

## Adaptation and Its Discontents: Asian American Cultural Politics Across Platforms

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“MySpace back then was just a regular html site, with no music players, no nothing. So I posted my music and videos on my website and put the player up on my MySpace page so people could check it out.”<sup>1</sup>

—Tila Tequila

MySpace has gone the way of so many social network sites; pushed to the margins by the hegemony of Facebook, it nonetheless heralded the dominance of the form. It was a very important platform. Few people are aware, however, that Tila Tequila, the first Internet star to cross from that platform to older ones such as television, claims to have played a key role in adding a new feature—the sound player—that created the conditions for its success. Though it is difficult to substantiate her claim, it is not a stretch to believe that it might be true. Users have made a number of platform innovations, such as the Twitter hashtag. Chris Messina, who claims to have started the use of the hashtag as a search and tagging device, was working for Google when he proposed its use in 2007.

In her 2008 memoir, *Tequila*, *née* Tila Nguyen, describes her entry into the early Internet via AsianAvenue.com, another legacy platform since eclipsed by Facebook, where she made her living posting nude and semi-nude pictures of herself. Tom Anderson, the founder of MySpace, invited her to bring her fans to his fledgling social network, hoping that she would help build it by bringing her fans with her as new members. Instead, according to her

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account, she contributed to the technological functionality of the platform through adding new features and affordances as well as bringing her followers and contributing content. As she writes, "If I were a dude, they'd be calling me an Internet mogul."<sup>2</sup>

Tila Tequila is no Jerry Yang, co-founder of Yahoo, another platform that has seen richer days. Yet while her contributions are far more modest than his, and her career trajectory has been very different, the dynamic that she points out reminds us that platforms are both technological artifacts and political affordances, and that credit and recognition can be allocated based on class, race, and gender.<sup>3</sup> Looking seriously at media platforms lets us move beyond an obsession with textual and visual representation into a new focus on the technologies, formats, and matrices that welcome some bodies in and keep other bodies at a remove. A critical ethnic and feminist perspective on the platform permits scholars to stage new kinds of interventions.

In his essay "The Politics of 'Platforms'," Tarleton Gillespie reminds us forcefully that digital media does not arrive to us out of the ether, but requires a "host," which can take the form of a device, an electronic infrastructure or service, a piece of software. The ways that these platforms intervene in what users can say, do, and experience, with whom, and for what price are informed by the digital industries' logic of capital and data accumulation and legal deniability.<sup>4</sup> Thus, platforms and users have an asymmetrical relationship, the hallmark of the political. And in the U.S., the political has been discernable through and conditioned by the gendered and racialized marks of exploitation and subjugation that inform access to technologies of all kinds.

Platforms are political in specific ways in the U.S. This special issue brings together new scholarship in Asian American Studies that takes platforms into consideration when parsing new cultural formations in the post-digital age. In this issue, we ask, "What can platform studies bring to Asian American Studies?" How does a focus on the platform give voice to Asian American cultural politics? What would an Asian American platform studies look like, and what would the field stand to gain by it? The essays in this special issue interrogate how Asian American culture is produced in multiple media and across diverse devices, physical environments, territories, and forms.

In its earlier days, Asian American Studies, like many social movements, was preoccupied with securing affirmation through visibility. Platform studies, a branch of digital media studies that

looks specifically to the materiality of media's making and delivery, is part of the turn away from the virtual as the dominant trope and towards the physical. For better or worse, media devices abound in our current moment. Rather than falling into the trap of either bemoaning their ubiquity, hoping vainly for a state of nature, or unreflectively and uncritically accepting the new normal, this special issue draws attention to the specificity of media's technicities.<sup>5</sup> Digital media has made all media more accessible, and has created entirely new relations and combinations of Asian American cultural politics. Platforms such as Yelp and YouTube have benefitted especially from Asian American peer production in ways that are often neither publicly acknowledged nor analyzed with attention to this fact. Christine Balance's 2012 essay "How It Feels to Be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance" demonstrates the critical purchase to be gained by looking at digital media "within a longer cultural history produced by the laborious acts of 'feeling Asian American'."<sup>6</sup>

Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, coiners of the term "platform studies," define the platform as the thing that is taken for granted when digital media developers create an object for a user.<sup>7</sup> It's the infrastructure in the broadest sense. The essays in this issue read power through the lens of platforms: Who can use them? What can traverse them? Who can possess them or make them? They interrogate questions of inequality and difference that speak directly to the intervention that Asian American Studies can make in platform studies and vice versa. Asian bodies have a unique relationship to digital platforms: their labor made cheap by history has been a necessary precondition for these devices to enter the mass market. As Anne Cong-Huyen writes:

These digital and electronic technologies are of particular importance because they are often perceived as being neutral, without any intrinsic ethics of their own, when they are the result of material inequalities that play out along racial, gendered, national, and hemispheric lines. Not only are these technologies the result of such inequity, but they also reproduce and reinscribe that inequity through their very proliferation and use, which is dependent upon the perpetuation of global networks of economic and social disparity and exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

What can Asian American Studies bring to platform studies? What are the potentials of this new moment?

Algorithms are ways of doing things. Kara Keeling's essay "Queer OS" invites us to imagine a new kind of digital culture

or platform that would “transform material relations” as well as reflect queer and intersectional realities. As she writes, “an aim of Queer OS *vis-à-vis* conceptualizations of commons is to provide a society-level operating system (and perhaps an operating system that can run on computer hardware) to facilitate and support imaginative, unexpected, and ethical relations between and among living beings and the environment, even when they have little, and perhaps nothing, in common.”<sup>9</sup> Keeling cites Wendy Chun’s and Gabriella Coleman’s foundational work in reading race as a technology, in particular Chun’s reading of promiscuous networks in Greg Pak’s anthology film *Robot Stories*.

The closing short of *Robot Stories*, “Clay,” takes place in a slightly future world where, thanks to the technological developments of a company called Forever, Inc., consciousness can be uploaded into a new kind of cloud that allows consciousness to live on after the death of the body. The central character John, a dying sculptor played by Sab Shimono, faces a dilemma over whether he actually wants to live on in that new platform where, as he says with exasperation to his deceased wife Helen (Asha Davis), “I’ll know everything; I’ll be everywhere. I’ll be filled with peace, love, and understanding, and you and I will live together in perfect joy forever and ever, amen.”<sup>10</sup> She responds, after a beat, “I love you.” Such immortality, omniscience, peace, and enlightenment are arguably the holy grails of technology, the engines that fuel innovation and presumably commerce. Yet when faced with the realization of all of these ideals—spoiler alert—John chooses old death. He refuses, not without ambivalence, to cross from an older platform to the newer and presumably better operating system.

While such a platform remains the stuff of speculative fiction, we can see how a hypothetical scenario like “Clay” dramatizes the ways in which our better, stronger, faster digital present sprang from the putatively inferior, weaker, and slower primordial ooze of a pre-digital past. In doing so, we can revisit past platform crossings and come to terms with the aspirations and ambivalences that those crossings occasioned, and perhaps envision how a post-digital future might look and feel and be. A key theme across each of the essays in this special issue is how cultural production negotiates with emergent, dominant, and residual technologies. We see how works of art shape reality in a new age of mechanical reproduction. In his influential essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Walter Benja-

min examines the implications of the platform shift from ancient art forms such as painting and sculpture to newly emergent cinematic forms, barely a decade into the talkies era at the time of his writing.<sup>11</sup> In that moment of transition, Benjamin recognizes how appetites abound for the immediacy of high-tech representations rather than the slowness of waning reality. Benjamin identifies

the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye.<sup>12</sup>

He marvels at and especially sounds a warning about the power of new forms and the new forms of power that come with these sensational technologies:

[I]n the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot altogether with other similar ones.<sup>13</sup>

This notion of reality as a “free[dom] from the foreign substance of equipment” describes the irony that comes from an ever-increasing apparatus of reproduction required to make that very apparatus go unnoticed. Nowadays a term we might use for the onset of the “age of mechanical reproduction” would be “the new normal,” or more likely, no term would be turned to. Normalcy again manifests through a willing suspension of belief in a means of production, with all the messy historicity and “equipment” that such belief would demand.

So then this special issue appreciates how the satisfactions of viral videos such as Psy’s “Gangnam Style,” the video game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, or multi-platform celebrity Tila Tequila make evident the emergent “special procedures” that the new production of reality—as well as that reality’s concomitant fantasies—necessitates. The articles collected here help us to better recognize how an attention to new forms and platforms demands a reckoning with what migrates across those platforms in the cases they examine: namely, Asian American cultural politics.

