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“I Want the Microphone”

Mass Mediation and Agency in Asian-American Popular Music

Deborah Wong

Introduction

In the spring of 1993, Pomona College—a small liberal arts school on the eastern edge of the greater Los Angeles area—held its annual Asian Pacific Islander Week, a week-long festival celebrating Asian and Pacific Americans. Noon on 2 April students, staff, and faculty gathered in a courtyard outside a dormitory and sat on the grass in the spring sun, eating lunch and watching a group of teenagers set up a large sound system and casually try out hip-hop moves on a small, concrete stage area.

A good half hour after the scheduled starting time, music suddenly began to blare out of the sound system, and a troupe of about ten young Filipino Americans—all dressed in baggy jeans and oversize T-shirts, many wearing baseball caps on backwards—strolled out and began to dance. The music came from a small sound booth at the back of the stage area, where the DJ stood and put on various LPs, occasionally “scratching” them, adroitly fading out and bringing in different grooves for the dancers. After more than ten minutes of free-form hip-hop, the leader of the troupe finally appeared—La Quian (meaning, the big or large one), a Filipino-American rapper. Tall and commanding, La Quian rapped (in English) for almost an hour as his DJ sampled backup music, and the dancers spun and strutted behind him. The following lines are excerpts from the rap which closed his show:

*La Quian*¹

They call me the La Quian

The son of Raul [“Raul” is unclear]

[indecipherable line]

Under a tree

And with the freestyle/And in the meanwhile

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So check it out
 Oriental/Instrumental
 Fundamental/Call me frontamental
 Hip-hoprisy/If I go to college
 Just to suppose/I seek some knowledge
 With my dancers/They know how to house
 I'm a [indecipherable phrase]/Just wait out and out
 So I step/Step to my right
 I step to my left and then I touch my bicep
 [indecipherable phrase] 'cause I go from the miiiiind
 [several indecipherable lines]
 Get the microphone/And I know what's up
 [indecipherable line]
 But I'm not Vanilla²/I'm the man from Manila
 Not Michael Jackson but yes I can tell ya
 [indecipherable line]
 I want the microphone/And yes, I'm an agent
 An Asian/Not a black sensation
 Got the microphone/So what's up with that
 That blow your mind/Yes I can see
 The A to the R to the N to the G
 And if you know I can also do my thing/Do the swing
 And I said like a sting/
 Like a song like a [indecipherable word]/Rhythm like a [indeci-
 pherable word]
 Cause you know/So so so
 Big-big-bagow/Big-big-bagow
 I come from the Riverside/Front end of the town

1. La Quian, a Filipino-American rapper, performs with his DJ, Jim, at Pomona College, Claremont, California, April 1993. "But I'm not Vanilla/I'm the man from Manila." (Video-tape still by Deborah Wong)



The side of the river/The river of the side
 Get the microphone and I can satisfy
 My my my/Just like Johnny Gibb ["Gibb" is unclear]
 Like Steven Segal³/I will be hard to kill
 [indecipherable line]
 Make like this/So I got to kick it
 So what up, Jim⁴/So give me some five
 [indecipherable phrase]/We come from the Riverside
 [indecipherable phrase] you know/[indecipherable phrase] the
 microphone
 And ya know
 Nineteen ninety-three/My name is La Quian
 I want to thank all of ya'll lovin' ["lovin" is unclear]
 For payin' attention to me/Give me your love
 And all the Asians/Asian Pacific Islander Week
 Good luck/And I'm out
 Peace/And I'm out

With that, he saluted the crowd with a clenched fist and strode off the stage, followed by his dancers.

