Ironic Blackness as Masculine Cool: Asian American Language and Authenticity on YouTube

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This article examines the cultural significance of cross-racial embodiments of linguistic signs that may be legible as 'black' within mainstream US discourses but, in YouTube's transnational space, may be subject to alternative interpretations. It specifically explores ideologies of race, gender, and authenticity that underlie signs stereotypically linked to symbolic blackness and embodied by a young Chinese American YouTube star named Kevin Wu, whose performance is further complicated by his ironic footing. I argue that although Wu's stance recognizes certain contradictory values of his racialized performance, his humor never challenges stereotypes of black hypermasculinity. At the same time, my examination of how viewers collaboratively interpret Wu suggests that although they may largely reproduce widely circulating ideologies of race, gender, and linguistic authenticity in the USA, their collaborative praise participates in the reshaping of widely circulating imagery of Asian masculinity in transnational space.

INTRODUCTION

In the USA, the embodiment of styles ideologically linked to symbolic blackness by Asian American men carries complex cultural significance. An optimistic reading may suggest the possibilities of cross-racial cultural alignment, namely, a shared orientation to African American culture among youth of different races as well as a collaborative challenge to the hegemonic status of whiteness (Cutler 2008). For Asian American men, who are frequently devalued within, or altogether erased from, hegemonic discourses of masculinity, black embodiments may be understood as an act of gender recuperation (Eglash 2002). However, a less optimistic reading also recognizes that the particular brand of physical masculinity that young Asian American men associate with blackness can reproduce essentialist racial imagery of masculine excess among African American men (Bucholtz 1999; Chun 2001). Additionally, such cross-racial acts are necessarily connected to a long history of mainstream and white appropriations of African American cultural and linguistic forms (Smitherman 1994; Bucholtz and Lopez 2011).

In transnational spaces such as YouTube, Asian embodiments of blackness acquire additional cultural significance. Importantly, these practices potentially

lose salience as acts of racialized differentiation and may instead gain social meanings of specific relevance to a transnational community whose members share a positive orientation to hip hop—a 'global hip hop nation' (Alim *et al*. 2009). In Brazilian and Japanese rap, for example, commodified signs of blackness may background racialized distinctions and foreground local forms of youth social distinction (Pennycook 2003; Roth-Gordon 2007). Likewise in South Korea, 'black' forms may index resistance (Lee 2004) or even cultural prestige because of how their classification as American English invokes a cosmopolitan masculinity (Lo and Chi Kim 2012). Relevant as well is the shifting ideological value of Asian masculinities as East Asian male entertainers have emerged as transnational objects of sexual desire (Jung 2010). Along these lines, the case examined here involves the celebration of a young Asian American man whose individual prominence and desirability may contribute significantly to this widespread revaluation of Asian masculinity.

This article investigates the cultural significance of cross-racial embodiments of linguistic signs that may be legible as 'black' within US spaces but, in YouTube's transnational space, become subject to alternative interpretations. It specifically explores how these racialized signs, as embodied by an enormously popular Chinese American YouTube star named Kevin Wu, move across spaces of interpretation and how meanings may emerge through the comments that evaluate his performance. In the specific video analyzed, cultural meanings are further complicated by the ironic footing Wu adopts in his reflexive critique of his black embodiment; his stance displays an ambivalence toward both his own racial inauthenticity and masculine excess. The analysis thus explores how ideologies of race, gender, and authenticity underlie Wu's complex performance of ironic blackness as well as how ideological meanings emerge once he is evaluated by his transnational viewership.

My analysis considers two moments of Wu's performance that are potentially legible as linguistic blackness. In one case, he explicitly labels his performance as 'black', and in another, he implicitly invokes blackness through the use of semiotic markers stereotypically associated with a racialized hypermasculinity. I argue that although Wu's ironic stance recognizes certain contradictory values of his black embodiment, his humor never challenges gendered stereotypes of blackness. At the same time, I suggest that an understanding of his performance must consider its uptake. Although viewers collaboratively interpret Wu in terms of widely circulating ideologies of race, gender, and authenticity, their responses also bring into conversation a disparate set of interpretations that, taken together, challenge unitary readings of racial embodiments. Finally, I argue that collaborative praise of Wu in this video as well as numerous others may reshape widely circulating images of Asian masculinity within YouTube's transnational space (cf. Thornton 2010; Chun and Walters 2011).

RACIALIZED STYLES AS MASCULINE COOL

The performance of masculine cool addressed in this article lies at the intersection of two racialized styles of masculinity that circulate in US youth popular culture and subsequently move into a transnational inter-pretive space. The first is a 'gangster' style of cool or a physical masculinity stereotypically associated with African American hip-hop and working-class gang culture. Although performances of this style are often explicitly racialized in public discourse as 'acting black' or 'speaking Ebonics'—and even classified as 'appropriations of African American Vernacular English' by scholars, they are often implicitly understood as displays of gender and class identities (Bucholtz 1999; Chun 2001; Reyes 2005); such explicit readings of 'blackness' may often constitute a critique of perceived hyper-masculinity in some communities (Chun 2010). As sociolinguists have argued, youth of across various ethno-racial and socioeconomic groups may positively orient to such a style, yet they also necessarily reproduce essentializing notions about African American culture (Bucholtz 1999; Chun 2001).

