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ASIAN AMERICA GONE VIRAL

A Genealogy of Asian American YouTubers and Memes

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Throughout YouTube's first decade, Asian Americans were clearly recognized as some of the platform's most notable breakout stars. Since 2007, enterprising youth such as KevJumba, Michelle Phan, and Nigahiga have used their self-produced videos to woo fans by the thousands, and to launch their careers. Asian American YouTubers have been able to parlay their popularity into a wide variety of outcomes, including feature film productions, corporate sponsorships, record deals, television roles, concert series, makeup lines, and more. Academic scholarship and mainstream media reports abound on the Asian American YouTube phenomenon, with countless writers and theorists celebrating how Asian Americans are evading the systemic racism of media institutions through digital outlets and their unique affordances. Their success stories particularly stand out in comparison with the struggles historically faced by Asian Americans in more traditional media industries. As is discussed elsewhere in this collection, Asian American professionals have always been rare within the world of film and television, where a "bamboo ceiling" still limits possibilities. While it may be questionable how much any one of these Asian American YouTube superstars has actually crossed the threshold into mainstream visibility and recognition, their stories remain legend within Asian American communities.

Yet, what comes next? In an era when Asian American YouTubers are already well established and have been widely recognized for their successes, it is time to look beyond this "first generation" and explore what Asian American online engagement means in a post-KevJumba era. Asian American youth may no longer need to ask whether or not someone like them can participate in online media production and distribution, as they have long had access to Asian American images with a click of the mouse. In productively building upon the successes of those who came before them, they can instead focus their energies on producing their own "viral" hits. In this chapter, I investigate up-and-coming Asian American YouTubers as a way of expanding our understanding of how digital Asian America is progressing, particularly focusing on the shape of dialogues that are being fostered as a result of the increased potential for new voices to participate. The concept of dialogue takes on a particular meaning within the digital sphere, as participants create a traceable thread that serves to document its

own history. But if we can now identify a progression from YouTube's early days until today, it is important to then ask how Asian American digital histories have been documented, referenced, and given meaning through these digital forms of dialogue. While the histories of minorities and people of color are always in danger of being coopted or lost, the digital context must be assessed for the way its affordances can serve to either record or negate its own historical traces.

I specifically investigate a YouTube channel called SuperBadFilm, which was created by a collective of second-generation and 1.5-generation (those who came to the United States as children) Hmong American youth from central California. Between 2011 and 2014, they posted 34 videos in an array of genres, including dramatic narratives and love stories, documentation of community activities, group vlogs, and humorous sketches. By 2016, they had acquired over 15,000 subscribers, and the hundreds of "likes" and comments on their videos indicate that they have a relatively small but dedicated fan base. Assessments of SuperBadFilm are particularly useful in terms of these questions about the way that today's Asian American YouTubers build upon and are in conversation with other widely visible online participants, because their videos are rich in intertextual references. In fact, all of their most popular videos can most accurately be categorized as memetic, or based on memes that deliberately participate in a digital dialogue that extends far beyond their own creations. Moreover, their identification as Hmong Americans, who are already marginalized within Asian America, and in particular with little visibility in U.S. media (Schein and Thoj 2009; Wilcox 2012), provides a unique perspective on Asian American media. But this investigation moves beyond asking how Asian Americans are representing themselves online; instead, I put forth new lines of inquiry—asking about the political function of online memes as a way of encouraging participation, tracing the production of digital citational practices as a way of shaping and documenting lineages, and uncovering a genealogy of the "next-generation" Asian American YouTube community and their videos. In doing so, this chapter illuminates the complexities of the digital arena as a space for recording and transforming Asian American histories.

YouTube's Asian American Celebrities

The success of Asian Americans on YouTube has followed a notably different trajectory from the careers of more traditional Asian American media professionals. Throughout the history of Asian American cinema (and other independent film genres), it has always been the case that filmmakers of color who focus on stories about their own specific communities face an uphill battle for recognition and professional success (Okada 2015). Yet, the advent of digital media production has already begun to open new possibilities for challenging the industrial status quo, and Asian Americans provide a clear example of the way that these opportunities can dramatically shift the possibilities for media production and distribution. This is partly related to the fact that many Asian Americans have eagerly adopted digital technologies, with their collective rates of internet usage and mobile phone adoption eclipsing those of all other racial groups (Pew Research Center 2011). A report by the Nielsen Company describes Asian Americans as "digital pioneers, adopting technology faster than any other segment. With higher rates of smartphone usage, online video consumption, and internet connectivity, they are redefining the way they watch, listen, and interact" (Nielsen Company 2013). It is also now commonplace for amateur media consumers to have access to high-quality cameras and editing software on their laptops and mobile devices. Together, the hunger for representations (Balance 2012) and the capacity for easily creating content to engage with these newly accessible audiences opened the door for artists such as two

