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African American English, racialized femininities, and Asian American identity in Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra*

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Abstract

We analyze Asian American comedian Ali Wong's linguistic and embodied performance in her 2016 stand-up special, *Baby Cobra*, through a genre-specific lens to investigate how stand-up comedy's performance conventions shape her comedic persona. We argue that Wong uses communicative forms indexically associated with Blackness to perform racialized and gendered figures of personhood, including the white "Karen," "sassy Black woman," and "Asian grandmother." This performance allows Wong to challenge hegemonic whiteness and dominant racializations of Asian women but relies on signs potentially interpreted as reproducing anti-Black ideologies. We situate Wong as an individual performer, "Asian American" as an ethnoracial category vis-à-vis Blackness, and the linguistic practices of Asian and Black American communities within racial capitalist histories that have shaped contemporary raciolinguistic ideologies. Rather than approach language varieties and racialized groups as necessarily distinct, we treat them as relational—as necessarily intimately and historically connected.

KEYWORDS

African American language, Asian Americans, comedy, gender, race



1 | INTRODUCTION

Asian Americans' linguistic practices challenge sociolinguistic theories of language, race, and identity that rely on one-to-one mappings of racialized populations and racialized language varieties. Lacking a so-called ethnolect, Asian Americans remain "linguistically underdetermined" racialized speakers (Lo & Reyes, 2009). Asian American performers who recruit differently racialized semiotic resources to construct stage personae often face accusations of appropriation. However, comedian Ali Wong, one of today's most prominent Asian American performers, recruits signs associated with Blackness without garnering such accusations. In this article, we analyze how Wong's engagement with Blackness in stand-up comedy embodies Black–Asian racial histories and raciolinguistic ideologies that are inadequately explained through frameworks such as appropriation.

Wong's stand-up comedy includes recurring themes of race, gender, sex(uality), and power and has a distinct performance style that incorporates crassness, absurdity, and highly animated personae. A 42-year-old Asian American woman of Chinese and Vietnamese descent, Wong was born and raised in San Francisco and majored in Asian American Studies as an undergraduate at UCLA. She was a successful comedy writer and actor when her first Netflix special, *Baby Cobra*, was released in 2016, but the special took her comedy career to new heights. *Baby Cobra* received wide critical acclaim (e.g., Zinoman, 2018), and its success was a milestone for mediatized Asian American representation in the United States. Wong's narrated experiences of Asian American womanhood highlighted how "Asianness" is constructed and interpreted through histories of (im)migration, racial ideologies that marginalize and homogenize Asian peoples, and the intersections of race, gender, and class.

The commercial success of *Baby Cobra* and Wong's second Netflix special, *Hard Knock Wife* (2018), coincided with a surge of public attention to many Asian American performers' styles. Celebrities, including Bretman Rock, Eddie Huang, and Nora Lum (aka Awkwafina), faced accusations of appropriation of African American English (AAE) and Black culture.¹ Lum, a rapper and actor, was one of the most visibly criticized for perceived appropriation of AAE in her music and portrayal of comic relief characters in the films *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Ocean's 8* (2018) (Jackson, 2018). In contrast to Lum, who was initially primarily associated with rap, a genre with historical ties to African American culture, Wong achieved celebrity through stand-up performances explicitly centering Asian American themes. However, to viewers aware of AAE, ideologies of Blackness, and/or the relationship between Asian American and African American culture in the United States, Wong's stand-up performances are equally significant sites for critical discussion of Asian American performance vis-à-vis Blackness.

Racialized, gendered, and regionally specific discourse practices are central to much stand-up comedy. For example, African American comedians use communicative styles associated with AAE to differentiate characters and resonate with Black audiences (e.g., Rahman, 2007). White male stand-ups adopt Southern and working-class styles to perform blue-collar masculinity (e.g., Hauhart, 2008). In this generic context, then, Wong's comedy raises sociolinguistic questions:

1. How does Wong construct an Asian American persona and perspective without a distinct Asian American ethnolect?
2. How does her use of linguistic-embodied features associated with AAE and Blackness contribute to her comedic goals?
3. How do her performance choices reflect broader sociohistorical dynamics between Black and Asian Americans?

Although various interpretations of Wong's performance are conceivable, our analysis centers on Wong's use of communicative forms with connections to Blackness because of the established socio-historical significance of (anti)-Blackness to US racial ideology and performance. We emphasize the indexical meanings (re)produced and the raciolinguistic ideologies made visible when Blackness is used for comedic gain by an Asian American performer. We argue that Wong uses communicative practices associated with Blackness to construct a racialized gendered persona as a confident, irreverent Asian American woman. By invoking racialized figures of personhood (Agha, 2007), Wong challenges dominant racializations of Asian women; however, her choices may perpetuate derogatory ideas about Blackness. Our analysis contextualizes contemporary racialized performance within histories of racial formation, demonstrating how a raciolinguistic perspective—treating racial and linguistic categories as socially constructed and historically intertwined (Rosa & Flores, 2017)—accounts for complexities of identity and relationality that are minimized in other sociolinguistic frameworks.

2 | THEORETICAL CONTEXT

2.1 | Stand-up comedy

We analyze Ali Wong's comedic performance understanding stand-up comedy as a speech genre. Because intertextuality is foundational to genre (Bauman, 2000), we analyze Wong's performance as part of a generic style (with intertextual consistencies) and a unique performance text (creating intertextual gaps). Comics revise jokes until they get the desired audience reactions and discard jokes that never do, and part of stand-up's audience appeal is the expectation for performers to violate societal norms (Gilbert, 2004). The presence of a stage, however, does not mean potentially offensive behaviors are automatically condoned. Stand-up is a linguistically stylized "staged performance" and a form of "high performance," meaning it is rehearsed, self-aware, and often hyperbolic (Bell & Gibson, 2011; Coupland, 2007). A comic's stage style can be understood as an exaggerated form of their everyday ("mundane") speech practices, with its own scale from "mundane" to "high" (Coupland, 2007). A comic then has a baseline "high performance" style that is (de)intensified at particular moments for stylistic purposes. Although stand-up comedy is rehearsed, audience members expect the person(a) on stage to resemble the comic's "real" self (Lindfors, 2019).

