How It Feels to Be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance

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On March 15, 2011, just days after University of California–Los Angeles undergraduate Alexandra Wallace posted (and subsequently took down) her incendiary “Asians in the Library” video log (vlog) on YouTube, another video set ablaze Facebook walls and Twitter accounts. Jimmy Wong’s “Ching Chong! Asians in the Library Song”—a satirical love song addressed to Wallace—distinguished itself from the hundreds of other ranting and remix response videos. Opening with an excerpt from the offending party’s original post—as she mockingly renders a scene of Asians answering their cell phones in the library with an “Ooooh, Ching Chong Ling Long Ting Tong,” Wong’s video quickly shifts into a style and staging commonly associated with online vlogs. Seated and directly addressing the camera, he is framed by his home studio’s accoutrements: computer and electronic keyboard on his left side and a row of cables neatly hanging on the wall behind him. Stuttering in a thick Asian accent and, in turn, deriding Wallace’s own orientalist rendition, a guitar-strapped Wong introduces his song into a boom microphone that hangs near his face: “Greetings, Miss Alexandra Wallace. I’m not most . . . how you say . . . politically correct person. So please . . .” (head bows quickly) “do not take offensive. Thank you.”

Viewers familiar with the “Asians in the Library” video would recognize that this introduction riffs on Wallace’s own preface: while she is not the most “politically correct person,” she does have Asian friends, and hopes, in the end, that viewers do not take offense. Wong strums a single chord, signaling a magical transformation, as the video again cuts to Wong, now guitarless but seated in the same position. This new version of Wong
purrs into the microphone without an Asian accent or tone of deference. With his recording studio–style headphones on, his seductive vocal style recalls Asian American radio disc jockey Theo Mizuhara (“Theo” on Los Angeles R&B/hip-hop station 92.3 the Beat), often assumed to be African American by unsuspecting listeners because of his deep and soothing voice. This sexier Wong calls to Wallace—“Oooh girl”—before launching into his own rendition of her library scene: “Don’t think I didn’t see you watching me talking on my phone yesterday . . . all sexy . . . All Ching Chong Ling Long . . . Baby, it’s just code . . . It’s just the way that I tell the ladies that it’s time for me to get funky.”

For Wong, “getting funky” means launching into an acoustic ode to Wallace, a remix and reclamation of words and phrases lifted from her original video post. The song culminates in a repeating chorus, one that “wrings the musicality of the original Ching Chong” bit while satirizing its incommensurability: “Ching Chong . . . It means I love you . . . Ling Long . . . I really need you . . . Ching Chong . . . I still don’t know what that means.” The song’s arrangement of vocal melody and harmony, acoustic guitar, and lo-fi percussion are simple and catchy. Yet the video’s visual elements—the main frame of Wong is surrounded by small boxes or PiPs (picture in pictures) of him performing each portion of the music—requires a professional style of multichannel editing. Here, Wong’s video evidences the unstable divisions between amateur and professional that is characteristic of the video-sharing website YouTube, ones that have helped redefine contemporary media production.