of YouTube's earliest stars, Kevin Wu "KevJumba" and Ryan Higa "Nigahiga." Their comic shorts—both scripted gags and more confessional-style vlogs—rocketed their fledgling channels to internet stardom, particularly within the metric of most-subscribed YouTube channels. Makeup guru Michelle Phan was another early stand-out, helping to pioneer the genre of the makeup/beauty vlogger and eventually becoming the first woman to reach one billion views on YouTube (Sawyer and Jarvis 2015). Other early stars included comedian Christine Gambino "HappySlip," rapper/comedian Timothy Delaghetto, filmmakers Freddie Wong and the trio comprising Wong Fu Productions, musicians David So and Kina Grannis, and many others who have together provided a wealth of Asian American artists and channels for audiences to follow.

Scholarly investigations of Asian American YouTubers have largely sought to address the question of how this new digital venue serves to alleviate the political shortcomings of mainstream media industries. For instance, we might hope that these self-representations would counter the preponderance of troublesome racial stereotypes that have long saturated film and television. Textual analyses of KevJumba's and Nigahiga's videos have shown that they do challenge some stereotypes, but have come to rely upon others (Chun 2013; Guo and Lee 2013). There is more optimism around the impact that YouTube videos have had on the careers of Asian American artists, who have long struggled to cross over into professional positions. In my own work I have argued that the successes of Asian American YouTubers has often been located at the level of the talented few, but that these highly visible celebrities are using their digital networks to call attention to Asian Americans working in both mainstream and independent media (Lopez 2016). The creation of partnerships between artists, videographers, musicians, dancers, and actors from the digital and traditional media realms interpellates an Asian American audience who will support and sustain the production of creative works. YouTube has also provided a powerful tool for Asian American musicians to use in circumventing institutional racism and taking advantage of transnational audiences in the development of their careers (Jung 2014). Yet, digital media can also serve as a counterpart to or criticism of mainstream media, as Pham and Ono find in their investigation of KevJumba's network television debut—they praise the agency he shows in using his YouTube videos to provide ancillary commentary that reframes his television performance (Pham and Ono 2016).

While these individual investigations have set out to understand the political consequences of these digital performances, together this literature more broadly affirms the brief—but meaningful—history of the rise of Asian American YouTube and acknowledges its social significance. As with so many forms of anti-racist cultural labor, participating in media production of such a personal nature can take its toll on the individuals at the helm (Lopez 2014), and we have already seen some of the most popular Asian American YouTubers take a break or step away from their YouTube channels to focus on other projects. To name just a few, the celebrated channels of KevJumba, HappySlip, and YOMYOMF are no longer regularly updated. Yet the success of these early participants has inspired many others, and a cadre of Asian American YouTubers has risen to take their place. Together, the works of both longstanding and more recent participants compose a deep and growing repository of Asian American digital narratives. The existence of so many hypervisible Asian Americans online must be acknowledged as a profound change within the mediated landscape, particularly for youth audiences who primarily rely upon YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, and other streaming platforms for entertainment content. A decade after the rise of the Asian American YouTuber, we can now begin to look beyond these early success stories to ask how later generations of YouTubers continue making use of digital affordances to participate and shape the platform in

new ways—and how these new interlocutors are rewriting the way that we understand Asian American digital histories on their own terms.

The Memetic Videos of SuperBadFilm

While perusing YouTube videos about Hmong Americans, I came across the channel "SuperBadFilm" and was instantly charmed. The videos produced by this collective of Hmong American college students and young adults are recognizable as being inspired by and in conversation with the cohort of Asian American YouTubers described above. Yet, they clearly speak from a perspective that is rarely seen within mainstream Asian American media—an enthusiastic emphasis is placed on their Hmong identities and cultures. Their videos include romantic shorts ("Give Me More Time" and "Silent Love"), humorous compilation videos ("You Know You're Hmong If" and "Fantasy vs. Reality"), and vlogs ("YouTube Q & A" and "Chubby Bunny Challenge"). In 2015, I contacted SuperBadFilm and was able to meet up with six members for a group interview in Fresno. We discussed the origins of their channel, the goals that motivated their participation on YouTube, and the connections they saw between themselves and other YouTubers. In the analysis that follows, I examine the content of their videos and statements from their interviews in order to connect their work to the contemporary Asian American digital landscape.