This essay reflects my ongoing interest in how Southeast Asians deal with mass-mediated music. Like people everywhere, Southeast Asians create, react to, interact with, and appropriate mass-mediated musics; they are enthusiastic participants in the transnational distribution of Western popular musics, and they support thriving popular music industries of their own. I'm interested not in what mass-mediated musics do to people but rather, in what consumers and performers can do with such musics. Mass-mediated musics provide all-too-fertile ground for Marxist takes on the asymmetrical relationship between the multinational music industry and a Third World that's often depicted as passive and disempowered.⁵ The power relationship is certainly there, but I want to argue that the ground-level reception of mass-mediated musics can be a site of real contestation and redefinition. I want to demonstrate this by taking a look at La Quian and then at karaoke; a genre that most of us love to hate, a genre that seems emblematic of the disempowered actor and the reified, global techno-musics that take the people out of performance.

While La Quian's performance has certain broad similarities with karaoke, I'd like to initially look at what he was saying before discussing how he chose to say it. In the four short minutes of rapping that I excerpted, La Quian deliberately positioned himself in a number of telling ways. He is very clear about who he is: he's Filipino, he's Asian, he's not Vanilla—i.e., he's not white. Despite his chosen performance genre, he's "an Asian, not a black sensation." He's from Manila. He's from Riverside (a city in the greater L.A. area). He's an agent (not a passive spectator). In short, he outlines a tangle of ethnicities and localities, all defining precisely who he is and who he isn't. The problems of positionality are fascinating—though, of course, they aren't problems for La Quian.

Yet, if rap is the genre of young African-American urban men, what is it doing in the mouth of a young Filipino immigrant? Does he have any right to it? La Quian coopts not only the genre, but actual recordings too: his performance is a palimpsest of live spontaneous utterances and borrowed recorded sound. He locates himself as a live landmark in a landscape of stolen sounds. His performance is a tour de force not only

of mass mediation but of visual and vocal presence, too, and the end result is not only powerful and confident, but also highly entertaining.

This suggests that it's worth considering how the interaction of the canned and the live messes up and redefines our notions of the authentic in performance. While mass mediation is often considered a hegemonic force, people can (and do) reclaim mass-mediated musics for their own purposes. I've seen how Southeast Asians constantly and enthusiastically put liveness back into genres that seem to epitomize the hegemonic evils of the transnational music industry. I don't doubt that this happens all over the world, but I think the greater Los Angeles area is a particularly rich fishbowl of such performance activities because of its intensely immigrant character.

Karaoke

Karaoke first appeared in a Japanese bar in Kobe in 1972; the first karaoke machine (for 8-track tapes) was put on the market in 1976, and the rest is history. *Karaoke* is one of only a few Japanese words (along with *sushi*, *teriyaki*, *kamikaze*, and *ninja*) to enter the English language. *Kara* means empty, and *oke* means orchestra. The compound word itself is wonderfully evocative—it joins the central Japanese aesthetic of emptiness (e.g., *karate* meaning empty hand) to the archetypal high-culture Western music ensemble, the orchestra. The word's interculturality, and the full-circle return of *oke* to the English language, points to the transformative power of intercultural performance.

Since the early '70s, karaoke has gone through a series of technological transformations and has spread all over the world. Karaoke is, however, especially popular in Asia, including Japan, of course, but also in Hong Kong, the People's Republic of China (Huang 1991), Taiwan, Korea, Hawaii (Harada 1992), and virtually every Southeast-Asian country. Interestingly, karaoke has been slightly slower to take off in Anglo-America (Armstrong 1992), but "karey-okey," as it's pronounced by most non-Asian Americans, is found in more and more bars. In fact, the transformation of karaoke into "karey-okey" points to the genre's transnational movement and a second intercultural transformation—a kind of full-circle imaginative return, in which orchestra, *oke*, becomes "okey."⁶

Karaoke in Asian-American communities is another story. Whether of East- or Southeast-Asian origin, when Asian Americans (especially first generation) talk about karaoke, their faces light up. Karaoke is fun. Karaoke is a social ritual of great satisfaction: it allows anyone to be a star for a few moments, and it can negotiate the potential wasteland between being Asian and being Asian American.