Since its initial posting, “Ching Chong! Asians in the Library Song” has garnered almost 4 million hits worldwide, received coverage from both Asian American and mainstream U.S. press outlets, and landed the twenty-three-year-old actor/musician a role in an upcoming indie film. As a video that was able to spread quickly and across many screens, the “Ching Chong! Asians in the Library Song,” in all respects, was a viral hit. While its popularity must be characterized as unexpected or accidental, in order for a YouTube video to “go viral,” it must actually incorporate emotional hooks: key signifiers that catch the attention and sensibility of a particular audience. While sites like YouTube, by hosting such videos, enable the process of viral video making, these videos’ successful transmission—from one user to the next—requires what media scholar Henry Jenkins has termed a larger participatory culture of related blogs, social networking sites, and mass media coverage (Jenkins 2006).
With these paradoxical and performative features, viral media has ushered in, according to journalists and industry insiders, a new generation of “Asian American YouTube stars.” All but absent in the Hollywood star system and on the Billboard charts, Asian Americans—such as Ryan Higa (NigaHiga), Kevin Wu (KevJumba), and Wong Fu Productions—dominate YouTube’s Most Subscribed lists.¹ Paying serious attention to this phenomenon of Asian American YouTube stars, either lauded for its democratizing potential (giving Asian American “unseen talents” a performance stage) or disparaged for its industry-driven tendencies (making visible an otherwise “unseen niche market”), I instead imagine other types of value that the stars hold for their youth audiences. It requires that we revisit this phenomenon, one branded as unforeseen, and locate it within a longer cultural history produced by the laborious acts of “feeling Asian American.” As “production(s) defined by combination of cybernetics and affect” (Hardt 1999, 97), these YouTube performances—vlogs, webisodes, and musical covers—function as forms of affective labor for young Asian Americans today. While I respectfully engage the analytical language of media studies, my purpose falls more in line with a central theoretical concern of performance studies: to envision what these enactments might mean for their audiences. It is a perspective that falls out of reception studies’ qualitative scope and one often concealed by the whitewash of fan studies.

I also want to think beyond a prevalent discourse that celebrates YouTube as a means for Asian Americans to infiltrate the mainstream and, therefore, “change da game.”² With breakthrough celebrities such as Legaci (pop star Justin Bieber’s touring backup vocalists) and Charice Pempengco (child star turned daytime television darling), many critics have heralded YouTube as a launching pad for Asian Americans, a group otherwise lacking representation in U.S. mainstream pop culture. Yet others maintain the opposite view: it is actually young Asian Americans whose “aesthetics and business sense have helped change the face of online video” (Kun 2010). As illustrated in discussions at the Conference for Creative Content (C3), which took place in June 2011 at Visual Communications’ annual Los Angeles Asian American film festival, today’s Asian American creative hopefuls do not merely accede to but actively exploit social media and information-sharing platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs as what was described at C3 as their “new calling card.” To further aid this generation in “negotiating and navigating between community
and commerce,” C3 panels focused on the entrepreneurial nuts and bolts necessary to succeed online: copyright and intellectual property rights; effective modes of branding, distribution, and news reporting; and crafting performances to capture audiences. And if their hands-on approach to “becoming a YouTube star” was not enough of a draw, the organizers also summoned Asian America’s celebrity power as panelists—bloggers Phil Yu and Diana Nguyen, YouTube trendsetter Wong Fu Productions, and Glee star Harry Shum.

Along with its ability to infiltrate and infect, the viral has the power to replicate. So, while some journalists and media organizations view YouTube as an open stage for Asian American performers, artists themselves look to the website as an alternative avenue of cultural production. As twenty-four-year-old Korean American rapper Dumbfoundead (Jonathan Park) noted in a recent Koream magazine article, “Asians got tired of waiting to get into the mainstream. With YouTube, you don’t have to wait for somebody to sign you, or give you a budget of millions of dollars to make a film; you can just do it. We’re like, ‘YouTube’s here. We’re going to smash it up with this YouTube thing’” (Eun and Ma 2010). With “no third party, no money-sucking managers, or closed-minded Hollywood executives,” Asian Americans do not simply leverage but actually dominate YouTube’s top-ten-channel lists, designating them as celebrities on the video-sharing site. Encompassing “highly visible and successful ‘homegrown’ performers and producers,” as defined by Joshua Green and Jean Burgess, the category of “YouTube celebrity” or “YouTube star” consists of entrepreneurial vloggers such as Jimmy Wong, cultural producers who collaborate with other artists and partake in the site’s daily life as active consumers (2009, 91). As a communication genre, vlogs derive from such media antecedents as “webcam culture, personal blogging, and the more widespread ‘confessional culture’ that characterizes television talk shows and reality television—while also adhering to current social media mandates to ‘invite critique, debate, and discussion’” (94) At the same time, while “digital visuality” online “can reinstate an understanding of race as always visible and available to the naked eye,” according to media scholar Lisa Nakamura, on the Internet (unlike in cinema) “users have the option to perform their identities in ways that are not possible elsewhere” (2008, 205). No longer simply broadcasting media, YouTube’s celebrity system also requires its stars to post responses to their viewers’ comments, follow other users’ videos, and maintain public profiles through other Web 2.0 channels (Facebook, Myspace, Twitter).
Tapping into and taking part in the “affective economies” of these media and networking platforms, YouTube stars are often required to extend their performances beyond these virtual arenas.³