A second style, namely, 'ironic' masculine cool, is performed through an ambivalent stance toward the kind of physical masculinity just described—that is, it is a simultaneous embodiment and critique of hypermasculinity. As researchers have noted, performances of ironic masculinity may some-times destabilize a coherent sense of masculinity by giving voice to oppos-itional perspectives (Benwell 2004), whereas at other times maintain a hegemonic masculinity because of the potential for performers to safely voice heterosexist and sexist positions (Korobov 2005; Kendall 2008). Through 'stylization' (Coupland 2001), or a uni-directional double-voicing (Bakhtin 1984), the ironic speaker gestures toward 'shared aspirations' with the figure he embodies yet also marks the performance precisely *as* performance rather than as authentic self-presentation. In some cases, ironic performances may lean toward the parodic, marking a symbolic break between an earnest desire for physical masculinity and a self-deprecating mockery of this desire. Although this style is not always ex-plicitly racialized in US popular culture, one of its most saliently circulating forms involves the ironic stylization of black gangster masculinity by white middle-class men who positively orient to youth culture, thus explicitly framed and recognized as a form of 'crossing' (Rampton 1995). In Hollywood representations (Bucholtz and Lopez 2011), this ambivalence is often framed as humorous because white figures are represented as never fully achieving the gangster masculinity they emulate. Although this ambivalent footing complicates the thrust of its social commentary, even ostensibly serving as a critique of white men viewed as insufficiently masculine or cool, such acts may reproduce racial and linguistic stereotypes as well as maintain the hegemonic status of white masculinity (Bucholtz and Lopez 2011).[1]

RACE, LANGUAGE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALNESS

A conceptualization of racialized styles as linked to stereotypical social types builds on current sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological approaches. First, this analysis assumes that the indexical value of a linguistic form does not derive from its status as an objectively listable 'feature' of a distinctive ethnic code (e.g. African American English) but rather emerges through discursive practices of performance and reception. Methodologically, the visible linguistic traces left on YouTube renders it an ideal site to examine the ebb and flow of signs in these discursive processes (e.g. Rymes 2012). I specifically attend to the processes through which performers and audiences connect semiotic forms with complex sociocultural meanings while also making claims about the realness of language through processes of authentication and denaturalization (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). As such, the ethnolinguistic classification I engage in by labeling particular acts as 'black' must contend with the fact that the same signs associated with racial difference may at other times, or even at the same time, index differences of class, gender, age, nationality, or modernity.

Secondly, although racialized styles are understood here as social constructs, invoking stereotypes, images, or figures (Irvine 1990; Koven 2004; Agha 2005), they produce and are produced by material realities. As such, linguistic styles cannot be relegated to an imaginary status; not only do hearable and recordable practices—moments that observers and analysts recognize and capture in the physical world—produce ideologies of raced and gendered bodies but these ideologies also inform how such bodies come to participate in actual physical spaces, economic structures, and social relationships.

Finally, this approach to racialized styles recognizes that any ethnolinguistic description and classification is a socio-political act (Jaspers 2008; Chun 2010). It has been noted, for example, that linguists' descriptions have sometimes contributed to anti-racist projects of African American recognition and legitmation in the USA (Bucholtz 2003), whereas at other times, they have abetted racist cultural projects of European colonialism in Africa (Makoni and Pennycook 2005). Reading a practice as 'talking black' may seem an objective characterization of racial performance, namely, the embodiment of racial signs, but it is necessarily tied to a moral evaluation that presupposes a politics of racial membership and linguistic ownership: *who is black and who isn't; which linguistic forms are black and which aren't;* and *which groups have the right to use these forms and which don't.* Classification is thus not merely a description of difference but a practice that responds to differences of power and value.

ASIAN AMERICAN MASCULINITIES IN TRANSNATIONAL NEW MEDIA

My analysis below focuses on the popular YouTube video *I'm not cool* (Wu 2011).[2] Uploaded in August 2011, it received 5,298,572 views by the time of

my data collection in March 2012 and continues to be widely viewed on YouTube, with 7,183,061 views by August 2013. It was the 77th video uploaded by a prolific 21-year-old Chinese American video creator from Houston, Texas, known both by his personal name Kevin Wu and his nickname KevJumba. His 2–4-minute videos, which total 114 to date, span a range of comedy genres, including music videos, cultural commentary about his social relationships, and how-to lessons. Wu's videos have received a total of 338,511,226 views since the time he joined YouTube in July 2006.[3]

Although Wu's popularity on YouTube has fallen in the past year, once with the seventh most subscribed channel, he remains popular, currently with the 75th most subscribed channel among all YouTube video creators. His appeal stems from his accessible persona as a young man earnestly grappling with his masculinity, often displaying a satirical humility regarding his physical and social shortcomings but presupposing a confidence required for such public self-deprecation. Linguistically, his performance is usually delivered in a fluid, relaxed, informal register of standard American English, identifying him as a 'regular American kid'. Although he engages in moments of stylization invoking stereotypes of race, gender, and class, he presents his 'normal' style as largely unmarked along these dimensions, besides his characteristic video opening (*Hey guys, how y'all doing*), which may index his Texan upbringing.

