

In the Eye of the Beholder: Asian American YouTube Beauty Bloggers

In August of 2013, the renowned YouTube beauty blogger, Michelle Phan, launched her personal makeup line, em Michelle Phan Cosmetics. This makeup line is just one such example of business endeavors to stem out of her success on YouTube: having uploaded her first video in 2007 under the username ricebunny, it was ultimately a series of Lady Gaga inspired makeup tutorials (“Lady Gaga ‘Poker Face’” and “Lady Gaga ‘Bad Romance’ Look) that catapulted her to YouTube stardom, thus allowing her to not only occupy the position as the “#1 YouTube Beauty Guru (with over 4.6 million subscribers)”¹ but also attain a sponsorship by Estee Lauder, two makeup lines (IQQU and em Cosmetics), a successful blog spot, a YouTube multi-channel network (MCN) aptly named FAWN, and as of January 2014, a thirty second feature in a nationally broadcasted commercial for Dr. Pepper’s “One of a Kind” campaign.

Phan’s incredible success pays testament to the ways in which such virtual efforts have translated to “real” material results, and to the weight in which these YouTube communities hold outside of this digital space. While Phan’s success as a YouTube beauty blogger may mark her as somewhat of an outlier, other such Asian American beauty gurus have also attained a certain degree of “success” within the YouTube community. Thus, this paper will also feature the work of three other prominent Asian American YouTube beauty bloggers- Korean Americans Jen Chae (frmheadtotoe), Jenn Im (clothesencounters), and Weylie Hoang (IlikeWeylie), a multi-ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese blogger. Judging solely on numbers alone, Chae, Im and Hoang’s

1 Michelle Phan, YouTube, 2014.

channels possess over 600,000 subscribers² each: Chae with 658, 396 subscribers, Im, 674, 286, and Hoang with 854, 015 subscribers. Thus, with each blog produced, these four women are guaranteed to reach out to a considerable amount of virtual participants, which arguably positions these women as noteworthy cultural producers.

As the popularity of these four beauty bloggers may suggest, I find that YouTube functions as a significant space that reveals a great deal regarding the role of Asian American female bodies in contemporary settings. Thus, I will be utilizing Dr. Grace Hong's work, "Existentially Surplus: Women of Color Feminism and New Crises of Capitalism," in order to observe the ways in which the YouTube beauty blogging sphere embodies notions of contemporary capitalistic space. By doing so, this paper opts to explore the ways in which the YouTube beauty community constructs and ensures specific racial and gender performances, particularly of these four Asian American female beauty bloggers.

Asian American Digital Cultural Productions

Since its inception in 2005, YouTube has been a significant virtual domain for Asian American communities. As Cindy Gao explains in her text, "The Virtuosity of Asian American YouTube Stars," as the success of such web celebrities like Kevin Wu (KevJumba), Ryan Higa (Nigahiga), and Wesley Chan, Philip Wang, and Ted Fu of Wong Fu Productions may suggest, Asian American content producers have come to gain significant traction as they continue to, as

² Subscribers are virtual consumers who pledge a membership to the channel and account for a steady stream of viewership for each video.

Gao notes, “occupy top spots in many of YouTube’s subscriber and page- view rankings.”³ Furthermore, it is due to this noticeable achievement that Gao asserts a critique of the Asian American presence on YouTube as necessary. Gao’s work undoubtedly follows in the vein of Jodi Kim’s, who within her text, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*, asserts, “Asian American cultural productions are critical in that they provide an interrogation of how and why ‘Asian America(n)’ was constituted in the first place and also might be disarticulated.”⁴ In other words, these YouTube videos are significant in that they demonstrate the ways in which digital communities identify, track, and challenge the construction of contemporary Asian America.

While beauty blogging possesses a starkly different style in comparison to the aforementioned videos of KevJumba, Wong Fu Productions, and other Asian American YouTube cultural producers, beauty blogging⁵ is significant in that these various videos divulge, engage, and transmit mainstream beauty discourse through unique methods of moralistic disciplining. Beauty discourse is critical in that it, as Kathy Peiss explains in her essay “On Beauty... and the History of Business”

Signifies difference in a number of registers, making distinctions
between high and low, normal and abnormal, virtue and vice.