To succeed in today’s participatory culture, with its own logic of affective economics, the larger U.S. entertainment industry has had to rethink how it does business. No longer able to merely distribute content in a top-down fashion, organizations and performers—whether amateur or professional, nonprofit or profit driven—are forced to devise new forms of audience outreach and engagement. In Asian America, the International Secret Agents (ISA) showcase and nonprofit organization Kollaboration are two grassroots examples of this new affective economics model as they both capitalize on a niche audiences’ emotional attachment to performers (“people like me”) by presenting YouTube celebrities live in performance. Started in 2008 by Southern California’s Wong Fu Productions and hip-hop group Far East Movement, ISA has since showcased popular Asian American performers, from YouTube celebrities A. J. Rafael, Ryan Higa, and Jennifer Chung to reality TV contestants/hip-hop dance crews Quest Crew and Poreotics, in cities such as Seattle and New York as well as the Los Angeles ethnoburbs San Gabriel and Cerritos. With five sold-out concerts in the past three years, according to Wong Fu Productions’ website, ISA “prov[es] that there is a voice, face, and desire for Asian Americans in the mainstream world” (see ISA [http://isatv.com/?page_id=66]). While both ISA and Kollaboration employ YouTube for the purposes of publicizing and programming their events, Kollaboration—with its tagline “Empowerment Through Entertainment”—actually auditions brand-new performers on YouTube for its seasonal acoustic as well as electric concert-competitions. Established eleven years ago in Los Angeles’ Koreatown (where its headquarters are still based), Kollaboration has spread across the nation, with local chapters, or Kollaboration Cities, in Asian American centers: San Francisco, Seattle; New York; Washington, DC; Toronto; Chicago; Atlanta; Houston; and Tulsa. Extending the reach of YouTube stars—from home computer screens onto concert stages—ISA and Kollaboration’s community-based efforts also map today’s Asian America.

According to Koream writers Elizabeth Eun and Julie Ma (2010), before YouTube’s advent in 2005, “it all seemed self-indulgent and borderline narcissistic . . . uploading videos of yourself belting out pop songs or talking to an invisible audience.” Yet despite the ways online media has changed the aesthetics and business of entertainment, most YouTube video
performances are still popularly perceived as being amateurish in their look and feel—“narcissistic” and “self-indulgent” musical or spoken solo performances addressed to a built-in computer camera, with little else in terms of lighting, backdrop, or editing. These are consumer-based productions. However, as critics have noted, the probability of a YouTube video’s “going viral” hinges precisely on the qualities of authenticity and earnestness. “Not targeted nor read as necessarily containing material for general audiences,” Patricia Lange notes, these viral hits often contain “stereotypical, spontaneous, and . . . numerous in-jokes and references that many general viewers would not understand in the way the creators intended” (2009, 73). In other words, to catch an already distracted viewer’s attention, viral videos must exude an air of amateur production—versus the slick, professional, and therefore controlled aesthetics of mainstream Hollywood or television sources—and mobilize key signifiers that resonate with a particular community or subculture.