Despite the recognizably 'all American' person he projects—or perhaps because of it—Wu's videos have broad international youth appeal. According to YouTube's statistics provided below his video, *I'm not cool* has been viewed primarily by female and male youth within a '13–17' age bracket as well as female youth in an '18–24' age bracket. YouTube's geographical representation of his viewership suggests that his audience is transnational though primarily in the USA. A manual search of the channel page of every hundredth commenter among the 41,860 comments considered in the current analysis, in addition to 400 additional commenters, suggests that commenters were mostly North American, though located as well across Europe, Asia, Australia, South America, and Africa. Most (57 per cent) were from the USA (385 comments), followed by Canada (50), the UK (27), the Philippines (21), Malaysia (16), Singapore (14), Australia (12), and the Netherlands (11). Commenters also claimed to be located in Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Bhutan, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Croatia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Guam, Hong Kong, Hungary, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Mauritius, New Zealand, Northern Mariana Islands, Norway, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, South Georgia, South Sandwich Islands, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

Wu's videos are also part of a broader YouTube presence among young Asian Americans with transnational popularity, such as Ryan Higa (Nigahiga),

Freddie Wong, Michelle Phan, Timothy Chantarangsu (Timothy DeLaGhetto), and Wong Fu Productions. The visibility of Asian Americans on YouTube, in particular men, may be related in part to the growing visibility of Asian figures of masculinity in transnational popular culture. Specifically, although Asian American men have been largely absent in popular US discourses of desirable masculinities, the emergence of Asian American figures may draw some cachet from the commodification of young South Korean and Japanese masculinities through the transnational marketing of television series and popular music since the 1990s (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008). The channel profiles of those who comment on Wu's videos suggest an active engagement with South Korean popular culture. Perhaps more importantly, Asian American male visibility on YouTube is also the outcome of strategically collaborative alliances among Asian American celebrities who share their respective fan bases. Wu closely collaborates with other popular Asian American YouTube celebrities, including Ryan Higa, Dominic Sandoval, Victor King, Chester See, and J. R. Aquino, in addition to Asian Americans with prominence beyond YouTube, such as actor Justin Chon, and basketball player Jeremy Lin.

As noted, Asian American male visibility as figures of desire in this cultural space starkly contrasts their relative absence in Hollywood and other sites of popular culture. Central to the genre of comedy that Asian American YouTube comedians perform is an engagement with the historical erasure or rejection of Asian masculinities in North American discourses (Kang 1993), described by David Eng (2001) as a form of 'racial castration'. As I argue later in the article, it is precisely Wu's incongruent juxtaposition of an excess of masculinity indexed by blackness, on the one hand, with a lack of masculinity indexed by his Asianness, on the other, that his racialized embodiment is presented as humorous. YouTube videos produced by Asian Americans genre may thus serve as an important genre through which Asian American masculinity is in the process of being reshaped or, at the very least, made visible.

PERFORMING IRONIC BLACK MASCULINITY

The two moments of blackness that are analyzed here are part of tightly structured video that illustrates why Wu is 'not cool'. Its introduction notes that some of his viewers have accused him of inauthentic coolness ('I get a lot of comments saying I try too hard'), his defensive response to this critique ('and this offends me'), his comical admission to inauthenticity ('Because it's true. I try really hard'), and his decision to openly admit his lack of coolness, thus resolving the problem at hand ('So no more trying to be cool. In fact, this video's gonna be about why I'm not cool.'). The body of the video consists of 'ten reasons why [Wu is] not cool'. Wu conceptualizes masculinity and coolness in terms of three categories of uncool habits: inauthentic emulation, hypermasculinity, and non-hetero-normative masculinity. I have numbered the habits below according to their order of appearance in the video, listing some under more than one category.

Example 1. Habits of inauthentic emulation

#2   I realize I do this a lot with my hair. *((flips long bangs up))* Like Justin Bieber with Tourette's.

#5   Also I subconsciously act black around black people and it's because I try really hard to fit in. Like fo rizzles.

#6   I secretly really want to be a Korean pop star. *((sings Korean song wearing make up))*

Example 2. Habits of hypermasculinity

#3   When I'm bored, my roommates and I have dance battles in my apartment.

#4   I'm also stubborn especially when I think I'm right.

#9   I like to show off sometimes especially when I'm working out at the gym.

#10   My friends find me annoying cause I'm super competitive all the time even when it's unnecessary.

Example 3. Habits of non-hetero-normative masculinity

#1   I spend more time talking to a camera than I spend talking to females.

#2   I realize I do this a lot with my hair. ((flips long bangs up)) Like Justin Bieber with Tourette's.

