Alpha, Beta, Gamma Males: Asian/American Men and Audience Research

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Abstract

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Through an audience reception analysis, this paper exposes and explores issues surrounding the expression of Asian/American masculinity and argues the importance of transnationality in intercultural communication and Cultural Studies works. Fifteen Asian/American male participants viewed the Japanese film, Train Man (Densha Otoko, 2005). In my analysis of their interview data, I looked at the ways in which participants distance themselves from stereotypes of Asian (men). This distancing generally occurred by projecting Asian stereotypes onto subject groups within the same racial category ("Asian") who belong to different nationalities, generations, and/or ethnic groups. Participants, however, through their own transnational positions, also demonstrated the ability to understand masculinity and manhood as it is conflated with race and nation in a way that was both inclusive and non-Alpha,

violent/non-aggressive. These findings suggest that scholarship regarding Asian/American masculinities need to take into account the ways in which the current Eurocentric scholarship is limits how we currently talk about non-normative masculinity and that a more transnational approach would provide different ways of discussing masculinity.
Keywords: Asian/American studies, masculinity, audience research, transnationality, intercultural communication

Introduction: "The Cause"

> **Dane**: It's kind of noticeable to me when I see an Asian guy with a white girl. If it's an Asian guy and Asian girl, it's okay—not too weird you know. It's not too uncommon to see a white male with an Asian female because then he's like more—whites are seen more masculine than an Asian guy. When [my friend and I] see an Asian guy with a white girl we're like, "Oh, plus one for 'The Cause'"… It's such a weird thing that we come up with this, "The Cause," you know—that we have to come up with this thing to describe it. It's like that kind of showed us how Asian guys are seen a little more feminine. Even then, when you do see that, I feel it's not international Asian guys with like white girls because it's a myth. It's a legend.

Dane, a fourth-generation, Asian/American[i] male participant, touches on the all of the themes addressed in this paper: The expression of Asian masculinity and sexuality, white hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), and intraracial Othering. In this transcript excerpt, he states, "Whites are seen as more masculine than an Asian guy" and then follows up with "That kind of showed us how Asian guys are seen as a little more feminine." Here, he refers to the stereotypes of Asian men as queer and effeminate especially they are compared to individuals who occupy the position of the white male (Shimizu, 2012)[ii]. When he articulates, "I feel it's not international Asian guys with like white girls because it's a myth," he illustrates that within the broad label "Asian/American," there are varying degrees of intragroup difference, which creates social hierarchies among Asian/American men, especially along intersectional lines of generation and nation. I argue later in the paper that it is Dane's transnational identity[iii], which enables him to identity these stereotypes of Asian/American men as well as expressions of hegemonic masculinity; this perspective enables him to reformulate and negotiate the meaning of masculinity in complex and beneficial ways.

This paper has two main goals: The first objective is to expose and explore issues surrounding Asian masculinity for Asian/American men by problematizing the way U.S. society's understanding of masculinity and manhood emasculates, effeminizes, and queers

Asian/American men (Eng, 2001; Ono & Pham, 2009; Shimizu, 2012). This paper takes into consideration the intersectional lines of nation, race, sexuality, and gender and the roles these lines play in focus group interviews. The analysis pays particular attention to the way Asian/American men understand themselves and their manhood/masculinity in relation to, not only white hegemonic masculinity, but to other expressions of Asian masculinity as well.

The second goal of this paper is to employ an audience-oriented research approach to provide a space for Asian/American men to talk about Asian masculinity. Merrigan & Hutson (2009) write, "Different methodologies come from profoundly different ways of thinking about what we know, what we believe communication is, and what we do as researchers when we study it." (p. 5-6). Critical audience research as method takes into consideration the text, the active audience, the inherent power dynamics between focus group participants and the researcher, and the ongoing production of meaning among all of these points (Ang, 1991; Hall 1986a; Kruger & Casey, 2000; Press & Livingstone, 2006). As such, critical audience research prioritizes and is, thus, mindful of the relationship between subjectivities, audiences, media, and texts. This allows for rich data collection that provides contextualized, in-depth, and socio-culturally informed analyses that recognize and maintain the integrity of the interviewees' input.

In an alleged post-race society, it is important to note the instances when men of color do, in fact, suffer because of race and when they take the time and gather the courage to speak out about it, which is exactly what Dane does in this excerpt. "I guess you could say [the visibility of Asian man/White woman relationships is] huge," says Dane earlier in the interview, and certainly, the issues that he and other focus group participants address in this paper are huge in that they not only reflect the state of hegemonic masculinity in the U.S. and some of the negative implications it has for Asian/American men, but through these issues—such as, "Asian

guys are seen a little more feminine"—focus group participants have the space to talk about, and concomitantly, define masculinity in ways that are pertinent and empowering for themselves.