Once struggling in a constrictive media system that viewed its films and performances as unprofitable and the idea of an Asian American audience as moot, indie Asian American artists have reaped the most benefit from social media’s democratic promise. Already engaged in analog forms of virality (such as DIY filmmaking, word-of-mouth advertising, and informal networks of production), Asian American artists and entrepreneurs have easily shifted into digital mode. In the nonprofit sector, Asian American theaters and arts organizations mobilize social media in order to publicize upcoming productions, assist in fund-raising campaigns, and archive highlights from past productions or major events. At the same time, some of the most successful Asian American artists on YouTube—Wong Fu, Legaci, Charice, and KevJumba, for example—had years of performance experience and training under their belt before uploading their first YouTube video. In the case of Wong Fu Productions, which started circulating its work via email in the late 1990s, the video-sharing website was merely a cheap and easy alternative for sharing film shorts and music videos, especially with friends who lacked high-speed Internet connections. In all these cases, YouTube was the means, not the ends, to producing and distributing their work.

Yet how do we account for the popularity of YouTube stars and their performances among today’s Asian American youth? In other words, besides just continuing a tradition of DIY cultural production, what purpose do these Asian American YouTube performers—their videos and
the ways in which they are shared—actually serve? These questions arise for me not only in the space of this essay or during my private moments of writing and researching but also, and more so, in the public spaces of teaching, when students share and retell their fandom for certain YouTube performers and performances—or when I notice swooning from thirty-and-under Asian Americans huddled around computer screens, see them standing in line for tickets to a YouTube college tour show, or hear them screaming from their seats at a recent Kollaboration Acoustic 5 showcase. Is there something about YouTube—a genre of new media dependent upon the viral, as a “politics of form and form of politics”—that speaks to the simultaneously virtual and material aspects of Asian American identity?4

At once an all-too-easy catchall term (among census takers, public health researchers, and marketers) for an endlessly diverse population—of various ethnicities, nations, and classes, fluent in a number of different languages/dialects and with divergent immigration histories—“Asian American” originated as a highly contested, simultaneously political and cultural term during the civil rights, anti–Vietnam War, and student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Purposefully pan-ethnic, it signaled the interlocking, oft-forgotten histories of U.S. war and empire in Asia and earlier Asian immigration to the United States as well as the mutually material and representational effects of these historical events and conditions. According to early Yellow Power proponents, while early twentieth-century U.S. popular representation of Asians focused on “contagious divides”—the discursive lines between U.S. modernity and Orientalized otherness drawn across Asian bodies—since the end of World War II and the Cold War’s onset, one particular myth of racialization has prevailed (Shah 2001). Published in 1966, in the aftermath of the Moynihan report and amid rising domestic racial tensions, the main themes of the *U.S. World and News Report* article “Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.” continue on in the “model minority” myth. Painting a portrait of the Chinese and Japanese as hardworking, obedient, self-reliant individuals whose drive toward assimilation is matched only by their fervent adherence to “traditional Asian values”—filial piety, humility, and sacrifice—the model minority myth is a neoliberal form of racialization.5 It at once promises U.S. citizenship and belonging to those Asian subjects (”obedient, self-reliant individuals) who must also perform a racialized script that marks them as forever foreign (”traditional Asian values”). In this frequent collapse between “Asian” and “Asian American,” model minority discourse has prescribed the parameters
of Asian American-ness, setting the terms for political debate within Asian America. Against this discursive containment, scholars such as Kandice Chuh, Laura Kang, Lisa Lowe, and Karen Shimawaka have helped us fine-tune a working definition of “Asian American,” one that reminds us of its supple and performative nature, an identity constituted by multiple and competing epistemologies. As Chuh has cautioned, “rather than looking to complete the category [of] ‘Asian American’” we must instead recognize how we are “positioned to critique the effects of the various configurations of power and knowledge through which the term comes to have meaning” (2003, 10–11). These configurations are simultaneously domestic and transnational—the Asian in the United States as well as the American in Asia—with the battle for meaning, both aesthetic and political—fought on the grounds of culture. Culture here operates through “affiliation(s) of meaning” that “occur(s) in negotiation with the material conditions of existence shaped by politics and economics” (Lowe 1996, 2). As Lowe eloquently outlined in her seminal Immigrant Acts, Asian American culture is a “countersite to U.S. national culture” where “contradictions are read, performed, and critiqued”; it functions as a “medium of the present” that “mediates the past,” remembering fragmented histories while reimagining political futures (65). Likewise, against community-based discursive containment—the kind that espouses notions of Asian Americans as culturally, socially, and politically homogeneous, attempts to expel radical Asian otherness through anti-immigrant sentiments, or even falls prey to the assimilationist lure of performing “model minority”-ness—I want to consider the political potential and critical possibilities offered by Asian American YouTube performances, as staged and everyday performances of affect and participation. By examining them along the formalistic lines of the “viral,” a category characterized as corruptive, mobile, and infectious, we are forced to remember and reckon with Asian America’s complicated historical path to U.S. citizenship and the forms of political and social belonging it has engendered.