#3   When I'm bored, my roommates and I have dance battles in my apartment.

#6   I secretly really want to be a Korean pop star. *((sings wearing make up))*

#7   This is embarrassing but I cry sometimes. I cried during Up. I cried during Kung Fu Panda 2. I cried listening to Adele's new album. I definitely cried when my hero Yao Ming retired. It was- It was so sad.

#8   This is even more embarrassing but my friends and I have matching pajamas.

Following several of these critiques, Wu incorporates brief illustrative skits (#3, #4, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10) that include basketball star Jeremy Lin (#4, #7, #9, #10) and YouTube collaborators Ryan Higa (#3, #9) and Victor King (#3). The video then closes with a summary ('Anyways, those are the ten reasons why I'm not cool.'), which is followed by a display of comically self-effacing masculinity ('I hope you'll still like me after this video. If not, I understand.'), which is then contrasted with another example of self-promoting hypermasculinity ('Now if you'll excuse me, I'm about to go destroy my buddy Jeremy at a game of basketball.').

Although several linguistic moments in this video are potentially identifiable as linguistic blackness [e.g. shouting *what's up* and *what's good y'all* after an urban-style dance (#3) and using a fronted nasal in *worki**ng** out* (#9)], I focus here on two cases that are most saliently legible as racialized blackness. In the first case (#5), Wu makes explicit reference to his performance as a form of positive racial accommodation to his African American friends.

Example 4. Wu's admission to acting black around black people (Minute 1:01–1:10)

1	Also
2	I: subconsciously?
3	act *black.*
4	around
5	black people.
6	and it's because I try
7	*real*ly hard to fit in.
8	Like
9	for (.)
10	rizzles.

In addition to its self-deprecatory suggestion, the humor of this admission to 'act[ing] black' depends on Wu's juxtaposition of his earnest desire to perform blackness with his failure to do so. This failure is constructed by his hesitant discourse marker *like* (line 8), his mid-phrase pause (line 9), and the use of standard English postvocalic /r/ in *for* (line 9), which he incongruently juxtaposes with the non-standard suffix *–izzles* (in a phrase 'for rizzles'), saliently associated in US popular culture with an African American gangster identity (line 10). This suffix, initially circulated in 2002 via African American rapper Snoop Dogg's song 'Suited N Booted', became widely parodied in mainstream popular culture as an emblem of an incompetent or ironic embodiment of a black gangster style. In sum, Wu constructs himself as an incompetent performer of this style, despite his positive intentions of accommodation to his African American friends.

In a second moment of blackness (#10), which occurs a minute later in the video, Wu illustrates his 'hypercompetitive' habits. Although he never explicitly describes his performance in racial terms, his marked and repeated use of monophthongal /ay/ alongside other racialized markers, after successfully batting away Jeremy Lin's crumpled paper ball, invokes a stereotype of black masculinity.

Example 5. Wu's admission to being hypercompetitive in 'I'm not cool' (Minute 2:08 – 2:29)

1	WU:	My friends find me annoying? *((to Wu's audience))*	Diphthong [ai] in *my*
2		cause I'm *su*per competitive	Diphthong [ai] in *I'm*
3		*all* the time	Diphthong [ai] in *time*
4		even when it's unnecessary.	
5		Hey Jeremy Lin. *((to Lin, relaxing on Wu's bed as he irons))*	
6		I bet you can't make this piece of *pa*per	Diphthong [ai] in *I*
7		into this *trash* can right here.	

8	LIN:	*Al*right.	Diphthong [ai] in *alright*
9		*((calmly tosses the paper ball from the bed))*	
10	WU:	TOLD YOU. *((aggressively bats ball away with one hand))*	
11		I TOLD YOU. *((stands up, thrusts hands in front of body))*	Monophthong [a:] in *I*
12		NOT IN MY HOUSE BABY*((lifts shirt, fanning motion))*	Monophthong [a:] in *my*, falsetto *house*
13		NO:T IN MY: HOU:SE. *((lifts shirt, fanning motion))*	Monophthong [a:] in *my*
14		*((flips bangs back, sits down))*	
15		Anyways *((to Wu's audience))*	
16		those are the ten reasons	
17		Why	
18		I'm *not* cool.	Diphthong [ai] in *I*

The humor of this excerpt depends on an incongruence between masculinities: Wu performs a hypermasculinity, characterized by an aggressively competitive attitude toward Lin, a professional basketball player, yet his masculine performance is undercut by the ridiculous of his boasted feat: 'rejecting' a paper ball nonchalantly thrown by Lin, who is reclined on bed while performing the humdrum task of ironing (line 5). As noted earlier, Wu does not explicitly refer to blackness, yet he racializes his performance through salient and co-occurring semiotic elements. Importantly, his monophthong [a:] tokens (lines 11, 12, 13), which are set in contrast to the standard diphthongs in lines 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 18, become linked with two activities stereotypically associated with African American men: boasting (Kochman 1981) and basketball. These monophthongal tokens are embedded in two boastful phrases (*I told you* and *not in my house*), commonly used among US basketball players upon successfully denying an opponent's attempt to score. Although this monophthong variant is sometimes associated with regionally marked varieties of Southern English, with which Wu may be familiar as a Texan, it is likely a racial, rather than regional, index: stereotypes of Southern figures as competitive or aggressive do not popularly circulate, whereas such stereotypes of African American men do. Wu's boast is further racialized with his double-handed thrust toward the center of his body (line 11), recalling a stereotypical African American gangster gesture, as well as his momentary use of falsetto voice in *house* (line 12) and the address term *baby* (line 12), both of which are sometimes associated with African American discourse styles (Tarone 1973). Additionally, his performance is framed as hyperbolically masculine through his aggressively raised pitch and volume and the fanning of his bare chest with his shirt (lines 12–13), a gesture of bravado sometimes adopted by young male basketball players.