³ Cindy Gao, “The Virtuositic Virtuality of Asian American You Tube Stars”, in *The Scholar & Feminist Online*, Issue 10.3, Summer 2012, <http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/feminist-media-theory/the-virtuositic-virtuality-of-asian-american-youtube-stars/>.

⁴ Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 7.

⁵ Beauty blogging is also referred to as beauty vlogging, which was a word created by combining the “blog” and “video”. This paper will use these terms interchangeably.

In doing so, beauty helps to define morality, social status, class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Ideals of beauty, in turn are fundamentally shaped by social relations and institutions, by other cultural categories and practices...[they] develop in complex ways.⁶

While Peiss makes the distinction between morality and social status, class, gender, race, and ethnicity, this paper will instead adopt Hong's assertions of morality being a key determinant in the performance of race, gender, class, and other such social categories.

While the artistic quality, subject matter, featured products and makeup/ fashion styles differ between each of the four bloggers, standard categories of videos exist. Typical types of videos that are uploaded include: general or themed makeup/ fashion how-tos, "hauls" (in which individual beauty bloggers discuss recently purchased products), reviews and "first impressions", monthly favorites, location (typically bedrooms, makeup storage, bathroom) tours, "tag" videos (where gurus respond to popular surveys trending on the website), and general life advice videos. Hoang, the youngest of the set, possesses the most appeal for an adolescent audience, thus produces videos such as "Homecoming Look! (Hair, Makeup + Outfit!)," "How to Deal with Girl Drama," and "My Festive Holiday Inspired Look + GIVEAWAY!" that reflect such a demographic. On the other hand, Im, a recent graduate from UC Davis, creates videos that reflect a bourgeois, trendy, post-college lifestyle. Her popular videos include, "The Ultimate Holiday Gift Guide: Unisex, His & Hers," "Alameda Flea Market Haul: Home Décor + Knickknacks," and "Black & White: Monochrome Looks." Jennifer Chae produces videos that

⁶ Kathy Peiss, "On Beauty... and the History of Business" in *Beauty and Business: Commerce, Gender, and Culture in Modern America*. Edited by Philip Scranton. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9.

reach a wide set of audience members, but unlike the other three, she creates videos that explicitly engage with a wider Asian/ Korean American community. For instance, popular videos of hers include “Korean Style Makeup Tutorial,” “HAUL: Korean Makeup,” and “Hyuna Bubble Pop⁷ Tutorial (and bloopers!).” Phan, who had attended various art institutions prior to her work on YouTube, produces some of the most stylized videos of the four, and produces vlogs that are not only how-tos, but also feature highly thematized content alongside short narratives. Such videos like “Zombie Child (WARNING: Graphic Content),” “How to Fix Broken Makeup,” or “Game of Thrones: Daenerys Targaryen Look” are a small sampling of Phan’s videos.

Shaping Moral Subjects

Despite the differences that span these four women’s channels, all four still exist within a common platform informed by the structures of capitalism, labor, and consumerism. Thus, by utilizing Grace Hong’s assertions put forth in her article “Existentially Surplus: Women of Color Feminism and the New Crises of Capitalism”, the subjectivity of Phan, Chae, Im and Hoang become considerably muddled. Hong utilizes Roderick Ferguson’s definition of surplus labor, which is the notion that labor creates social differences in order to function, but in doing so, creates surplus subjects “that capital requires but cannot entire manage.”⁸ These surplus subjects are then barred from citizenship and are at the mercy of, as Hong refers to “necropolitical

⁷ Hyuna is a popular K- Pop (Korean Pop) star, and *Bubble Pop* was her Summer 2011 viral hit.

⁸ Grace Hong, “Existentially Surplus: Women of Color Feminism and the New Crises of Capitalism”, in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 18, Number 1, 2012: 87.

violence,”⁹ or violent state control through the matters of life and death of specific populations. Hong applies this theory of surplus labor and the construction of the surplus subject to pre WWII United States, but she identifies a change in the determination of surplus subjecthood due to a shift within the capitalist system from a focus on production to that of speculation. Because of the shift, Hong explains, which in part is due to “neoliberal response to the social movements (that occurred after WWII), subjectification became organized as a choice, available to populations that were once categorically excluded from normative subjectivity... [thus] we see subjects with access to capital and citizenship in ways previously unimaginable.”¹⁰ Because of these seemingly widening notions of citizenship, the importance of morality, rather than a supposed phenotypic and other such markers of difference, then becomes critical in determining proper subjecthood, or as Hong articulates, “the claim to the protection of life.”¹¹