Literature Review

Train Man*: About the Film*

Train Man is a Japanese movie, Fuji TV *dorama* (Japanese television serial), and novel based on the purportedly true story of a 23-year-old virginal *otaku* who intervenes when a drunken man harasses several women on a train. The plot is identical in each of these mediated formats: Train Man (Takayuki Yamada), with the help of members on the mega-BBS 2channel online forum[iv], ends up dating one of the women: a middle-aged, fashionable career woman who is referred to as "Hermès" (Miki Nakatani). In Japan, this text has come to represent the pinnacle of a new *otaku* image, which is to say, *otaku* men who were not, at the time of the film and series, considered to be attractive or desirable by Japan's standards (the nerdy, left out beta males) later were viewed as desirable due to, at least in part, the serial and cinematic narratives (Freedman, 2009; Galbraith, 2010).

Transnationality and Media Flows

I selected this film as the text as a discussion prompt for the focus groups to acknowledge the importance of transnational flows of media and the embedded transnational ideologies that inform and complicate the identity of Asian/Americans. Of this era of transnationality, globalization, and diaspora, Oren (2005) notes that Asian/America transcends national borders and that "diasporic, global, and national cultural elements" (p. 342) are inseparable from one another; following this logic, media from Asian countries are very much a part of the constantly changing state of Asian America[v]. Similarly, Robert G. Lee (2005) writes, "The borders of Asian America are not synonymous with the borders of the United States of America" (p. 23);

Asian/America and its constituents, therefore, should not be limited to these presumed borders that designate a specific, singular national ideology (Lowe, 1996; Palumbo-Liu, 1999; Parameswaran, 2007). The imagined community of Asian/America, with its transnational flows of ideas and objects—including media text and their embedded ideologies—consists of individuals who are able to navigate and negotiate multiple national identities. Individuals, particularly the ones who consume transnational media, may be able to use their position from within the margins and their position between national identities to decode both local and transnational texts in meaningful ways.

Though not without criticism, *Train Man* was met to a largely positive reception in Japan and contributed to a societal level change[vi] [vii](Galbraith, 2010). This film, which embodies and perpetuates ideologies for a Japanese audience is an effective foil against which focus group participants are able to talk about U.S.-centric issues of how "difference, marginality, [and] disempowerment…matter and [how they] are reconstituted through the different logics in globalization" (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 176). More importantly, employing an international film wherein the cast is entirely Asian creates a space for participants talk about themselves and their manhood/masculinity in relation to, not only white hegemonic masculinity, but to other expressions of Asian masculinity as well in a way that is not possible with mainstream U.S. films.

In regards to the politics of Asian/American media and racial representation, there is always scrutiny over whether any (Asian/American) director has represented or not represented Asian/Americans and "Asian Americanness" accurately (Oren, 2005; Schiappa, 2006). Additionally, although these issues are important and discussed in-depth by scholars (see Hamamoto, 1994; Oren, 2005; Shimizu 2007, 2012) discussing the impacts of representation

politics although innately a part of this paper through my exclusion of it, is not my primary goal. It detracts from the research goals of "Improving understanding of one's own country, improving understanding of other countries; challenging claims to university identifying marginalized cultural forms, improving international understanding; examining the local reception of important cultural forms (Livingstone, 2003, p. 479). Additionally, post-colonial feminist scholar, Raka Shome (2009), articulates the importance of attempting to "deconstruct the narrative of (British) 'origins' and move beyond North Atlantic centered logics for studying culture." Scholars do this through "position[ing], fram[ing], or articulat[ing] cultural studies through a logic of the 'international' that has emphasized the importance of recognizing cultural studies work in diverse global, and especially non-western, contexts" (p. 694).

Intersection of Nationality, Race, and Gender

As with any other facet of identity formation, the intersection of race and gender is an on-going, unstable process and a site of cultural production which is often-times informed by and contributes to the (re)production of media-disseminated ideologies. The alignment of media-disseminated images and the formation of sociocultural norms in regards to identity formation generally place the white, able-bodied, heterosexual male as "normal" and in the primary position of power and privilege (Connell, 1995, 1998, 2005); thus, marginalized bodies that are located outside of these categories can be read as Othered in terms of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ability (Edwards, 1997; Gilmore, 1990; Robinson, 2001). Because this paper looks at the intersection of Asian/Americans and expressions of masculinity, it is important to note and contest the globalized theories of hegemonic masculinities, which, although useful for viewing issues taking place on a larger structural level (Connell, 1995, 1998, 2005), essentialize diverse marginalized expressions. These claims to universal terms of white masculinity enables

the West to "legislate what is good for others without ever having to learn to listen to young men and young women in different cultural settings who might question the terms in which they are being theorized" (Edwards, 2006, p. 12); it is through a transnational lens of analysis that individuals can see past and undo this legislation.

Current literature on Asian/American stereotypes suggest that Asian/American men in particular occupy a complex subject position not only because society reads their race in a way that is in accordance with Asian/American stereotypes—foreign, socially inept, geeky, and the model-minority (Hamamoto, 1994; Ono & Pham, 2009; Zhang, 2010)—but because of the way society also understands white men and expressions of white masculinity. Due to the European barometer of physical attractiveness and Eurocentric notions of masculinity, Asian/American men, despite being viewed as industrious, sensitive, and respectful, are also perceived to be undesirable romantic partners, effeminate, lacking in physical stature, and asexual (Mok, 1998). As Livingston (2003), Shome & Hedge (2002), Lowe (1996) and Parameswaran (2007) all suggest in one way or another, a more transnational understanding is necessary for reconsidering the way the way we look at culture in an era of globalization. It is necessary in deconstructing the dominant Eurocentric narrative, and subsequently, changing the way we talk about race, gender, sexuality, and other lines of intersectionality.