In other words, in this initial reading of his two performances of ironic blackness, Wu problematizes different aspects of his own masculinity, in one case (Example 4) critiquing the racial inauthenticity of his accommodation, and in another case (Example 5) critiquing the hypermasculinity of his display.

Interestingly, in both of these cases, Wu necessarily reproduces narrow hegemonic images of black and Asian masculinities. First, he links linguistic elements of blackness with an image of the black gangster, who is an emblem of masculine cool but also masculine excess. Secondly, the humor of his display depends on its incongruent juxtaposition with an implicit image of Asian masculinity—for example, those associated with figures of the 'model minority' and the 'foreigner' (Osajima and Okihiro 1988)—lacking in cultural and sexual cool. Thus, Wu's performance, despite its humorously ironic footing, potentially invokes two problematically essentializing images of racialized masculinity.

RACE AND GENDER IN TRANSNATIONAL SPACE

Despite the adherence to familiar images of racialized masculinity in Wu's performance, the eventual circulation of his video in YouTube's transnational space may open his performance up to alternative interpretations that are more hopeful from the perspective of those who seek the subversion of hegemonic stereotypes. One is that Wu's linguistic play may challenge essentializing ideas about the relationship between language and race, as his act takes part in a broadly recognizable and increasingly normative youth phenomenon of cross-racial embodiment. A second possibility is that his performance potentially loses its racial salience in this transnational space, as he is read along other dimensions, such as nationality, age, or gender. A final possibility is that the stereotype of Asian masculinity as deficient may be challenged by the evidentiary act of Wu's embodiment of two forms of desirable masculine cool.

   The remainder of my analysis illustrates that only the last of these ideological possibilities, namely, the elevation of Asian masculinity, is successfully achieved by Wu as viewers interpret his performance. My analysis is based on the 41,860 comments that were posted between August 2011 and March 2012 in response to his video.[4] Using a spreadsheet program to code and analyze these comments, I identified broad patterns of stances toward Wu's performance as well as the multiple and complex ideologies of race, authenticity, and value that were presupposed in commenters' interpretative negotiations. In particular, I focus on three genres of evaluation that commonly appeared in this data set specifically as well as YouTube comments more generally: *direct quotations, metalinguistic evaluation,* and *declarations of love*. I show how these evaluative strategies recirculated hegemonic US stereotypes about blackness in this transnational space while also complicating ideologies of racial authenticity and Asian masculinity.

Direct quotations

One of the ways in which YouTube commenters generally engage in the expression of aesthetic appreciation is by directly quoting lines from videos.

Among the many quotations that viewers offered were 319 tokens of *not in my house*, which revoiced Wu's performance of hypercompetitive boastful masculinity. The first five cases among 319 are shown below (Table 1).[5]

Direct revoicings of Wu's humorously aggressive and boastful persona not only constructed Wu as successful in his performance but also recirculated this particular image of stereotypical blackness. Although it may not be the case that all quoters of *not in my house* invoked blackness consciously or intentionally, their orientation to a racialized image of masculinity is evidenced by the frequent use of non-standard orthography in their quotations. Among the 319 total cases of directly quoted *not in my house*, 72 contained representations of the marked monophthongal [ma:] (*ma, mah, mah!,* or *mahh*) for the first person possessive pronoun *my*. In other words, the phonological, and potentially racial, distinctiveness of Wu's performance was indexed by its marked orthographic representation (Table 2).

Using non-standard orthography not only reflects viewers' interpretations of Wu's performance but invites future interpretations by orienting readers to meaningful phonological contrasts between the monophthongal and

Table 1: First 5 of 319 cases of directly quoted *not in my house*

Item	Commenter	Comment
117	Fearlessthebestday	Told you! I told you! Not in my house baby not in my house! *Justin Bieber flip* Hahaha! xD
626	CourtneyPalma	not in my house baby not in my house <3 i love you Kevin <3 i grew up watching your videos <3
862	duyzzigkeit789	not in my house !
1,047	ilovmc	Not in my house baby!
1,049	purplemandy817	NOT IN MAH HOUSE, BABY! *HAIR FLIP*

Table 2: Cases of unmarked and marked orthographic representations of the first person possessive pronoun 'my'

