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Opportunities and Inaudibilities: Asian American Internet Musicians

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Eileen Dawn Marino Regullano

June 2015

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Opportunities and Inaudibilities: Asian American Internet Musicians

by

Eileen Dawn Marino Regullano

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Music
University of California, Riverside, June 2015
Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson

With the rise of social media and Internet 2.0, Asian American visibility increased through various social media and streaming video websites. Using a combination of virtual ethnography and real-time ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis explores not only the reception and framing of Asian American musicians on the Internet, but also the content of the videos uploaded by these artists. In addition, the strategies employed by Asian American Internet musicians, including the activation of panethnicity, presentation of masculinity, and self-branding across social media platforms, play a significant role in these artists' degree of success and visibility through streaming websites such as YouTube. Ultimately, this thesis argues that while YouTube provides a platform for wider Asian American visibility, it also serves to ghettoize Asian American artists, providing them with limited options for self-representation to gain success.

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Introduction

As a young girl, like many others, I loved playing with Barbie dolls. It didn't matter to me that Barbie, with her blonde locks, blue eyes, and impossibly long legs looked nothing like me; I enjoyed the long hours of playtime with her and her playhouse all the same. All of that changed after I turned three years old, and Mattel began to run commercials for "Chinese Barbie," a black-haired, brown-eyed spin on the usual doll complete with hair chopsticks and "traditional" Chinese garb. I was immediately taken with Chinese Barbie because I thought she looked just like me—never mind the fact that I had short hair just past my chin and she had hair that almost reached her high-heeled feet; that I had short legs even for my height while she had disproportionately long legs betraying her blonde counterpart's usual unattainable measurements; or that I was not Chinese, or even East Asian. I received Chinese Barbie for Christmas that year and cherished her dearly because I was desperate for someone—anyone, fictional or otherwise—visible through any sort of media who looked even marginally similar to me. Finally, I had found someone just like me.

If three-year-old me had grown up with Internet 2.0, perhaps she would not so readily have accepted Chinese Barbie as her first Asian(-resembling) role model; she would have found plenty online. Steadily growing Asian American communities throughout the United States in the last several decades have not seen a corresponding rise in entertainment media representation—except on the Internet. The video streaming website, YouTube, represents a particularly popular arena for Asian Americans to

experience success with their uploaded videos. These Asian American "YouTubers"[1] upload a wide variety of videos, including makeup tutorials, sketch comedy, music videos, short films, and much more. Some are lucky enough to gain millions of subscribers on YouTube, netting what some might term Internet "success" through this popularity.

Despite the fickle nature of Internet success, many both within and outside the Asian American YouTube community characterize Internet stardom as empowering.[2] Mainstream and alternative journalists have touted YouTube as a "democratized platform" on which otherwise marginalized communities find a voice.[3] These newspaper articles and blogs highlight Asian Americans as the demographic that benefits most from YouTube's democratized atmosphere, with a 2001 report from the Pew Research Center showing that 75 percent of English-speaking Asian American adults had used the Internet.[4] The notion that YouTube has been particularly beneficial to Asian Americans is further supported by the success of Japanese American comedian Ryan Higa, whose YouTube channel is among the top ten with 13.7 million subscribers; Vietnamese

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[1] Here, as elsewhere, I use the term "YouTubers" to refer to those artists, musicians, comedians, etc. who upload content to YouTube.

[2] Andrew Lam, "The 'Bamboo Ceiling': Hollywood Shuns Asians, While New Media Embraces Them - New America Media," accessed February 11, 2015, http://newamericamedia.org/2014/01/the-bamboo-ceiling-hollywood-shuns-asians-while-new-media-embraces-them.php.

[3] Austin Considine, "For Asian-American Stars, Many Web Fans," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2011, sec. Fashion & Style, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/fashion/for-asian-stars-many-web-fans.html.

[4] Tom Spooner, "Asian-Americans and the Internet," *Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project*, accessed February 23, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/2001/12/12/asian-americans-and-the-internet/.

American makeup artist Michelle Phan, who has 7.4 million YouTube subscribers; and Chinese American entertainer Kevin Wu who has three million.[5] These YouTubers represent only a small sample of the young generation of Asian Americans who use YouTube as a way to assert through new media an Asian American presence that is all but absent from mass and broadcast media.

As encouraging as it might seem, this increase in Asian American presence through various forms of cultural production on the Internet demands closer scrutiny. Unless journalists, media scholars, and the concerned public move beyond this seeming success to examine the content and conditions of production, Asian American cultural production will remain ghettoized. As Asian American activist and writer Cindy Gao argues, the visibility of Asian Americans on YouTube does not provide freedom from stereotyping and discrimination but "in actuality, […] ghettoizes Asian American entertainment production and profits from the unpaid labor of YouTube stars with zero risk. […] Asian American YouTube videos can only make incremental gains toward a kind of democratic progress."[6] Gao's assessment of Asian American cultural production on YouTube pushes back against the overwhelmingly positive narrative about Asian Americans as the model breakout demographic touted by a mainstream and alternative press that stops short of actually examining and assessing the content of Asian American YouTubers' videos.

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[5] As of February 16, 2015, according to their respective YouTube channels.
[6] Cindy Gao, "The Virtuosic Virtuality of Asian American YouTube Stars," *S&F Online*, 2012, http://sfonline.barnard.edu/feminist-media-theory/the-virtuosic-virtuality-of-asian-american-youtube-stars/.

Therefore, I discuss here not only the reception and framing of Asian American musicians, but also the actual content of their videos. I rely partially on textual interpretation of visual and audio culture. This includes not only the music and comedy videos uploaded by Asian American artists, but also an examination of how, as Christine Balance argues, "today's Asian American creative hopefuls do not merely accede to but actively exploit social media and information-sharing platforms"[7] through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Using multiple platforms, Asian American artists post a variety of visual, textual, and audio content that contribute to their branding as musicians. In addition to textual interpretation, I conducted real-time ethnographic fieldwork at several concerts, including interviews with other audience members. I conducted virtual ethnography by participating in these musicians' online fan communities, which included watching and listening to streaming video and music as a "follower" on the musicians' social networking websites (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter profiles) and reviewing viewer comments on YouTube. Finally, I interviewed several members of the Asian American YouTube community, including former and currently active YouTube musicians to assess their perspective on various aspects of the Asian American YouTube phenomenon. These Asian American YouTube artists conceive of themselves as a community even if there is no central physical site where they meet each other. Indeed, although many do collaborate in person, others never actually meet in person, but still consider themselves part of a larger Asian American

[7] Christine Bacareza Balance, "How It Feels to Be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2012): 140.

YouTube community through their virtual connections. In this sense, the Asian American community follows Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities,[8] except rather than having connections through print media, the community is bonded through virtual means. In combining both a virtual ethnography with an "off-line" ethnography, I aim to take YouTube on its own terms as a virtual space where users interact differently with each other and with artists than in real life, as Tom Boellstorff does with the video game *Second Life*;[9] at the same time, I address questions of the artists' and fans' lived reality.

Examining the virtual space of YouTube reveals how some YouTube users take advantage of their anonymity by posting incendiary comments on videos in general; although this hateful speech is by no means limited to YouTube, as other websites allow users to post anonymously, Asian American YouTube artists' videos are a particularly popular arena for racist speech. These users post derogatory comments that are not found as readily on these artists' social media pages or in person at their concerts, where most (if not all) followers/attendees are already fans of the artist. This makes clear how audiences who are not already part of these musicians' fan niche demographic perceive them, and virtual ethnography allows room for the perspective of those who are not fans and would not normally go out of their way to find these artists. In addition, as ethnomusicologist Eun-Young Jung notes, the prevalence of Asian American musicians

[8] Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed (London ; New York: Verso, 1991).
[9] Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life an Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

on YouTube is "not a panacea for racial exclusion, as the primary medium for distributing music is in the form of video materials, in which the racial identity of the musicians is almost always clearly visible. […] He or she is subject to the racialized judgments of social media users,"[10] and because of this (in addition to anonymity), users on YouTube are freer to express racist comments than on other websites that do not depend as heavily on the visual representation of musicians. The virtual ethnographic approach can make clear, therefore, the extreme unease and suspicion with which Asian American musicians are met by mainstream (read: white) audiences, in an arena where these audiences more readily air racial anxieties and prejudices in an unambiguous, if extreme, way.

Since these musicians primarily disseminate their music online and often gain success through their Internet activities, a virtual ethnographic approach is essential to understand how artists choose to brand themselves, as well as to observe how fans respond to particular text or multimedia posts uploaded by the musicians online and interact with artists through virtual means. These online branding choices by artists and interactions from fans illustrate how, as Lei Guo and Lorin Lee observe, "[YouTube] allows dance crews, such as Jabbawockeez and Poreotics, and indie music artists, such as David Choi and Kina Grannis, not only to promote their talents, but also to create an

[10] Eun-Young Jung, "Transnational Migrations and YouTube Sensations: Korean Americans, Popular Music, and Social Media," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 1 (February 14, 2014): 57, doi:10.5406/ethnomusicology.58.1.0054.

intimate connection with fans."[11] This is not only limited to YouTube activities, however, but also extends to musicians' general online presence through social media and streaming audio websites (e.g., SoundCloud and Spotify).