Methodology: Focus groups and audience research

In critical audience research, audiences are understood to be active rather than passive in that they can decode the message in oppositional or negotiated ways in addition to or in tandem with the intended hegemonic meaning (Fiske, 1989; Hall, 1980; Lotz, 2003; Press & Livingstone, 2006). Fiske (1989) employs the metaphor of torn jeans, wherein the ripping and personalization of the jeans represents cultural appropriation; audiences are capable of snatching

interpretations and creating personalized spaces for themselves. Fiske and other critics were complicating the notion of media as consciousness industries, because previously, it was assumed that media interpellated the average audience member into the intended hegemonic meaning. Thus, media were best studied by decoding source texts rather than audiences (Smythe, 1997). However, rather than assuming that meaning is inherently located in the text, critical audience research assumes that meaning is actively created and negotiated through audiences. It "is now recognized as one of the best ways to lean about the differentiated subtleties of people's engagement with television and other media… Advantages of [this] work include its interdisciplinarity, the richness of its data and insights, its ability to integrate the study of text and viewer, and contextualization" (Ang, 1991, p. 35). Critical audience research is a type of qualitative empirical research that is usually carried out in the form of in-depth interviews with a small number of people either in a one-on-one or focus group setting (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The goal of critical audience research is not to tell a definitive truth about an audience; rather, the purpose is to use interview data to glean some insight to the present state of society (Ang, 1991; Grossberg, 1987; Press & Livingstone, 2006). As such, it is not my objective to present my analyses of the participating Asian/American men to be definitive truths applicable to all Asian/American men. Rather, this case study illuminates some of the ways in which this particular group of Asian/American men employ their transnational backgrounds to construct their identities as Asian, American, and men. This insight could potentially inform other strategies for thinking about constructing identity and performing race and gender.

Focus groups and power dynamics

In this paper, I conduct an audience reception analysis of five focus group interviews consisting of a total of 15 Asian/American male participants who viewed the Japanese film,

Train Man (*Densha Otoko,* 2005). Audience reception studies is enriched through guided conversations and participant observations in the informal settings where reception takes place or is discussed (Gibson, 2000; Moores, 1993; Morley, 1980; Morley & Silverstone, 1991; Seiter, 1992). Participants for this study self-identified as Asian/American, male, and were between 18-25 years of age. I recruited participants through my extended networks on the West Coast. I found subjects through courses I had taught at a large university campus in the Pacific Northwest and through acquaintances made through friends and family members. Eleven participants were students at four-year universities; one participant was a white-collar worker; two participants were students at community colleges; and one participant was a high school senior. Nine participants identified as either third or fourth generation Asian American and six participants were either foreign born or second generation. Fourteen of the participants were of East Asian descent, specifically from China or Japan. One participant was of Southeast Asian descent. Two participants also identified as mixed-race.

I opted to conduct focus group interviews rather than individual interviews because viewing a film is a social activity (Geiger, Bruning & Harwood, 2001) and because "a group possess the capacity to become more than the sum of its parts, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone do not possess" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 24). Moreover, the group setting helps to mitigate the inherent power dynamic that I have as an interviewer (Lotz, 2006). Each focus group consisted of two to four individuals, were conducted in either an unused classroom or in a home entertainment room, and ranged from 40 minutes to just under an hour in duration.

After screening *Train Man*, I opened the interview by asking participants to discuss Asian stereotypes based first on their own experiences, and then by utilizing the film's protagonist as a foil. I proceeded to ask a series of open-ended questions regarding race and masculinity and

society's perception of those topics, such as "What makes a person masculine?"; "Does the fact that Train Man is Japanese/Asian affect the way you judge/perceive him as masculine or judge/perceive his attractiveness?"; and "How do you understand Asian masculinity presently?". I encouraged participants to talk about the ways in which their own personal experiences and understandings shaped their opinion of Train Man and their opinion of (Asian) masculinity in general. By the fourth and fifth focus group interviews, the data appeared to reach its saturation point. Although there was much intragroup difference, (i.e. notable points of intragroup difference within the pool of participants include difference in nationality, generation lines, ethnicity, and age) the following themes are topics that were not only evident in all interviews, but of seeming significance to interviewees: race and distancing, gender and sexuality, and expressions of masculinity.

Formation of focus groups were arranged based on participants' availability, and these focus groups are numbered based on the order in which the interview was conducted and will be labeled as such (i.e. Focus Group 1 was the first group of participants that I interviewed, and Focus Group 5 was the last group I interviewed): Focus Group (FG) 1 (Joe, Bruce, and Xing), FG 2 (Jeff, Joben, and Michael), FG 3 (Alan and Fumiya), FG 4 (Taylor, Dane, and Drew), and FG 5 (Torey, John, Riley, and Brent). Focus Group participants had varying degrees of familiarity with one another. The interviews for FG 1, 2, and 3 were conducted in a classroom setting with a projector[viii]. Participants in both FG 4 and 5 were all mutual friends rather than schoolmates, and were all fourth generation Asian/American men; moreover, interviews 4 and 5 were conducted in a home entertainment room, as such the intragroup dynamic was animated from the beginning of the interview, whereas FG 1, 2, and 3 interviewees generally took about twenty minutes to fully warm up to each other.

