Video Stars: Marketing Queer Performance in Networked Television

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INTRODUCTION

"Identity is not what you are so much as what you do."

—KOBENA MERCER

In 2010, a local news team in Huntsville, Alabama, interviewed a young man named Antoine Dodson about the attempted rape of his sister. Dodson's defiant response sparked a cavalcade of Web commentary, going "viral" on its own, then spreading further after the Gregory Brothers of Auto-Tune the News remixed it into a song. "Bed Intruder Song" became an iTunes hit and the most-watched YouTube video of that year, raking in millions of views and thousands of dollars for its producers (Lyons, 2010). As spectacular as it sounds, the Dodson affair was far from new. The history of the Web includes scores of such incidents, in which people who are historically underrepresented became suddenly and spectacularly visible. Only three years prior, queer YouTuber Chris Crocker created one the most iconic YouTube videos in its history with his performance of empathy for Britney Spears (Christian, 2010a; Weber, 2009). Mr. Pregnant, a deep parody of Black and African minstrelsy, went viral that same year (Sabatini, 2007).
The “viral” nature of these videos has drawn scholarly and media attention to proliferating representations of marginalized people online. Yet focusing on how users interpret and spread these images masks a profound fact: Many of these videos were deliberately marketed to Web audiences by their stars. Chris Crocker had already built up a strong following of viewers, drawn to his sincerity and his story of coming of age as queer in Tennessee, long before Leave Britney Alone! Auto-Tune the News was a highly profitable independent Web series under a network umbrella, Next New Networks, acquired by Google/YouTube in 2011 (Roettgers, 2011).

With lower barriers to distribution online, independent filmmakers and creators have access to wider audiences, but open markets create greater burdens of representation. Performers can acquire skills, either on their own or through formal training, and self-distribute representations of marginalized groups that cross lines of class, gender, race, and sexuality to a large portion of the population. In a marketplace where corporations provide the most efficient means for reaching viewers, these images become packaged and sold, both by companies such as Google and by performers eager to create for a living. These questions arise: What happens when identities corporations have not valued—the queerest, most ambitious, and most difficult to define—suddenly have the opportunity to “market” (i.e., create value for) themselves? How do video stars and independent entrepreneurs sell themselves to the public? Finally, what does this market say about the political potential or limitations of new media?

In the new media landscape, historically marginalized voices rely on difference, that is, the Othered body and voice, along with discourses of the “self,” to present themselves to mass audiences on networked television. Historically, television networks have had an ambivalent relationship with performances of cultural difference. Felicia Henderson (2011), drawing from autoethnographic experiences in corporate television writers’ rooms, describes this as the “uni-cultural” tendency in Hollywood media production, derived from its historical oligopoly that packages national culture as a transparent, mass commodity. Black and queer performers excluded from this vision of culture and its production embrace their difference in culture and its distribution. The “networked” aspect of Web television—that is, its ability to facilitate theoretically infinite amounts of connections between producers and consumers— aids their identification with television’s business and disidentification with its cultural strategy. This aberration, as Roderick Ferguson (2004) might describe it, creates powerful cultural formations easily exploited by network intermediaries such as YouTube, along with other producers and cultural distributors. This chapter explores the increasingly less “amateur” space of YouTube, the primary venue for individuals creating videos about their lives, before and after 2010, as that site gradually increased its focus on marketing its users. Using interviews with producers and analyses of videos, this chapter explores various identities performed for networked television, focusing on the intersection of Black, queer, and woman.

THE PERIL AND PROMISE OF QUEER PERFORMANCE IN AN OPEN MARKET

To be marginal is to exist outside. To have an intersecting identity is to exist in between. Intersectionality and marginality are concepts uniquely suited to studying the ambivalences of the new media economy and its capacity to create opportunity from the bottom while reinforcing hierarchies at the top; its openness to a broad range of identities that it then burdens with self-marketing; and its ability to monetize niches in ways that help both major corporations and independent producers. The “digital” sometimes disturbs the business models of multinational corporations and occasionally offers possibilities to individual and independent producers to make money and build community. Outsiders, we are often told, are getting in (Jenkins, 2006; Shirley, 2008). Yet barriers still remain for many who want to fully participate in new media economies and profit as much as existing institutions and individuals with connections to them (Hindman, 2009; Marwick, 2013; Terranova, 2000; Turner, 2010).

