

Autoexoticizing: Asian American youth and the  
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## **Autoexoticizing: Asian American Youth and the Import Car Scene**

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### Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research of an import car crew, this article examines the origins of the import scene as an Asian American phenomenon. Young Asian American males and females use the unique youth car subculture, the "import scene," as a cultural space in which to articulate what it means to be an Asian American youth today that is in opposition to the model minority. Through the autoexoticization of the scene, Asian American youth affirm a sense of pan-Asian ethnic identity and it offers a reworking of Asian American males masculinities. It suggests youth subcultures as racialized and gendered terrain.

## AUTOEXOTICIZING:

*Asian American Youth and the Import Car Scene*

soo ah kwon

IT IS LATE MORNING ON A WARM SATURDAY AFTERNOON and the line to purchase tickets for the car show, "Import Showoff," already has snaked around the San Jose convention center. I wait among the throng of young Asian American males dressed in baggy jeans, puffy jackets, and tennis shoes and females dressed in midriff-baring baby T-shirts, tight jeans, and high-heel sandals. Once inside, hip-hop music is blasting from the speakers and all I can see are neatly lined rows of highly modified, "souped up," import cars parked side-by-side, hoods open and engines displayed. Standing next to the cars are the proud owners who talk eagerly to spectators and bystanders about engine specifics, body kits, paint color, and interior design. Heads turn when a group of Asian American women dressed in tight tank tops with "Asian Scene" written across their chest and short mini-skirts come strolling by arm-in-arm and stop to pose for photos in front of a car and its wide-grinning male owner. A group of guys shove and scoot their way up to the front to get their pictures taken with the import models. Nearby, vendors in tents promote aftermarket car products and hand out promotional posters, stickers, and magazines. Meanwhile judges work through the crowd, methodically examining each import car to determine which will be named the "Best of Show" in today's competition.

This is a glimpse of a unique and popular youth car subculture referred to as the "import scene." The import scene, which formed in the

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