Comedic storytelling often requires stand-ups to perform other people, using their voice and body to construct multiple personae. To ensure the audience understands these are different people and understands the types of people (if not the specific individuals) they represent, comics perform "well known persons or social types identified in the public's mind with certain speech styles" (Bell & Gibson, 2011, p. 558, citing Agha, 2003)—and, we argue, certain embodied practices. Whether exaggerated stereotypes or realistic portrayals, they constitute characterological figures—"any image of personhood that is performable through semiotic display or enactment" (Agha, 2007, p. 177)—and are defined by multiple identity and social categorizations. Comics can draw on linguistic features associated with explicitly racialized figures (e.g., the white "Valley Girl") to suggest rather than name race, and they may perform exaggerated stereotypes of group(s) they identify with to draw attention to the absurdity of the stereotypes and critique them through metadiscourse and framing (Calhoun, 2019; Chun, 2004).

In the United States, white male comics' perspectives and comedic preferences have been uncritically treated as the measure for "good humor" for decades (Krefting, 2014). Commercial success for comics from nondominant groups often requires appealing to hegemonic ideologies about race, gender, and related topics to capture "mainstream" (read: white, male, middle-class) audiences. Comics of color must balance audience expectations for racial stereotypes, racial authenticity, or both

(e.g., Jacobs, 2023). Women have historically been most successful when their performance upholds dominant ideas of femininity and reinforces men's social dominance (Webber, 2013). For comics like Wong who earn money through stand-up, social critique in a performance on the scale of a Netflix special could be costly. Wong's performance, then, must be understood not only within the context of a performance genre, but also within the capitalist societal structures that have shaped stand-up as a financial opportunity.

2.2 | Indexicality

Foundational to our analysis are theories of indexicality that posit linguistic and embodied forms as signs that accrue malleable, contextually specific meaning(s) over time. Once a form takes on indexical value, it necessarily becomes available for reinterpretation, creating possibilities for new meanings to co-occur, blend, or overtake a form's original meaning (Silverstein, 2003). Each form, then, has multiple indexicalities that create clusters and/or hierarchies of potentially interrelated meanings (Eckert, 2008; Silverstein, 2003). Few, if any, forms index only one social category or identity, because categories themselves are constructed dialogically and individual forms do not occur in isolation (Ochs, 1992).

The social meanings of indexes are necessarily ideological, because "every stylistic move is the result of an interpretation of the social world and of the meanings of elements within it" and is an act of social positioning (Eckert, 2008, p. 456). The stylizer's intended ideological positioning, however, may not be the same as how they are interpreted by others, because people interpret indexes based on their respective lived experiences and familiarity with meanings associated with a form. Thus, a viewer's social positionality is as significant to meaning-making through interaction as the language producer's (see Inoue, 2006). To *Baby Cobra* viewers who share Wong's US-based sociolinguistic and sociopolitical context, many of her linguistic and embodied forms have highly salient, if not dominant, meanings tied to AAE and ideologies of Blackness given the centrality of Blackness to US history and culture. We analyze these as one cluster of indexical forms that does particular ideological work in the construction of Wong's comedic persona.

2.3 | Language and race: from crossing to raciolinguistic enregisterment

Early sociolinguistic research of racialized groups tended to employ distinctiveness-centered approaches to sociolinguistic variation, assuming different racialized groups speak different language varieties (Chun & Lo, 2015; Lo & Reyes, 2009). Rampton's (1995) foundational examination of "crossing" relied on observations of UK youth who crossed perceived ethnolinguistic boundaries within peer networks. Subsequent research has used the framework of linguistic appropriation to analyze power dynamics when an out-group entity "crosses" and benefits from using linguistic features originating in a socially marginalized community. Much contemporary sociolinguistic research has shifted toward "linguistic repertoires" (e.g., Benor, 2010) to account for diverse linguistic environments people encounter in their everyday lives. In this framework, language users employ varied linguistic features, associated with different styles and varieties, for heterogeneous interactional effects.

Rosa and Flores (2017) challenged traditional sociolinguistic frameworks of language and race by advancing "raciolinguistic enregisterment," the process by which linguistic signs become associated with racialized bodies and the two become sociohistorically co-naturalized. Agha (2003) theorized "enregisterment" as a process whereby the linguistic practices (i.e., linguistic repertoire) of a

characterological type become socially recognized as a register; thus, any encounter with this culturally meaningful register is an encounter with a type of person. Rather than treat discrete linguistic codes as inherently racialized, Rosa and Flores (2017) theorized racialization through language as encounters between speaking subjects and racially hegemonic perceiving subjects who can dictate the significance of others' utterances (cf., Inoue, 2006). Language ideologies about Asian Americans often invisibilize complex linguistic practices, and the lack of evidence for an Asian American ethnolect motivates a shift from a distinctiveness-centered framework toward an examination of raciolinguistic enregisterment. The racializing logics that render Asian Americans always already underdetermined speaking subjects (Yoo et al., 2023) often fuel facile accusations of appropriation without considering the historical conditions and semiotic processes that shape linguistic practices and perceptions.

AAE is perhaps an achievement of raciolinguistic enregisterment par excellence. AAE shares structural features with other varieties of US English because it emerged through contact between enslaved African peoples and white, Southern English-speaking slave owners. During African Americans' Great Migration from the South to metropolitan areas across the United States during the twentieth century, AAE developed notable regional variation (Wolfram, 2005). An AAE with grammatically similar patterns to Standardized American English is used by many middle-class African Americans (Weldon, 2021). This internal diversity and overlaps with other varieties are often elided when AAE is posited as evidence of Black racial inferiority: In these instances, AAE is homogenous and defined by distinctive features raciolinguistically enregistered as forms used only by Black people. Linguistic features, then, need not be unique to AAE to be ideologically linked with Blackness and Black figures of personhood—especially when in service of anti-Blackness.