The users and producers in this chapter render visible the networked economy’s contradictory discourses of self and society, art and market, independent profit and corporate dominance. This free, open market demands more of citizens, allowing them to create new cultural formations and niches in the marketplace while also inciting clashes and paradoxes along lines of identity in culture and politics (Duggan, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Miller, 2007). Queer of color critique can illuminate how performers and producers resolve these paradoxes through networked television, a technological paradox in which the cost of distribution has been lowered, but access to capital for complex productions still rests with the companies that have historically created television written and starring White, straight men. Television’s power to represent attracts Black, queer, and feminine-identified producers, historically marginalized from its vision of nation: “As it fosters identifications and antagonisms, culture becomes a site of material struggle” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 3). By using the Internet to produce a vision of themselves, they upset television’s history and reality, disidentifying with its cultural form through the open network (Muñoz, 1999). This attracts attention, which can produce value through technology designed to facilitate many-to-many connections (Webster, 2014).

These ambiguities within markets and categories, then, force scholars to look at practices. What do users and producers do with marginal and intersecting identities? How do they navigate the open market? How do they balance affective desires to be seen and heard against the need for marketing? Marketing requires simplicity; it has little use for deconstructing categories, because categorizing people is the easiest way to sell products to them. This is true, perhaps especially so, online. Intersectionality, meanwhile, is ambiguous: “precisely the vagueness
and open-endedness of ‘intersectionality’ may be the very secret to its success” (Davis, 2008, p. 69). Yet identity-based categorization, and the political security and community it provides, remain useful and powerful. For those at the margins, reclaiming identities could be a form of empowerment if one does not negate how multiple identities can intersect: “At this point in history, a strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for dis-empowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1297). As will be shown, indie creators variously eschew and claim categorizations, which is a necessary dance in a digital marketplace open to the nation and media corporations, along with marginalized communities.

Faced with the possibility—if not quite the reality—of profiting off their identities in a market that does not value them, creators use the Web to represent themselves sincerely and disrupt television’s formulas for serializing culture to make it consumable in short doses over long periods of time.

YOUTUBE: SELLING YOURSELF ON THE OPEN MARKET

YouTube is a vexing, fascinating space. For decades, after the introduction of television, having one’s own network has been the dream of many a filmmaker, producer, or aspiring celebrity. “YouTube,” as the name implies, offers this promise: “broadcast yourself,” and, by selling oneself, make money, build fans, and support artistic or political projects. YouTube, then, is a key site for examining how producers—or producers, etc.—negotiate the self and the market. In part because of its brand, which encourages individuals to become producers, YouTube has risen above other video sites such as Justin.tv, Vimeo, Blu, Funny or Die, and a host of others as the preeminent space for lo-fi video production; for nearly all of its early history, YouTube outpaced all other streaming sites across metrics such as viewership, videos posted, and total streams.

YouTube was always commercial, but it started as a more “personal” space, and much early media coverage focused on the user’s ability to watch home videos of the sort shot on vacation or during the holidays (Graham, 2005; Kirsner, 2005; Ojeda-Zapata, 2005). After the popular Lonely Island digital short “Lazy Sunday” went “viral” on the site in 2005, however, the use of YouTube as a vehicle for more market-oriented content became clear (Burgess & Green, 2009). Google purchased the network a year later, making clear its split identity as a place for the personal and commercial (Jarrett, 2008).

For many years YouTube has remained a rich, dense environment: It is a social networking site with community building tools, an (increasingly corporate) entertainment venue, and a venue for self-publicity. “Vlogging,” or video blogging, was, in the beginning, the site’s bread and butter; it was a way for individuals to cheaply make videos, either about themselves or culture and politics. Users such as Philip DeFranco and Michael Buckley used the vlogging practice of looking to the camera and speaking directly to audiences to build large fan bases for their pop-culture commentary.