Collectively and individually, the diverse research featured in this issue makes the case that Asian American cultural politics is discernible at platform crossings. Lisa Lowe, in her influential book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, describes how the “abstract citizen” is a political space that liberalism presumes can be occupied by Asian Americans, despite the fact that, “[i]n the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined over against the Asian immigrant, legally, economically, and culturally.”<sup>14</sup> The stakes of Asian American cultural politics then become evident when desires for reconciliation, resolution, and especially representation are critically and pointedly thwarted. We see a particularly explicit convergence of Asian American cultural politics and platform crossing in Lowe’s chapter titled “Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dicteé*.” Lowe, in her generative reading of Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha’s experimental text, notes that:

If one of the aims of literary representation, with its premise of mimetic correspondence between the name and the thing, is to provide a fiction of reconciliation that resolves the material contradictions of differentiation in and between spheres other than the literary, *Dicteé* suggests that every representation claiming such correspondence must bear anxious traces of the fundamental conditions of unmimetic irresolution.<sup>15</sup>

Through appreciating the enfigurations of the subject in *Dicteé*, we come to appreciate even the codex book itself as a form of equipment involving “special procedures.” This then calls attention to a panoply of representational forms that similarly rely on a premised logic of functionally mimetic correspondence to be legitimate.

Like the ancient but once emergent codex book, other widely adopted technologies can be critically reexamined for their historically sedimented techniques of production and reception. Warren Liu’s “How Not to See (Or, How Not to *Not* See): The Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi,” examines the Mao series photographs by and of the late Tseng to appreciate how his work exploits the ways in which Chinese difference has long been a screen onto which the U.S. has projected its hopes and anxieties. Liu writes that “what [Andy] Warhol found (or claimed to find) most appealing about Communist China was also what the United States found most threatening about China at the time of Nixon’s historic visit: the robotic, repetitive surface, a pure

(inhuman) form, emptied of content, and thus perfectly reproducible." Appreciating the stakes of Tseng's photographic work means tracking the cultural politics of racialized and gendered difference, as well as sartorial iconicity—especially the Mao suit—as they manifest in and *as* representational technologies.

And these implications become more overtly evident when considering newer emergent technologies. Asia and Asians have been identified with digital technologies and new media since its inception. Media texts like *Blade Runner*, *Neuromancer*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and others depict Asian Americans as the original cyborgs, as inherently digital.<sup>16</sup> This formation of the techno-Oriental is ubiquitous in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Video games and other interactive forms of storytelling carry on this tradition and create new ones, yet their interactive form presents serious challenges to older methods of reading and analyzing texts.

Takeo Rivera's "Do Asians Dream of Electric Shrieks?: Techno-Orientalism and Erotohistoriographic Masochism in Eidos Montreal's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*" argues that "'desire felt for the body-as-stereotype'. . . is an Asian American condition best studied across platforms." His essay moves beyond the narrow discourse of digital games as bad media objects that reproduce racial stereotypes, seeking instead to bring performance studies to bear on the ways that video games offer Asian players both pleasure and trauma. Asian virtual bodies are leveraged as both a site of identification and interactivity and violence and revulsion. Rivera's work "bring(s) technocultural studies, queer theory, and Asian American Studies into conversation around this politically 'improper' object." His insightful reading of the "simulated self-annihilation" that Asian/American players confront in techno-Oriental video games compares *Deus Ex* with *M. Butterfly*, a comparison across platforms that traces the genealogy of Asian/American sadomasochism as both spectacle and point of identification.

In "Open-Source Identities: Identity and Resistance in the Work of Three Asian American Artists," Valerie Soe focuses on "artists [who] use their work as tools for social change and as a means of actively resisting what they perceive as oppressive or outdated systems of exchange." How does the gift economy work in Asian American Studies? Most popular artists have embraced the digital as a platform for distributing awareness of their work, if not the work itself, but as Soe writes, Asian American artists

Scott Tsuchitani, Gaye Chan, and Hasan Elahi go beyond this by building open forms of material and symbolic distribution associated with the digital—the gift economy—into the meaning of the work itself. While the Recording Industry Association of America (R.I.A.A.) continues to fight a losing battle as customers help themselves to copyrighted media, these artists produce work that is intended to be freely shared and given away without expectation of monetary gain or reward. These artists have pioneered the use of multiple platforms: as Soe notes, Tsuchitani’s work “utilized multiple strategies, combining guerilla performance, ‘real-life’ intervention, the Internet, social media, and traditional media to critique the structural racism of the Asian Art Museum.” They use digital platforms both as tools for reclaiming the self from hegemonic practices, such as quantifying the self, and the idea of the open-source as a metaphor for what identity-based Asian American art does.