This last point assumes a special importance in the Vietnamese communities of Los Angeles. After 1975 and the end of the Vietnam War, the United States became the new home for hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians. Unlike immigrants from China, Japan, the Philippines, and Thailand—who generally came to the United States voluntarily (for reasons of economic opportunity)—the Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese who managed to gain entry were political refugees, cut off from their original countries. Now concentrated in California (especially in Fresno and Orange County), these communities have had a doubly difficult task. Like most immigrant communities, they work hard at maintaining tradition, but, economically cut off from their homelands, they have had to create a contemporary sense of self as well. This has meant creating an immigrant popular culture.

2. *U-Sing-Along*, a store in Little Saigon, Westminster, California, specializes in karaoke technology. (Photo by Deborah Wong)



At least 85,000 Vietnamese now live in the greater Los Angeles area (Pearlstone 1990:93), and most are concentrated in the Orange County cities of Westminster, Garden Grove, and Santa Ana. These sprawling suburban cities are the center of the Vietnamese community in America and are characterized by one mini-mall after another, each filled with huge Vietnamese supermarkets, travel agencies, gold shops, restaurants, and music stores. In the music stores, cassettes, CDs, and laser discs line the walls and spill out of bins. Most are produced in Orange County; very few are imports from Vietnam, and these are usually black-market dubbings. Any store stocks a few traditional genres (especially *cai luong*, or opera) but most are devoted almost entirely to southern Californian, Vietnamese-American popular music.

A good portion of any Vietnamese-American music store is given over to karaoke. Karaoke material is available in a variety of formats, and this is usually prominently advertised in store windows (see the lyrics in the accompanying box). Some stores even specialize in karaoke. In addition to recordings, such specialty shops also carry karaoke equipment—and when they do, there is lots of it. As one clerk said: “Lots of stuff in here that the government doesn’t know about!” Any such store is a beehive of activity on a weekend afternoon: several customers will be gathered around a monitor playing the latest karaoke laser disk, others will be bargaining for a lower price on a pile of videotapes, and others will be intently listening to a clerk’s description of the latest laser-disc combiplayer, remote mike, or package deal.

Technology is at the heart of the karaoke phenomenon. Japanese equipment dominates the market: the stores in Orange County are full of Sanyo, Nikkodo, JVC, and Sony hardware, each model newer and more sophisticated than the last. Unlike the rest of the audiovisual industry, which is explicitly focused on reproductive quality, karaoke technology is primarily directed toward social accessibility and the people who use it.

Consider the progression of karaoke technology over the past 15 years; after the first 8-track karaoke tapes, audiocassettes, videotape, CDs, and laser discs successively cornered the market. The first karaoke machines were essentially glorified tape players. Initially a typical 8-track (later replaced by cassette tapes) contained four songs and eight tracks. The machine played each song twice, once with the solo vocal part and once without. The performer either sang from memory or read from special books of lyrics. By the late '70s, however, video karaoke was introduced: the song lyrics unrolled in front of a series of romantic backdrops. This new visual element created a significantly dif-

ferent performance environment: instead of looking at the singer, the audience tended to watch the video. As one electronics industry executive said, "Sometimes people felt uncomfortable singing in front of other people, but videos helped eliminate that tension" (McClure 1992:K3). The president of the Karaoke International Singalong Association described the change in audience dynamics even more succinctly: "With the lyrics on TV, the whole room gets to watch, and they get sucked into the experience" (McGowan 1992b:K2).

In 1978, home-use karaoke machines were introduced but were still expensive enough that most karaoke singing continued to take place in bars. In 1982, Pioneer introduced LaserKaraoke, the first laserdisc machine, and despite dire predictions that its costs could never compete with the VCR and videotape market, it took off almost immediately because of its accessibility. Unlike the constant rewinding and fast-forwarding required by videotape, laser discs permit random access, allowing performers to select songs in any order. In 1985, the first home-use LaserKaraoke machine appeared, and it's now estimated that there are some 450,000 such machines in Japanese homes alone. As users grew to like the possibility of performing in an intimate environment, public performance possibilities changed accordingly, and in 1988, the first "karaoke boxes" were introduced in Japan: at certain karaoke establishments, customers could rent small private rooms with karaoke equipment and have parties with a few select friends, but on better equipment than they might be able to afford at home. In the interests of affordability, "CD + G karaoke" (compact discs with graphics) has appeared in the past few years: the CDs offer good sound quality and random access and can project the song lyrics onto any TV monitor.