In its earliest years, the site offered users numerous strategies to manage their personal space, similar to peer sites Myspace and Facebook. YouTube offered a number of features for identity management, publicity, and social networking. In terms of identity management, users can delete videos they have posted in the past, and they can make certain videos private (though this is not a popular option). On their videos’ pages, vloggers can delete comments they don’t like, bar discussion on a video entirely, and block users who do not fit their standards. For social networking, the primary methods of connecting with others are subscribing to others’ channels, friending, and messaging. Subscribing is the most common method of connecting; some users subscribe to a lot of channels, while others do not. Most accept friendships liberally, though a few are more careful. As for private messages on the site, a few vloggers, especially more popular ones who receive them regularly, do not use YouTube’s emailing tools and instead redirect viewers to a social networking page or alternative email, either personal or professional. Users can also dictate who sends them messages; a few, though a minority, require an offer of friendship before someone sends them a private message on the site. In general, YouTube’s customizable features allow users a great deal of control over how they are seen and presented, further encouraging individualization and the existentialist project.

Yet “personal” management quickly segued into “brand” management when the site introduced the partner program in 2007 (Kirkpatrick, 2007). In the beginning, select YouTube creators, those with a large number of subscribers and a record for consistently publishing “quality” content (i.e., safe, consistent, and popular), were invited to allow advertisements to be placed on their videos. These advertisements were automatically placed on videos through advertising networks, which mined tags, video descriptions, and audience demographics to match the correct 15- or 30-second spot with the video. Eventually brands started to contact YouTubers directly for product placement and branded entertainment. YouTube rapidly expanded the partner program. Within a few years the company claimed thousands of creators were making a living off the site, with a substantial number making more than $100,000 (Albrecht, 2008; Wei, 2010). YouTube continually refined ad delivery and sales, though not always to the satisfaction of either its corporate partners, whom it privileged, or independent producers.

Even as it supports independent and amateur creators with some basic infrastructure, Google has consistently courted the traditional media and higher-budget independent production companies. After initially suing YouTube for copyright violations, mainstream media companies such as Disney eventually
entered million-dollar distribution deals with the site (Child, 2011). In 2010, YouTube bought new media studio Next New Networks, looking to harness low-budget but more sophisticated videos (than vlogging) to develop a slate of programming much more like a traditional television network. By late 2011, the site had invested more than $100 million in upgrading its “channels,” money that went straight to the pockets of its top homegrown talent, as well as traditional celebrities, new media studios, and brands (Nakashima, 2011). That project fizzled, and Google then promised to sell the audiences of “preferred” channels (the top 5 percent), including corporations both traditional and new (multichannel networks) and some producers who had been developing their channels since the early years.

The producers named in the first half of this chapter came of age in the early days of YouTube, when fewer channels existed, collaboration was more common, and its “stars” were much less focused on branding and more engaged in managing the self and the growing community. Dodson came of age in a later stage in the Web video market, which was by then heavily curated by companies such as YouTube, and in which marginalized identities had to do more work to sell their intersectional selves. I conducted 17 interviews on the phone and via instant message with Black vloggers with intersectional identities—mostly Black women, gay, hi male, or Latin performers, though I did speak to four straight men. I asked participants why they started producing, what kept them going, and what their experiences on YouTube said about it as a site for social interaction and video marketing. Creators expressed ambivalence about authenticity, negotiating the complexities of their work, and the online market through discourses of “sincerity” (Jackson, 2005).

**CHANNELING DIFFERENCE INTO THE SELF**

The home for marketable “amateur” user production in online video is YouTube. YouTube continues to be the platform for diverse groups of individuals, of which have incredibly large, if not commercially valuable, audiences—Dodson and Crocker, for example, had subscriber bases well in excess of 100,000 in 2011.

How have users sold themselves to a large, unknown public? Vloggers sell both “the self,” the idea of an individual who is sincere and independent, and “quirk,” the marks of cultural difference that separates them from the thousands of YouTubers on the site. YouTube has birthed a number of these stars, all of whom have managed to build audiences both despite and because of their intersectional identities. These include B. Scott, an androgynously queer talk show host of mixed race identity; Mr. Pregnant, whose channel offers a challenging performance of minstrelsy; and Tonya TKO and Jia, two Black women who have managed to build stable audiences, even as Black women remain relatively absent from the site’s top users. Other vloggers will also be discussed.