While there are a variety of genres represented in the videos posted to SuperBadFilm's YouTube channel, their most popular videos can largely be categorized as memetic—that is, the style and content of their videos are derived from and based upon other popular internet memes. The idea of a "meme" comes from Richard Dawkins (1976), who took a biological approach to theorizing how small units of culture adapt, survive, and are replicated. Although originally used to describe analogue memes such as songs or images, the idea has been taken up in the digital realm to refer to the way that phrases, images, and videos invite copying and imitation in order to rapidly spread from user to user (Shifman 2013). While many common internet memes like "lolcats" or "philosoraptor" consist solely of photos with user-generated captions, the practice of slightly modifying a very popular framework can also be applied to the creation of videos, as we can see with SuperBadFilm's YouTube channel. For example, the second video posted by SuperBadFilm is called "Shit Hmong Dads Say," and features quick cuts between a long list of brief quips, advice, admonishments, and funny fatherly statements edited together into a three-minute sequence. This is based on the memes "Shit My Dad Says" and "Shit Girls Say," which are broader in scope but use the same tone and style of editing for comedic effect. Both of these memes circulated widely; in fact, the Twitter account for "Shit My Dad Says" became so popular that it inspired a sitcom called *$#*! My Dad Says* starring William Shatner. Posted in early 2011, the SuperBadFilm video "Shit Hmong Dads Say" was one of hundreds of memetic videos that followed up on this particular meme, including a host of YouTube videos such as "Shit Asian Girls Say," "Shit Drunk Guys Say," or the more politically themed "Shit White Girls Say To Black Girls."

We can also see this reliance on internet memes in their video titled "Hmong Songs in Real Life." It is based on popular YouTube user SteveKardynal's comic video series "Songs in Real Life," which inserts lyrics from popular songs as dialogue in real-life situations. Riffing on this formula, SuperBadFilm's videos use a blend of popular and traditional Hmong songs to similarly create comedy through juxtaposing melodramatic or humorous lyrics into banal everyday situations. They created three versions of "Hmong Songs in Real Life" with different songs, but also moved beyond music to include videos such as "Hmong Movies vs In Real Life," "Hmong Girls in Real Life," "Hmong Parents in Real Life," and "Hmong Guys

in Real Life." In each, the videos take up the task of explaining stereotypical or generalized attributes of Hmong gender roles or familial roles through humorous depictions of everyday life. Some of their other memetic videos include "Hmong Be Like," "Harlem Shake [Hmong Store Edition]," and "You Know You're Hmong If." While many studies of memes examine a collective body of memes as a way of understanding the work that a single meme can perform (Gal et al. 2016; Soha and McDowell 2016), here we can ask why a single video source would focus on memetic videos, and in particular, why this next generation of Asian American YouTubers chooses to focus so heavily on memes.

One way of understanding the significance of formal and aesthetic mimicry to minority media producers is revealed in the case of *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002). The Asian American independent film became a breakout hit for first-time director Justin Lin in large part due to its confident, proficient take on the genre of the mainstream teen comedy. Despite its shoe-string budget, it was easily recognizable as fitting within a constellation of familiar tropes, aesthetic conventions, and plotlines—the nerdy and unnoticed teenager lusting after a romance with the cheerleader and social acceptance from the popular crowd, the thrill of developing and undertaking a complicated heist, and the dramatic downward spiral following the allure of drugs, money, and violence. In her analysis of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, Margaret Hillenbrand (2008) argues that Lin deploys enthusiastic mimicry as a way of moving Asian American cinema from the arthouse into the mainstream. She does not see this as demonstrating a wholehearted capitulation to mainstream or hegemonic norms and values, as she is able to read certain moments from the film as counter-hegemonic and subversive. Yet, her argument helps to reveal the political value of aesthetic and stylistic imitation in an uneven mediated landscape where Asian Americans are often disregarded.