Initially a form of public entertainment, karaoke has been designed for increasingly intimate environments. Karaoke bars and "boxes" exist in southern California, but karaoke machines for the home now command a large part of the American market. For instance, a small advertisement in a recent issue of the *Los Angeles Times* states that "We can turn your VCR/Cassette/CD/Laser Player into [a] Karaoke Machine with Karaoke Mixer (\$159.00)." In fact, the preferred venue for Vietnamese karaoke is restaurants, which are, in my view, public extensions of the home.

Like most Southeast Asian groups, Vietnamese regard eating as an activity that should be social and affordable. Most Vietnamese-American restaurants in Orange County are thus significantly cheaper than their Western counterparts and are geared toward fairly large groups of people—families and, later at night, groups of male friends. Most restaurants now have a laser disc karaoke machine and a large screen that can be easily seen from any table. My observations from here on are based mostly on evenings spent at the B.B.Q. Banh Mi So Mo restaurant in Pomona. Pomona is a small city just inside the eastern edge of Los Angeles County; it is about 25 miles from the Westminster/Garden Grove area but has a sizable Vietnamese population. Though not in one of the most densely populated Vietnamese areas, the restaurant has mostly Vietnamese customers and does fairly good business.

By late afternoon or early evening, the karaoke machine in B.B.Q. Banh Mi So Mo restaurant is on constantly whether anyone chooses to sing or not. Unlike karaoke bars, where patrons pay by the song and have to meet a minimum tab (usually \$10), karaoke is free in most restaurants. The B.B.Q. Banh Mi So Mo restaurant doesn't have a liquor license; in fact, the owner of the restaurant says he bought the karaoke

setup to attract more customers, and feels it's done just that. During the early evening, most of the tables are filled with extended families, but by 8:00 or 9:00 P.M., most of the customers are men who sit and smoke, eat snacks, chat, and sing karaoke.

It's important to understand that informal, amateur singing of popular music is common in social gatherings of many Asian cultures: Imelda Marcos crooned into a microphone at countless diplomatic dinners; Chinese wedding banquets often feature singing by the bride, groom, and their family members—I'm told that this is now common in Java as well. I've been on countless long-distance bus trips with Thai university students and faculty members where nearly everyone got up, one by one, and sang a song into the bus P.A. system to pass the time. Common to all these settings is an emphasis on participation rather than skill: while good singing is admired, bad singing isn't maligned. The point is simply to take part—to demonstrate good humor and good manners by taking one's turn, as well as by expressing appreciation of others' singing. Karaoke thus falls neatly into a performative niche already well established in many Asian societies.

The customers at B.B.Q. Banh Mi So Mo restaurant who choose to sing are almost entirely men. Although some women sing, this is unusual and usually involves middle-aged women in large family groups. Vietnamese women simply don't gather in public; they socialize in same-sex groups in the home. Male social life, on the other hand, often involves informal evening gatherings in restaurants and bars. I've heard from Vietnamese women of several generations that female socializing at home can revolve around karaoke evenings: one woman told me that she and her female relatives periodically get together and pool their individual collections of karaoke laser discs. Such gatherings are usually noisy events full of laughter, food, and conversation.

Male socializing around karaoke in restaurants is a much more restrained affair. At B.B.Q. Banh Mi So Mo restaurant, a circle of regulars—male friends in their thirties—stops in almost every night for an hour or two; they invariably sit in nearly total silence, smoking continuously, staring at the karaoke screen, and passing the microphone

3. *Three friends at B.B.Q. Banh Mi So Mo restaurant in Pomona, CA, sing karaoke with little emotion. Even the sadder songs that are typical of Vietnamese love songs and classical poetry do not elicit much fervor. However, karaoke often provokes comradeship between tablemates. (Videotape still by Deborah Wong)*



around the table. In fact, part of the pleasure of the evening seems to lie in the routine itself: night after night, these friends sing songs from the same laser discs with no apparent loss of enjoyment, though the occasional new laser disc meets with keen interest.