Vlogging renders more visible and powerful the drive to articulate a singular identity in a networked world, one not necessarily, but often, based on notions of collective identity. YouTube space propels a centered narrative—“Broadcast Yourself”—such that their videos reflect self-conceived ideas and representations. Always weighed against the desire to assert difference and the realities of diverse audiences, personal authenticity, or sincerity—which, as argued by John Jackson (2005), stands in opposition to images of people or representations—remains the most marketable currency among vloggers, an interesting turn in the history of media representation (pp. 14–15). Perhaps the best way to demonstrate this is through two radically different yet popular vloggers: Mr. Pregnant and Jia of JiaTV.

By turning himself into a caricature and emphasizing his quirks to the extreme, Mr. Pregnant is among the most problematic Black vloggers on the site, but he has also been one of the most popular. By 2011, his videos had been viewed nearly 45 million times, and his channel had about 60,000 subscribers. Yet his channel is awesomely, or satirically, obscene, transgressing racial and sexual boundaries that few performers, even the most daring, would transgress. Coupled with his accent—the network VH1 identifies him as Adelston Holder, a Nigerian immigrant living in New Jersey—he performs “otherness” (Webjunk TV, 2007). When I interviewed him via instant message, he said he was White, male, and 100 years old. To anchor his identity with anything resembling the truth would ruin the irony of the performance.

Mr. Pregnant must be seen to be understood, but a quick sample of his videos includes his most popular video, *Big Girls Don’t Cry* (Holder, 2006a), in which he, wearing lipstick and cinching his dreads into two ponytails, cries to the famous pop song for an uninterrupted four minutes. The videos are clear from their titles: *Big Belly Man*, in which he shows and jiggles his enormous belly (Holder, 2007); *Mainboobs*, in which he raps the simple refrain “titties like a woman” (Holder, 2006c); *I Am Stupid* (Holder, 2006b); and *The Internet Freak*, a label he wears proudly (Holder, 2008a). In a recent video, *A Rape Story* (Holder, 2008b), he dresses as a thug and “rapes” himself. At the end of the video, he, the raped woman, cries, but then yawns. In each video he wears fake teeth with enlarged gums and opens his eyes wide, as if in the blackface tradition. He has catchphrases, including “Schniker Schnaw!”

This would be a traditional case of minstrelsy, except Mr. Pregnant is not in traditional blackface. It is a version of his actual face that he is broadcasting. He is tenaciously unwilling to break character and, in our interview, denied the existence of a character altogether. This refusal to differentiate between the “character” and self is unusual on YouTube. To get views, the site’s most popular users are willing to acknowledge they exaggerate their personalities at least a bit, and many of them
are careful to show more “human” sides. Many popular YouTubers such as Michael Buckley, LisaNova, and DaneBoe have separate channels where they post more subdued videos about their thoughts and feelings. Yet trying to peel back from the obscure extravagance of Mr. Pregnant was impossible:

AJC: how did you come up with Mr Pregnant?
MP: I am Mr. Pregnant...
AJC: so Mr. Pregnant isn't a "character" (or you are him "right now")
MP: It's an insult... How did George Bush, Paris Hilton and Britney Spears come up with their characters?

Realizing I would be talking to Mr. Pregnant, I asked him about his thought process:

AJC: so how do you come up with ideas/topics on what to post?...you have a lot of videos
MP: they're aren't ideas...just my regular thoughts...I...never saw them as ideas because they required no mental work.
AJC: sort of stream-of-consciousness-like
MP: Neither...what is required from you to talk to me?...a stream of consciousness?

Mr. Pregnant would not admit to any active construction of his image or his videos, a rhetorical strategy employed by vloggers who want to be perceived as “real” or authentic (Christian, 2009). In an interview with VH1, Mr. Pregnant said: “I see the Internet as a medium of expression, where I can go there and just express my true feelings to the entire world and just be me” (WebjunkTV, 2007). This “just being me,” a common refrain among other vloggers, who are all more believable as human beings than is Mr. Pregnant, is the single clearest linguistic evidence that vlogging on YouTube is an existentialist practice. Even among vloggers whose videos would suggest parody—a postmodern division of the individual self as a fallacy, a representation to be toyed with—there are appeals to sincerity amid the obvious existence of a web of lies. Some aspect of the “self” must be true, or at least superficially present, to fit within the YouTube motto. Mr. Pregnant’s plea to be understood as an honest individual is likely part of the act, a commentary on YouTube’s privileging of naturalism and self-expression. His invocation of it says something important about the site and about being in the world, the demands that (Black) individuals be seen as wholly constituted.