Meanwhile, traditional on-the-ground ethnography at concerts and with YouTube musicians themselves answers different questions than can be answered through this virtual approach. Although it is important to examine the fan responses and perspectives reflected on artists' YouTube videos and social media pages, there is no substitute for observing, interacting with, and participating as a fan and audience member at live performances, where reactions to particular songs and performances can be seen and heard firsthand. Real-time ethnographic work allows direct interaction with both fans and artists, and presents essential information about audience's visceral and embodied reactions to performers they were first exposed to virtually—whether through dancing, singing along, shouting, or standing completely still and silent. In addition, interviewing fans at these concerts as well as YouTube musicians themselves reveals much about their motivations for being there and participating in the YouTube community in a way that differs from how they portray themselves online.

These combined methodologies, therefore, represent an essential approach to conducting research on the Internet. As ethnomusicologist Kiri Miller[12] argues (following Boellstorff's lead), virtual experience is inherently linked to "actual," embodied

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[11] Lei Guo and Lorin Lee, "The Critique of YouTube-Based Vernacular Discourse: A Case Study of YouTube's Asian Community," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 5 (January 16, 2013): 392, doi:10.1080/15295036.2012.755048.

[12] Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance*, Oxford Music/media Series (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

experience. She attempts to link the two through her examination of video games and YouTube by conducting research both online (or in-game) and by talking to individuals who participate in these forms. For Miller's work, mixing virtual and on-the-ground ethnographic approaches is essential; similarly, I combine these approaches to illustrate a research direction not often considered by ethnomusicologists. Although some studies in ethnomusicology have focused on music and technoculture,[13] the field itself has not, on the whole, widely explored virtual modes of music-making.

In addition, within the field of ethnomusicology, very few studies specifically focus on Asian American musicians. This fact owes partially to the colonial history of the discipline, where studies examining the Other in a far-off country are favored not only by funding institutions, but also by many practitioners within the field itself.[14] These scholars and funding institutions often look askance at scholarship within the Western world, especially within the United States, where work on popular music in particular is often called into question. Even scholars of color who attempt to do work on communities of color within the United States as so-called "native ethnographers" face these institutional and disciplinary barriers in attempting to conduct such research, despite academic tokenism pressuring scholars of color to study their own communities. Asian American scholars attempting to study Asian American music communities are no

[13] René T. A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay, eds., *Music and Technoculture*, Music/culture (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).
[14] René T.A. Lysloff, "Mozart in Mirrorshades: Music, Technology, and Ethnomusicological Anxiety," *Ethnomusicology* 41, no. 2 (1997): 206–19.

exception. It is no surprise, then, that there are so few works on Asian American musicians, especially those who perform popular music.

The most notable of the few works within ethnomusicology on Asian Americans is Deborah Wong's seminal work, *Speak It Louder.*[15] Following Wong, I do not attempt to locate an Asian American sound, as Asian American musicians work across a wide variety of musics, but instead I focus on "Asian Americans making music"[16]—or more specifically, in my case, Asian Americans making music on the Internet. Considering the prevalence of Asian American musicians in this sphere, studies like this one are long overdue within academia at large, particularly in ethnomusicology. Like Wong, I consider how "scholarship on Asian America must be an activist undertaking."[17] I view my own work as an act of activism in its own right by legitimizing the work of Asian American artists on YouTube, where their limited success is stigmatized, as well as bringing attention to these musicians who are largely inaudible to mainstream audiences. In another sense, this work is an activist undertaking in my attempt to broaden the scope of what is considered legitimate ethnomusicological scholarship, bringing attention to the possibilities of valuable work that refuses to continue the colonial legacy of the discipline as a whole.

In my research, I almost exclusively examine male YouTube artists. In discussing these men, I highlight the dominance of male musicians within the Asian American

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[15] Deborah Anne Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
[16] Ibid., 4.
[17] Ibid.

YouTube community. Although there are some prominent female Asian American musicians such as Clara C., Cathy Nguyen, and Kina Grannis, they do not have the same level of notoriety as their male counterparts, due to the double barriers of their gender and race. They encounter both the bamboo ceiling encountered by Asian American men on YouTube, as well as the glass ceiling encountered by women in general.[18] In addition, they tend to do more collaborative work with men than Asian American male YouTube musicians do with Asian American women: men more often perform solo or with other male musicians than with female artists. In the YouTube community at large, Asian American women do not tend to enjoy the same levels of success as men, with the exception of Melissa Phan with her makeup tutorials and Lilly Singh's comedy channel. This disparity between Asian American men and women on YouTube illustrates that, although the website has opened up new terms for Asian American representation, it is not equal for men and women. Nor is this equal across ethnicities within the larger Asian American *panethnicity*, defined by Yen-Le Espiritu as a politico-cultural formation between various Asian ethnicities to achieve common goals.[19]

I focus on Asian American YouTube musicians who post videos that often include comedic content to battle stereotypes, but whose main purpose is to disseminate their music. I argue that for these Asian American YouTubers, the streaming video

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[18] Peggy Li, "Recent Developments Hitting the Ceiling: An Examination of Barriers to Success for Asian American Women," *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice* 29, no. 1 (January 2014): 140–67.

[19] Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*, Asian American History and Culture Series (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

website acts as a platform for wider Asian American visibility, audibility, and success than could otherwise be achieved through traditional media outlets alone. At the same time, however, YouTube also ghettoizes Asian American musicians, marginalizing them as Internet acts, while simultaneously illustrating the limited avenues available to them in mainstream media.

I also highlight these artists' use of panethnicity by working with other Asian American musicians. Asian American panethnicity emerged from social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, when, as Grace Wang puts it, the term 'Asian American' "coalesced different ethnicities under a single category to contest shared racisms encountered in the United States, to claim cultural and political citizenship, and to create a viable alternative to the existing racial category 'Oriental.'"[20] For Asian American YouTube artists, panethnic Asian American formations are activated to combat common stereotypes of Asian Americans as well as to expand spaces for Asian American media presence. These musicians build inter-ethnic bridges among themselves and their fans through internet musicking, or Christopher Small's concept of "tak[ing] part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing."[21] By doing so, these artists gain traction in Asian American communities, but do not achieve mainstream success.

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[20] Grace Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America: Navigating Race through Musical Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 19.
[21] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Music/culture (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), 9.

U.S. Perceptions of Asian Americans and the Rise of Asian American Panethnicity

My analysis of how young Asian American YouTubers interact with both their fans and each other emerges from a triangulation of Asian American history and portrayals of Asian Americans by the U.S. media. In addition, the stereotypes associated with Asian Americans shape how Asian American musicians are heard and seen, so it is essential to examine the model minority and other stereotypes to understand how artists are aware of their potential reception and thus make preemptive choices about branding. YouTube musicians' extensive strategy of panethnic collaborations also necessitates a brief overview of Asian American panethnicity as a critical and political construct.

Representations of Asians/Asian Americans in the U.S. media, as with any other marginalized group, have changed along with the evolution of cultural attitudes toward that racial category. As Lisa Lowe points out, Asians/Asian Americans have been present in the U.S. since at least the nineteenth century as immigrant laborers, and were seen as a "'yellow peril' threatening to displace white European immigrants,"[22] which resulted in the passage of immigration exclusion acts and laws against naturalization of Asians in 1882, 1924, and 1934.[23] This anti-Asian attitude of white Americans toward the so-called "yellow peril" was manifested in early films' portrayal of Asians, Peter Feng says, in

[22] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 6.
[23] Ibid, 5.

such characters as "devious and brutal Chinese warlords"[24] in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) and their female counterparts, the "Dragon Ladies," in the Fu Manchu films of the 1930s. On the other hand, representations of Asians in early American cinema also supported U.S. imperialist tendencies by "representing Asians as racial inferiors who would benefit from U.S. rule,"[25] so that Asians were portrayed only between these two extremes.

During World War II, while Japanese Americans were vilified and placed in concentration camps, China was a key U.S. ally and the Chinese exclusion laws were repealed, allowing greater opportunities for Chinese to immigrate to the United States,[26] and race relations with Asians and Asian Americans appeared to improve. With the surge of immigration after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 in addition to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, however, renewed xenophobic anxieties toward Asians/Asian Americans emerged. According to Ronald Takaki, the entertainment media had "begun marketing Asian stereotypes again: where Hollywood had earlier portrayed Asians as Charlie Chan displaying his wit and wisdom in his fortune cookie Confucian quotes and as the evil Fu Manchu threatening white women, the film industry has consistently relied on images of Asians as either comic (in *Sixteen Candles [1984]*) or criminal (in *Year of the Dragon [1985]*)."[27] This indicated a shift toward

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[24] Peter X. Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, Rutgers Depth of Field Series (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 2.
[25] Ibid, 2.
[26] Ronald T. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: a History of Asian Americans* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books, 1990).
[27] Ibid, 480.

different stereotypes rather than eliminating them altogether as a result of the model minority stereotype's materialization.