ANALYSIS

Race and Othering

One of the most prevalent themes that became obvious while coding these focus group interviews was the ways in which Asian/Americans would attempt to distance themselves from other, more "foreign" Asians—whatever "foreign" meant in relation to the participants own subject position. I argue that participants do this because Asian/American men occupy a complex subject position in that society reads their race in a way that is in accordance with Asian/American stereotypes—foreign, socially inept, geeky, and the model-minority (Ono & Pham, 2009; Zhang, 2010). Participants want to, thus, distance themselves from these stereotypes. Pat Gehrke (2009) states, "one's very capacity to say 'I' is already owed to the Other" (159). If participants are able to distance themselves from embodiments of Asian stereotypes by othering Asians to whom participants are in some way dissimilar (i.e. in regards, for example, to nationality, ethnicity, and/or generation), then participants are identifying themselves as not Other. Or, in other words, participants are able to locate themselves in the U.S. mainstream rather than in the marginalized—interiorly located rather than exteriorly located—through locating "other" Asians outside of the U.S. mainstream.

In the following excerpt Dane and Taylor (FG 4) employ this sense of what they are not [i.e. Other] in order to establish what they are: Fourth-generation, US citizens who have fully assimilated into and are accepted by the culture here. In order to create a sense of solidarity with the mainstream culture, Dane and Taylor distance relations within the Asian/Americans subject position by distancing themselves from "real"[ix] Asians as articulated below.

> **Dane**: [Asians are] [n]erdy, like really smart and studious. Like when I think of the international Asian students who never want to leave their rooms, they're always studying and just super try hard in class and when they're not studying they're playing videogames online. And like all interaction is through electronic means, not like going out and doing stuff.

Tanya: So you make the difference between international—
Dane: Well that's because I think like they're from a place. They're like *the real*…[Asians]
Taylor: Uhhhhh in Hawaii it's not so much because everybodyyy…
Dane: Everyone's Asian, right?
Taylor: So if anything, it's like the local Asians are seen or looked at as normal, and the ones that are like first generation here, then they stick to themselves and [are] quiet and [of a] very different style.
Dane: Yeah I feel like [those who are] from like Asia they still carry like the—
Taylor: 100% stereotypes
[laughter]
Dane: Yeah, they carry over the cultural norms or whatever. But people who have been here for more generations have assimilated to American culture.

In this particular case, Dane and Taylor first establish themselves as capable of socializing by explaining the ways in which international and first generation Asians are not adept at interpersonal communication, which is an assertion that is in line with current stereotypes about Asians. "Real" Asians, or international and first generation Asians are characterized as "really nerdy, smart, and studious"—a description which falls into the model minority stereotype. Dane and Taylor both talk about Asians as introverted individuals who "never want to leave their rooms" and "stick to themselves and are quiet" and Americans as extroverted individuals who "[go] out and [do] stuff." Even in the case of Hawaii's minority-majority demography, Taylor makes the distinction that local Asians are "normal" whereas first generation individuals retain "100% stereotypes." Although they do not explicitly state that they are fourth-generation Asian/Americans, they imply that generational lines play a role in determining who is a "real" Asian that embodies stereotypes.

Fumiya (FG 3), a Japanese national who has lived in the states for the past two years, talks about how Train Man is an introverted character in that he overthinks social situations; he states that many Japan nationals are like this—they have a tendency to think things "over and over" without necessarily speaking out. Although he does not initially frame this internal thought

process as good or bad, throughout the discussion, his dialogue progresses in such a way that he does, eventually, distances himself from Train Man by saying "he thinks too much for me" and his Japanese citizenship.

> **Fumiya**: No offense (to Alan), but I think that American people ask everything that they think in the brain. They just ask it before they think of it. Like: 'What time is it? What are you doing?' Whatever that is. Yeah. But Japanese, they think about too much. They don't say anything and they think about it. Think about it and – I don't know – Over and over.
> **Tanya**: So – and if they do that, like when you're watching *Densha Otoko* he's like thinking. You're just like, "Oh, that's normal?"
> **Fumiya**: Well, he thinks too much for me. I think it's because I've been here for like two years. I think I was influenced by this culture. So, I'm not like same person than before.
> **Tanya**: Oh, interesting. So, are you more direct now?
> **Fumiya**: Yeah.

Out of all of the participants, Fumiya offered the most transnational perspective in that he was able to juxtapose Train Man and facets of the larger (Japanese) national identity[x] with personal observations of American/U.S. interpersonal communication styles. In this particular transcript, he observes that "American people ask everything they think in the brain." However, by prefacing this statement to Alan with "No offense," Fumiya first distances himself from this American tendency and concomitantly identifies with his Japanese nationality; by concluding with "[Train Man] thinks too much for me…I was influenced by this culture" he also distances himself from his national identity and identifies with a facet of U.S. national identity from which he previously disassociated himself[xi]. Fumiya navigates his identity by distancing himself from either community which enables him to belong to both communities rather than neither as convenient. As such, he validates his existence as a Japanese national and is simultaneously capable of distancing himself from this very nationality by asserting that he is an individual who has assimilated into U.S. culture.