When I asked Jia about how she managed to get so many subscribers—almost 15,000—without employing the histrionics of someone like Mr. Pregnant, she gave a remarkably similar answer: “I dont use my body to get people to watch, I dont speak one way or dress a certain way to attract viewers...I just shoot from the hip and to most people, thats being real.” To “shoot from the hip” is to not really think about or deliberately construct an image too far in advance, to “be real” by way of honesty and an implied lack of forethought, just as Mr. Pregnant told me.

Jia is the opposite of spectacular. The vast majority of her more than 400 videos are unedited, and many of them are extraordinarily long by YouTube standards (more than five minutes, with some even more than 10 minutes). In these videos she merely speaks in front of the camera and gives her opinion on a subject, which can range anywhere from pop culture and music to relationships and sex to Black hair, racial politics, and Black women. She rarely even wears makeup.2 “I think that its a great place for [talking about issues] b/c it allows a person to not only voice their opinions but to also ‘show’ their passion and emotion,” she told me via instant message. Emotional sincerity is very important to Jia—and she does not let others interfere with that or impinge on her identity: “I dont let other people dictate my emotions. My conclusion is that people are going to say and do whatever they want...you can’t let what others have planned dictate your emotions or what you will/wont do,” she said when I asked her about people’s negative responses to her videos.

How can Jia and Mr. Pregnant be alike in any way? The discourse of personal sincerity on YouTube, much more prevalent in the earlier days of the site, is powerful. It animates everything users do and undergirds their production practices. This fierce sense of self and honesty in many ways connects all the users on the network. It allows them to “do their thing” without guilt and without having to answer for what they do (usually). It even connects the postmodern sensibility of Mr. Pregnant with Jia’s more pre-modern performance, which is romantic, effusive, singular, and unironic.

MANAGING THE SELF AND STARDOM

Still, the “self” on YouTube is neither pure performance or simple evocation. It must be managed. The simplicity of vlogging—talking to the camera—might lead to pronouncements that videos express unmediated “true” selves. Indeed, some earlier YouTube videos and vloggers employed this rhetoric when they describe their practices (Christian, 2009). Presenting a version of the self that is legibly sincere is important to gain and maintain fans, but no vlogger is purely transparent. As a space for edited video with a large degree of functionality—unlike, for instance, late 1990s webcams that merely broadcast unedited streams of individual lives—YouTube has allowed for its stars to manage their presentation of self in a number of ways.
When I asked sketch comedy vlogger Barrett of BarrettTV—whose sexuality is unknown but is often read as queer by fans—if his channel in any way reflects who he is, he gave me an answer commensurate with the density of his page: “It is me, but more of an extension. People like to assume that’s how I am all the time. It’s more of a persona. I have to put on a little for the camera. But it still is really me.” His answer is equivocal, and scanning through his videos, it is clear why. Barrett has done skits mocking church ladies, satirical videos that mock the limits of labels—like Cuz I’m Black, among others—and more opinionated personal vlogs. He is both funny and serious. So it makes sense that he both “exaggerates” and expresses himself honestly: It is all there for the viewer to see. Yet to justify his participation, he ends up at “it still really is me,” the explanation wraps up the political, comedic, and personal into a neatly digestible sense of self. Johnathan Gibbs, or BlasianFMA, also says his channel—in which he plays different “sides” of himself, the Black side, the Asian side, and the “real” side—is an exaggeration, which is why he created another channel, johannahibgs, for matters more personal to him. Still, to Claxton J. Everett, this practice is silly: “I kno people who have their YouTube characters and themselves... that’s so deceiving to me... just be yourself.” For Everett, “being oneself” includes keeping videos relatively light on editing and focusing more on being serious, not over-the-top. However a user frames it, all of these tools for self-management are framed around projecting a sincere self in all its complexity.