As mentioned above, the success of viral media depends upon (1) a niche or subculture’s active participation through online networks (i.e., websites, blogs, and social networking directed at its particular needs/concerns) and (2) its knowledge of and ability to craft emotional hooks, key signifiers that touch upon a shared set of affective investments and affiliations. Asian America’s particular use of viral media points to this virtual diaspora’s simulated and representational elements and, in turn, to
the performative and affective dimensions of the “symbolic ethnicity” of Asian Americans.

A 2001 Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that “fully 75% of English-speaking Asian-American adults have used the Internet,” surpassing the numbers for all other English-speaking ethnic and even white American groups and making them “the most wired racial or ethnic group in America,” “the young and the connected” (Spooner 2001, 2). Unlike their ethnic or even white counterparts, Asian American Internet users were “proportionally much more likely than others to get information about financial matters, travel, and political information” as well as “to use the Internet as a resource at school or at work” (2). In this comparative race-based research study, the report’s author cites the challenges to surveying and collecting coherent data within this pan-ethnic community: heterogeneity of languages, high levels of language retention, and a lack of proper translation services. Thus, with its English-only survey, the Pew report depends upon and, in turn, perpetuates a limited definition of “Asian American.”

Alongside a critique of this domesticating discourse, the trope of Asian American “hyperconnectivity” requires a deeper inquiry into the causes and effects of this group’s long-standing Internet use and early adoption of Web 2.0 technologies—social networking sites like Friendster, Myspace, Facebook; short message services; and Internet telephone providers such as Skype. For both U.S. and foreign-born Asian Americans who maintain connections to homeland politics and family networks, these digital technologies allow for quick, inexpensive communication across time zones and national borders. Therefore, as Linda Leung has noted, the Asian diaspora is an imagined community “experienced largely over the Internet” and best “characterized as ‘virtual’” (2008, 10). While the virtuality of Asian America traffics in both the simulated and representational, it also gestures toward an extensive cluster of real-world implications and everyday situations. The explosion of Korean pop (K-pop) culture globally, in the past decade, exemplifies this interplay between the virtual and material. Although the Internet’s role in disseminating state-sponsored and market-driven forms of K-Pop culture is vital, as cultural anthropologist Jung-Sun Park observes, Korean American youth (U.S.-born and 1.5 generations as well as yuhaksaeng, students who study abroad) and their “consumption, dissemination, and to some extent, creation of trans-Pacific popular culture”—as they participate in K-Pop-oriented websites and
forums and share with friends, family, and other fans the latest news and songs from abroad—plays an equally crucial role (2008, 161). Alienated from mainstream U.S. popular culture, the Korean American youth whom Park interviews find a sense of belonging, a “feeling at home,” in K-Pop’s style and culture.