Alpha, Beta, Gamma Males and Sexuality

Participants articulate what they understand to be hegemonic expressions of masculinity; by attempting to fit themselves into these hegemonic expressions, they draw attention to the violence these expressions cause and the limitations they place on expressions of sexuality, masculinity, and manhood. Participants tend to agree that aggression and dominance are defining traits of masculinity. Although they tend to employ words such as "confidence" and phrases such as "having a backbone" to describe masculinity, which are fairly neutral descriptors, they also utilize words such as "dicks," "douchebag," and "asshole" to describe what it is to be a "real" man. In the excerpt below, Dane, Drew, and Taylor (FG 4) juxtapose Train Man to three young men who verbally harass Hermes, the leading female protagonist, while she is waiting for Train Man. Participants assert that "douche bag" type behavior is masculine.

> **Tanya**: So what makes a person masculine?
> **Drew**: Confidence
> **Dane**: I just think like, compared to like those three kind of douchebag guys who went up to the girl when she was on the bench and were "Oh, you wanna come over with us?" they were kind of just like, assertive and just like how they were kind of dicks about it. Like, they were…
> **Tanya**: So that's manly, being a douchebag?
> **Dane**: Well I feel like that's the way people think men should be. 'Cause you know, it's always the guys who's gotta ask the girl out and make the moves and whatever—so being assertive like that instead of: "Oh, um, uhhhh…"
> **Drew**: But he did always ask her. And he made the choices where to eat and even if there were other people, he was still in charge.
> **Dane**: He was, but he was timid about it. He did the male role like let's go here, but he did it in a lame way.
> **Taylor**: He was the lowest of the males. He was a male but he did it…
> **Drew**: Like gamma male? Like alpha, beta, gamma. You could tell people in the train to stop talking 'cause they're disturbing everybody.
> **Tanya**: Oh, like the drunk guy, right?
> **Drew**: Yeah, the drunk guy, he's masculine.

Dane first establishes that confidence is a masculine trait, which in itself is not negative; however, he immediately references a scene from the film where young men harass Hermes and

clarifies that that behavior is "confidence." Even when Drew attempts to defend Train Man's actions by arguing that Train Man, in fact, was assertive in more subtle and subversive ways, Dane and Taylor facilitate the conversation in such a manner that Drew, at the end of the excerpt is contributing vocabulary—"gamma"—to describe Train Man's lack of masculinity. He then follows up with his own reference to the opening of the film wherein a drunk salaryman shouts in women's faces and knocks things out of their hands. Gerkhe (2009) states, "Those who do not fit the established understanding of the in-common become exiles within the community—not removed, but captive within a community in which their existence cannot be acknowledged" (163). In this case, in order to fit in the "established understanding" of masculinity and to avoid becoming an "exile" in the focus group setting, Drew repositions himself as an in-group member by reiterating what Dane and Taylor have asserted. A point of worth noting, however, is when Dane states "Well I feel like that's the way people think men should be." Rather than stating decisively or definitively that "real" men are "douche bags," he comments on society's expectation of men. The interviewees understood that men were required to take on what Katz calls "tough guise." Men put on the "tough guise" as a survival mechanism to endure their peer cultures. However, by doing so, they have also suppressed the ability to express emotion, and as a result, this "tough guise" damages their psyches and abilities to be "decent human beings" (Katz, 1999). This guise inflicts damage not only to others, but to the men themselves.

Below, Jeff (FG 2), a third-generation Asian/American who lives in a predominantly white city, consumes no transnational media and makes the statement, "the fact that he's so nice [is] a turn off." He has, perhaps, the least flexible understanding of "masculinity."

> **Jeff**: They would probably see the fact that he's so nice a turn-off. Because, I feel like, most young girls or whatever, they like guys that are kind of mean in a way, like not somebody who's going to bend over backwards for her so easily. Yes. American girls are more like…

> **Tanya**: Would you go so far as say douchebags?
> **Jeff**: Yes, douchebags, there we go. I was going to say something else. Oh, yes. I guess you're recording this. So, yes, assholes, dicks, whatever you can say, like, somebody who's not going to make it so easy for them, you know?

Although I prompted him with the term "douchebag," he immediately employs it and provides similar terms such as to describe men. Moreover, even before the prompt, Jeff talks about how being nice is a "turn-off." If this statement is a reflection of present U.S. society's expectation of men's behavior toward women, why must ask ourselves why this is the case. One possible explanation is the society's expectation for men to be detached and an aggressor rather than "nice" and thoughtful (Connell, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Moss, 2011). These terms that Dane, Drew, and Taylor (FG 4) and Jeff (FG 2) employ (i.e. douche bag, dick, assertive) are perhaps not synonymous with "alpha male" but there is some correlation to the term "alpha" in that these traits prevent men from being "beta" or "gamma" males. Participants with a more transnational perspective, however, seem to be able to recognize their aspiration and distaste for this hegemonic masculinity. Or, in other words, although Jeff, Dane, Drew, and Taylor all use negative terms to describe "normal" masculinity—which in itself is problematic—interviewees who consume more transnational media seem to be particularly ambivalent about the implications of employing negative terms to talk about "normal" masculinity, whereas Jeff is able to make his statements definitely, without the ambivalence.