The work of self-management is an all-consuming activity among vloggers on YouTube. Vloggers decide how and where to be seen and what those questions mean. B. Scott, a mixed-race, genderqueer pop-culture commentator and talk-show personality, probably best exemplifies how hard YouTubers work to sell their identities. B. Scott used his YouTube vlog and written blog, both called “Love B. Scott,” along with a radio show and cosmetics line, to amass tens of thousands of fans—100,000 YouTube subscribers, 80,000 Twitter followers. Along with TV appearances on TV One, Fox, and Oxygen, B. Scott has interviewed Mariah Carey, Jennifer Lopez, and Chaka Khan, among other stars, and has been mentioned by A-list celebrities such as Rihanna and Jamie Foxx.

How did he achieve such success? B. Scott brought in viewers by talking about pop culture and created a personality through self-help-style reflections on his own life. A spring 2011 video about his hearing the daughter of his first-grade teacher refer a young boy to his YouTube channel reveals his skill at harnessing neoliberal notions of the self:

I was once that little boy in her mother’s class... For her to go and show that little boy my videos and say: “You can be happy. You can be successful. You can achieve and you can exist and there’s nothing wrong with who you are.” It means so much to me. [Here he starts to cry]. It wasn’t easy being that little boy and sometimes it’s still not easy being who I am today. But moments like that. It makes it worth it. (Scott, 2011)

B. Scott, revealing his own emotions, funnels a deeply personal experience into a story about how queer, “different” people can achieve success. B. Scott’s performance, including numerous instances of classic camp, from lip-synching to drag-like glamour, has allowed him to attract eyeballs (Christian, 2010a). But his viewers have stayed for his personal sincerity.

These YouTubers maintain strict requirements on how they present themselves based on a perceived audience and make compromises based on what reactions they receive. Both Jia and TonyaTKO, two of the most popular Black female vloggers on YouTube, said that they regulate their appearances as women. In one of Jia’s early videos, she wore a tube top and makeup as she discussed the issue of rich older women dating younger men. She told me she dresses down now and rarely shows her breasts because

In the past when I have been all “done up,” that’s the first thing people say... “Oh Jia, you’re pretty...” and they avoid what I said in the vid... so I give em t-shirts, scarves and usually no makeup lol. so they have no choice but to pay attention to the ugly girl.

Jia adapted her image as an attractive Black woman to her audience to make sure her voice was heard. After getting comments like “slut” and “jezebel,” Tonya, too, altered her appearance: “the mainstream is really not ready for sexy Black females,” she said to me. “People on YouTube love them some breasts... YouTube is just notorious for breast hunters.” After starting her channel with very personal stories, she has since moved to discussing issues and talking about self-empowerment: “I’m really trying to keep a professional distance... You realize that the stuff that you say online have greater impact.”

Another way users create boundaries around the self is video deletion. Many viewers delete past videos if they no longer think it represents who they are. Dancer and slightly less popular vlogger Marcus Bellamy, a New Yorker with roles in prominent shows such as Spider Man: Turn Off the Dark, told me he goes through regular “purges” and will delete videos in bulk (I had added one video, in which he discussed the complexities of his open sexuality, to my favorites, only to find it gone months later). Popular-culture commentator Alonzo Lerone deleted most of his videos at one point so he could refocus the message of his channel, shifting it from personal content to criticisms and analyses of stars and music videos.

On YouTube, presumably noncommercial activities such as vlogging meet the market demands of building an audience and selling advertising for revenue, a market the vloggers above are all engaged with. While YouTube’s motto “Broadcast Yourself” is increasingly out-of-step with the site’s focus on independent producers and traditional media content, it remains an accurate description of how thousands of producers, including those of color and of various sexualities, have been able to build careers: by selling and sharing the self.
GRAPPLING WITH SPREADABILITY, THE MAINSTREAM, AND THE LIMITS OF SELF-MARKETING

By 2011, YouTube had significantly changed, as Google began doing many more deals with traditional media outlets and deemphasizing amateur vlogging in favor of higher quality, "produced" content. Few better examples of this growing tension between the self and the market exist than in the case of Antoine Dodson, the "Chris Crocker"-esque meme of the late 2000s. If Crocker's video spread by funneling his personal obsession with Britney Spears into a camp commentary on mainstream culture, Dodson's was the inverse: The mainstream thrust his personal commentary into the broader market and turned it into camp. The story is revealing about the limits of personal marketing in an increasingly complicated and corporatized Web space. Dodson's saga from the margins to the center reveals how the Internet marketplace increasingly relies on mainstream media corporations and new media networks to create its entertainment, and how previously unseen individuals can get caught in the middle. Put in that situation, they have little option but to assert the self and manage their stardom with what few resources they have.