If we apply Hillenbrand's analysis of mimicry to SuperBadFilm's video oeuvre, we can similarly see the use of memetic videos as a way of attracting audiences, because their videos are, as with *Better Luck Tomorrow*, "fluent in the lexicon of popular film, [they display their] proficiency, like an apt pupil, through enthusiastic mimicry—of genre, stock character, and dramatic structure" (Hillenbrand 2008: 51). Both Lin and SuperBadFilm ostensibly deploy mimicry as a way of gaining access and increasing popularity, given that potential alternatives (such as avant-garde experimentation, or the expository mode of documentaries) are assumed not to be crowd-pleasers. Internet memes and memetic videos, in contrast, are designed for wide propagation and longevity because they are so easily understood and appreciated, which prompts circulation. Individual entries can then more easily become swept up in the larger momentum of sharing and spreading that propels meme cultures. While this phenomenon is popularly described as "going viral," Jenkins et al. (2013) remind us that this epidemiological term can serve to deny the agency of human actors in making decisions about what content to share. There is nothing "natural" about the circulation of ideas; audiences decide to engage with texts that mean something to them, and they share those texts when something is gained in doing so. In asking what SuperBadFilm's memetic videos mean, we must, then, ask how they resonate with actual audiences.

Inserting Hmong Americans into Digital Asian America

Beyond their reliance on memes, another remarkable characteristic of SuperBadFilm's videos is a strong voicing of their Hmong identity. Their videos are filled with explicit references to their ethnic identity, with over half of their films specifically mentioning the word "Hmong" in their title and one completely in Hmong ("Ua Siab Ntev Tos Kuv"). This explicit identification is unusual among the early Asian American YouTubers, who rarely created works

with the word "Asian American" in their title and often seemed to shy away from making any claims to Asian American identification. In contrast, the videos of SuperBadFilm stand apart in their desire to build pride for identifying as Hmong. Nearly all of the comical videos are scripted in Hmong, but in addition, the jokes from videos such as "Hmong Songs in Real Life," "Hmong Love Movie Stereotypes," and "Hmong Medicine from China" depend upon a familiarity with Hmong music, Hmong movies, and Hmong commercials. SuperBadFilm also create documentary-style videos about their participation in cultural activities such as Hmong New Year. We can see from these videos an earnest affection for many aspects of Hmong culture, including Hmong language, cultural traditions, and a variety of media objects. These choices reveal the target audience for their videos, as well as some of their broader goals in what they hope to communicate to them—they seem to be speaking primarily to those who speak Hmong and are familiar with cultural norms, and they encourage the maintenance of an affective, potentially nostalgic connection to Hmong cultural texts.

Shifman (2013) distinguishes memes from virality because they are characterized by modification and reinterpretation, rather than simply their ability to spread rapidly. Yet, the two concepts are connected in the sense that slight modification to an easily understood, recognized, and appreciated meme is what might encourage its popularity in a competitive environment. If transformation is a key component of the resilience and power of memes, we can then better understand the power of SuperBadFilm's memetic videos—they are meaningfully transforming the original content in a way that is specific to a new audience. In this case, it seems clear that the unique signature of their videos is simply applying the memetic content to their own Hmong identities. While the decision to often speak only in Hmong serves to limit their audience to only Hmong (or Hmong-speaking) viewers, it also constitutes the meaningful and attractive "transformation" that is integral to the appeal of memetic content. Yet, Shifman's work on memes also reminds us that the creators of memetic videos can also shift the meaning of the video. Since digital memes often focus on the "performative self" by including the uploader's face and body as part of the message (Shifman 2013: 30), they can represent a body or perspective that shifts our understanding of the digital landscape. For instance, in Shifman's (2011) examination of the "Leave Britney Alone" meme, she argues that the video itself "[conveys] the message that being gay and effeminate is a legitimate practice" (44). This is clearly the case for racialized memes—that is, both those who use the visibility of a racialized body to disrupt the normatively White media landscape, and those whose message is outwardly focused on anti-racism or racial specificity, are working to legitimize their mediated existence and participation. Indeed, Shifman defines a meme as being "incorporated in the body and mind of its hosts" (Shifman 2013: 56), rather than simply spreading in an unchanged way from user to user.