In regards to physical representation of masculinity, participants talk about size, posturing (i.e. "look like you have a skeletal structure), and "signs of high testosterone" as masculine. The participants seem to have the following logic: If one is physically big, he is confident. If he is confident, he can get the girl. Both Joe (FG 2) and Drew (FG 4) talk about the way media dictate this particular standard:

> **Joe**: Just like the main role for any Hollywood movie, with a man actor. Just macho, directs the conversation, has a lot of authority in his voice. I think in America especially, it's the size, being big is being masculine.
> --
> **Drew**: Yeah. It's like in American commercials where you see men, they're like big. Shirtless but they got huge muscles and everything. And tall and just like men. Like in terms of males, you have a spectrum of masculinity. On one end, you have feminine. I feel like on a feminine end, you got more Asians. Whites are on the middle and maybe blacks, like more… [crosstalk] I mean just physically you know they're usually big like you watch football or basketball, they're all big.

Edwards (2006) asserts, "The contemporary plethora of near pornographic representations of muscular men, oiled and gleaming, in everything from Hollywood movies to pop music and adverts for soft drinks, has led some to argue that there is a culture of anxiety not dissimilar to that experienced in relation to women for many years" (p. 11). And Katz (1999) comments on the increasing size of GI Joe figures for boys and the lack of attention. Similarly, a look at Arnold Schwarzenegger in the film *Terminator (*1984*),* wherein his entire body, which is indeed a muscular and gleaming spectacle, is also a killing machine—illustrates the intersection of violence and physical size as representative of masculinity. "Just macho," Joe says, when describing what comes to mind when he thinks of a "masculine man." Similarly, Drew states, "They're all big," referring to white and black athletes; he explicitly states of Asians, "I feel like on a feminine end, you got more Asians." These statements suggest participants' perspective are aligned with stereotypes perpetuated by that U.S. media, which largely shape society's perspective.

Transnational Perspectives

Interview data reveals that participants are able to see things from multiple perspectives which gives them capacity to be empathetic towards the protagonist even though they may not personally identify strongly with him. In the previous section, I made the observation that the participants talked about the theme of the physical body in alienated manner, despite the fact that

so much of the literature focuses strictly on the pressure men feel regarding U.S. society's expectation of a big, muscular male body. In this particular section, participants employ a largely transnational perspective talk about different kinds of masculinity; moreover, and perhaps more importantly, participants exhibited a high level of engagement with this particular topic.

> **Joe**: Oh, yeah I think for Asia the physical body is not a big issue. Yeah, I think, just like I said, just like success and how they are acting how they are saying, that yeah, that take much important issues.
> **Xing**: Yes. Just like you said, being able to provide for your family I think is a huge honor throughout history for Asia. Yes, muscles I don't think really goes into it. But at the same time I think big people are seen as masculine. But when I move to the States, I work out [at the gym]. In China, I don't work out
> **Joe**: And I'm trying to differentiate in my mind between attractive and masculine. Because in Tokyo, or in Japan, the guys that are popular with the majority of Japanese girls are really skinny and pretty much they wear make-up. They shave their eyebrows to like a little line. So girls actually favored that. But they are not masculine at all.

Despite talking about the typical Hollywood male protagonist as the epitome of masculinity in the previous excerpt (i.e. "Just like the main role for any Hollywood movie, with a man actor"), Joe also talks about how Asians might hold a different body standard. Again, I would like to emphasize the way Joe talks about mainstream U.S. masculinity compared to the way he talks about Asian masculinity. He does not engage too deeply with the topic of mainstream masculinity; this is evident in the way he applies vague characteristics to his describe his understanding of the topic: "Just like the main role for any Hollywood movie." Here, however, when talking about differences between Asian masculinity and mainstream U.S. masculinity, Joe immediately starts off by saying "In Asia the physical body is not a big issue," and then takes time to gather this thoughts so that after Xing asserts his own opinion, Joe is still engaged with the topic and provides further, thoughtful insight: "I'm trying to differentiate in my mind between attractive and masculine."

Joe, who is hapa (in this case, half-Japanese, half-white), lived in Japan until the age of 18 and attended an international school in Tokyo. He points out that in Japan masculine is not necessarily attractive [or desirable]. Miller explains that typical signifiers of masculinity, such as body hair or facial hair on men in Japan, are considered to be unattractive and undesirable traits by women (2006). This contrasts with comments the participants made earlier in the paper that physical signifiers of masculinity greatly assist in being confident, and in turn, "getting the girl." Again, the subject position of these participants enable them to be more flexible in considering what is masculine, or in Joe's case, attractive, in ways outside of US media perpetuated ideologies. Xing, an international student from China, provides anecdotal evidence of the ways he performs masculinity different in the U.S., "When I move to the States, I work out [at the gym]. In China, I don't work out." He clarifies that being able to provide for one's family is not only masculine, but also an honor that does not require muscles.

In regards to personality traits, Bruce (FG 2) and Riley (FG 5) establish the ways in which they might be more understanding of different expressions of masculinity because of their Asian background.