Orthography		Total
Unmarked	*my*	246
Marked	*ma*	38
	mah	32
	mah!	1
	mahh	1
Other	*mi*	1
Total		319

diphthongal variants of *my*. Thus, viewers in Sweden or Singapore might not initially *hear* the monophthong associated with hyper-competitiveness when viewing the video, yet they can *read* this distinction in others' responses. As might be expected, most cases of non-standard monophthongal orthography were presented by those who claimed the USA as their home country (33 of 72); yet commenters who identified themselves as being from the UK, New Zealand, Israel, the Netherlands, Norway, United Arab Emirates, Denmark, Ireland, Portugal, Bulgaria, Finland, Thailand, Bolivia, Spain, Turkey, and Zimbabwe also used monophthongal representations, suggesting that the phonological markedness of Wu's performance circulated transnationally (Table 3).

Metalinguistic evaluation

A second strategy of evaluation that YouTube commenters frequently perform is explicit metalinguistic commentary. The 163 viewers who used this strategy,

Table 3: Orthographic representations by country

Country	my	ma	Mah	mahh	mah!
USA	125	15	17	1	
N/A	22	6	5		1
Canada	15	2	2		
UK	11	3	1		
Philippines	7		1		
Australia, Germany	5				
New Zealand	3	2			
France, Hong Kong, Sweden	4				
Israel, Netherlands, Norway	3	1			
United Arab Emirates	2	2			
Denmark	2	1			
Ireland	2		1		
Portugal	1		2		
Brazil, Indonesia, Jamaica, Malaysian, Poland, Singapore	2				
Bulgaria	1		1		
Finland	1	1			
Thailand	1	1			
Austria, Bahrain, Belgium, Cambodia, Guam, Luxembourg, South Africa, Switzerland, Trinidad and Tobago, Vietnam	1				
Bolivia, Zimbabwe			1		
Spain, Turkey		1			
Total	246	38	32	1	1

specifically as responses to Wu's claim that he 'subconsciously act[s] black around black people', negotiated the meaning of his performance, namely, whether it was a practice to be celebrated or critiqued and whether Wu was engaging in blackness at all. Among this set, 35 viewers either critiqued or denied Wu's admission of using black language, thus contesting and deracializing his performance. Fifteen viewers directly problematized Wu's essentializing characterization of black language with direct contestations such as 'how does one act black?' (Table 4). Others, however, accepted that it was possible to 'act black' but problematized Wu's inauthenticity. Interestingly, this critique was achieved while remaining positively aligned in most cases (16 comments), as viewers framed their critique as a sympathetic suggestion ('Kevin u don't have to act Black around me') or juxtaposed it with praise ('no kev your funny and i think your kool..But the black people thing thats creepy') (Table 5).

In 47 cases, viewers either noted or complained that Wu had not included a performance of blackness, thus defining his performance as non-black. Some

Table 4: Selected comments among 15 that problematized Wu's linguistic essentialism

Item	Commenter	Comment
14,852	MissAsaju	How does one act black Kevin? What would you think if i said i try to act Chinese around Chinese people, whatever that means?
27,782	mindsight1	WTF is acting black? GTFO
28,819	09wedabest	Kev I'm black . . . and I don't say forizzle lol
36,800	kesha12523	HEY FIRST OF ALL BLACK PEOPLE DONT SAY FRIZZLES WTF DOES THAT MEAN ANYWAY!

Table 5: Selected comments among 16 that problematized Wu's inauthenticity

Item	Commenter	Comment
5,317	KawaiiChi85	You are cool in my heart (black female)..and you don't have try hard to fit in among black people.. we love you the way you are.
5,558	missuppereastside	looool mr.simple!!!! and Kevin u don't have to act Black around me . . .'well acting black' i don't like that phrase but hey lol. Kpop rocks!
21,572	Notebookchic2	Lol,you don't have to act black around us,we love you just the way you are dammit! And,MR SIMPLE!!!! Wow.
28,823	jnyerere	you're cool in my eyes Kev. you don't have to act black around me. you're very cool.

commenters teased that the absence of a black performance was a result of his lack of black friends ('He couldn't find a black person for 1:08'),[6] whereas others positively aligned with an imagined performance of blackness ('Wish you would of had a skit for you subconsciously acting black!'). Highlighting an absence of blackness may have challenged essentializing conceptions of race and language by imagining, and sometimes celebrating, cross-racial performance, but the assumption of its status as an imagined spectacle worthy of commentary simultaneously reinforced these essentialist ideologies (Table 6).