This insertion of Hmong American bodies, languages, cultures, and perspectives into the digital landscape is particularly meaningful for a community that is largely absent from the digital networks of millennial Asian America. As mentioned earlier, Asian Americans are often recognized as early adopters of digital technologies and are celebrated as full participants within the online realm. Yet, Hmong communities are among those falling under the heterogeneous umbrella of Asian America who are conspicuously missing from this data. Pew Internet Research and other mainstream research bodies routinely use studies on only the largest six ethnic populations of Asian Americans to stand in for the entire group (Pew Research Center 2012), and Hmong are the ninth largest ethnic group of Asians in the United States. With a population of only 260,000 as of 2013 (Pfeifer and Yang 2013), Hmong communities and their media practices are rarely discussed in academic scholarship, mainstream media discourses, or online venues. The digital participation of Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans,

Vietnamese Americans, Indian Americans, and mixed race Asian Americans has been fairly common within YouTube's popular channels. In comparison, there are currently no Hmong YouTubers cracking the ranks of top performers, among other markers of digital power, which mirrors the lack of Hmong artistic performers in general who are available within the entertainment media realm.

Taken together with the attributes of aesthetic mimicry and digital fluency, we can see that SuperBadFilm are able to use their production of memetic videos as a tool for challenging the boundaries of digital Asian America. This relationship between SuperBadFilm and other Asian American YouTubers is important in making sense of the intertextuality of SuperBadFilm's work. Hillenbrand sees Justin Lin's mimicry as reflective of tensions between Asian American cinema—a latent cinema that had largely failed to break into the mainstream until *Better Luck Tomorrow*—and the mainstream, with depictions of "violent heteromasculinity and bourgeois materialism" (65) serving as intertextual referents to similar themes that are omnipresent in such genres as teen flicks and gangster movies. Hillenbrand calls Lin's implicit critique of such generic norms "parodic," as they can serve to remind viewers that Asian American bodies are so often denied access to these kinds of roles. In replicating the style and voice of popular Asian American YouTubers, the work of these Hmong American artists reflects a similar tension in asserting their own distinctive voice as an ethnic group that has long been marginalized and left out of dominant characterizations of Asian America.

In interviews with members of SuperBadFilm, they explicitly discuss the fact that they have seen no Hmong predecessors leading the way in creating YouTube videos for or about Hmong Americans. When talking about the absence of Hmong Americans within the online media world, one member stated: "Our generation is still trying to catch up to society. We have to promote ourselves." Just as *Better Luck Tomorrow* uses the style of mainstream cinema to rectify the absence of Asian Americans in that space, so SuperBadFilm use the style of Asian American YouTube videos to create an online space for Hmong Americans. They render visible a Hmong presence within digital realms wherein their technological and artistic proficiency serve to legitimate their membership and affirm a sense of belonging. This desire and struggle for digital recognition reminds us that participatory cultures online are not equally open and available to everyone; digital spaces and cultures reflect many of the exclusions and social stratifications of the offline world (Nakamura 2008). For Hmong Americans, as with many diasporic communities, digital spaces have opened up a wealth of opportunities for connecting to other Hmong Americans and affirming their own identities within a larger Asian American collective that often does not recognize their cultural specificities.

Participating in Memetic Citational Practices

We have seen the way that SuperBadFilm's memetic videos serve to expand the boundaries of digital Asian America to underrepresented communities, but the question remains as to how later generations of YouTubers such as these participate in the creation of an Asian American digital history. This line of inquiry is important for a number of reasons. First, we must acknowledge the political significance of citational practices in general, due to a recognition of the fact that minority labor has systematically been obscured and erased throughout history—an injustice that Asian Americans have long worked to rectify (Okihiro 2014). The very origins of Asian American Studies as a field of research and teaching stem from the political necessity of documenting widely overlooked Asian American histories and contributions to American society and culture (Chan 2005). Given that Asian Americans played a pioneering role in the early days of YouTube and are a vital part of the platform's history,

we can, then, ask how their influence has left a trace and what it means in the context of what came afterward.

Digital media provides its own challenges and opportunities for conducting historical analyses. Digital data can easily be deleted or moved, rendering links inactive or broken, replaced by dummy pages created by cybersquatters or 404 error pages (Gitelman 2006). Yet, digital data is also prone to leaving a trace, both through being archived by the crawlers of the Wayback Machine and through the complex network of links that create paths from one site to another. All forms of media are figuratively connected through intertextuality, homage, and other artistic devices, but online forms of media use hypertext and other forms of digital linking to create literal pathways from one site to another. Many of the most common social media platforms build opportunities for direct links into their algorithm—for instance, when Facebook messages are shared, a tweet is retweeted, or a Tumblr post is reblogged, an automatic link is created to the original content. Yet, we still see many instances of digital theft, failure to correctly give attribution or credit, and other forms of exploitation, particularly surrounding the labor of those who are disenfranchised in the offline world as well (Felix 2015). For instance, the three Black women who created #BlackLivesMatter in the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder have discussed their frustrations with those who have failed to correctly acknowledge their contributions to the project. In an online article discussing the origins of the movement and the "Theft of Black Queer Women's Work," Alicia Garza states: "When you adopt Black Lives Matter and transform it into something else … it's appropriate politically to credit the lineage from which your adapted work derived" (Garza 2014). This call for proper citation is particularly significant when the failure to do so risks shifting the political goals and outcomes of a project.

