your impression of Greek organizations at NJU?
   6.3 How much do you know about cultural sororities and fraternities? Would you ever join one?
7. Ethnicity/Diversity

7.1 Would you agree that NJU is a diverse campus?

7.1.1 How important do you think diversity is for a college?

7.2 How diverse was your friend group growing up? How about now?

7.3 (For Asian American participants) What does “Asian American” mean to you?

7.4 How important would you say your ethnic identity is in your daily life?

7.5 Was there ever a time when you felt you were treated badly because of your ethnicity?

8. Culture

8.1 What type of food did you eat growing up?

8.1.1 What was your favorite food as a kid? Least favorite?

8.2 What were the major holidays that your family celebrated?

8.3 Did you go to church/temple with your family?

8.3.1 How important would you say religion is to you?

9. Relationships

9.1 Tell me about your current/last relationship.

9.2 Did your parents have rules about dating when you were in high school?

9.3 Do you think your parents want you to date or marry someone of the same ethnicity?

9.3.1 How about you? Is that important to you?

10. Language

10.1 Has anyone ever commented on the way you speak?

10.1.1 Has anyone ever said you “sound White/Black/Asian”?

10.2 Do you think you can tell where someone is from based on how they speak?
10.2.1 What about ethnicity? Can you tell if someone is Asian/Black/White just from hearing them speak?

7.2 Consent and information forms

Doctoral Dissertation Research: A Sociolinguistic Study of an Asian American Sorority

Thanks for participating in my dissertation research! You’ll be asked to sign an official consent form, but this document lays out the same information in plain English.

What’s this research about?

As a sociolinguist, I’m basically interested in how people use language to create and reflect their identity. No two people talk exactly the same, so what does the way we speak say about who we are?

Why study an Asian American sorority?

Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing minority groups in the U.S. right now, but to date they’ve largely been left out of research on language and ethnicity. Increasing the representation of minority groups in research is important not only to our scientific understanding of language, but also as a step in fighting stereotypes and prejudice. I’m further interested in the sorority because of the close-knit nature of the community, and the importance of membership to a person’s identity.

What do I have to do? How long will this study take?

I’ll be conducting my research for the whole school year (Fall 2013-Spring 2014). Most of the time, I’ll simply be observing and recording sorority activities, like meetings, social events, etc., so you won’t have to do anything different than you normally do. Once or twice during the school year, I may ask you to participate in an interview, which will take about an hour.
**Will my data be kept private?**

Yes! Your name and identity will never be used in my dissertation or shared with anyone except my faculty advisors. You, your sorority, and your university will always be referred to with pseudonyms in any public presentation of my research. In addition, you always have the right to review my recordings and have any part where you’re speaking erased.

**Still have questions? Contact me at carina.bauman@nyu.edu.**

Name: __________________________

Preferred pseudonym: __________________________

(Your pseudonym can be anything you want! If left blank, one will be chosen for you.)

Date: __________________________

______________________________

**Consent Form for Sorority Members (18+)**

You have been invited to take part in a research study about the social practices of members of an Asian American sorority. This study will be conducted by Carina Bauman, Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts & Science, New York University, as a part of her Doctoral dissertation. Her faculty sponsor is Professor Gregory Guy, Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts & Science, New York University.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Be observed and audiorecorded by the investigator while participating in normal sorority activities.
2. Take part in 1-3 interviews (either one-on-one or as part of a group) about everyday experiences, such as growing up, going to college, and participating in the sorority.
Your interviews and participation in sorority activities will be audiotaped. You may review these tapes and request that all or any portion of the tapes that includes your participation be destroyed.

The investigator will observe and record over a 9-month school year. This observation and recording will not take any time beyond your normal sorority participation. The interviews will take approximately one hour each.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand the social practices of members of an Asian American sorority.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by using pseudonyms so your data will never be directly linked to your identity. Additionally, any references to specific persons or places will be removed before the data or results are shared with anyone.

Your responses will be kept confidential by the researcher, but the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the group will do the same.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For interviews, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Carina Bauman at (212) 992-7518, carina.bauman@nyu.edu, 10 Washington Place, New York, NY, 10003, or the faculty sponsor, Gregory Guy at (212) 998-7947, gregory.guy@nyu.edu, 10 Washington Place, New York, NY, 10003.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects, New York University, 665 Broadway, Suite 804, New York, New York, 10012, at ask.humansubjects@nyu.edu or (212) 998-4808.

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep.

**Agreement to Participate**

____________________________________

Subject’s Signature & Date
Consent Form for Control Group

You have been invited to take part in a research study about the social practices of college students on your campus. This study will be conducted by Carina Bauman, Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts & Science, New York University, as a part of her Doctoral dissertation. Her faculty sponsor is Professor Gregory Guy, Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts & Science, New York University.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Take part in an interview about everyday experiences, such as growing up, going to college, and participating in extracurricular activities.

Your interviews will be audiotaped. You may review these tapes and request that all or any portion of the tapes that includes your participation be destroyed.

The interview will take approximately one hour. You will receive $15 for your participation.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand the social practices of college students on your campus.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by using pseudonyms so your data will never be directly linked to your identity. Additionally, any references to specific persons or places will be removed before the data or results are shared with anyone.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. During the interview, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Carina Bauman at (212) 992-7518, carina.bauman@nyu.edu, 10 Washington Place, New York, NY, 10003, or the faculty sponsor, Gregory Guy at (212) 998-7947, gregory.guy@nyu.edu, 10 Washington Place, New York, NY, 10003.

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Agreement to Participate

_______________________________
Subject’s Signature & Date
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