With the large influx of Asian immigration to the United States after 1965, the model minority and the opportunistic foreign national persist as the dominant stereotypes for Asians/Asian Americans. The model minority encompasses many "model" behaviors, traits, and achievements that Asians/Asian Americans supposedly have, including but not limited to earning good grades in school, showing an exemplary work ethic, deferring to authority, and being able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This characterization of Asian Americans is so pervasive in the United States that, as Frank Wu writes, "[t]he miracle is the standard depiction of Asian Americans in fact and fiction, from the news media to scholarly books to Hollywood movies."[28] Despite its seemingly "positive" characterization of Asians/Asian Americans, the model minority myth is harmful like any other stereotype, essentializing and caricaturing millions of people. Most importantly, as Wu bluntly puts it, "the myth is abused both to deny that Asian Americans experience racial discrimination and to turn Asian Americans into a racial threat."[29]

While the stereotype, like many others, is rooted in some small truth, the perceptions and reality are quite disparate in such statistics that show that Asian Americans are still underrepresented in higher education.[30] and that Asian Americans are

[28] Frank H. Wu, *Yellow* (New York; Oxford: BasicBooks; Oxford Publicity Partnership, 2003), 41.
[29] Ibid., 49.
[30] It would appear on first glance that Asian Americans are actually overrepresented in higher education statistically, making up 5.9% of higher education students while representing only 4% of the U.S. population at large in 2000, according to the U.S.

not, in fact, more economically successful in general than white Americans.[31] These and other differences, therefore, are attributable to factors other than race. Worse, however, is that this stereotype pits Asian Americans against other minorities as the "middleman minority" to which all others should aspire. It hurts not just other marginalized racial groups like African Americans, but Asian Americans as well, leading some to believe that Asian Americans themselves, rather than the model minority myth, harm society. This ascribes an "us versus them" dichotomy to Asian Americans and situating them as simultaneously against whites and other minorities while permanently foreign. The supposed "positive" nature of the model minority trope, and this strange characterization of Asian Americans as simultaneously white economically and non-white socially, produces the argument from Senator Alan Simpson that

> even if Asian Americans press complaints about bias for which they have evidence, the incidents should be treated as inconsequential or written off as the cost of being a newcomer. The reasoning seems to be that because Asian Americans have theoretically surmounted the deleterious effects of racial discrimination, we cannot be actually aggrieved even if real wrongs are done to us.[32]

In this way, the model minority stereotype takes away even the right to object to racial prejudice against Asian Americans without being dismissed out of hand.

Census Bureau. However, many sources indicate that Southeast Asian Americans, in particular, are underrepresented in higher education. Only 14% of Hmong Americans, for example, have a bachelor's degree according to the Center for American Progress, compared to the national average of 29.6%.

[31] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, poverty rates in 2000 for the Asian American population in general were similar to the national average despite higher median income. As with higher education representation, this varied according to specific ethnic groups, where Hmong and Cambodian Americans experienced the highest individual poverty rates.

[32] Ibid, 69.

This history of Asian American representation in the U.S. media thus shapes audience reactions to Asian American YouTube artists, including viewers' xenophobic and racist comments on their videos as well as a glorification of Asian Americans' talent and success on YouTube. Moreover, the history of racist representation informs how these artists represent themselves on the website, and some push back against these stereotypes and other racial microaggressions. When attempting to address and/or overcome these stereotypes without being dismissed by non-Asian Americans, one strategy these artists employ is panethnic collaboration between various Asian ethnicities. I argue that this activation of panethnicity among Asian American YouTubers differs significantly from how Asian Americans historically used panethnicity, and I will thus closely examine the shifting shape of Asian American panethnicity to understand how the concept has changed for younger generations of Asian Americans.

In her now-canonic book on Asian American panethnicity, Yen Le Espiritu outlines how various Asian Americans originally came together as a panethnic group. She defines panethnic group as "a politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto distinct, tribal or national origins."[33] Asian American panethnicity emerged from social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. She emphasizes that panethnicity, or "the generalization of solidarity among ethnic subgroups,"[34] resulted from the categorization of Asian Americans by non-Asian Americans ascribing racial and ethnic classifications onto Asian American bodies, but has also become "a political

[33] Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 2.
[34] Ibid., 6.

resource for insiders, a basis on which to mobilize diverse peoples and to force others to be more responsive to their grievances and agendas."[35] The creation of this larger panethnic group, she argues, requires the formation of a common identity and heritage out of many diverse ethnic backgrounds, and although many fissures exist among Asian Americans along class and ethnic lines, their fusion as a whole is equally important in achieving shared political goals.

Although her book was published in 1992, Espiritu's assertions about the importance of Asian American panethnicity remain relevant to Asian Americans today, and Asian American YouTube musicians activate panethnic strategies to challenge and reverse Asian American stereotypes. Espiritu asserts in her concluding chapter that in the process of panethnic formation, "the panethnic idea becomes autonomous, capable of replenishing itself. Over time, it may even outlive the circumstances and interests that produced it, creating conditions that sustain and revivify it."[36] Such an ideological shift in Asian American panethnicity is certainly reflected in the way young Asian American YouTubers approach panethnic collaborations.

Case Studies

I examine three Asian American YouTube musicians at length—Legaci, Thai American rapper Traphik (or Timothy DeLaGhetto), and Korean American singer-songwriter David Choi—to demonstrate how some Asian American YouTube musicians

[35] Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 7.
[36] Ibid., 164.

have attempted to gain mainstream success. They provide contrasting and compelling case studies: each offers slightly different approaches to representation, success, and panethnicity. They try to overcome Asian American invisibility in different ways, with varying levels of success. I employ primarily textual interpretation and virtual ethnography to analyze both Legaci's and Traphik's YouTube activities. I use this methodology in my discussion of David Choi as well, along with an analysis of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted at two of his concerts to examine the relationship between YouTube performers and their fans. I also explore this relationship and performance practices through ethnographic fieldwork at a concert put on by Filipino American artist JR Aquino.

Legaci

Filipino American R&B group Legaci represents a particularly important example of how Asian American YouTube artists can gain success only to a limited degree, while their Caucasian counterparts may experience wild success. While the (Caucasian) pop idol Justin Bieber, widely known to have risen to fame through YouTube videos, has gained wild success and fortune through this website, similarly "unknown" Asian American artists do not experience mainstream success to the same degree. Though Bieber is certainly outside the norm, the disparity between him and Legaci, his hand-picked backup singers while on tour, is clear: Bieber has his own record contract while Legaci does not. Legaci's continued struggle to break into mainstream consciousness illustrates the link between success and racial identity as a result of the bamboo ceiling.

Although this is difficult to prove due to the subtler nature of twenty-first century racism that commonly consists of microaggressions[37] rather than overt discrimination, indicators of the bamboo ceiling exist in the clear lack of prominent Asian American entertainers in mainstream media at large, much less in music. Legaci's audition for the popular television show, *America's Got Talent*, where they attempted to showcase their singing ability on a national stage, illustrates their struggle to regain success as musicians, and their racialized representation on the show demonstrates how pervasive and important race remains among mainstream audiences and cultural producers.

[37] Daniel Solorzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students," *The Journal of Negro Education* 69, no. 1/2 (January 1, 2000): 60–73.

Figure 1: A screenshot from the YouTube video showing Legaci's performance on *America's Got Talent*.[38]

When Legaci appeared on *America's Got Talent* in July 2014,[39] both their popularity on YouTube and their performances as Justin Bieber's backup singers went unacknowledged on the show. In contrast, the members' occupations in the technology field were emphasized, playing to stereotypes of Asian Americans as interested only in computers, science and math. In addition, the judges as well as emcee Nick Cannon subtly mocked the group, and the show's editors used various cuts and sound edits to make the members appear socially awkward, a classic trope often used to emasculate

[38] *Legaci: Techies Sing Unexpected "Who's Lovin' You" Cover - America's Got Talent 2014*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvFpyCYZsm0&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
[39] *Ibid.*

Asian American men, as scholar David Eng argues.[40] Even the show's sound editing pigeonholed Legaci in this stereotype through what appears to be the addition of microphone feedback noise to the answers one group member gave to the judges' questions; such extensive audio and video editing are run-of-the-mill in reality television talent competitions such as *American Idol*, as Katherine Meizel notes, as time, sound, and space are constantly conflated during the production process for the show.[41] Only after the group finished performing and their musical talent was recognized did the judges' ridicule stop—a common pattern in reality television talent competitions where, as Meizel argues, "Viewers witness the construction of fame and infamy, successes and failures, and the public humiliation that is intrinsic to [*American Idol's*] scopophilia."[42] Although this humiliation is a standard practice in these shows, it is clear that Legaci's representation on the show was racialized, whether purposefully or unintentionally, in the focus on their careers in technology and the description on the YouTube video that says, "A boy band proves that you can't judge a book by a cover as these techies surprise the audience and judges with a cover of ″Who's Lovin' You."[43]

Although the group was selected to continue on to the next rounds of *America's Got Talent,* they were not seen again on the show, and fan speculation within the comment threads on Facebook and YouTube suggested that their silent disappearance

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[40] David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, Perverse Modernities (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2001).
[41] Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).
[42] Ibid., 27.
[43] *Legaci,* 2014.

from the show had something to do with conflicting television contracts. However, Legaci did not elaborate on this point and declined to comment despite repeated fan requests for explanation on their Facebook and YouTube pages, so it is likely that the fan speculation was inaccurate—especially in light of the fact that one of my interlocutors later told me that Legaci is now defunct and performs only rarely. Whether or not the speculation about conflicting contracts is true, it is significant that although the group achieved success as Bieber's backup singers, they have had to return to day jobs outside the music industry, and to continue auditioning for shows like *America's Got Talent* to try, once again, to make singing their full-time occupation. Although YouTube served to catapult Legaci into a more visible, albeit background, role on Bieber's tour, this breakthrough did not bring them financial or cultural success in the long term. Instead, they were typecast on mainstream outlets and relegated to Internet stardom, where success is fleeting and financially unrewarding.