These questions about how to properly give credit for the contributions of minority workers and cultures have arisen around memetic videos in particular. The example of the "Harlem Shake" meme is helpful because it has been widely discussed in terms of both cultural theft/ appropriation and digital citation practices. Originating in 2012, this meme is based on a version of a song called "Harlem Shake" that was produced by Harry Rodrigues. A comedian named Filthy Frank posted a video of a wild dance party breaking out at the moment the beat drops, and within days, over 12,000 variations of dance parties set to the song had been posted to YouTube (Allocca 2013). Yet, a slew of criticism quickly followed, denouncing the viral trend for appropriating the Black cultural roots of the dance form sharing its name (Palmer 2013). With each new iteration of the meme, knowledge of the dance form that originated in the 1980s seemed to recede and become obscured from the conversation.

These two cases remind us that digital content is both resilient and tenuous. It is resilient in the sense that digital copies are easy for any user to create and repost, making it difficult to scrub the internet of any particular content. Online searches can be used to unearth even the smallest, most limited references, and the long tails of internet databases rely upon digital storage space to preserve content. In this sense, Garza's story about the origins of #BlackLivesMatter and videos of Harlem Shakers from the 1980s can persist alongside the later iterations and transformations of their work that necessitate these arguments. Yet, their complaints about the ways in which origin stories and histories can be rewritten or obscured remind us that not all internet content is equal. Due to vast disparities in the popularity of certain sites and the role that search engine algorithms play in ranking and highlighting content, users are likely to encounter certain content more commonly than others (Halavais 2009). Highly ranked YouTube videos are those that are popular in terms of views, comments, and ratings, that are widely linked to by external sites, and that deploy relevant keywords and descriptions. Moreover, YouTube's platform—unlike Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr—does not provide a space

for content creators to automatically link content or videos, leaving it up to the discretion of individuals to perform this citational act.

Within this context, it becomes clear that memes and memetic videos themselves can constitute weak vehicles for citational practices. As discussed earlier, memes flourish when they are instantly recognizable, and then spread through the modifications and interventions made by individual users in a way that extends or reinterprets the original message. These two practices do not require any knowledge of the meme's originator or the original context for the meme itself, and practices of citation have not become commonplace. In their simplicity, memetic videos rarely offer opportunities to even link to similar content. Yet, as with all practices of appropriation, there are clear political consequences for the disenfranchised communities whose sense of ownership and history is obscured in the digital arena, buried beneath thousands of videos, channels, and pages that search algorithms rank above theirs. We can see here that there are both technological and cultural barriers in place that make memetic videos poor tools for looking backward and creating traceable histories.

Digital Genealogies of Asian America

If this linear form of tracing history is fraught, it may be more productive to consider a genealogy of the memetic videos by SuperBadFilm—asking how their own histories are either made visible or obscured, and how this connects to their own goals and stated interventions. I use the Foucauldian idea of "genealogy" here to highlight the way that the histories are deeply ideological and cannot be extricated from the power dynamics that shape their development. The use of this term in the context of Dawkins' metaphor of the meme is particularly ironic, as the genealogical method eschews the linear evolutionary path of biological genes. Rather than searching for an unbroken narrative of evolution, Foucault sees the search for history as one in which we must "identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us" (Foucault 1977: 146). The genealogical method is particularly appropriate for seeking histories in the digital realm, where "what has value" is often impossible to trace directly to its source, given the ephemerality of so much internet storage. Wendy Chun reminds us of this in her examination of the future of digital media:

> Memory, with its constant degeneration, does not equal storage; although artificial memory has historically combined the transitory with the permanent, the passing with the stable, digital media complicates this relationship by making the permanent into an enduring ephemeral, creating unforeseen degenerative links between humans and machines.
>
> (Chun 2008: 148)

This framework offers a powerful means for excavating the enduring legacy of the Asian American digital pioneers who shaped YouTube in its earliest days, yet who are often completely neglected in mainstream accounts of the platform's rise and development.