The strong raciolinguistic enregisterment of AAE does not preclude signs associated with AAE from shifting in their indexical meanings. Not everyone may “hear” linguistic features associated with AAE as “Black”—contributing to different audience interpretations of linguistic performances. The overdetermined nature of Black language practices, along with the indexical malleability of linguistic features associated with Blackness, exposes the limited ability of most sociolinguistic frameworks to explain the sociocultural impacts of Wong's invocations of Blackness. These theories account for linguistic diversity (e.g., repertoires) or power structures (e.g., appropriation) but are less oriented to intertwined historical formations of racial and linguistic categories and their ongoing co-constitutive nature. We consider the historical racialization of Black and Asian American communities in order to destabilize and better understand raciolinguistic categorizations that permeate the ideological context of Wong's performance.

2.4 | Blackness and African American English in the United States

Language varieties spoken by descendants of enslaved Africans have long been considered reflections of Black people's supposed intellectual inferiority. Institutionalized anti-Blackness treats AAE as a proxy for race to oppress Black people in legal settings, housing, employment, and education (e.g., Rickford & King, 2016). For decades, non-Black people's mediatized representations of Blackness have reduced complex linguistic structures to a few “nonstandard” phonological and morphosyntactic features and/or excessive profanity and slang (Bucholtz & Lopez, 2011; Ronkin & Karn, 1999).

Black culture is desirable to many non-Black people because of the commodifiable “otherness” of Blackness (hooks, 1992), and it is most desirable when separated from Black bodies. The cultural capital of Blackness is exemplified by the global influence of rap and hip-hop (Alim, 2006) and the appropriation of Black language practices in other globalized musical genres (e.g., Garza, 2021) and corporate marketing. Non-Black rappers use African American language practices to establish

mainstream artist credibility (e.g., Eberhardt & Freeman, 2015). Social media accounts for non-Black corporations use features associated with AAE to index “coolness” in attempts to connect with young customers (e.g., Roth-Gordon et al., 2020). Non-Black individuals also adopt Black language practices to socially position themselves based on contextual understandings of Blackness and AAE. For example, white gay British men perform a “sassy” persona online using AAE features (Ilbury, 2020), and non-Black youth may use features to express local affiliation with Black friends or with Black popular culture (e.g., Bucholtz, 2011; Fought, 2002).

In the United States, exaggerated and/or derogatory performances of Blackness are a centuries-old form of profitable entertainment. Beginning in the 1800s, minstrel shows staged white performers in blackface mocking Black people’s intelligence and abilities. These shows, birthed from anti-Blackness and white racial paranoia, established a cultural precedent portraying Black people as controllable objects, securing white spectators’ superiority (Lott, 1992). Narrow and persistent derogatory representations of Blackness across media types created materially influential tropes like Black Buck, Jezebel, Mammy, Welfare Queen, and more (Bogle, 2016; see Collins, 2000 on “controlling images”). The ideas about Blackness that these tropes perpetuate are now part of the clusters of meanings for communicative forms associated with AAE; performers can reinforce anti-Black stereotypes through linguistic choices that activate these associations for their audiences.

2.5 | Commodification, racial capitalism, and racial formations

If commodified Blackness is situated within histories of anti-Blackness, we must contextualize performance genres in histories of accumulation and dispossession that treat performers and performances differently based on hierarchies of race and gender. Wong’s livelihood depends on commodifying her comedic self and her craft. The theoretical framework of racial capitalism explains how racialized performance is commodified—say, in the context of a Netflix special—and how it reinforces or challenges racial hierarchies. Racial capitalism posits that capitalist accumulation has always required racialized dispossession (Robinson, 2000; Melamed, 2015). Thus, the contemporary capitalist order and the global social structure it organizes is “a system in which race and capitalism are mutually supporting” (Táíwò & Bright, 2020, para. 11). Melamed (2015) argued that there are subtle, perhaps more insidious, forms of inequality wrought by contemporary forms of racial capitalism less overtly linked to white supremacy. Specifically, “multiculturalism” and neoliberal notions of “inclusion” (re)produce social separateness by reifying difference—and by extension, differently valued forms of humanity—rather than encouraging readings of historical relationality (Melamed, 2015). This “social separateness” is reproduced in dominant theorizations of linguistic appropriation that assume distinct racialized groups necessarily use different language varieties. Put differently, racial capitalist logics inform sociolinguistic ideologies even as these ideologies ignore racial capitalist processes, including those that have shaped Asian–Black relations in the United States.

One historical starting point for Black–Asian relations is the relationship between enslaved Africans and Asian indentured laborers (“coolies”), who became racialized and incorporated into the category of “subhuman/laborer” in different and uneven ways (Jung, 2008). Such historical overlap has meant that racialization has always been relational; racialized groups are positioned not only in relation to whiteness but to one another (Lowe, 2015). Thus, as the Asian laboring body became a buffer between (white) freedom and (Black) enslaved labor, the social categorization(s) resulting from Asian racialization produced sometimes unmanageable and at other times ambivalent positionings. Kim (2023, p. 8) argued that Asian American racialization must be understood with regards to historical anti-Blackness, claiming “nearness or farness from Blackness—not whiteness—is the overriding

determinant of racial status, which means that the key categorical divide is not that between whites and everyone else, but *that between Black people and everyone else*” (original emphasis).