In the registers of emotion and affect, Asian American youth also work through and against the specter of the model minority as a prescriptive racial fiction. Throughout its popular cultural history, Asian America has propagated the “grander passions” of anger, rage, and shame (Ngai 2005, 6). Like today’s YouTube videos, ‘zines of the 1990s yesteryears, with their espousal of punk and indie subcultures’ DIY credo, also toed the lines “between commercial and D.I.Y., between mainstream and marginal” (Rubin 2003, 14). In the case of highly successful print publications that survived their digital transformation into online ‘zines—Eric Nakamura and Martin Wong’s Giant Robot, Mimi Thi Nguyen’s Exoticize This!, and Sabrina Alcantara-Tan’s Bamboo Girl— the tone of Asian America’s talk-back to mainstream U.S. industries and representation took on the punk aesthetic of “gleeful opposition to decorum and propriety” by expressing itself in ways that “fl[y] directly in the face of the ‘polite Asian’ stereotype” (Rubin 2003, 15–16). If model minority status was maintained through deference, then these cultural forerunners instead chose to express anger and rage, emotions falling outside the boundaries of this racial fiction. Ironically, model minority rhetoric actually figures Asians as unfeeling or, as Wesley Yang vividly described in his recent New York magazine article “Asian Like Me,” “a mass of stifled, repressed, abused, conformist quasi-robots” (2011, 22). Derived as they are from this ‘zine publishing tradition, it is no wonder that some of today’s most popular Asian American blogs still contain emotionally charged terms—the blogs Angry Asian Man, Disgrasian, and You Offend Me You Offend My Family (YOMYOMF). Through these particularly salient examples, we might hone our understanding of Asian American as a “symbolic ethnicity.” According to Rachel Rubin, the categorical term of “Asian American” is “symbolic, because of its rhetorical and deliberative nature, but, nonetheless possessed of real-world implications” (2003, 5). As a mode of identification, it holds the possibility of being a “deliberative and motivated thing: experiential rather than biological, grounded in the present as much or more than in the past” (5). For Asian American ‘zine writers, this “deliberative and motivated thing” registered as an “attitude,” a particular way of expressing one’s
being-in-the-world. In the case of YouTube performances, such as Jimmy Wong’s “Ching Chong! Asians in the Library” parody, the Asian American attitude today references a broader set of emotions than just anger and rage but still performs the affective labor of transforming alienating episodes into a common understanding.

From Europe’s capitals to California’s Silicon Valley, in hospitals and call centers, Asians and Asian Americans constitute a greater part of the world’s affective labor force. According to theorist Michael Hardt, affective labor runs throughout “today’s dominant economic forms” (1999, 96). Whereas some forms of caregiving activities continue “the production and reproduction of life, [has become] firmly embedded as a necessary foundation for capitalist accumulation and patriarchal order,” Asian American YouTube artists, through their “production of affects, subjectivities, and forms of life” instead “present an enormous potential for autonomous circuits of valorization, and perhaps for liberation” (100). This is not to say that these artists are safe from critique, for the majority of Asian American YouTube performances still tend toward reinforcing community-driven norms. Yet, like their cultural predecessors—from the earliest protest poems and plays, literary anthologies, and documentaries of the Yellow Power movement to the recent past of online magazines, forums, blogs, and cyberzines—these Asian American YouTube performers express their own shared political and social affects, feelings that are produced in response to discourses of virality and that are otherwise absent from most mainstream popular representations of Asian America.

For Davis Jung, producer of the recent Conference for Creative Content, Wong Fu Productions’ 2006 “Yellow Fever”—the group’s first YouTube video and response to the common narratives of Asian American masculinity—arrived at a critical point in his life. In his online essay “How New Media Gave Me a Voice,” Jung narrates familiar tales for Asian Americans—the perpetual mispronunciation of one’s name, the attempt to cultivate a love for genres of whiteness (country music, Classical Civilization major), and, of course, the lack of “role models” or “words” to articulate one’s self—in order to capture the paradoxical feelings of Asian America: cultural alienation and, yet, the desire to belong. Bored and procrastinating, one fall evening in 2007, the then college-age Jung stumbled upon the University of California–San Diego collective’s video link and clicked it. “I cannot tell you how many times I watched that video. It reached out and shook me. It made me laugh, and later on, it made me cry. It excited me, it
incited me. It made me question everything that I had ever assumed about myself. It made me question what it meant to be ‘normal.’"