Legaci employs several strategies to attract new and varied audiences outside the Asian American community. One such strategy is in choosing particular kinds of songs to appeal to mainstream listeners. Almost all of Legaci's uploaded videos, both original songs and covers of popular songs, revolve around heteronormative narratives describing romantic relationships. This specific choice of repertoire promotes particular mainstream values of heteronormativity particularly in regard to romantic relationships. Focusing on these mainstream values without mention of their race or ethnicity, except in response to viewer comments specifically addressing the topic, reflects Legaci's attempt to draw attention to their performance rather than their physical appearance.

Like many Asian American YouTube musicians, Legaci tends toward covers of popular songs by mainstream artists, and view counts of these cover videos far outstrip those for their original music. In fact, it was their cover video of Justin Bieber's hit song, "Baby," that led Legaci to be handpicked from YouTube as Bieber's backup singers. This Legaci video was originally posted on Thai American rapper/comedian Timothy DeLaGhetto's channel, and it features Vietnamese American singer Cathy Nguyen and Traphik/DeLaGhetto. The video had over 4.1 million views and over 10,000 comments as of February 2015, although the video has since been made private.[44] It was also posted on Legaci's channel, which has over 2.1 million views and more than 5,000 comments.[45] In contrast, Legaci's most-viewed original music video, ""Never Got Over You," has only 415,463 views.[46] The discrepancy between the popularity of their cover videos and their original music videos emphasizes that the songs Legaci covers are ones already well known to a wide audience. In this sense, Legaci's strategy to gain mainstream attention by covering already-popular songs was successful in attracting viewers who would not otherwise seek them out.

Nonetheless, the enormous difference in viewers' hits between their original and cover videos illustrates the challenge of breaking out of the long-established patterns of Asian American YouTube cover artists to achieve recognition for original songs. While

[44] As of February 23, 2015, according to the YouTube page. I can't think of a reason Traphik would make this video private so many years later, unless it is to distance himself from this particular cover or to attempt to direct users to the cross-post on Legaci's channel.
[45] As of May 28, 2015, according to the YouTube page.
[46] As of February 23, 2015.

most of the comments on "Never Got Over You" praise the group for their talent and songwriting skills, one of the comments reads: "Prefer n'sync or backstreet boys then [sic] this Chinese shiting [sic] shit!!! support American guys not china [sic]."[47] This is only one of many racist, xenophobic, and even homophobic remarks that explicitly address the appearance of this Filipino American group. The sheer number and prevalence of such comments on Legaci's YouTube videos suggests that racist reception thwarts the group's efforts to reach beyond the niche audience of Asian American fans. Although it is just as easy to find extremely unpleasant comments on other YouTube videos belonging to white artists (such as Bieber) due to the anonymity of the medium, the comments on those videos do not draw on race as part of their criticisms. In addition, although some may argue that these comments are simply from "trolls" seeking to instigate negative reactions from other users, these comments still reveal the kinds of racial anxieties preventing Asian Americans like Legaci from breaking through the bamboo ceiling. It is telling that the group frequently receives comments on their videos equating Asian American identity to poor singing ability, and these racialized perceptions of their performances undoubtedly contribute to their struggle to achieve financial and cultural recognition.

[47] *Legaci - Never Got Over You (Official Video)*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAm4EUI8qbo&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

Traphik, A.K.A. Timothy DelaGhetto

In contrast, YouTube has provided Traphik (Timothy DeLaGhetto) with sustained financial and cultural success. With 2.6 million subscribers,[48] Traphik has a significant presence on YouTube and has been able to tour on the basis of his success on that platform. He is also featured on MTV2's hip-hop comedy reality series, *Wild 'N Out*, where his rap skills are displayed on the show's rap battles. It is telling that much of Traphik's self-branding and self-promotion present the artist as hypermasculine. He plays into general tropes of hip-hop and rap with videos and pictures showcasing his (often half-naked) body (see Figure 2) and using women as accessories to demonstrate that he is sexually desirable. On the one hand, these hypermasculine tropes preempt the mainstream typecasting of Asian American men as feminine and socially awkward (faced by Legaci); on the other hand, they illustrate how playing into the problematic, misogynist stereotypes of rap music in general reinscribes mainstream values. These struggles are discussed aptly by sociologist Oliver Wang, who argues that "in an effort to deracinate both themselves and their ideal of hip hop culture, [Asian Americans] apply the utopian concept of the 'universal,' ostensibly a community freed of racial or other social boundaries. […] Appealing to the universal is an attempt to alter the terms of authenticity—making it less about race and more about skills and talent."[49]

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[48] As of February 16, 2015.

[49] Oliver Wang, "Rapping and Repping Asian: Race, Authenticity, and the Asian American MC," in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 50.

Figure 2: A photo Traphik uploaded to his own Facebook page of his half-naked body, complete with his own hypermasculine commentary about working out—clearly taken in a men's bathroom.[50]

Traphik is consistently attentive to race in his comedic videos and his rapping, both on YouTube and on the television show *Wild 'N Out*. In response to another rapper's racist joke about Asians eating dog, he retorts, "You made a dog joke, man? What's up with that? Asians don't eat dog, but I eat your mom's cat!"[51] He thus combats racial stereotypes through his artistry, but seems unable to do so without using women as a punchline—a technique he uses often in his rap. That other rappers find his race and stereotypes thereof to be fair game in these rap battles further illustrates prevalent

[50] Traphik, "Traphik," *Facebook*, February 9, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/265878373825/photos/pb.265878373825.-2207520000.1434111067./10153059158978826/?type=3&theater.
[51] *Timothy DeLaGhetto Dog Joke.*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ab4Lm3XtoQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

attitudes toward Asian Americans that do not exist in the same way for many other communities. Unlike Legaci, however, these racial stereotypes do not prevent Traphik from achieving significant financial success as an entertainer. Traphik was able to pay off his parents' $210,000 mortgage with the profits from his success as a performer. Yet, despite this financial success, neither Traphik nor his alias Timothy DeLaGhetto have gained recognition outside the Asian American YouTube community, and, perhaps, among those who watch *Wild 'N Out*.

David Choi

Unlike Legaci and Traphik, singer-songwriter David Choi has achieved success strictly through his use of the Internet rather than mainstream media outlets. Choi began posting to YouTube shortly after it was established in 2005, and he is sometimes called "the grandfather of YouTube."[52] Like Traphik, Choi has toured nationally and worldwide as a YouTube artist multiple times and has released three albums of original music. All of this success, particularly marketing his own original music, differs significantly from the experience of most Asian American YouTubers. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of David Choi's career, however, is the recent launch of his self-titled webseries *David.* The series focuses on his own success as a YouTube artist and presents the problematic aspects of YouTube stardom, particularly in terms of what Christine Balance calls YouTube's "industry-driven tendencies (making visible an otherwise 'unseen niche

[52] Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America*.

market').”[53] In this way, the series foregrounds market pressures on Choi to take advantage of his niche audience through endorsements and other advertisements. The series glorifies Choi in his capacity as a YouTube superstar with these kinds of marketing opportunities but does not address his failure to break into mainstream media and gain radioplay. The series thus foregrounds capitalist pressures on Choi to take advantage of his niche audience through endorsements and other advertisements while ironically functioning as an extended commercial for Choi's new album and tour. It reinforces the ghettoization of Asian American YouTube artists by emphasizing his success on the internet while minimizing his absence from radio.

[53] Balance, “How It Feels to Be Viral Me,” 140.

