

# Community Enclaves and Public Imaginaries: Formations of Asian American Online Identities

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## Abstract

This article draws on an 18th-month digital ethnography of Asian American online writers to extend on current theories of digital publics and argues for a broader framework that includes the co-constructing relationship writers have, not only with their digital environments, but also through their ethnic and raced experiences. Additionally, online writing ecologies can be seen as simultaneous and overlapping community and public imaginaries for writers who may need to have multiple audience orientations in order to articulate their ethnic and raced experiences. Ultimately, this article addresses the following questions: How does a particular group of online Asian Americans conceive of the public? Under what conditions do Asian American identities form for these writers? And, how is this Asian American collective shaping their public identity?

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## 1. Introduction

This article takes up questions regarding the relationship between identity and public conceptions, and specifically examines a group of Asian American writers and their construction of an Asian American identity through their public participation on an online social network site, Xanga. By attending to Asian American identity formation, this article argues for the need in our field to pay attention to the ways that raced groups imagine writing spaces and audiences in order to better comprehend alternative ways of shaping or accessing public spheres. That Asian bodies have been historically ignored or highlighted for political ends is, indeed, integral to the ongoing construction of the public (Lowe, 1996; Ono and Pham, 2009).

Typically portrayed as a silent model minority or as economic competition, the Asian body functions to uphold a national race narrative that maintains a perception of who constitutes and belongs in the American public. To point,

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examining public identities is about interrogating positions of power and how such positions are upheld or can be dismantled.

Even within our field, Asian Americans are often overlooked for study unless they are considered in relation to ESL or International studies, reifying the association that all Asian bodies are foreign and/or lacking in Standard English proficiency. Therefore, we know little about how Asian Americans construct language or identities for digital publics. Therefore, this article addresses [LuMing Mao and Morris Young's \(2008\)](#) call for studies presenting Asian Americans as “no longer the objects of translation and transformation; rather, they become the agents of translation and transformation as they make *their* claim on America through their rhetorical acts” (p. 11). To this end, this article draws on an 18-month digital ethnographic study and takes as its central premise that Asian Americans are constructing public identities as part of this “claim on America.” In considering public identities, this article poses the following questions: How does a particular group of online Asian Americans conceive of the public? Under what conditions do Asian American identities form for these writers? And, how are this Asian American collective shaping their public identity?

With this study, I hope to provide more complex, nuanced insights into the intersection of identity, digital contexts, and public theories by drawing on participants' digital writing practices. Ultimately, if we want to help students and (as) writers think about public spaces as unfolding events of potential for equitable participation, we need to understand how some of our most publicly excluded students engage with their social spaces that include digital publics.

## 2. Race and digital public(s)

In order to address issues of race and digital publics, I extend on works based on [Jürgen Habermas \(1994\)](#). With *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas established “the public” as a foundational social theory, constituted by free-thinking, private citizens, with the ability to deliberate on common issues, in order to mediate powers between the state and the private sphere. Since *Structural Transformation*, scholars have significantly contributed to Habermas' work, theorizing public for more current and inclusive contexts. For example, Nancy [Fraser \(1996\)](#) critiqued Habermas' classist and male-centered conceptions of the public; both [Fraser \(1996\)](#) and Michael Warner (2005) examined subaltern—and counter—publics as significant concepts and spaces for the formation of alternative subjectivities. Indeed, the teaching of public writing has become synonymous with a form of public good, according to Christian [Weisser \(2002\)](#) who chronicled the “public move” in composition studies. As scholars realized more nuanced public theories are needed for understanding our current shifts in culture, politics, and technology, they have turned to studying publics in relation to digital technology and alternative spaces, such as gaming communities ([Johnson, 2008](#)), online dating sites ([Almjeld, 2014](#)), and digital art museums ([Pierroux and Skjulstad, 2001](#)). The term *digital publics* is less of a question and more of a given in examining new media and modalities impact on shaping the contours of emerging public spheres ([Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Anthony, 2012](#)).

This move to broaden public theories, and what now may be considered a growing subfield in our discipline, includes *identity* as an important point of interrogation. In some of the most noted works about this topic, Gwendolyn [Pough \(2004\)](#) and Vorris [Nunley \(2011\)](#) reconfigured the Habermasian public sphere to think about the Black experience in America, and how subaltern African American publics help participants affirm a Black voice and identity in the face of a dominant, white public sphere. [Carmen Kynard \(2007\)](#) took identity and publics online and provided valuable insights into the ways new(er) technology helped to facilitate rhetorical, symbolic resources and a cultural space for her African American students. In an academic world that is too often dominated by unspoken white standards, [Kynard's \(2007\)](#) article demonstrated the digital's potential to create enclaves where marginal students are able to draw on their own cultural realities to make meaning. She wrote, “students' texts are fundamentally reshaped in content and style when they are *asked to write for Black audiences*,” underscoring the power that the dominant gaze has on writing and rhetorical choices and acts, and the possibilities of meaning-making when underrepresented populations are given the opportunity to engage with their own cultural resources (p. 335).

Other than [Kynard's \(2007\)](#) article in *Computers and Composition*, there are only a handful of works which interrogated the intersection between racial identities and public spaces ([BenNET and Walsh, 1997](#); [Blair, 1998](#); [Grabill, 1998](#); [Knadler, 2001](#); [Kynard, 2007](#); [Redd, 1998](#); [Richardson, 1997](#)) and none that significantly tended to the intersection of Asian Americans and digital publics. Indeed, Kristie S. Fleckenstein (2014) pointed out the conspicuous absence of race when it comes to multimodal communication (p.15). Drawing on [Kynard's \(2007\)](#) approach, I ask, how do Asian Americans shape communication practices when they are writing to an Asian American audience and away from a dominant gaze?

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