There are a number of ways that we can uncover the history of SuperBadFilm, their channel, and their memetic films. First, we can consider the memes that they are referencing and trace their specific origins. As is common with most memes, there is not much direct citation to the meme conversations in which they are participating. The only example of direct citation is a line in the description of their "Hmong Songs in Real Life" video, which reads: "THIS VIDEO WAS INSPIRED BY Steve Kardynal, THE FIRST GUY WHO MADE "SONG'S

IN REAL LIFE" :)"Yet, there is no link to Kardynal's videos, and this line is directly beneath a description of their own sequel video, "Hmong Songs in Real Life 2," which does contain an active link—directing traffic back to their own channel, rather than to their actual predecessor. In all of their other mimetic videos ("Shit Hmong Dads Say," "Hmong Be Like," "Harlem Shake [Hmong Store Edition]," and "You Know You're Hmong If "), there is no discussion of a connection to other memetic videos at all. As mentioned earlier, memes are often able to spread because they are part of an interconnected digital conversation that links from one version of a meme to another. In this case, SuperBadFilm do nothing to indicate knowledge of these memes or a desire to participate in any ongoing conversation—they are simply using the meme as inspiration for their own Hmong-centric videography.

This lack of interest in participating in a memetic conversation was also made clear in my conversations with the members of SuperBadFilm. When asked about who inspired their work, they do not mention any of the names of the White YouTubers such as Steve Kardynal, Kyle Humphrey and Graydon Sheppard, or Justin Halpern, who originally created the memes that they are explicitly referencing in their videos. Moreover, they do not mention the works of Black videographers on YouTube or the video sharing app Vine, whose works provided the source material for their videos "Harlem Shake (Hmong Store Edition)" or "Hmong Be Like." In some sense, the absence of these referents can be seen as an instance of misattribution or a failed citational practice, as there does not seem to be any recognition of the broader conversation in which these videos are playing a role.

Yet, it is also interesting to note who they do discuss as the inspiration for their videos—they were eager to point to their fandom and affection for Asian American YouTubers including Wong Fu Productions, Nigahiga, and Just Kidding Films. These are the YouTubers whom they claim to emulate, and whose works inspire their own participation as videographers and YouTubers. We can see from these comments that their involvement is not premised on the content of their videos or the love of memes and memetic videos, but, rather, on the act of participating in YouTube itself. In the wake of the first generation of Asian American YouTubers pioneering a mode of online storytelling that opened doors and transformed possibilities, the next generation of participants affirm and acknowledge these accomplishments. One of the ways that they do so is by playing an active role in establishing their own histories. In the case of SuperBadFilm, they eschew the literal connections between their work and non-Asian YouTubers—instead, they affirm the ideological consequences that Asian American YouTubers have had in reframing the identities of those who belong within digitally mediated spaces. They hope to join in with and continue the conversation started among those media producers, even if their actual videos evolved from and reference a different body of work.

YouTube 2.0 and our Digital Futures

Another potential site for mapping digital citational practices is in the direct links provided within the different subpages of SuperBadFilm's channel, as all YouTube pages contain spaces for promoting other channels. While it is possible for the owners of YouTube channels to designate their own related channels on the tab called "Channels," SuperBadFilm do not enter any information into this area. The only links to other channels are those listed under the heading "Related channels"—a short list of other channels that is created automatically by YouTube's algorithms based on what is believed to be similar content (Figure 14.1).

In this case, we might guess that related content would include channels hosting similarly memetic videos, or the Asian American YouTubers whom they describe as their inspira-
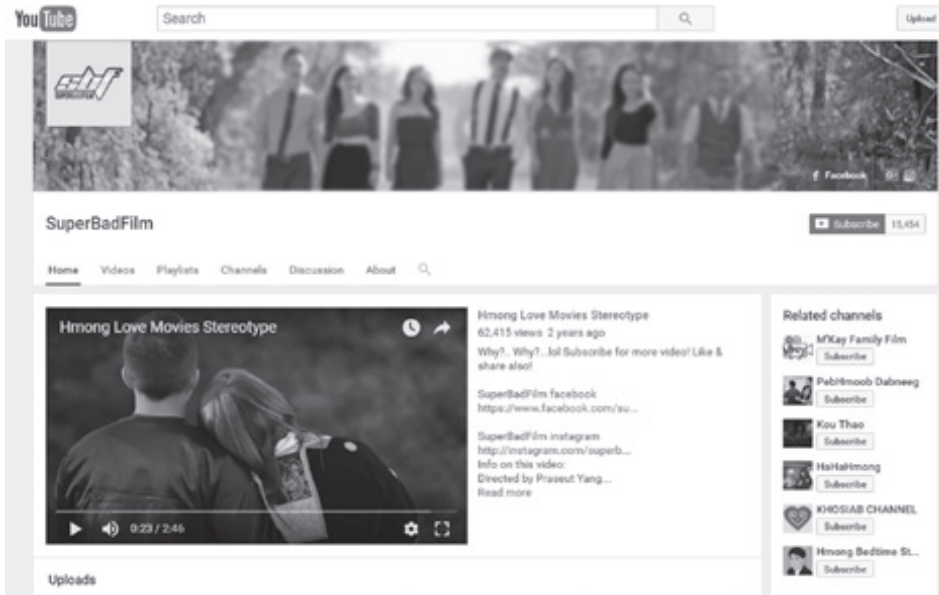
Figure 14.1 The YouTube channel for SuperBadFilm automatically links to similar channels under the heading "Related channels."