Figure 3: A screenshot of David Choi's self-titled webseries, depicting David (left) as a well-known star interviewed and photographed by the press.[54]

Choi's new album, *Stories of You's and Me*, and the accompanying tour (plugged at length in the webseries) follow the branding and promotion patterns used by many mainstream artists, who also go on tour to promote new albums. In this sense, Choi's offline activities indicate an attempt to break out of the virtual Asian American YouTube ghetto by following mainstream patterns of branding. Choi's extensive use of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to promote the tour deploy the same branding tactics used by mainstream artists but in ways that mark him as part of an indie or YouTube (rather than mainstream) community of artists. The branding strategies used during the tour by Choi and his manager complicate his placement in a strictly

[54] *"David" (The Series) - Episode 4 - YouTube*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXYmFkTerWY&list=RDmXYmFkTerWY#t=1.

ghettoized YouTube environment yet indicate his difference from mainstream artists in the do-it-yourself appearance of many of these posts, as well as the intimacy between Choi and his audiences as seen in his Instagram stream.

I attended two concerts in Choi's "Stories Tour"—one in Southern California on March 21, 2015, at the beginning of the tour and one in Northern California on April 19, 2015 at the end—and witnessed these branding tactics in action at both concerts. Every show on the tour had the option for attendees to buy a VIP pass on top of their admission ticket, which provided multiple benefits listed on the purchase page for VIP passes, including: an autographed copy of the *Stories of You's and Me* album; a pre-show meet and greet with Choi, including photos and autographs; a pre-show solo acoustic set played by Choi; a VIP group photo posted on Choi's Instagram; early entry with crowd-free merchandise shopping; 10% off all merchandise; an exclusive VIP laminate; and an extra raffle ticket for a chance to win a new Yamaha GL1 Guitalele. Even reading this list of benefits makes clear that a focus on branded commodities (merchandise and product placement) separates Choi from other Asian American YouTube artists like JR Aquino, who are not as financially savvy in selling merchandise, product endorsements, or self-branding through a capitalist system. Although Aquino and the other artists on his current BSY tour similarly offer a VIP pass, this only includes a meet-and-greet before the show with access to a special VIP area during the show, and it does not come with products or social media benefits. The VIP benefits offered by Choi, then, serve to place him in a category more similar to mainstream artists than fellow YouTubers. These mainstream artists generally profit from monetizing attendees' interactions with them, including not

just concert ticket prices but also autographs and photos posted on social media, *in addition to* encouraging fans to purchase merchandise and buy into corporate sponsorship.

Unlike mainstream artists, however, Choi's product placement and promotion tactics do not lead his audiences to see him as a tool of the music industry or as a sell-out. The do-it-yourself aesthetic of YouTube videos often creates a feeling of intimacy between YouTube artists and their viewers that does not exist between mainstream artists and their fans. For fans of Choi and other internet-famous musicians, this intimacy makes it easier for them to relate to these artists as regular people rather than as larger-than-life superstars. As a result, fans tend to perceive YouTube musicians as "real" or "authentic" to a greater degree than mainstream artists, and place particular value on this authenticity. When I purchased a VIP pass for the show in Southern California, curious to see how Choi would present himself in person to a small group of fans before the concert as opposed to the larger audience during the show—whether his in-person persona would match that of his online persona, and whether this would change depending on the number of people and physical intimacy involved. I was also curious to see whether the extensive list of commodity benefits would result in extensive plugging from Choi, and if this would negatively affect how fans perceived him. Sure enough, the intimacy and do-it-yourself aesthetics of Choi's YouTube videos translate well into how Choi presents himself in person to his fans both on- and off-stage, and even though he subtly promoted himself throughout the VIP meeting, this did not affect how fans perceived him, as several told me how impressed they were that David was so "authentic" and "genuine."

The Southern California concert took place at The Observatory, a small venue in Santa Ana. Choi's show was to start at 6:30 p.m., what I thought was an unusually early show for a Saturday night main artist. I would later learn that he was not, in fact, the featured artist that night and would perform in a smaller area within the venue; meanwhile, funk artist Dam-Funk would take the main stage at 8 p.m. to open for George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic.[55] VIP ticket-holders were encouraged to show up an hour before doors opened for the pre-show benefits, and when I arrived, a handful of other VIP pass-holders were already lined up outside the venue, all in their twenties or younger (with the exception of one woman, who appeared to be the mother of one of the high school-aged attendees). We waited for about fifteen minutes outside the venue in the Southern California sun until a young Asian American man in his thirties came out holding a dozen or more lanyards with VIP cards attached, and he called out the names of the VIPs to hand out their passes. He introduced himself as Eric, Choi's manager, and talked to the VIPs about "house rules." These "rules" were not really rules, but rather a description of what would happen during our forty-five minutes of pre-show time with David (as Eric consistently referred to him-- by first name only--and from then on I too thought of him simply, even intimately, as "David")—this time would be casual, we could talk to David and ask questions, and we would have some drinks covered *if* we were twenty-one.

[55] It is noteworthy that Clinton was an inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and that both Dam-Funk and Clinton are signed with industry record labels—both markers of mainstream recognition and success that Choi cannot claim.

We were allowed into the venue and ushered to an outdoor patio, where we sat down on wooden benches jutting out from the patio walls and waited anxiously for David to show up. One young fan in her twenties in particular was very excited about meeting David. She repeatedly said she was "so nervous!" and intoned after a similar line from the webseries, "Oh my God, we're going to meet David Choi." After about ten minutes, David appeared in the corner—dressed (to my surprise, considering his usually toned-down clothes in YouTube videos) in green camouflage pants and bright red sneakers—and awkwardly squeezed around some shrubbery to enter the patio. All the VIPs cheered and clapped as soon as he approached us. Since there were only ten VIPs, David asked each one of us to introduce ourselves and say where we came from that day—a surprisingly intimate and friendly way for a nationally-touring musician to deal with a bunch of strangers he probably wouldn't remember a couple of hours after meeting us. In fact, he even admitted as we introduced ourselves that he wouldn't remember all of our names!

This was only one of several ways that David reinforced the close relationship between YouTubers and fans distinct from relationships between mainstream artists and their audiences. David also volunteered that his birthday was the following day and took photos with each VIP (selfies in most cases). During the solo acoustic set, he asked fans for song requests and then admitted that he didn't remember how to play the song requested. These deliberately informal interactions broke down the usual barrier between performer and fans and created at least the illusion of closeness between performer and fans. The fans themselves rearticulated this intimate relationship with David through their

interactions with him in the VIP group. Several fans asked David to drink a round of alcoholic beverages with them, and asked what his drink of choice was. One knew that David's birthday would be the following day and had brought him a birthday present even though she had never met him before. This presumption of friendly interaction on the fans' part illustrates that David's use of YouTube and social media results in a close imagined relationship, similar to the intimate fantasies presumed by fans of mainstream artists.

Figure 4: A selfie of the author with David Choi taken during the VIP Meet and Greet in Southern California.

Eric played the role of timekeeper and informed David it was time for him to go backstage, and he then ushered the VIPs to the Constellation Room, a small area within the venue that would house the concert, before allowing the rest of the audience to enter. The Constellation Room held a relatively small number of audience members (see Figure 5), most of whom were young Asian Americans. Throughout the concert, most of these

audience members were very quiet and neither sang along nor danced. Like the Aquino concert I had attended several weeks earlier (and will address later), the audience seemed quite docile in comparison to concerts put on by more mainstream artists. Did this have to do with the crowd being mostly Asian American, fulfilling stereotypes of the quiet model minority?

Figure 5: David's Instagram post of the audience and venue in Santa Ana. The Constellation Room held much fewer people than the Great American Music Hall (Figure 6).[56]

As I would learn at the second David Choi concert in San Francisco, this was absolutely not the case. A month later, I walked through neighborhoods close to the Tenderloin to get to the concert venue. As I turned onto the street, I spied a brightly-lit

[56] "David Choi (@davidchoimusic) • Instagram Photos and Videos," accessed June 12, 2015, https://instagram.com/davidchoimusic/.

marquee that marked the location of the Great American Music Hall. On the marquee were the words "David Choi," highlighting the night's main performer. This was markedly unlike the Observatory in Orange County, which did not indicate David's name anywhere, and in which David was decidedly a side attraction while other bands took the main stage.

As I approached the ticket office for my will-call ticket about fifteen minutes before the start of the concert (I did not buy a VIP ticket this time, so I could experience the concert from a non-VIP standpoint), I noticed a group of people walking up to the booth at the same time. This small group of young Asian Americans called out to Eric, who also walked up from the sidewalk one or two minutes afterward. Clearly, this group of young people knew Eric and they were presumably friends with David, as they had comped tickets under David's name. I had assumed that in San Francisco it would be far less likely for David's friends and family to attend than in Orange County, but this initial encounter, and David's interaction with audience members during the show, indicated that he had a fair amount of friends at this concert.

After a short chat with these individuals, Eric stood on the sidewalk near a large black van with his backpack on, and I approached him and reintroduced myself. After mentioning that I had gone to the Orange County show and was doing research on Asian American YouTube artists, Eric remembered me. He asked if I went to school in the bay area, and when I responded that I had road tripped from Riverside specifically for the concert, he seemed very surprised and impressed. I chatted with him for a short time, and he said that the tour was very tiring, especially with the band together in the black van for

the whole tour, taking turns driving. After thirty-five days straight in the same van, he said, they were getting really sick of each other and were very glad that the tour was over. After the San Francisco show, they would drive back to Los Angeles and rest for two days before flying out to Hawai'i for the last show of the tour in Honolulu.