To examine Asian American linguistic practices vis-à-vis Blackness requires consideration of the historical and contemporary racialization of Asians in the United States. Immigration was a catalyst for major shifts in race relations and the overall racial and linguistic landscape. During the 1900s, Asians were depicted as incapable of assimilation (linguistic and otherwise) and were legally excluded from US citizenry (Jung, 2008). The second half of the twentieth century saw a surge in Asian immigration, driven by US imperial wars in Asia and key domestic legislative changes. The 1965 Hart-Celler Act abolished national origin quotas, and the Refugee Act of 1980 institutionalized refugee settlement, both acts shaping immigration trajectories of diverse Asian groups. Immigrants who benefited from legal policies favoring highly skilled labor often settled in affluent suburban neighborhoods within a generation (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Later immigrants, mainly from Southeast Asia, received less structural support and experienced less socioeconomic mobility (Sakamoto & Woo, 2007). Many of these later immigrants settled in historically Black neighborhoods in cities like Wong’s hometown of San Francisco, creating the conditions that exposed Asian American youth to Black linguistic practices.

In the mid-twentieth century, Asian Americans became an ethnic minority who had “made it” in the United States despite historical injustices—a model minority (Yoo et al., 2023). This narrative conveniently advanced liberal values associated with US democracy while denigrating other racial minorities, especially Black Americans (Kim, 2023). Model minority racialization produced other characterizations of Asians as apolitical, nerdy, and asexual and fueled ideologies of conditional “honorary white” status, informing linguistic ideologies of Asians in the United States as “speaking white.” Concurrently, the enduring “perpetual foreigner” trope continued to animate assumptions of fluency in a non-English heritage language.

Two decades of sociolinguistics research demonstrates how this historical context is reflected in Asian Americans’ heterogeneous use of linguistic features associated with AAE, which allow Asian Americans to achieve different social goals in interaction. Asian Americans’ use of AAE-enregistered features varies by ethnicity, class (Shankar, 2008), age (Bucholtz, 2004), gender (Chun, 2001), and place (Hall-Lew, 2010); there is also intra-ethnic variation within peer groups (Reyes, 2005). Asian Americans’ metapragmatic discourses about AAE, and their approximation toward or distancing from it, reflect their linguistic navigation of a binary Black/white racial ideology in the United States (Bucholtz, 2004).

How differing racialized and gendered subjects are afforded power determines how their speech is recruited, read, and taken up across racial capitalist landscapes, and uses of indexically Black signs are interpreted or valorized differently based on who produces them (Smalls, 2020). The pervasive use of AAE and other semiotic phenomena by non-Black people warrants an interrogation of not only how racialized subjects must navigate the US racial capitalist landscape but also how anti-Blackness functions as “total climate,” structuring the global ordering of racial hierarchies (Sharpe, 2016). Thus, although Asians may navigate a racial landscape that frequently renders them invisible, they remain a racialized group that has historically benefitted materially from an ontological distance from Blackness (Kim, 2023).

3 | DATA AND METHODS

For our analysis, we watched *Baby Cobra* three times and identified “marked” moments: ones that distinguish Wong’s high performance style from her baseline performance style and/or include relatively infrequent forms. These moments include, for example, Wong’s reenactments of other

people, points of narrative climax, and the punchlines of jokes. We then identified the structural linguistic features, styles, and/or genres used in these moments, as discourse-level practices can become enregistered through the same processes as individual linguistic forms.

Our initial list of linguistic features occurring in marked moments included various elements, such as “baby voice,” hyperstandard pronunciation, and verb regularization. We then narrowed our data set to include only features associated with AAE. These features have been described in (socio)linguistics research as part of the variety’s distinct repertoire of features, represented as part of African American language practices in Black media, and/or used in other popular representations of Black language. In addition to literature on Asian Americans’ use of AAE features, we drew on recent scholarship about AAE use by non-Black language users in other contexts such as social media. Because peer-reviewed publication lags behind real-time language use and change (and is not necessarily comprehensive), we also accounted for features we have observed (e.g., metadiscursively attested as Black language online) but have limited to no description in linguistics research. Categorizing these features by type resulted in 13 categories, some specific to one form, while others encompass multiple forms. Our analysis centered on features’ association with, not exclusivity to, Black people and language; as seen in Table 1, many identified features are not unique to AAE or were at one time but are no longer limited to AAE speakers.

Stand-up is a multimodal genre, and identity is fundamentally multimodal (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016), so we also analyzed Wong’s embodied actions in these marked moments, including gestures, facial expressions, and gaze. In some cases, the embodied action coincided with marked linguistic features, and in other cases, the embodiment was the marked feature. We analyzed marked features and moments as parts of “bits”—cohesive narrative units that may be part of a larger narrative joke. Below, we analyze two bits to illustrate how Wong uses linguistic and embodied features associated with AAE to construct an overtly Asian American comedic persona. These bits are representative of Wong’s performance style and are two of the clearest examples in our data of Wong constructing a specific characterological figure that is not her own persona. Following these examples, we discuss the implications of Wong’s stylistic choices with regard to comedic performance, social commentary, and perceptions of Asian American language use.

4 | ANALYSIS

4.1 | Reading a co-worker

In one of Wong’s narratives, she describes struggles that working women encounter, such as shared bathrooms and navigating relationships with colleagues. In one bit, she narrates an interaction with a co-worker who reprimands Wong’s tardiness. Wong’s comportment intensifies as she describes the confrontation: Her volume increases, she takes multiple pauses, and her gestures and facial expressions become exaggerated. (See [Appendix](#) for transcription convention keys).

This bit is representative of Wong’s monophthongization of /aɪ/ as a stylistic pronunciation. She speaks in her baseline style in Line 1, pronouncing *I* with a diphthong; in Lines 12 and 17–22, as she approaches a narrative climax, she monophthongizes each instance of [aɪ]. This is not simply a naturally occurring phonological shift that occurs when Wong is excited: Throughout the special, she repeatedly monophthongizes and backs /aɪ/ to [ɑ:] in the phrase “oh my god” for emphasis in otherwise baseline style utterances.

Before introducing her co-worker, Wong expresses disdain for workplace bathrooms and states she loses respect for any colleagues who “blow ass into the toilet.” She further evaluates this specific co-worker as dislikeable by referring to her as “this bitch” (Line 4). Wong sets up a confrontational

TABLE 1 Marked linguistic features associated with AAE identified in *Baby Cobra*.