> **Bruce**: Yeah, I can say that but I've seen enough Asian media to understand that it's a different ideal with masculinity. It's not … You wouldn't have to be super macho and Asian and it's not about big size. Not everyone is really super confident either, as I said earlier. Yeah I would say it definitely does 'cause in Asian culture it's not always good to be direct, sometimes you want to be very roundabout so I can understand that.

> **Riley**: Yeah, just like when we're going back to like the handshake and the eye contact, those values are basically the opposite within the U.S. and Japan. Like in Japan you have bowing instead, and it's disrespect[ful] when you look at someone, when you're referring to the higher person, and then the US is opposite like you want the firm handshake and want like direct eye contact.

They note that there are different ways of expressing respect and that there is value and merit in being indirect. Bruce, who was raised partially in Shanghai, states that "not everyone is super

confident either" in such a way that he gives the impression that there is as much pressure to display confidence in an extroverted manner [i.e. aggression or dominance]. He follows up with that type of "confidence", as it would be called here in the U.S., is not always a good thing. Additionally, his phrasing of the statement, "You wouldn't have to be super macho" suggests that in the States, one "has to be" "macho" to be considered masculine. His transnationality enables him to state that this is not necessarily the case in Shanghai—there are other expressions of masculinity. Riley conveys similar sentiments when he juxtaposes the handshake and direct eye contact to bowing. The U.S. greeting contains physical contact and establishes a sense of power: If one has a limp handshake or fails to meet the other's eyes, he will most likely not create a lasting [positive] impression. Whereas, in Japan, a more indirect approach may be valued.

Participants who had more transnational experience and/or the more exposure to international media seemed to be more adept at engaging different cultural codes and norms. Only one participant did not consume any Asian media or associate strongly with his Asian background. The two excerpts illustrate how media consumption habits enable individuals to comfortably employ a transnational perspective.

> **Tanya**: Was it weird to see an entirely Asian cast? Were you like, "Oh, that's not normal. What are all these Asians doing here?"
> **Jeff**: Yes, I would say so. Like, this is probably, honestly the first international movie that I've seen, completely Asian… My standard film is American …
> **Tanya**: Okay. So, you're like, "Okay, this is a bit much. I actually have to read." But, what about seeing the cast, all Asian cast, are you like…
> **Jeff**: Yes, it was different.
> **Tanya**: Okay. That's different. What would you say, Michael?
> **Michael**: Felt right at home.

> **Tanya**: If you were to show this [film] to your family in [state in the West] – like what would they say? Would they understand?
> **John**: "Why do you have to read subtitles?" Oh, well, I think if they got past all the language.
> **Tanya**: Do you think they could get pass the language?

> **John**: Eventually [crosstalk]. I think they would probably say like something's really wrong with [Train Man]. And like he needs to just get out and… maybe stop going on the computer or you know join a club.

Out of all of the participants, Jeff (FG 2) had the least exposure to Asian media and lived in a location which is predominantly white, whereas Michael consumed Asian media regularly; although Jeff talks about all the ways in which he had to consciously process the various transnational facets of *Train Man*, Michael states that he "felt right at home". Similarly, John (FG 5), a fourth-generation hapa-haole (half-Japanese, half-white), lives in a majority-minority state, and consumes Asian media on a regular[xii] basis. His statement here suggest that his white family members not only have different ideas of masculinity as it is conflated with race and nationality, but they also hypothetically exhibit a certain surprise and subsequent unwillingness to engage with foreign material: "'Why do you have to read subtitles?'" John, however, is able to utilize his exposure to transnation media to more be more receptive to different expression of manhood and masculinity as they relate to gender and ethnicity. These attitudes reinforces the idea that media is a major agent of ideological production and circulation, which produce "ideologically omnipresent notions of race and gender" (Joseph, 2009, p. 248). Without a diversity of mediated representations of Asians in the media, society's and the participant's understanding of "Asian" is limited to U.S. stereotypes (Zhang, 2010).

Fumiya (FG 3) talks about the way his cousin conflates nationality with gender expression and sexuality, in such a way that suggests the Japanese are inherently not masculine.

> **Fumiya**: When I came here for the first time, when I was in Wisconsin with my cousin, they're American, they're white, like a quarter Japanese American, so he was kind of judging, not in a bad way but… [My cousin said:] "It is not manly, are you girl, and like people in Japan [have a] kind of gay look."
> **Tanya**: Did he explain that to you like what does that mean?
> Fumiya: So like the color of rainbow is gay in here but not in Japan well, then, I was like, "Oh, I didn't know."
> **Tanya**: And how did that make you feel when he told you that?

> **Fumiya**: I decided to not wear that.
> **Tanya**: Oh okay, interesting. But now?
> **Fumiya**: But now, I don't really care. I just want to have things that I like in Seattle. But I think when I go back there I would care. They are my cousins and I don't want them to think that.