Despite advertisements that invite karaoke enthusiasts to experience what it's like to be a star, for these men the pleasure of karaoke performance seems to lie in a very different place. If they experience flights of fancy as they hold the mike, such fantasies are contained in a frame of male reserve: the singers remain seated at the table, and express no emotion beyond slightly pained expressions during the sadder love songs. Technical skill is irrelevant, and neither applause nor boos punctuate any performance, no matter how excruciating. Though a friend may be holding the mike, other men at the table may sing along silently, moving their lips but making no sound. The performance experience may be solo, but it occurs within a circle of cigarette smoke and restrained male comradery.

Since the main point of karaoke is for the performer to feel like a star, the visuals behind the lyrics never feature singers; instead, most Vietnamese-American videotapes or laser discs feature a series of scenes over which the lyrics unfold. At their most bland, these visual narratives are merely panoramic shots of nature—rivers, meadows, waterfalls, etc. More often, though, the visuals follow a character through a minidrama. One videotape of a song about a man away from his sweetheart, for instance, shows a young soldier stationed along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border, alternately walking on patrol, stopping to read his sweetheart's letter, and gazing soulfully into the distance. This example was filmed in Vietnam, which brings me to an important point: karaoke material is now being filmed by Vietnamese-Americans in both Vietnam and southern California. Regardless of where it's filmed, these karaoke narratives have a strong and integrated aesthetic sensibility of softness and restraint. Markedly unlike the fast cutting and juxtapositions of American MTV, Vietnamese-American karaoke videos (like so many music videos in Asia) often feature extended pans, liberal use of slow motion, and many soft-focus shots.⁷

Some songs are so popular and well established that they exist in several karaoke versions, highlighting an important aspect of Vietnamese-American karaoke videos: they provide a performative frame for exploring immigrant identity. One such song, "Bai Tango Cho Em," or "A Tango for You," is available in at least two different karaoke versions, issued by different companies. "Bai Tango Cho Em" is literally a tango, sung in Vietnamese but driven by classic tango rhythms. Its lyrics are intensely romantic, and although the song can be sung by either a man or a woman, it is actually a dialog between two lovers. The frequent references to sadness and melancholy are typical of Vietnamese love songs and classical poetry: love tinged with melancholy is central to the aesthetics and poetics of romance.

One karaoke version of "Bai Tango Cho Em"⁸ is laid over a visual narrative of life in old Vietnam: a young woman, dressed in traditional Vietnamese clothes, is seen in a series of scenes, absorbed in daily village life—washing clothes by the river, feeding chickens, praying at the family shrine, greeting her grandmother, and going to the market. This film was in fact shot by Vietnamese Americans in Vietnam, but was then produced and distributed in California. As far as I know, it was intended solely for an immigrant market, and is unavailable in Vietnam.