Thus, it is due to YouTube’s “multicultural” and neoliberal platform in which these beauty bloggers are supposedly unconstrained by skin color and racial difference that marks these beauty blogs as particularly poignant locations that demonstrate this shift in the determination of surplus subjectivities. This is accomplished through its showcase of “new methods” in which previously deemed surplus subjects engage in “capital and citizenship.”¹² Therefore, through the productions of their beauty channels and videos, the four blogger’s productions demonstrate exactly that: through the engagement with beauty discourse and the occupation of space as (cultural) content producers, these four beauty gurus can be seen as

9 Hong, 89.

10 Hong, 91.

11 Hong, 94.

12 Hong, 91.

affirming their subjecthood through the utilization of beauty as moralistic currency in which to navigate this capitalistic space and thereby ensure their survival and maintain their subjecthood. As Hong states,

One's ability to articulate oneself as a moral subject becomes a means of legibility within a structure of biopolitical regulation. Being a moral subject means having claims to protection from necropolitical violence, to having a claim to exist, and for one's existence to be protected. Not choosing to inhabit this moral subjectivity means relinquishing one's claims to protected life."¹³

Thus, the YouTube sphere is rendered significant because of these gurus' ability to make such "claims to life" and challenge these "biopolitical regulations" in this digital space. In turn, these assertions function as a process for racial, ethnic, and phenotypic normalization and shift the boundaries of Asian America.

Channeling Morality through Lifestyles

While marketed as simple how-to videos, the YouTube beauty blogs (regardless from Asian American content producers or otherwise) are lifestyle videos that promote and privilege specific body types, consumeristic behaviors, and gender and racial performances. The YouTube beauty community is a business, which as Peiss explains, "If beauty is a signifier of difference,

¹³ Hong, 93.

beauty businesses- whether national, regional, or local- have continually made choices about what differences to emphasize, reinforce, or efface.”¹⁴ Therefore, these specific productions by Phan, Chae, Im and Hoang emphasizes explicit differences that are critical to the success of these individual blogger’s channels. By reinforcing particular “moral” and “correct” performances of Asian American women, these channels ensure the continuation of their non-surplus existence and ultimately, survival. For instance, both Im and Hoang uploaded videos regarding weight and weight loss. For both Im, whose video is titled “How I Lost 10 Pounds + Diet Tips,” and Hoang, video titled “How I Slimmed Down”, these videos are the most popular ones on their respective channels, accruing upwards of a million plus views each. Arguably, weight loss is not directly related to fashion or makeup, which implies that such videos merely function to highlight particular lifestyles that are encouraged in order to achieve such moral transcendence as displayed by the four women.

One specific way in which morality is contested is through the creation of a specific beauty grammar, particularly within the space of the Asian American beauty blogger. Amongst such mainstream beauty terms like “waterline,” “tight-lining,” “feathering,” “winging it (eyeliner) out” in this particular digital space, there exists a racialized beauty grammar that further builds upon and complicates this already specialized language. Most commonly expressed is the discussion of the monolid, and from here, specific grammars that reference other related racialized items like eyelid tape, eyelid glue, and eyelid surgery emerge. A common theme that is oftentimes addressed by Asian American beauty gurus is the notion of “faking a crease”, or creating an epicanthal fold on a mono-lidded eye. This is exemplified in an early

14 Peiss, 13.

IlikeWeylie tutorial, titled “Smokey Green Tutorial.”¹⁵ In this video, Hoang demonstrates the process of mixing, blending, and shading eyeshadows to create an illusion of a fold. Through the complex process of layering dark and light shadows, Hoang creates a noticeable depth contrast on her “monolidded eye,” and therefore “successfully” completes her otherwise inadequate look. It is this very sense of lack expressed through these racialized grammars that the various beauty bloggers are able to insert their own assertions of mortality and subjectivity. A particularly apt example of these particular tensions is exhibited by Jen Chae in her January 22, 2014 blog post, “Take Me with You! The FHTT (From Head to Toe) App,” in which she reveals the motivations behind her beauty blogging,

One of the reasons I started blogging nearly 6 years ago is that I felt like I was alone in my journey of discovering how to apply makeup to my monolid, Asian eyes while growing up in Midwest America surrounded by very little diversity... If I felt loneliness of feeling un- pretty when magazine tutorials led me to dead ends and makeup counters made me look like I had a black eye, I knew others *had* to have experienced the same feelings... That’s why I felt the desperate need to share with others a way to take that power into our own hands to feel pretty¹⁶.