Importantly, 60 viewers positively aligned with Wu's claim of racial crossing, thus paradoxically reproducing ideologies of authenticity through their recognition of Wu as 'crossing' but also contesting ideologies of authenticity through their positive alignments toward it. For example, many commenters aligned with his experience, noting their own accommodation to black practices when interacting with African Americans (Table 7). Although many of those who claimed to engage in racial accommodation were presumably non-black, several claimed to be black themselves, thus constructing the practice of 'acting

Table 6: Selected comments among 47 that denied Wu's blackness

Item	Commenter	Comment
2,821	Eskibro84	Wish you would of had a skit for you subconsciously acting black!
3,245	beyerballler54	No clip for the black people one lol.
3,282	OhJoyLOL	when he said he acts black around black people i thought he was gonna show a skit of it
40,692	hatesigninwithgmail	lol you didn't have a clip for the black people one cause you aren't friends with black people

Table 7: Selected comments among 60 that aligned with Wu's experience of acting black

Item	Commenter	Comment
18485	San45501	I subconsciously act black around black people because I try really hard to fit in. Yup, I done that shit before:)
21,683	lilfoot113	I don't know if you were joking about tending to act black around black people, but I can't stop laughin cause that is so true for me.
21,931	renesmecullen212	i accidently talk black around black people too…XD
31,985	DancinDaisy DoodleBu9	OMIGOD i do the exact same thing around black people!!!!!!!! :D :D :D o god im so not cool…

black' as shared across racial groups (Table 8). Likewise, many viewers who identified themselves as black noted their own desire to be Asian, thus again adequating (Bucholtz and Hall 2004), or highlighting similarities, between their own experiences and Wu's (Table 9). Finally, in similar practices of positive reinforcement, many black-identified viewers explicitly accepted Wu's claim to blackness, thus providing an in-group authorization (Bucholtz and Hall 2004) of Wu's linguistic crossing act as a positive act rather than a problematic one (Table 10).

Taken as a whole, these comments displayed a range of responses toward Wu's performance of blackness, in some cases problematizing the very essentializing constructs he proposed, whereas in other cases accepting them; in some cases recognizing his performance as blackness, and at other times denying such racialization. In general, it appeared that most of his viewers positively aligned with Wu, even if they did not align with his performance of

Table 8: Selected comments among seven by black commenters who aligned with Wu acting black

Item	Commenter	Comment
7,752	Neonlights715	omg i act black around black ppl too so i can fit in and well im black..
9,911	aisoleil	I'm Black...and I find myself acting ''black'' around other Black people to fit in. It never goes over well. :-\
10,849	XDpeaceout	I too try to act black in front of black people so that I can fit in :[Only its a little different because Im also black, but either way I can never quite pull it off...dawg
28,219	marikachica	i subconsciously act black around black people lol everyone does that, even me...and im black !!!!! XD

Table 9: Selected comments among 18 that identified as black and claimed a desire to be Asian

Item	Commenter	Comment
6,967	LozerChic7	I also want to be a kpop star.... sadly I'm black.....
12,153	GeanJin	i want to be a korean pop star too but the problem is, im black lol
34,619	Slat101	I develop an asian accent when I watch like asian shows and I talk to my exchange student. it's like how you act black!!! Kinda
38,545	honeysenpai19	i wanna be a korean pop star too...but im black T.T

Table 10: Selected comments among nine that identified as black and accepted Wu's blackness

Item	Commenter	Comment
16,900	TheBambieyes	Kevin, Im black & I consider you my brotha from another motha. You know you're part black on the sneak lolz, for rizzle;)
22,172	Halimarie77	how y'all doin . . . yep, that's trying to be black, but if it bothered me I would stop watching your posts!
36,602	horo30	Hmm. Everyone else acts black around black people, no harm done.
38,432	mirrorage1	that dance battle is so funny! Aw, you can act black around me anytime in my house!

blackness. In addition, a visible number explicitly aligned with Wu's claim of racial inauthenticity, legitimating it as not merely a potentially desirable practice to observe in Wu, but also one that is commonly desired by Wu's viewers themselves. Importantly, the juxtaposition of these various comments in this YouTube space not only shaped a collective interpretation but also highlighted the multiple interpretive possibilities of a single linguistic performance.

Declarations of love

A third popular response to YouTube videos is the declaration of love, whether for the video creator, the video, or some part of the video. Wu's viewers presented 1,614 declarations of love, 556 of which were directly addressed to Wu. These comments were highly visible in this YouTube space, appearing on average once every 26 comments (3.9 percent of 41,860 comments) (Table 11).

These claims of love reflect positive orientations to Wu's masculinity in ways that may not only challenge Wu's satirically self-deprecating claims about his lack of coolness but also broadly circulating images of Asian masculinity as deficient. Rather than necessarily reflecting viewers' internal feelings toward Wu, each of these comments constitutes a performative speech act that collaboratively constructs a social reality, namely, Wu's desirability. In addition to positively positioning the commenter (represented with first person *I*) in relation to the object assessed, the juxtaposition of numerous love declarations also brings Wu's viewership into general alignment (Du Bois 2007), suggesting a mutually shared positive orientation toward Wu and constructing a mutually oriented community on YouTube (Chun and Walters 2011). Ultimately, the collectivity of the subjective statements of 'I love you' transforms Wu from someone loved by individuals into someone who embodies an objectively attractive masculinity, evidenced by vast alignment in this YouTube space; individual opinion thus becomes transformed into a verifiable fact of public

Table 11: Number of pronouncements of love

Pronouncements of love	Cases
I love you	556
I love [something about you]	86
I love him	33
I love Kevjumba	28
I love them	25
I love [something about him]	23
I love Kevin	10
I love you guys	9
I love Kev	7
I love Team Jumba	1
I love [something in this video]	498
I love [Asians/Asian things]	200
I love this video	99
I love Wu's videos	39
Total	1614

opinion (Briggs 2007). Likewise, the large number of views and the numerous 'like' votes displayed under the video, contribute to Wu's masculine 'factual' desirability.