tion. Instead, the six videos selected by YouTube's algorithms consist of six Hmong-themed channels: PebHmoob Dabneeg, Kou Thao, M'Kay Family Film, HaHaHmong, Khosiab Channel, and Hmong Bedtime Stories. The same is true for the videos that pop up as "Up Next" on the right-hand side of the video player page—rather than linking to other "Songs in Real Life" videos, nearly all of the links are to Hmong-themed videos. The centrality of Hmong identifications in the names and content of these related channels and videos again reminds us that the act of inserting Hmong language, narratives, and bodies into the online realm is noteworthy—such that YouTube categorizes their videos as primarily Hmong, rather than primarily Asian American, as they would characterize their own oeuvre. YouTube's algorithms serve to delimit their own genre as "Hmong," prioritizing their ethnic/cultural markers as somehow more significant than these other possibilities.

If SuperBadFilm's memetic videos allow limited paths for tracing their own digital histories and predecessors, they nevertheless open new possibilities with regard to the opposite side of the temporal equation—looking forward, and inviting future participation. Indeed, the channels of these "competitors" or other Hmong videos evidence this particular phenomenon, as the allure of SuperBadFilm's "Hmong Songs in Real Life" video inspired other Hmong YouTubers to also participate in the meme. The channel HahaHmong produced its own "Hmong Songs in Real Life" video, M'Kay Family Film produced a "Hmong New Year Songs in Real Life" video, and If you are… produced a parody video called "Hmong Songs in Real Life, MASK HMONG PARODY." Together, these videos serve to promote the visibility of many different Hmong cultural producers, including the videographers themselves, but also the artists whose song clips are featured and listed in this meme. While the members of SuperBadFilm position their works as being inspired by the first generation of Asian American YouTubers, they are also attentive to the role that they play in inspiring other young Hmong artists. One member stated:

> We want to inspire Hmong kids to go further than us. Get a camera and start shoot–
> ing, step out of the box. Instead of getting out and racing cars or being gang mem–
> bers or getting in trouble, they can make videos and have fun with their friends. In
> the Hmong community the actors support the people in Thailand, but they don't
> support the actors over here in the U.S. I think that would be cool.

They also affirmed that they are always excited to partner with other Hmong YouTubers when possible. We can see from these statements that they recognize the value of using their YouTube platform to speak to and for Hmong audiences, impacting larger narratives around how Hmong youth are perceived and what options are made available to them.

This genealogy of an Asian American YouTube channel from "the next generation" of Asian American YouTubers reveals the challenges and discontinuities that must be negotiated in understanding the digital archive. In looking for traces of SuperBadFilm's digital history, we see that it is not important to accurately reconstruct the particular branches of the evolutionary process that provided the inspiration for any one meme. The memetic videos of SuperBadFilm play a weak role in linking to those that came before them, and can scarcely be said to participate in the broader conversations engendered by any one meme. Rather, a genealogical investigation helps to reveal the ideological consequences of Asian Americans having established a digital presence. Moreover, this genealogy reveals the way that the temporality of this history can be reversed—memes and memetic videos can be seen to more productively issue a call to the future for future participation, and for unique voices to continue to challenge the ideologies that had previously rendered their identities invisible. In this sense, the lack of direct citation by memes is not necessarily a negative attribute. Rather, the memetic videos of SuperBadFilm are but one node in a constellation of digital participants who are together impacting our understanding of both the past and the future.

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