His cousin's comments reflect that certain types of fashion expressions are not manly, that it is gay and, even more broadly, the peoples of Japan have a "gay look." His cousin, thus, equates fashion/posturing and ethnicity/nationality with a queer sexual orientation and with the implication that being gay is not manly. His cousin, in other words, is unable to read Fumiya and his fashion choices in a transnational manner, which causes him to misunderstand Fumiya's fashion choices[xiii]. Although Fumiya states that "I don't really care. I just want to have things that I like in Seattle," he follows that up with the comment, "When I go back there I would care. They are my cousins and I don't want them to think that." It is Fumiya's transnationality that enables him to be flexible and open in differing expressions of masculinity, gender, and sexuality as they relate to his nationality. Although some may argue that the hegemonic masculinity of the U.S. is forcing Fumiya to fit in to a certain notion of masculinity, I suggest that Fumiya's transnationality gives him the agency to make informed, appropriate decisions based on the cultural context.

Conclusion

In the quote which opens this article Dane states, "'The Cause' is just a thing we made up where it's like reversing how Asian guys are seen a little more feminine unlike in the white culture that you don't see as many white girls who like Asian guys" this paper, too, attempted to, perhaps not "reverse how Asian guys are seen," but expose and explore issues surrounding Asian masculinity and argue the importance of transnationality in Cultural Studies works. The findings

for this project confirm that the ways in which these participants understand Asian stereotypes are aligned with the stereotypes perpetuated by media (i.e. foreign, nerdy, effeminate), and, thus, participants attempt to distance themselves from these stereotypes by differentiating themselves from other Asians through ethnicity, generation, and/or nation. However, most importantly, data also show that participants are able to employ their transnationality in a way that enables them to acknowledge different types of expressions of masculinity and manhood by drawing on their connection to, rather than distance from, other Asians.

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[i] Although the term Asian/American is in an on going process rather than a static label, for the sake of this paper, Asian/American (written with a slash to note the transnational dimension between the two terms) refers to a person having origins from Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.

[ii] In the U.S., society arguably always compares Asian men to white men to a certain degree because, as the phrase white hegemonic masculinity implies, notions of white masculinity are ubiquitous and dominating.

[iii] "To be transnational is to confront differences in power experienced within the simultaneous production and reconfiguration of gender, race, and class in specific geographic locations" (Schiller, 2013, p. 160).

[iv] 2channel (2chan) is an online forum where all users are anonymous. The western version, which is based on 2chan, is 4chan.

[v] Data from the U.S. Census 2010 shows that here is a 162% projected increase of Asians by 2050. Within the next four decades, the Asian population is expected to reach 40.6 million. Additionally, statistics also reveal that the percentage growth of the Asian population between 2007 and 2008 was the highest of any race group during that time period (US Census Bureau, 2010). The projected influx suggests that the entire state of Asian America is expanding and that there is, therefore, a need to consider taking on more transnational approaches to research and to look to transnationality as mode of analysis. Oren states, "The melancholy of racialized people is often sourced in their visual erasure—the refusal or casual inability of white mainstream culture to see, to pay attention" (p. 340-341)

[vi] For a more nuanced and sociohistorically accurate account regarding space that *otaku* have occupied in Japan and for more detail regarding the reception of *Train Man* in Japan, see work by Patrick Galbraith (2012), Tohru Honda (2005), and Akio Nakamori (1983).

[vii] Because of its popularity, the novel was translated into English; VIZ Media gave the film a limited release in the U.S.; G. Allen of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *The New York Times'* Jeanette Catsoulis both praised the film; the film was screen Portland, Chicago, and Seattle.

[viii] . Focus Group participants in groups 1 and 2 were schoolmates, whereas participants in FG 3 had not previously met before the screening and interview, although, FG 3 participants did have mutual friends. Neither participant in FG 3 was a four-year university student at the time of the

interview. With the exception of one individual, all participants were either international students or second generation

[ix] Another interesting point of analysis, which I do not look at in this paper, is perceptions of "authenticity" (i.e. Participants talk about "real" Asians and "real" men).

[x] It is not my intent to essentialize the character of the Japanese nation. I am aware that there have been many Japanese Area Studies scholars who talk about the negative consequences of a homogenized national identity of Japan (See Field, 1993; Fujitani, 1996; Igarashi, 2000 for more on this topic); however, when using nations as units of measurement, intranational details are lost.

[xi] I understand that these may not be parallel facets of respective national identity. Fumiya can identify with different facets of both national identities simultaneously and it is not necessarily the case that one precludes the other.

[xiii] One explanation why Fumiya's American cousins misunderstood Fumiya's fashion habits and read it as "gay" is that sociohistorically attention to male beauty is not unusual in Japan. Miller (2006) states, "Cosmetic products targeting men have long had great success in Japan. This may be related to the fact that from the beginning, the product category roughly equivalent to cosmetics (*keshôin*) was never strictly gendered in Japan as it is in the United States" (p. 138). In other words, the way certain men's fashion/beauty products are expressed in Japan is perhaps not constrained by a man/woman binary; however, if Fumiya's cousin is unfamiliar with these differences in fashion expressions, he may conflating these expressions with issues of queerness and nationality (Shimizu, 2014). Similarly, in a separate focus group interview, Jeff, a third-generation Filipino/Japanese-American illustrates this difference in perception. Talking about Train Man's fashion make over in the film, he says: "I guess I'm so American to the point where I can't even imagine myself thinking…[the makeover] is attractive."

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