Appearing at the end of his essay, this moment of cultural discovery serves as Jung’s final word, his response to the question continually raised regarding the value of YouTube for Asian Americans. Pivoting between the dualities of culture and commerce, business and cultural resource, node and network, the rhetoric regarding the content-sharing website vacillates between characterizing it as “culturally generative” (for the several roles it plays as “high volume website, broadcast platform, media archive, social network”) and seeing it as merely another “top-down platform for distributing popular culture” (Snickars and Vondereau 2009, 13). Yet, as Jung’s anecdote so vividly reminds us, we need another set of protocols: an audience-centered analysis of the value of Asian American YouTube performances. By invoking a certain set of shared affects for these Asian American youth audiences, these YouTube stars’ vlogs, song parodies, skits, and cover performances produce something “intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (Hardt 1999, 96). Breaking out of the model minority myth’s discursive containment, these emerging online personalities restage and respond to the banal and ridiculously racist moments of Asian America’s everyday life, performing the affective labor of transforming alienation into humor, hate into love. Unexpectedly, a story or a song might catch us. Moved by these performances, we cannot help but share them, infecting others with a feeling.

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Notes

1. The most spectacular examples: comedic vlogger “KevJumba” (Kevin Wu): no. 9 Most Subscribed Comedian (All Time), 1.4 million subscribers, over 150 million views; character actor/comedian “NigaHiga” (Ryan Higa): YouTube no. 1 Most Subscribed (All Time), 3.4 million subscribers, over 746 million views; directorial/writing collective Wong Fu Productions (Wesley
Chan, Ted Fu, and Philip Wang): 785,394 subscribers, over 95 million views.

2. From the title of a panel at the 2010 San Francisco Asian American Film Festival: “Changing da Game: YouTube Legends and the Future of Online Media” (Center for Asian American Media 2010).

3. In this particular case, I am referencing Burgess and Green’s use of “affective economies” to describe the participatory culture of emotional attachments and investments expressed on YouTube. Other scholars such as Sara Ahmed and Henry Jenkins have also written about the “affective economies” of political language and actions between racialized individuals within the nation-state (Ahmed 2004) and the logics of “affective economics” as propagated and perpetuated by reality television shows such as *American Idol* (Jenkins 2006).

4. I am borrowing this notion of “the politics of form and the form of politics” to discuss the critical and political work enacted by cultural productions from Jodi Kim’s (2010) recently released *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*. Thanks also to Joshua Chambers-Letson (2009) for his essay “Contracting Justice: the Viral Strategy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” which models different ways that a term such as the “viral” can be mobilized as a conceptual meeting point for an interdisciplinary discussion of bodies, the law, and artistic form.

5. In some aspects, the political difficulties faced by a term such as “Asian American” find a kinship with the similarly vexed identity category of “Latino.” As Jose Esteban Muñoz has questioned, “Latino does not subscribe to a common racial, class, gender, religious, or national category, and if a Latino can be from any country in Latin America, a member of any race, religion, class, or gender/sex orientation, who then is she? What, if any, nodes of commonality do Latinas/os share?” (Muñoz 2000, 67) Yet, in other ways, “Asian American” has historically served as an umbrella term that has unified seemingly disparate groups. For the purposes of this essay, I draw on the spirit of Muñoz’s focus on affective performances, or ways of “feeling brown,” as a site for mobilizing different forms of what Norma Alarcon (1996) has designated an “identity-in-difference.”

6. It bears repeating here that, within this containment logic of the “model minority,” “Asian” more often refers to East Asian Americans (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, and sometimes Korean) rather than Asian/Asian American ethnicities such as Filipinos, South Asians, and Southeast Asians.

8. For future conversations and reading, we might think of these affective labors alongside what Alan Bryman (2004) has famously termed the “performative labor” within tourist economies, especially that performed by Asian and American women. Thanks to Patricia Ahn for sharing her proposed work (a dissertation tentatively titled “Disorganized Convergence: Global Music Television and Channels of Asian American Production”) concerned with ideas on these particular connections.

Works Cited

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