After my conversation with Eric, I headed into the venue, and was immediately struck by how much larger it was than the Observatory in Santa Ana (see figures 5 and 6). David Choi was clearly the main act here; there was no smaller, separate room in which he performed while other bands played on a larger stage. As I entered, the venue's staff checked my ticket while a young Asian American man, who was clearly part of David's entourage and not a member of the venue staff, handed me a raffle ticket for the guitalele giveaway that would take place later. I had not seen him at the Orange County show and wondered if non-VIP members at that show had similarly been handed these raffle tickets at the door by members of David's entourage, or if David's entourage simply had not joined the tour by that point. I learned later that he and the young Asian American woman handling the merchandise had come along on the tour to help out for some time, along with his twin. It is interesting to note that these brothers, Justin and Jason, are also YouTube musicians known as the Jrodtwins.

The venue had a main floor, where the stage was located, and a balcony that wrapped around three walls of the venue. When purchasing tickets for this venue, attendees had the choice of paying an extra $25 to have dinner provided by the venue before the show. To my surprise, considering how many cheap food options are available in San Francisco, a fair amount of people seemed to have chosen this option; almost all of

the tables I could see both upstairs and downstairs were full of people eating when I walked in. This somewhat expensive dinner option, along with the various cherubs and other old-fashioned, fancy décor along the walls and facades, indicated a more upscale venue than in the Santa Ana venue (although the ticket price itself remained the same). Unlike the Observatory, which had a bar but no food options available, the Great American Music Hall had servers come around to take drink and food orders.

As the lights were turned down and the opener came onstage (Tess Henley, the same opener as at the Orange County show), it was immediately clear that this audience was much louder and more responsive than the one in Santa Ana, especially in response to the performer's banter. This crowd was not shy about showing their enthusiasm for the performers throughout the night. Some of Tess's fans or friends screamed her name. The audience here seemed more familiar with Tess and her music than in Orange County, where nobody had seemed to know who she was. She interacted with the audience much more freely and included more audience participation than at the Orange County show as a result of their enthusiasm, asking them to clap along. At one point, someone in the audience shushed those less-engaged audience members who were talking while Tess was speaking. These indicators of a more enthusiastic audience and, in turn, a more interactive performance from Tess, were not limited to her performance, and in fact intensified when David and his band took the stage.

In between the opening act and David's performance, I spoke to a group of four Asian American audience members in their twenties—three women and one man. I asked how they had gotten interested in David and his music, and they said they had discovered

him through YouTube, as he was "definitely one of the OG[57] YouTube people," and they had found him and other Asian American YouTube artists through YouTube's suggestions for related videos. One woman in particular stated that Asian American YouTube artists like David were inspiring because "You know, Asian Americans, you don't see a lot of us on television or movies, and I feel like YouTube is one place where people finally see us and we get to be represented." Her viewpoint echoed the popular narrative of YouTube as a great equalizer for Asian Americans, democratizing media and making it possible for Asian American artists like David to be seen and heard.

As at the Orange County show, the audience members cheered and got very excited when David and his band walked onstage. Although the set list was almost the same at this concert, the audience's engagement with the music was significantly more noticeable than the previous concert. The audience consistently danced and sang along to many of David's songs, especially those from older albums. The audience's fanatic declarations of love for David, screamed by female fans from various areas of the venue throughout the night, confirmed this audience's rowdiness and exuberant self-expression. These behaviors from David's fans (and friends) blew away my expectations of a docile audience like the one I had seen in Santa Ana, where the smaller audience in addition to a greater presence of David's friends (and therefore, fewer die-hard fans) may have contributed to the quieter audience. In contrast, the San Francisco show's larger audience and venue (see Figure 6) probably allowed fans to feel more anonymous and,

[57] OG stands for the slang phrase, "Original Gangster," used here by my informant to indicate that David Choi was one of the first Asian Americans to upload his music to YouTube.

consequently, more comfortable behaving gregariously. The seemingly larger ratio of fans to David's friends at the San Francisco show may also have contributed to this, as several attendees I interviewed at Santa Ana had met David through mutual friends that had come to support him, and they were not familiar with David's music—therefore, less likely to sing along, dance, and scream fanatically.

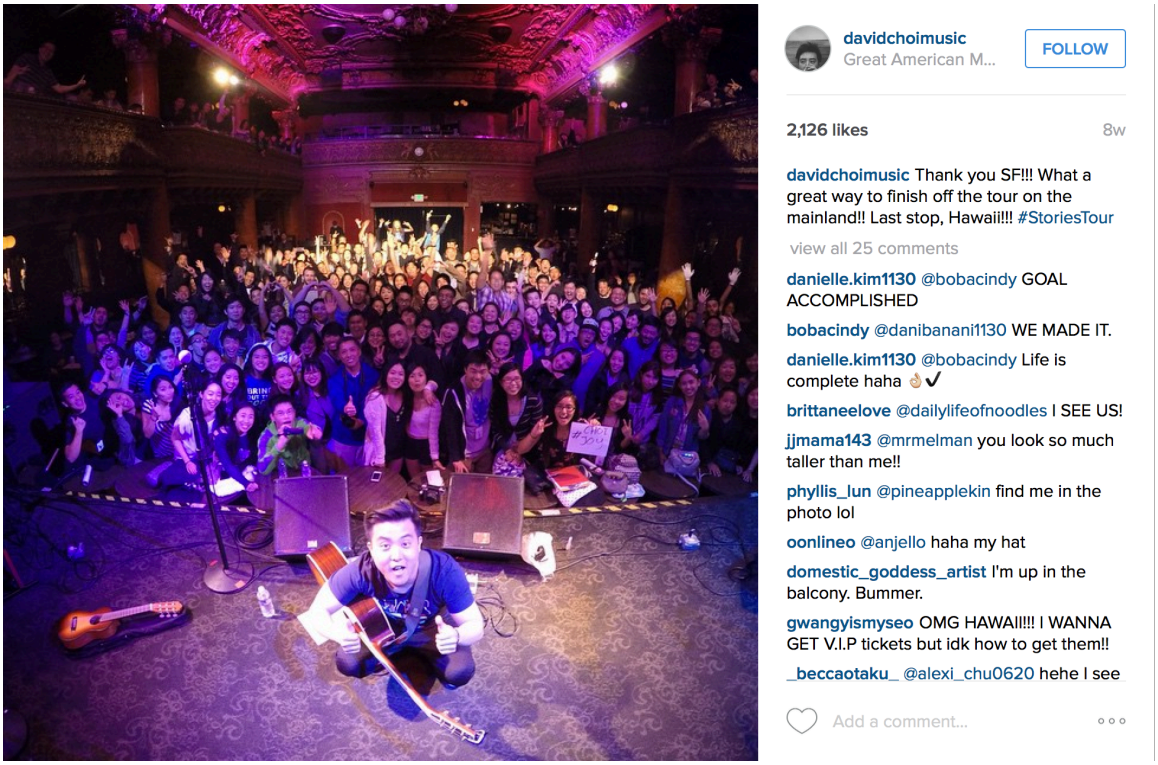

Figure 6: David's Instagram post picturing the venue and audience in San Francisco—both much larger than in Santa Ana (Figure 5).[58]

Like Tess, David responded to this audience differently than the one in Orange County, with more revealing personal stories. For example, when introducing a song off his new album, David told the audience that this past year was difficult for him because three of his grandparents had passed away in a short amount of time, inspiring this song;

[58] "David Choi (@davidchoimusic) • Instagram Photos and Videos."

when introducing the same song at the Orange County venue, he had simply left it at, "This past year was very difficult for me." David's onstage banter was also different with this audience, both with other band members and with audience members. At one point, when a particularly ardent fan loudly screamed, "I love you, David! Have my babies!" he asked, "Is that Susan?" This audience member did turn out to be his friend, to whom he responded, "Susan, you're married!"

Aside from the set list, there were several other aspects of the concert that remained more or less the same between the Orange County and the San Francisco shows. The commodification of music through the corporate sponsorship of the guitalele giveaway remained the same; audience members were still required to use Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook and tag Yamaha to win the guitalele. Other uses of social media to reinforce David's branding also remained the same, including the Instagram photos and GoPro video footage intended for an upcoming music video. Ironically, that footage was shot at every concert along the tour to go along with the song, "This One's For Me," in which David emphasizes his distaste for the music industry and musicians' self-promotion. This rejection of major label representation and capitalist music-making is obvious in the following opening lines:

> I don't want no industry
> I don't want something that holds
> Who am I kidding, it was never for the gold
> Who cares if I don't make it
> I never ever wanted fame
> Everyone around me knows it
> that this whole thing's a game[59]

[59] David Choi, *Stories of You's and Me* (I Can Do It Music/Choi's Music, Inc., 2014).