It is, of course, possible that explicit statements of love do not necessarily convey gendered or sexual value; yet evidence of Wu's desirable masculinity can be found in the specific adjectives that commenters used to describe him. Among all adjectives appearing in the syntactic frame *You are* _____ and *Kev/Kevin/Kevjumba/he is* _____, the most frequent ones conveyed desirable masculinity, namely *cool, hot, sexy, cute, awesome,* and *funny* (Table 12). Although it is possible to interpret these positive declarations as upholding hegemonic masculinity, given that they may respond to an assumption of Asian male undesirability,[7] I argue that their counter-hegemonic effects are particularly important in this transnational context. The overtly positive characterizations of Wu that proliferate across this space are the textual traces that remain visible, establishing his overwhelming desirability as a verifiable public fact.

CONCLUSION

My analysis of two moments of 'black' embodiment by a young Asian American man in a popular YouTube video partly leads to a familiar conclusion about the inescapable reproduction of racial boundaries, images, and

Table 12: Adjectives used to describe Wu

Adjective	Cases
cool	59
hot	19
sexy	12
cute	11
awesome	9
funny	8
better	5
Korean, not cool	4
gay	3
heterosexual, lucky, back, Chinese, epic, hipster	2
proud, not Filipino, handsome, adorable, popular, hit, best, dumbfounded, attractive, jealous, not gay, boss, priceless, Linsational Lintastic!, self-deprecating, famous, tall, most subscribed, amazing, naughty	1

values in acts of racialized deauthentication. Despite the ironic style that Wu adopted and the self-critique that such irony entailed, a narrow image of the black gangster, characterized by masculine excess, necessarily remained intact, as did an image of masculine deficiency, stereotypically embodied by Asian men. Yet an examination of viewers' interpretive acts in response to the video—acts of quotation, metalinguistic evaluation, and love declaration—suggest that a range of possible meanings came to circulate in the transnational space of YouTube. First, I suggested that acts of quotation, which sometimes marked Wu's blackness through non-standard orthography, may not have explicitly invoked blackness, but they directed viewers' and readers' attention to racialized meanings associated with Wu's display of hypermasculinity. Secondly, metalinguistic comments may not have always disrupted hegemonic ideologies of race, language, and authenticity, but fissures in these ideologies were sometimes visible, and more importantly, this visible space for comments allowed Wu's fans to experience an interpretive multiplicity across its disparate audience. Finally, I showed how declarations of love by fans ultimately contributed to a shifting understanding of Asian masculinity, one that is not only visible and audible but also highly desirable in this transnational space.

Certainly, not all activists and scholars, such as myself, who seek equity across lines of race and gender may readily celebrate the visibility and desirability of Asian men like Wu. After all, decontextualized, racialized images and forms are subject to objectification and exoticization—an Orientalism that ultimately reproduces hegemonic norms (Said 1978). It may be the case that Wu remains popular only insofar as his Asian masculinity is understood as 'novel' in relation to both black hypermasculinity and white hegemonic masculinity.

However, I suggest that, at the very least, Wu's transnational visibility necessarily broadens the field of racialized masculinities that can be imagined, desired, and aspired to on YouTube; categories of race may be hardly dismantled but their relative visibility and value at least reconfigured. Perhaps the question that remains then is which kinds of linguistic performances survive only as long as their novelty stands in relief to the old, simultaneously challenging and recalling the old, and which ones survive as constitutive of a new old, a novel social order itself.

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NOTES

1 For example, a 'viral' parodic rap video *Lazy Sunday* exemplifies such hegemonic reproduction in the USA. In the video, young white men who emulate black masculinity, performed by comedians Andy Samberg and Chris Parnell, appear to be the object of self-deprecating mockery, yet the video also celebrated a white middle-class masculinity associated with ironic reflexive critique.

2 This video was uploaded on August 26, 2011.

3 Statistics were retrieved from http://vidstatsx.com/youtube-top-100-most-subscribed-channels.

4 Although a large corpus such as the one analyzed here allows attention to the range of possible readings of Wu's performance as well as the identification of patterns across these readings, it should be acknowledged that the comments I attend to in my analysis are unlikely identical to those to which other comment readers of this YouTube space are also attending.

5 Only 10.3 per cent (or 34 of 319) cases included quotation marks, potentially suggesting viewers' ambiguous footing: they were not merely animators of someone else's words but flirting with the possibility of claiming his words as their own (Goffman 1981).

6 The claim that Wu did not have black friends was also implicitly contested by 60 comments from viewers who claimed to be black and praised Wu.

7 I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insightful argument.

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