Linguistic feature	Description	Example from <i>Baby Cobra</i>
Ain't (Green, 2002)	Regularized form of negation	"you ain't scared of the pain"
ass constructions (Collins et al., 2008)	Emphatic suffix that creates prenominal complex adjective	"grown-ass woman"
	Metonymic pseudo-pronoun	"he Enron'ed my ass"
Consonant cluster simplification (Green, 2002)	One consonant in a word-final sequence is pronounced	"it's [ɪs] like making love"
Grammaticalized future intentional (Newkirk-Turner et al., 2016)	Phonologically reduced form of "I'm gonna"	"I'mma make this left hand turn signal"
Emphatic prepositional phrase (observational)	"all up" precedes prepositional phrase beginning with <i>in</i>	"all up in my bed"
Alternation of indefinite article a/an (Labov & Harris, 1986)	Indefinite article 'a' can occur before a vowel	"it's a O-turn"
Interdental fortition (Green, 2002)	Word-initial fricative pronounced as stop preceding a vowel	"like dat"
Modal <i>got to/gotta</i> (Labov, 1998)	Modal verb indicating necessity or obligation	"I still gotta work at a office"
Monophthongization (Anderson, 2002)	Diphthong pronounced as monophthong	"oh my [ma:] god"
Schwa deletion (Thomas, 2007)	Deletion of word-initial schwa preceding stressed syllable	"talkin 'bout that Whole Foods mango"
Verb leveling/regularization (Green, 2002)	Irregular verb form matches other person forms	"she don't even know"
Vowel raising (Thomas, 2007)	TRAP and DRESS vowels raised	"trap his ass [ɛəs]" "you go and get [ɡɪt] it"
Zero copula/auxiliary (Green, 2002)	Auxiliary verbs in zero form before main verb	"why you telling me this shit" "they got no body hair"

interaction by pointing at the audience (as a stand-in for the co-worker) in an accusatory manner and prefaces the description of her co-worker's actions with "had the nerve to" (Line 5). By double-voicing (Bakhtin, 1981) her co-worker in Lines 8 and 9, Wong presents a character who is overly prescriptive and disagreeable. In particular, her co-worker's use of the modal form *need to* (cf., *have to*, *got to*) presumes interpersonal authority she does not have (Glass, 2015). Wong's exaggerated embodiment (Lines 8 and 9; Figure 1) depicts the woman as aggressively encroaching on her personal space. Overall, the indexical meanings associated with the co-worker present a Karen type, a characterological figure of white womanhood associated with being entitled and overbearing (e.g., Young, 2020).

Before responding to her co-worker, Wong takes a noticeable pause (Line 11), standing silently still with eyes closed, eyebrows raised, and lips slightly open (Figure 2), suggesting she is preparing a rebuttal. This embodied shift also functions as a visual transition: Wong transforms from her abrasive co-worker to her narrative self, relaxed and unfazed. When she responds, Wong ensures the audience knows she is voicing herself, opening with the quotative phrase "I was like" (Line 12). The intonation and syntax of Wong's retort "You need to eat bananas" (Lines 13 and 14; Figure 3) parallels her



FIGURE 1 “You need to get to work on time.”



FIGURE 2 Pause between utterances.



FIGURE 3 “You need to eat bananas.”

co-worker’s admonishment in Lines 8 and 9, making clear that Wong’s statement is in direct response to this prior utterance. This mocking rebuttal offers a home remedy for diarrhea and redirects focus to the bathroom incident. As though anticipating denial, Wong provides evidence of her co-worker’s “guilt.” Using the deictic *those* while pointing to where her co-worker’s feet would be in a neighboring bathroom stall, Wong implies her co-worker is currently wearing the same green ballet flats Wong



FIGURE 4 “When I heard you.”

saw in the bathroom, and therefore “that shit was [her]” (Line 18). This knowledge gives Wong interactional leverage that she wields in Lines 21–23.

Playing with the polysemy of *shit*, Wong reasserts that someone’s bathroom habits can undermine their authority or respectability. In Line 21, *shit* is part of the idiomatic expression “get one’s shit together,” meaning to organize one’s life and meet responsibilities. In Line 23, Wong refers to scatological shit: “not hav[ing] your shit together” means having loose stools. Lines 21–23 have a parallel intonational and syntactic structure (Lines 8, 9, 13, and 14), that is, a second affront–retort pair. Wong begins her response to her co-worker’s command with “Don’t try to tell me” (Line 21), challenging the woman’s attempt at unearned authority. Wong’s linguistic-embodied performance of high affect takes on a compounded aggressive effect: She raises her volume, raises her eyebrows, opens her eyes wide, bares her teeth, and points her finger directly at the audience-as-proxy-co-worker (Figure 4).

Lines 11–23 feature a “sassy” stylistic performance reminiscent of the “sassy Black woman” stereotype. Wong’s witty retort and embodied expression fit the genre of reading, an interactional practice popularized by Black women and Black LGBTQ+ people (Livingston, 1990). The genre has gained recognition outside of Black spaces through representations in popular media. For example, skillful reading is a defining characteristic of Elektra, a Black trans woman on the FX television show *Pose*, and *The Read* is a pop culture podcast with two Black queer co-hosts, Kid Fury and Crissle. Reading occurs when one speaker directly and unambiguously denigrates another and is usually reserved for highlighting violation of social norms, rather than mere meanness (Morgan, 2002). A read is definitive, final, and, like other African American discourse genres, requires verbal creativity and wit (Mitchell-Kernan, 1972). In Wong’s performance, Lines 21–23 mark the climax of the read and are the punchline for this narrative bit. Wong visually indicates this finality with a self-satisfied smirk as she turns away from the audience, walking away because there is nothing more for her interlocutor to say.