David's self-identification as an independent musician, thereby distancing himself from the mainstream music industry, was a through line between these concerts. He made a point toward the end of each concert to thank his audience members for coming to the show, emphasizing the importance of their support for him as an "indie musician" and "unsigned" artist – simultaneously rejecting major label representation and making the most out of being unsigned.

While David certainly lies outside the mainstream as an unsigned artist whose songs have not achieved widespread radioplay, it is difficult to place him in the same category as other Asian American YouTube artists like Legaci or JR Aquino. His savvy use of social media to promote his music and his image (as brand) reflects that of other Asian Americans, but he surpasses other Asian American YouTube artists in his ability to make a living from his music. In particular, his corporate sponsorship by Yamaha and ability to sell merchandise including physical albums (CDs and vinyl), posters, and guitar picks separate him from other Asian American YouTubers. On the other hand, his status as an artist squarely outside the mainstream music industry results in his use of friends to help sell merchandise; his band and manager driving themselves all over the country for the entire tour; and his band having to set up and take down their own equipment, rather than having hired staff for all these tasks. In this way, it is difficult to locate David entirely in either the niche Asian American YouTube market or in the mainstream music market. Instead, he represents an artist who appeals to something in between—perhaps the most successfully "mainstream" market and audience an Asian American YouTube artist has achieved so far.

JR Aquino

In contrast to David Choi's concerts, and put on partially to promote David's new album, JR Aquino's performance on the University of California, Riverside campus was part of a fundraising event put on by a non-profit organization called Circle K. The event was called the Kids Rock Benefit Concert, and it included carnival games, food, and beverages. It also featured performances from various campus music groups and student performers, leading up to the headliner, Filipino American YouTube musician JR Aquino. Like the David Choi concerts, most of the attendees were young, college-age Asian Americans. As with most UCs, UCR has historically had a large Asian American student population; although it is now the most ethnically diverse of all the UCs, Asian Americans remain the largest ethnic group represented in the student population. This concert format was significantly different from David's in its multifaceted nature; although JR Aquino was the headliner for this event, many audience members, including the ones with whom I spoke, were there due to their involvement with the non-profit rather than JR Aquino's performance. While this may seem odd, for most YouTube musicians (and indeed for unsigned and up-and-coming bands long before YouTube), these kinds of multipurpose events on college campuses comprise a significant portion of their performing schedule. The multipurpose events for which Asian American YouTube artists perform are often sponsored by Asian American campus groups or are otherwise associated with Asian Americanness.

The concert took place in a conference room on the third floor of the Highlander Union Building, one of the main buildings on campus. By the time I arrived to the event, which ran for five and a half hours on Friday, January 23, 2015, it was already in full swing. The room was split in half, with the side closest to the entrance housing the carnival games and the opposite side housing the stage with performers. The opening acts consisted mainly of Asian American undergraduate students performing covers of popular songs either as soloists or in groups of two or three. These acts resembled the videos uploaded by many popular Asian American YouTube artists in their musical style, using a single amplified acoustic guitar along with singers to enact a singer-songwriter aesthetic.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this event was the audience. The attendees at this event were split into two groups—those interested in the musical performances near the stage, and those interested in socializing and playing carnival games near the door. Considering the split nature of this event, this in itself was not shocking; what was surprising was that literally all of the audience members listening to the music were seated on the floor! These listeners, though attentive, did not interact with the performers at all until the very last duo before JR Aquino finally got the audience to stand up. At this point, audience members began to participate by recording the performance on their phones; however, they stood stock still and remained silent, neither dancing nor singing along.

When JR Aquino finally came out onstage, the crowd cheered and got much more excited. As he began to perform, a sea of cell phones appeared in the audience to record

him. Unlike what one would expect at most mainstream concerts, the organizers and MCs of the event seemed to condone recording. When one of the MCs was about to walk in front of my camera, he first asked if I was recording and tried to duck out of the way so as not to disturb my video. However, aside from this participation through recording, the audience remained silent and motionless. The audience also maintained a distance of several feet from the stage and between each other until Aquino called out this strange behavior, saying, "I feel like there's an awkward barrier. Can you guys move up?" After this, the crowd surged forward and moved much closer to Aquino, at a distance much more like what I would expect at a concert, especially in such a small venue. It was only during Aquino's cover of the popular Jonas Brothers' song, "Jealous," that the audience finally began to really interact with him. During this cover, he did not have to tell the audience to dance, clap, or sing; they began to do so without cajoling. At one point, he switched roles with the audience, remaining silent while the audience sang the chorus and he echoed their singing.

Aquino performed solo on an electroacoustic guitar while singing, with no backing band. Unlike David, who performed exclusively original music, Aquino performed mostly covers with just a few original songs sprinkled in. Interestingly, he addressed a criticism often made of Asian American YouTube artists as masters of mimesis rather than original content when he admitted that for his songs, "It's basically the same chords because I have no originality." This admission, whether true or not, illustrated another big difference between David and many other YouTube artists in his considerable songwriting skills, for which he has received awards in the past, as opposed

to the myriad Asian American YouTubers who post endless covers and often avoid uploads of original songs.

Like David, Aquino repeatedly encouraged audience members to make use of social media to contact him, particularly through Twitter and Instagram. Unlike David, he did not actually take selfies with the audience or otherwise use social media during the concert, missing a vital opportunity for self-promotion. It is clear that Aquino and other Asian American YouTube artists are less savvy than David in their use of social media to promote their own brand. This was made clear to me a few weeks later, when I discovered that Aquino and several other Asian American YouTube musicians had started their own tour just a month later, and Aquino had never once tried to plug this tour during his set at the Kids Rock Concert. This less aggressive form of self-promotion may explain why Aquino's BSY Tour seems less organized than David's, with very few dates and cities announced in advance. In combination with Aquino's focus on covers instead of originals, perhaps the absence of commodification (so present in David's performances) partially explains why Aquino and others like him have not seemed to reach the same level of success as David. However, as my interlocutors indicated in our interviews, striving for that particular kind of success is not always the goal for Asian American YouTube artists.

Perspectives from YouTube Musicians

I interviewed four Asian American YouTube musicians, all young Filipino American men in their twenties with a wide range in popularity on YouTube (according

to their numbers of subscribers). Jan-Michael de la Cruz clearly identifies himself as no longer active in the YouTube community, although he expressed the possibility of returning to upload more videos sometime in the future. Charles Victoria and Melvin Gutierrez both squarely identify as current YouTube musicians, although Melvin currently balances his YouTube career with being a full-time student and working part time at a museum. The last of my interlocutors, AJ Rafael, is quite well known among fans of Asian American YouTube artists, and although he is currently on hiatus from the YouTube scene, he describes music as his full-time career. AJ has significant personal and professional connections with other Asian American YouTube artists, including David Choi, Cathy Nguyen, and many others. His perspective on Asian American YouTube musicians' self-branding and promotion, as well as his views on the Asian American YouTube community, differed slightly from the perspectives of the other three, and merits close consideration before turning to the others.

I was able to get in contact with AJ Rafael through mutual acquaintances, and after arranging a general time and place to meet through texting, he spontaneously invited me over to his house for a night of hanging out with friends, playing video games, and jamming. I was taken aback by how comfortable AJ was inviting someone he had never met over to his house late on a Monday evening, and prepared myself for a potentially awkward evening with AJ and his friends. When I arrived at AJ's home in Riverside, California, introduced myself, and shook his hand, AJ said he was going to hug me, because after all, I was in his house. These fairly intimate overtures, along with his continually introducing me throughout the night to his mother and his friends as "my

friend Eileen," indicated that perhaps the intimacy David showed with his fans was not limited to David and his tour. After talking with AJ about his collaboration with other Asian American musicians, it seemed in fact that this friendliness, especially between Asian Americans, is a hallmark of the Asian American YouTube community, as AJ repeatedly stated the need for Asian Americans to support each other in their endeavors. He discussed consistent collaboration with other artists as essential to their collective success, particularly in the years between 2007 and 2011 at the beginning of YouTube's rise in popularity. This collaboration was necessary because, he said:

> That's really the only way we [Asian American musicians] can grow. I mean, to me, collaboration was one of the key things of growing […]. I'd just be like, "Hey, do you want to do a video sometime?" And probably a hundred percent of them said yes, and maybe sixty percent of them, we actually got to do one, because we all kind of live in the area.[60]

This informal, friendly collaboration with other Asian American musicians was described by my three other interlocutors as well. Jan-Michael, Charles, and Melvin all identify each other as friends as well as previous collaborators, and like AJ, acknowledge the importance of working together. For them, working with other Asian American musicians was similarly important for their personal growth, as well as a byproduct of the community itself. As Melvin pointed out, "The YouTube community is really small and the people who started together like Gabe Bondoc, Jeremy Passion, AJ Rafael, etc., we are all friends and keep in touch. We all seem to inspire each other in one way or another."[61] These panethnic collaborations, therefore, not only build community between

[60] AJ Rafael, Interview with the author, May 11, 2015.
[61] Melvin Gutierrez, e-mail interview with the author, April 23, 2015.