Examining the suggestive convergences of Psy’s 2012 worldwide hit “Gangnam Style” and Jessica Hagedorn’s influential postcolonial novel *Dogeaters* from over two decades earlier, Erin Suzuki offers an inspired genealogy of neocolonial cultural ascendance that has proven remarkably resilient under neoliberalism. Starting with Psy’s ubiquitous “Gangnam Style” video and exposing the fallacy not only of “dressing classy”—too obvious a straw man anyway—but also of “dancing cheesy” while thusly attired, Suzuki traces the ways in which irony and parody have become a modus operandi of the new economy. Suzuki helps us to appreciate how ironic consumerism and the aspirational conspicuous consumerism the former lampoons both affirm a shared vision of development that seeming crossings of borders and platforms do little to disrupt. Indeed, those crossings make more critically evident the resilience and adaptations of hegemony.

In “Refugee Representations: Southeast Asian American Youth, Hip Hop, and Immigrant Rights,” Loan Dao appreciates how emergent political recognition effectively, and perhaps necessarily, adapts resonant emergent forms. In her analysis of poet Kosal Khiev and the Khmer Exiled American youth constituencies that he and his work make visible, Dao critically considers how the terms of mainstream assimilation that Asian Americans have historically been associated with are at odds with the conditions of refugee and deportee existence. Fittingly then, transformative visibility requires cultural expression that is both folk-inflected (e.g., spoken word and hip hop) and technologically-

mediated (e.g., entries in a White House-sponsored streaming video contest). The story of this attempt at platform crossing, and border recrossing (albeit more discursive and virtual than corporeal), serves as a test of the existing apparatuses of representation to reconcile marginalized and even subaltern histories with well-intentioned, though poorly executed, attempts to bring change, visibility, and representation from the top-down.

To return to an earlier claim: Algorithm is a way of doing things, and thus it holds out the possibilities of reinscription. Minh-Ha Pham's "alternative archive of the not-quite-hidden but too often ignored fashion histories of women of color," "Of Another Fashion" (ofanotherfashion.tumblr.com) exploits Tumblr's social media platform to do fashion's visual culture differently by inviting users to compose an alternative archive. This project invites users to submit older photographs of women of color and their clothing, tagged with categories such as #beauty queens, #Latina, #AfricanAmerican, #1940s, #1900s, #hats, #forbiddencity, #Japanese American, and so on. Many were contributed by granddaughters who include textual narrative that describes the outfits that their relatives made and wore so proudly in these rare photographs, thus situating them in a personal and historical context. This project queers the operating system of fashion photography that has flourished on digital platforms like Tumblr, Etsy, etc., by using the platform to include beautifully curated collections of women of color who are rarely viewed online in the context of beauty and fashion. It produces a "new reality" that brings the potential of new platforms into gorgeous life.

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## Notes

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3. Lisa Nakamura, "Cyberbace," *PMLA* 123:5 (October 1, 2008): 1673–1682.
4. Tarleton Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms'," *New Media & Society* 12:3 (May 2010): 347–364; available online at: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1601487](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1601487).
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6. Christine Bacareza Balance, "How It Feels to Be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40:1/2 (2012): 138–152.
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8. Anne Cong-Huyen, "#CESA2013: Race in DH—Transformative Asian/American Digital Humanities," *HASTAC: Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory*, September 9, 2013, available online at: <http://www.hastac.org/blogs/anne-cong-huyen/2013/09/27/cesa2013-race-dh-transformative-asianamerican-digital-humanities>.
9. Kara Keeling, "Queer OS," *Cinema Journal* 53:2 (2014): 152–157.
10. Greg Pak, *Robot Stories and More Screenplays* (San Francisco: Immedium, 2005): 216.
11. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn, trans. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968): 217–252.
12. *Ibid.*, 223.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996; reprint, 1999): 4; emphasis in original.
15. *Ibid.*, 152.
16. See David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Leilani Nishime, *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Rachel C. Lee and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Asian America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2003).