4.2 | Subverting racial stereotypes

In another bit, Wong strategically challenges negative stereotypes about Asian women by playing with references to race, age, and gender. Her verbal and embodied performance introduces the figure of an elderly Asian woman; in contrast to Example 1, Wong draws on indexically Black discursive practices

Example 1 “You need to eat bananas” (00:27:47).

	Speech	Selected embodiment
1.	WONG:	I [aɪ] heard one of my co-workers
2.		<u>blow</u> ass into the toilet the other day?
3.		(0.3)
4.		This <u>bitch</u>
5.		had the nerve to come up to me
6.		and say,
7.		(0.2)
8.		“ <u>You</u> need
9.		to get to <u>work</u> on time.”
		<i>Points toward audience; raised eyebrows; eyes opened wide; teeth bared while speaking (Figure 1)</i>
10.	AUDIENCE:	[(Laughter)]
11.	WONG:	[(1.7)]
		<i>Closes eyes; keeps eyebrows raised (Figure 2)</i>
12.		I [a:] was like,
13.		“ <u>You</u> need
14.		to eat (.) bananas.”
		<i>Raises eyebrows; keeps eyes neutral; upper lip curls to a snarl (Figure 3)</i>
15.	AUDIENCE:	[(Laughter)]
16.	WONG:	[(2.3)]
17.		I [a:] <u>saw</u> those green ballet flats.
18.		I [a:] <u>know</u> that shit was you.
19.	AUDIENCE:	[(Laughter)]
20.	WONG:	[(0.9)]
21.		<RAISED VOLUME > Don’t try to tell me to get <u>my</u> <u>[ma:]</u> shit together
22.		When I [a:] <u>heard</u> you </>
		<i>Raises eyebrows; widens eyes; points away from face with index finger; purses lips to expose teeth while speaking (Figure 4)</i>
23.		Not have <u>your</u> shit together.

to construct an explicitly Asian persona. Before the excerpt in Example 2, Wong discusses how friends discouraged her from having children, advising her to enjoy time with her husband instead; she retorts that she needs children as she will outlive her husband “because [she’s] a Asian woman and therefore guaranteed to live until [she’s] a billion.” Wong then “explains” a negative stereotype (Asian women can’t drive) by exploiting an ambivalent one (Asian women live for a long time). Bolded words in the following transcript highlight instances of “harsh voice quality” (explained below).

After referencing the popular expression “Black don’t crack” (Line 2)—that is, Black people age well—Wong hyperbolizes her description of Asians. Her pause (Line 3) primes viewers for a smart punchline or the less-entextualized but still widely circulating expression, “Asian don’t raisin.” Instead, Wong asserts, “Asian don’t die.” In Lines 12–15, she links Asian immortality to the stereotype of Asian women as bad drivers. Although her wording frames the stereotype as true (“we’re such bad drivers”;

Example 2 “Asian don’t die” (00:40:28).

1.	WONG:	We all know the phrase,
2.		“Black don’t crack”?
3.		(1.2)
4.		Well Asian (.) don’t (.) die:.
5.	AUDIENCE:	[(Laughter)]
6.	WONG:	[(2.8)]
7.		<u>We</u> don’t die.
8.		Especially the women.
9.		We live (.)
10.		<u>forever</u> .
11.		(0.3)
12.		And you <u>know</u> why we’re such bad drivers?
13.		(1.0)
14.		Because we’re <u>trying</u>
15.		to <u>die</u> :.
16.	AUDIENCE:	[(Laughter)]
17.	WONG:	[(4.4)]
18.		We’re like
19.		<HVQ> “ Yeah : let me see how invincible I [a:] really a:m !
20.		(0.8)
21.		I’mma make this < / > <u>left</u> hand turn signal
22.		and ignore this red light <u>completely</u> .
23.		(0.8)
24.		I’m gonna make a <u>right</u> turn –
25.		<HVQ> I [a:] changed my [ma:] mind
26.		it’s a <u>U</u> -turn.
27.	AUDIENCE:	[(Laughter)]
28.	WONG:	[(1.2)]
29.		I [a:] changed my [ma:] mind [ma:n] again
30.		It’s a [‘Is.ə] <u>O</u> -turn. </>

Line 12), Wong subverts it by asserting intentionality: Asian women drive poorly because “[they]’re trying to die” (Lines 14 and 15), not because of misogynistic or racist explanations. Wong’s assertion of agency also challenges stereotypes of elderly drivers as careless due to cognitive decline. Older Asian women who drive poorly are fully aware and are testing their invincibility (Line 19). Wong further indexes an elderly persona through her movements. As she describes her reckless turn-taking (Lines 21–30), she moves her body in a jerking manner, suggesting restricted mobility associated with age. She alternates between a slight crouch and a slumped posture (Figure 5), in contrast with her usual erect posture.

More subtle humor in this bit comes from the raciolinguistic mismatch between the “Asian grandmother” figure Wong constructs multimodally and the features indexically associated with Blackness that she intersperses. Wong uses monophthongization (Lines 19, 25, and 29), grammaticalized future intentional *I’mma* (Line 21), consonant cluster simplification (Line 30), and the indefinite article



FIGURE 5 Slumped posture.

a before a vowel (Line 30). Importantly, these features also occur in varieties of Southern American English (SAE); monophthongization, in particular, is strongly associated with “countriness” or “Southernness.” Though there are regional and ethnoracial differences in its phonetic production, the indexical fields of monophthongization (including, e.g., informality, friendliness) reflect the intertwined histories and geographic origins of AAE and SAE.

The lexicalized forms *I’mma* and *issa* have been widely circulated through Black popular culture since before the release of *Baby Cobra* (e.g., The Black Eyed Peas’ 2009 hit song “Imma Be”), making their indexical associations with Blackness easily recognizable to Wong and much of her US audience. Therefore, it is significant that Wong’s use of these features does not clearly align with indexical meanings commonly discussed in sociolinguistics literature: The Asian grandmother figure is not using features associated with AAE and Blackness to appear cool or “urban” as a non-Black speaker (Bucholtz & Lopez, 2011; Chun, 2013). However, her performance choice may orient toward other hegemonic associations with Blackness, such as being loud, defiant, or criminal.