Unlike many of the previous examples, Dodson is that rare video star whose audiences ballooned without his consent. Dodson performed for the camera not, like most vloggers, because he sought a dedicated audience (though one assumes he sought a little bit of fame), but because he was angry about violence in his neighborhood. That we even know about Dodson is the work of producers for the Huntsville, Alabama NBC affiliate WAFF-48, who decided he was more camera-friendly than his distraught sister, who was, perhaps, too traumatized to be entertaining. Black queer activist Kenyon Farrow, who expressed conflicted feelings about Dodson's queer performance, directed pointed criticism at the station: "Also, the news station intentionally included more footage of Antoine than Kelly, who was the actual survivor—were they going for ratings here? Did they stick this on YouTube?" (Farrow, 2010). For decades, news reporters have framed what is important for viewers to see, but in the age of the Web, others can amplify that curation. The Black queer Dodson became the story.

The video of Dodson spread rapidly. Yet it was not until another operation picked it up, this one YouTube-grown, that Dodson's image spread like wildfire. The Gregory Brothers had themselves become "viral video" stars years earlier, when they started to "Auto-Tune the News." At the time, auto-tuning had reached a climax in hip-hop, as the young White men (and one woman) used its saturation to mock it. They did not, however, stop there. By 2010, the Brothers were being distributed by an increasingly powerful Web video network, Next New Networks (NNN), which had a broad slate of programs such as Rarely Political (of "Obama Girl" fame), Key of Awesome (spoof videos), and IndyMogul. The loose network was able to aggregate hundreds of millions of views on a regular basis, all based on low-cost, consistent content that "spreads" because of the ways in which marginal identities motivate sharing and participation from a plethora of groups (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). The Brothers had been producing consistently, too, but their auto-tune of Dodson upgraded them from jokesters to impresarios.

"Bed Intruder Song" would become their biggest hit, and the video was the most-watched of the year on YouTube (Banks, 2010). The success of the song catapulted NNN's already high profile, and the following year, as part of a broader plan to ramp up independent production on the site, YouTube bought the company for a reported $50 million (Roetgers, 2011). The Gregory Brothers became superstars, booking gigs with The Cleveland, the BET Awards, and the Academy Awards, while being feted in the New York Times Magazine for their "old-fashioned musical ability, high-tech skills and the do-what-you-want spirit of the World Wide Web" (Itzkoff, 2011). As of this writing, they have more than one million YouTube subscribers, making them one of the site's leading acts.

I narrate this story to make clear the marketability of caricatures of outsiders in a "viral" or "spreadable" marketplace. It was precisely the problematic nature of Dodson's performance that attracted so much attention. For his part, Dodson was able to capitalize on his fame, but not nearly to the extent of YouTube, the Gregory Brothers, and Next New Networks, who, as distributors and producers, have the clout to integrate consistency into the chaos of the Web. Because Dodson was given rights to "Bed Intruder Song," which sold enormously well, he was able to "move his family out of the projects" (LaCapria, 2010). Dodson also released an EP, Love Is More Than a Song, along with a hip-hop collaboration with Lady G called "Gucci Bag." He started his own YouTube channel—now at more than 100,000 subscribers—started selling clothes and costumes, and acted as a pitchman for some humorous products, like the Sex Offender App (Dodson, 2011b). He signed to star in a reality show, though without a network distribution deal in place (Molloy, 2011).

Dodson's independent efforts represent an attempt to assert his particular identity within the dominant media system. With the Internet, he is able to do that—to a point. On his YouTube channel, Dodson's videos, which followed his life around the height of the buzz, were viewed hundreds of thousands of times. A year later, however, when he tried to blog about his personal opinions and his life—he'd been arrested for possession of marijuana in April 2011, then again in September for not appearing in court—those videos were much less popular, raking in views in the low tens of thousands. Dodson appeared sobered in these videos, post-fame:
The next problem. I'm just going to be doing videos and everything since I'm on chill mode and all that, you know, they got me doing drug classes I guess. "I'm on drugs" and stuff and "I can't handle what's going on," I'm "a crackhead," you know what I'm saying. I'm "ugly."... They just say everything and it's so funny to me. They always said that the world is cruel... but never ever have I got to experience the world in this type of way. (Dodson, 2011a)