¹⁵ Weylie Hoang, August 15, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvoip3ga0mg>

¹⁶ From Head to Toe, <http://www.frmheadtoe.com/2014/01/take-me-with-you-fhtt-app.html#more>.

Through her words, she not only utilizes the language to discipline her followers, but also herself. Chae is a proper subject, but as her blog post reveals, she did not always hold such a position. By encouraging her followers to recognize their own incompleteness, she expresses the potentiality of, or as Hong would explain, accessing their own subjectivities and “capital” to ultimately attain citizenship as she herself has already mastered.

Popular beauty gurus also expand their presence into other social media outlets, predominantly through such platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, blogs, and Instagram. Through these sites, beauty bloggers are able to highlight explicit aspects of their “real” lifestyle and offer supplemental (disciplining) material to their followers. All four of the bloggers provide links to external sites, and a quick browse through each of them includes content regarding clothing, technology, social outings, purchased products, and food. One such example is on October 21, 2012, Im uploaded a picture to her Instagram account in which she is pouting after eating a fairly large meal. The caption simply states, “I surrender.”¹⁷ With 12,400 likes, the image is striking in a multitude of ways: it is a glamorous shot, the makeup and hair done just right, the clothing and accessories posed in perfect tandem. Despite the seemingly “gluttonous” behavior she has just indulged in, Jenn is celebrated as the ideal consumer (and by extension, moral subject) - one who eats/ consumes, but in which the exertion to do so does not show. She is an effortless consumer and ultimately, Im looks and is deemed beautiful.

Thus, these grammars possess a dual purpose: while this language encourages the development of community and recognition of certain (phenotypic) attributes of the community,

¹⁷ Jen Im, October 2012, <http://instagram.com/p/fBpepdEmBg/>

it is also utilized as an attempt to repair and recuperate these undesirable physical aspects of the racialized body, or in other words, reconstitute the Asian body in form of a moral subject.

Beautiful Tensions

By visually rupturing the normative beauty discourse through the insertion of these Asian American bodies, it may appear as though these videos exist as a form of resistance, a challenge to mainstream beauty discourse. However this “resistance” is complicated when only *specific* Asian phenotypic expressions are normalized, and the mainstream accepts *certain* Asian women’s beauty discourse, and deems them as normal, acceptable, relatable, and useful. In doing so, these Asian women are therefore confirmed as good, moral, and productive subjects, which in turn allows individuals such as Phan, Chae, Im, and Hoang to affirm their status as a nonsurplus subject. But where do these productions locate the rest of Asian America? Or as Hong explains, “This new form of (bio) power is marked by the rampant proliferation of deadly regimes enabled by limited incorporation and affirmation of certain forms of racialized, gendered, and sexualized differences.” In other words, which Asian American bodies are then left out of the equation, and what sort of consequences does this particular structuring of moral/immoral and beautiful/ non- beautiful bodies create?

Peggy Zeglin Brand states in her work *Beauty Matters*, “The pursuit of beauty and its attendant ideals lies at the center of controversy among women who disagree about the role of female agency... whether an elusive idea of beauty is a menacing, male- fabricated myth that victimizes women or an avenue of self- realization by which women become empowered

agents.”¹⁸ She explains, agency within beauty discourse can certainly be encouraged by having, “more women to speak out about beauty and to engage in a productive dialogue (among themselves *and* with men) since it is *their* bodies that are routinely on display, under scrutiny, and object of all who gaze.”¹⁹ While this certainly may be true, the conception of agency becomes complicated once beauty work and discourse is considered through the framework of race and ethnicity. After all, does the mere addition of Asian American bodies and perspectives widen the mainstream beauty discourse? And if so, how does this renegotiate any sort of normative narratives that exist within these platforms? Is beauty even a productive space in critiquing Asian American “agency” and resistance”? While these answers may remain unclear, there is no doubt that these Asian American beauty blogs undoubtedly exposes significant nuances within the Asian American community that are yet to be considered.

18 Peg Zeglin Brand, *Beauty Matters* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 5.

19 Brand, 3.

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