Wong further evokes associations of Blackness by using “harsh voice quality” (HVQ) in Lines 19–30. HVQ has been characterized as a harsh or pressed phonation and can include perceived growling, an effect created when airflow during laryngeal constriction causes vibration (Laver, 1980; Moisik, 2013). HVQ is usually produced on open vowels and stressed syllables, especially in emphatic contexts (Moisik, 2013). Typically associated with heightened affect, including shouting, HVQ can serve as an index of aggression or intense excitement. Moisik (2013) found that Black male comedians, including Wong’s contemporaries Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock, use HVQ to emulate influential Black comedians of previous generations, particularly in states of outrage, surprise, or exasperation. HVQ, alongside other enregistered AAE features, may index a specific generational, masculine, Black

comedic style marked by high affect. Wong's use of HVQ closely aligns with Moisik's description, occurring on the open vowels in Lines 19, 25, and 29 ([æ], [a]) and the stressed initial syllables in *U-turn* and *O-turn* (Lines 26 and 30). Lines 19–30 are marked by high affect and amplitude, conveying the grandmother's aggressive driving in a near-shout.

Wong's performance of reckless abandon typically associated with youth deviates from stereotypes of Asian elders as stoic. By using linguistic features associated with AAE, she also subverts stereotypes of Asians elders as monolingual in non-English languages or limited in English proficiency. She avoids the Mock Asian (Chun, 2004) that other Asian American comedians have used to perform older, typically immigrant, Asian characters, and her avoidance suggests that linguistic features potentially read as "Black" advance her performance goals more effectively than linguistic features unequivocally read as "Asian."

5 | DISCUSSION

In *Baby Cobra*, Wong performs various racialized gendered figures to present an assertive and unabashed feminine comedic persona. We examined Wong's performance of the (implicitly) white Karen and the Asian grandmother in contrast to the "sassy" Black woman (through the genre of reading) and the Black male comedian (through HVQ and other features associated with AAE). Here, we discuss Wong's multimodal performances of racialized femininities as negotiations of intersecting racial, linguistic, and gendered ideologies structuring Asian women's experiences in anti-Black US society.

The genre of reading and the linguistic features highlighted in Examples 1 and 2 are not unique to AAE; however, their use within each bit, contextualized in the whole special, makes their indexical associations with Blackness salient to knowledgeable audience members. Reading is based on communicative skills valued within African American communities (Morgan, 2002) and conveys a sense of self-respect; it is a strategy in Black and other marginalized peoples' ongoing fights for dignity.

Wong's successful read in Example 1 positions her narrative self as the interactional protagonist. She performs an assertive femininity the audience is meant to align with, but the exaggerated embodiment accompanying her linguistic performance semiotically invokes representations of Black femininity that are interpreted differently when performed by different racialized bodies. Although not an overtly reductive or minstrel performance of Blackness, Wong's multimodal practices nonetheless mirror derogatory representations of Black women with "attitudes." Raised volume, neck rolling, finger wagging, and other "aggressive" interactional forms associated with Black women (Morgan, 2002), combined with linguistic features associated with AAE, have become indexes of a "sassy" persona read as funny and confident (rather than "ghetto" or "rude") for non-Black language users (e.g., Ilbury, 2020; see Goodwin & Alim, 2010). Wong embodies this persona as a valorized femininity directly juxtaposed with the antagonistic Karen. As a petite, pregnant, Asian woman, Wong's racialized gendered presentation compels us to consider how linguistic ideologies are intertwined with our raced and gendered bodies within specific social and historical contexts. As Smalls (2020) argued, bodies are integral to critical examinations of race, especially non-white bodies shaped by histories of colonialism and white supremacy. Cheng (2019) argued that theorizations of racialized gender have tended to over-determine the Black feminine body—as overly fleshly, commodified, and (hyper-)sexualized—whereas Asiatic femininity is recognized by ornamental elements (that conjure Orientalist tropes) rather than a physical body. "Borrowing" tropes indexical of Blackness (and Black femininity in particular) renders Wong's Asian femininity more legible.

In other parts of the special, Wong manipulates dominant associations of language/race/gender/body to make sexually explicit jokes, contributing to a vulgar and sexually agentic persona. She rejects stereotypes of Asian women as passive and undesirable by openly discussing her sexual desires and experiences, including contracting HPV and having sexual encounters with strangers. Despite performing both Black femininity and conspicuous sexuality, Wong's body mediates interpretation of these performances, avoiding accusations of perpetuating derogatory figures of Black women as hypersexual or sexually deviant (e.g., the "Jezebel"; Collins, 2000). Wong also avoids (mediatized) stereotypes of Asian women as lewd and promiscuous (Shimizu, 2007) by visibly adhering to hegemonic notions of acceptable femininity: pregnancy/motherhood within the bounds of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Wong's persona navigates contradictory stereotypes, positioning her between idealized white femininity and Black women's supposed hypersexuality (Brown, 2022).

Example 2 underscores the significance of embodiment, as the joke gains strength from perceived crossing of raciolinguistic boundaries based on expected relationships between racialized physical appearance and speech practices. Western media often stereotype elder East Asian women as calm and taciturn figures. Furthermore, given post-1965 immigration settlement patterns in the US, first-generation Asian immigrants—including the elderly woman Wong embodies—are unlikely to have learned AAE as their primary variety of English. This makes Wong's Asian grandmother figure driving recklessly, yelling, and using speech features raciolinguistically enregistered as "Black" humorous in its unexpectedness. Mock Asian or Asian-accented English, as used by other popular Asian American comedians (e.g., Margaret Cho, Jo Koy), would be familiar to many viewers. Mock varieties reinforce attitudes about nondominant language practices that view them and the people who use them as laughable (Hill, 2008). Instead, Wong repeatedly subverts dominant raciolinguistic ideologies about Asian English fluency, including voicing her immigrant mother in standardized English.