Dodson was clearly affected by some of the negative press around the arrests, and the fact that by all accounts, the public had moved on. Having not built his fame from the ground up, like Chris Crocker, Jia, or even Mr. Pregnant, his channel was not necessarily a destination, and he had little recourse to control his narrative. Users were not seeking him out. He may yet be able to market himself outside the mainstream media, but having achieved stardom outside of his control, he may be even less equipped to sustain it. As YouTube becomes even less about “you” and expressing personality, outsiders find themselves with fewer tools to manage and streamline their images.

WHEN INDEPENDENTS MEET THE MARKET

The market is supposed to stand in opposition to progressive cultural politics. Yet throughout history, companies and minorities have tried to harness the market for political ends, using marketing to assert the importance of difference (Weems, 1998). The epigraph of this chapter invokes Kobena Mercer's notion (1993) of identity as practice, and the independent producers in this chapter “do” their identities by trying to make inroads into the new media market.

What kind of liberation can come from this? Mercer praised the Black queer experimental films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which reimagined genre and cinematic form to express the tensions and irreconciliabilities of being Black and gay. Those filmmakers did not have the level of access to capital and mass audiences digital practitioners believe they have today. The Web series producers and vloggers in this chapter came after the rise of niche marketing and media conglomeration, some of which commodified previously unseen identities from LGBTQ people (Viacom's Logo) to Latino-Americans (NBC's Univision, HBO Latino, etc.). With profit in sight, amateurs and independents saw little value in the less commercial forms of experimentation Mercer described, instead relying on firm notions of the self, genre, and form to carve a space in markets. As Maurice Jamal, founder of the Web's first Black gay video network, GLO, said in an interview: "It's about economic empowerment, our community showing if we can

flex our muscle not only creatively, but also economically" (M. Jamal, personal communication, October 6, 2010).

Yet, as gay consumers have realized after the growth of the LGBT market in the 1990s, there are limits to visibility. The fundamental problem stems from the difference between consumers and citizens, economic subjects and social subjects. As Rosemary Hennessey (1994–1995) writes:

Not only is much recent gay visibility aimed at producing new and potentially lucrative markets, but as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line.... Visibility in commodity culture is in this sense a limited victory for gays who are welcome to be visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects. (p. 32)

Written after the advent of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” in the 1990s, Hennessey's warning bears some weight. Markets, indifferent to transformational politics, are a scary space for marginal identities. For Arlene Dávila (2001), the rise in Latin@ representation around the same time held little currency for true political change: “Latinas are undoubtedly gaining visibility...but only as a market, never as a people, and ‘markets’ are vulnerable; they must be docile; they cannot afford to scare capital away.” Beretta Smith-Shomade's (2008) work on BET shows how access to mass distribution for Black communities did little to quell representational grievances.

Lacking marketing teams, these independents must follow the logics of markets, and so rely on formulas and proven tropes to sell less visible “others”—in this case, their “selves,” the one resource they will never lose. True independence, then, is a bit of an illusion; any attempt to achieve audiences and raise money through advertising means aspirations must conform to the dominant culture, which controls the flow of capital.

What this chapter has shown, however, is that difference is not lost in transition, but comes in from the side, sometimes as an afterthought, sometimes superficially. When othered groups and bodies produce and market their own representations, they cannot completely erase their identities and bravely insert those differences into the wider new media market. This is meaningful. Hennessey perhaps could not have predicted that the economic subjects in the 1990s would become politicized a decade later. The efforts of the producers in this chapter may have unintended consequences; they are hoping the market might hold the same weight as noncommercial spaces, offering another way to interject meaning into cultural difference and carve out more room for identities historically too troubling to fit comfortably within the American media landscape.
NOTES


2. Dodson YouTube channel.

3. Another user: Claxton Everett, who knows Jia, confirmed my analysis: "take jia...she does VERY little editing...and she is VERY popular...just because it's her...she is very well spoken, and she never holds back...she always speaks her mind."


REFERENCES


Holder, A. F. [Mr. Pregnant]. (2006a, October 2). Big girls don’t cry [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9x4C1JLkUK