Asian American YouTube musicians but are also a deliberate strategy used to boost the popularity of individual Asian American musicians and the community as a whole.

These collaborations often occur in the form of cover versions of popular songs, as in the "Baby" video produced by Legaci, Traphik, and Cathy Nguyen. Like the act of collaboration itself, the choice of song to cover is often strategic. In describing the process of choosing which song to cover, AJ indicated that he goes first by songs he and his collaborator both like, although sometimes they access the list of top hits on iTunes and take the popularity of a song into consideration to generate more hits. However, he expressed some disdain at the idea of covering popular songs he did not like just for the views, as some other YouTube artists do. This dislike of YouTube musicians choosing particular songs or videos specifically for fame was shared by Melvin, who felt that this strategy, as well as the attention to editing found in newer videos, was a shift away from the original goal of many Asian American YouTube musicians:

> I feel like things are truly changing. At first the people I spoke to were all about sharing the music. It was never for the fame. Now I see people wanting to post videos just about anything. Vlogging [posting video logs] music, etc. Just as a way to get them out to the public eye. It is a little bit saddening to see such a powerful outlet be used just to become famous. I loved seeing the pure, raw talent but now people's videos are always pre-recorded or edited to not only be pleasing to the ears but pleasing to the eyes. I feel like the raw "one take sessions" have died but I can see it slowly making a comeback again.[62]

Although both AJ and Melvin both expressed a sadness for this goal of Asian American YouTube musicians to compromise on their musical aspirations for the sake of views, AJ

[62] Melvin Gutierrez, e-mail interview with the author, May 5, 2015.

was more forgiving and understanding of this strategy, especially in terms of expanding into other kinds of videos to promote artists' "brand."

Throughout our conversation, AJ repeatedly brought up how YouTube musicians have to focus on their brand. He said, "I just felt a lot of pressure to make [my YouTube career] financially stable, and so I started worrying a lot more about just myself and my brand. You know, in that sense, community kind of becomes second or third priority, naturally."[63] This focus on personal brand that AJ observed thus resulted in a sort of fracturing of community, where the focus on individual success and promotion relegated the former sense of community in person to online forms through retweets on Twitter and shares on Facebook. He defined this branding as the different ways artists do things to differentiate themselves, specifically citing Kina Grannis's cycle of tours and writing, David Choi's merchandise and webseries, Jason Chen's Music Never Sleeps campaign, and even his own YouTube shows Music Lab and Pen Trails. He emphasized the importance of this commodification as a way for musicians to achieve financial stability:

> When you hear Music Lab, you think of me. When you hear Pen Trails, you think of me. When you hear the "Jellybean" music video, that's Kina Grannis. You know what I mean? When you think of David the Web series, you think of David Choi, so I think over the years, everyone just developed their brand. Like Jason Chen does this cool thing, Music Never Sleeps, and he has an owl. It's little things like that, and I think it's really important that people focus on that stuff for sure because I think that's what will keep them financially stable and at the same time, people who promote your brand are walking billboards, and they help spread the word about your brand.

Considering AJ's emphasis on the importance of such branding, it appears that this self-promotion is in fact effective for the artists he named, considering the vast difference in

[63] Rafael, Interview with the author.

subscriber numbers between them and other, lesser-known Asian American YouTube artists. Although all of my interlocutors consistently indicated that their first priority in uploading videos on YouTube was to "share their music," AJ was the only one who pointed out these more practical, financial issues in trying to make a YouTube career financially viable.

However, all of my interlocutors agreed on some level that Asian Americans were constrained as musicians on YouTube in terms of how they were categorized, musically and racially. For Charlie, although the Asian American YouTube community was a positive experience, labeling it according to racial category was restrictive:

> I think the Asian American YouTube community is pretty awesome, but what would be even more awesome is to break the mold as the Asian American YouTube community and exist as just the YouTube community. It's awesome to share similar interests as Asian Americans, we eat *lumpia*, we bless our *lolo* and *lolas*, etc., but it'd be awesome to share more than that on a deeper universal level.

Jan-Michael had similar concerns about racially labeling the community. He said, "I never really thought of it as an Asian American community because I just kind of thought of them as musicians that I could relate to."[64]d In this way, he preferred to think of the community as a community of musicians rather than of Asian Americans, again drawing on the idea of music being universal and transcending markers of difference. Melvin similarly stated,

> I feel like being Asian American and being put in that category of Asian American YouTube artist is sometimes limiting us as musicians. […] My heritage and my culture play a big factor to who I am but I don't feel like that should be categorized as something on the internet. We all play music and we all love what

[64] Jan-Michael de la Cruz, Interview with the author, February 19, 2015.

> we do but I feel like that puts us in a little bubble and I want people to know that we are more than just the typical Asian American making YouTube videos.[65]

Finally, AJ also said that although he considered himself part of an Asian American YouTube community, he also considered himself part of a YouTube community, as well as a community of independent musicians. While they clearly expressed a love for YouTube as a platform for sharing their music, all of these musicians felt that they were limited—even ghettoized—as Asian Americans uploading their work onto YouTube.

Conclusions

Clearly, the celebratory narrative built up around Asian Americans and their use of YouTube is part of a broader cultural project focused on visibility. It inspires fans and gives them hope for better representation in media at large. On the other hand, this so-called democratized media platform leaves at least some musicians feeling as though they can only make music in racially delimited spaces. To counteract the ghettoized nature of the Asian American YouTube scene, these musicians experiment with creative strategies to gain some degree of notoriety and/or financial success.

One such strategy is the activation of Asian American panethnicity with extensive collaboration between different musicians, as demonstrated in the "Baby" video featuring Legaci, Cathy Nguyen, and Traphik. This collaboration not only strengthens the community of musicians, as expressed by my interlocutors, but also directs viewer traffic between multiple artists and ultimately boosts subscriber numbers. Since musicians often

[65] Gutierrez, e-mail interview with the author, April 23, 2015.

strategize by collaborating on cover versions of popular songs, they also gain traffic from subscribers outside their usual audiences who are fans of mainstream artists and songs.

Asian American YouTubers also try to gain popularity by commodifying their music through branding, self-promotion, and merchandise. This tactic plays out in many different ways: artists like David Choi and AJ Rafael sell merchandise and emphasize product placement, endorsements, and videos promoting themselves and/or their corporate sponsors; other artists like JR Aquino are less focused on commodification but still tour with other Asian American YouTube musicians. All of these musicians, regardless of their focus on these commodity capitalist strategies, make extensive use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to brand themselves.

Finally, these male musicians play with mainstream heteronormative values to attract wider audiences and broader popularity. They focus on covers and original songs that frequently focus on heterosexual love and relationships; indeed, they rarely sing about anything else. To counteract the emasculation experienced by artists like Legaci on mainstream media, artists like Traphik carefully present themselves in hypermasculine ways in an attempt to transcend mainstream biases toward Asian Americans.

Through the kind of musical collaboration evident in "Baby" as well as in David's and AJ's work with well-known Asian American production collective Wong Fu Productions,[66] these artists expose themselves and each other to fan bases that may or

[66] Wong Fu Productions is particularly important in the Asian American YouTube community because of its trendsetting role with videos addressing issues of Asian American identity, as well as its role in bringing together and promoting Asian American entertainers in the many videos the collective produces.

may not overlap, and they also draw in new audiences through showcases of their collective talent. These collaborations increase their visibility on YouTube, and also create carefully crafted relationships between Asian American YouTube artists and between the artists and their fans. These collaborations visually and musically create inter-ethnic bridges. They enact panethnicity to rally Asian American communities behind these artists and root for their mainstream success as the face of a young Asian American generation hungry to be seen and heard in the mainstream. As scholar Grace Wang argues,

> Casting other Asian Americans in their videos and supporting a network of other Asian American artists through their work, these performers collaboratively project a worldview that places Asian Americans at the normative center. Being Asian American becomes less a marker of difference than a shared aspect of identity that does not require additional explanation, commentary, or translation.[67]

In this way, Asian American YouTube musicians succeed in using YouTube's democratized platform to create a new space for visibility through collaboration and outside mainstream broadcast television and radio. Individual Asian American YouTube musicians negotiate this space in their attempts to gain mainstream success in different ways, sometimes playing to mainstream values and sometimes combating stereotypes to bolster support for themselves outside the YouTube community.

These strategies are deployed by Asian American YouTube musicians to gain wider acceptance by mainstream audiences. Some might argue that their popularity on YouTube indicates some level of mainstream success, but the fact remains that these artists remain well-known only on YouTube and not through more traditionally

[67] Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America*, 117.

widespread outlets such as television or radio. In other words, these musicians have not broken through to audiences beyond their young Asian American market niche. Asian Americans in their twenties hardly represent what has always been considered mainstream: the white audiences that have historically driven the U.S. popular music market.

Although it seems clear that YouTube's deceptively democratic platform will continue to provide Asian American musicians with new opportunities for their voices to be heard, it also seems likely that new media platforms alone will do nothing to counter the ghettoization of these artists nor to bring them into the mainstream in any meaningful, long-term capacity.

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