In both examples, Wong uses features associated with AAE in the stylistically exaggerated climax of the bit, when she aims to elicit the strongest laughter from the audience. Considering the rehearsals and revisions leading to a stand-up comedy special, we interpret these linguistic choices as intentional. Wong performs her mother with standardized English and the grandmother figure with AAE-associated features, even if she did not conceptualize it in those terms. Comics adopt personae that align with their intended social messages, meaning Wong's strategic use of communicative practices indexically associated with Blackness further her comedic goals.

As a professional comedian performing for a global media company, Wong's goals for *Baby Cobra* include commercial success. Her performance, and stand-up comedy broadly, are inseparable from the racial capitalist structures that facilitate their commodification. Anti-Blackness is foundational to US performance culture as well as the sociopolitical structures that have shaped Asian-Black relations. By constructing her explicitly Asian American persona using indexically Black linguistic-embodied forms, Wong's performance could be understood as expanding the indexical field of Asian American femininity. She challenges dominant ideologies of Asian American women's appearance and behavior, diverging from whiteness and subverting stereotypes. However, her performance may rely on derogatory ideas of Blackness legible to "mainstream" US audiences, perpetuating harmful racial ideologies while undermining others.

To accuse Wong of appropriating or mocking AAE solely because she is a non-Black performer risks reproducing hegemonic raciolinguistic ideologies that ignore how language actually functions across minoritized groups. As discussed, the racial and linguistic underdetermination of Asian Americans leaves their linguistic practices undertheorized (Lo & Reyes, 2009; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Yoo et al., 2023). They have been accused of "speaking white" (i.e., speaking hegemonic varieties of English)

when racialized as a model minority and afforded proximity to structural whiteness. When racialized as perpetual foreigners, they are assumed to speak an accented English or a language other than English. Asian Americans' ambivalent racial positioning means they are raciolinguistically primed to be heard as speaking a variety that is *not their own*—leading to facile accusations of “appropriation.” AAE's deep raciolinguistic enregisterment frequently precludes recognition of its overlap with other linguistic varieties and the racial diversity of speakers who, for various reasons, do in fact use features raciolinguistically enregistered as “Black language.” We have historicized Wong as an individual performer, “Asian American” as an ethnoracial category vis-à-vis Blackness, and the linguistic practices of Asian and Black American communities in order to move away from a treatment of linguistic features as (a priori) racialized; instead, we advance a raciolinguistic perspective that understands racialized gender (here, Asian womanness) in relation to sociohistorical distinctions generated by racial capitalist structures.

6 | CONCLUSION

Our analysis has shown how racialized figures of personhood are constructed, performed, and negotiated through the recruitment of linguistic and embodied resources to perform legible social types, such as the “Karen,” “sassy Black woman,” and “Asian grandmother.” We argue that Wong uses discourse forms raciolinguistically enregistered as AAE to mock hegemonic whiteness and to contest racialized and gendered stereotypes about Asians. In contrast to the critiques lobbied against several of her Asian American peers, we do not see Wong as overtly aligning herself or her performed personae with Blackness or aiming to insert herself into Black culture. Instead, these figures contribute to Wong's overall presentation of an irreverent, feminine Asian American comedic persona—one necessarily in dialog with complex, potentially negative, ideologies about Blackness and Black people.

We have focused on one cluster of indexical features, and these features have indexical fields that are interpreted through audience members' positionalities, including our own racialized and gendered positionalities as researchers. We have not argued for one “correct” analysis of Wong's performance, instead articulating the sociohistorical, cultural, and linguistic significance of her choices for audience members who likewise identify her engagement with Blackness. Through our multimodal analysis, we respond to Smalls' (2020, p. 237) call for a theory of “racial semiotics” as “one means to bring to an end the convenience of extracting language and discourse from the historical and political.” We have shown that linguistic analysis must examine how nonlinguistic semiotic features are used to render a convincing performance and reading of personae in a staged comedic context.

We have demonstrated the importance of situating contemporary racialized performance and discourses of so-called appropriation within racial capitalist histories. Although linguistics has historically engaged the material conditions that shape linguistic practices and ideologies, its critique of power has often been limited to critiques of its modes of interpretation—neglecting the material conditions that shape tools of linguistic analysis. Sociolinguistics' over-reliance on dominant frameworks to explain the linguistic practices of racially minoritized groups (e.g., appropriation, crossing) can foreclose the explanatory possibilities of other linguistic theories (e.g., language contact, socialization). This over-reliance further reifies the raciolinguistic status quo by assuming a bounded and immutable nature of language and of racialized peoples. Language can move between groups and is central to processes of racialization. The study of language, then, can open up analytic possibilities that reimagine how we understand racialized subjects' languages and histories relationally—as necessarily intimately connected.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to our many friends and colleagues who have been critical interlocutors and friendly reviewers throughout the development of this project. We especially want to thank Aris Clemons and Carolyn Park for offering feedback on our first draft of this article; deandre miles-hercules and Chloe Willis for their phonetics expertise; and our audience at the 2021 annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, where we first presented this work. Any errors in this publication are the responsibility of the authors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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ENDNOTE

¹ We use *African American English (AAE)* to refer to the English-based language variety used primarily by descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the United States. We understand AAE as one variety within the umbrella of *African American Language* or *Black (American) language*, which encompasses language practices used by African Americans and is closely tied to African American culture but is not limited to varieties of English.

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How to cite this article: Calhoun, K., & Yoo, J. (2024). African American English, racialized femininities, and Asian American identity in Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra*. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 28, 64–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12673>

APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPTION KEY

<u>Underline</u>	emphatic speech
()	Pause length
Aligned [brackets]	Overlapping speech
	[Across lines]
<DESCRIPTION></>	Description of speech