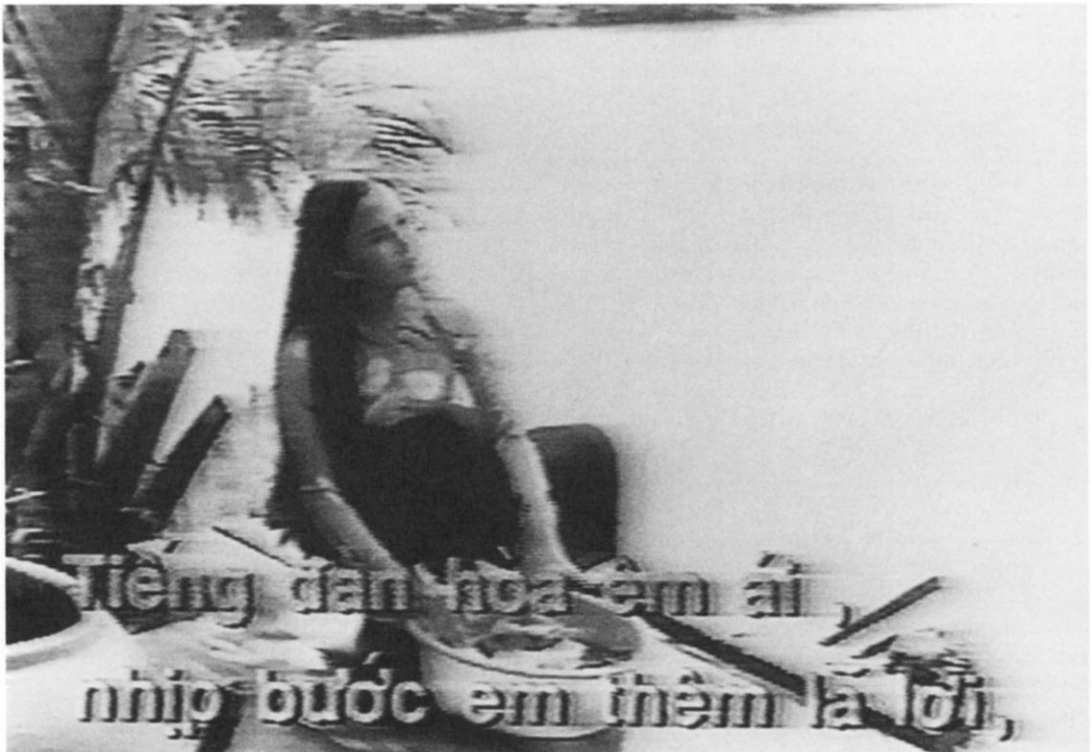
A second version of "Bai Tango Cho Em," released by a different

company,⁹ follows a teenaged couple through an idyllic afternoon in southern California. It opens with the young woman strolling down a suburban street and then knocking on the door of a typical southern Californian ranch house; her boyfriend answers the door, they embrace, and then they wander through sunlit gardens and the oceanside boardwalk at Long Beach.

Why would this song be set to such contrasting narratives? One version offers a vision of the past—a way of life now nothing but a memory to most Vietnamese Americans, and nothing but hearsay to any Vietnamese American under 20 years old. The other is squarely placed in the world of the Southeast-Asian diaspora—or rather, a utopian vision of the refugee experience. The second version, marked by light and affluence, is a sedate fantasy of demure romantic love in which teenagers hold hands and go for long walks in slow motion.

Why a tango? Tangos made their way from Argentina to European nightclubs, from there to colonial outposts like Vietnam,¹⁰ and from there to the karaoke of Vietnamese immigrants. In this present context, the tango has a complex emotional landscape indeed; in some ways it is a postcolonial artifact with a new spin. Ethnomusicologist Adelaida Schramm, who has done some preliminary fieldwork on Vietnamese music in refugee camps and in New York City (Schramm 1991), suggests that dance-hall numbers of Latin-American origin—tangos, chachas, and boleros—have special meaning for Vietnamese immigrants. The musical life of post-1975 Communist Vietnam is shaped by government regulations, and, for some Vietnamese of the diaspora (especially the middle- and upper-class Vietnamese who emigrated immediately after 1975), Western-influenced popular musics represent a pre-Communist past. As Schramm writes, tangos

4. *The storyline of the karaoke videotape of “Bai Tango Cho Em” provides a performative frame for exploring immigrant identity. As this Vietnamese-American couple stroll along the boardwalk at Long Beach, the young woman puts her arm around her boyfriend as the subtitle reads, “Now that we’re together.” (Videotape still by Deborah Wong)*



are part of a pre-1975 Vietnamese past, [a] symbol of a pre-Communist period which immigrant Vietnamese wish to retain as [a] marker of who they are vis-à-vis other Vietnamese and vis-à-vis the American host country. Whatever the ideological force of these dichotomies might be, the relevant point is the new multiplicity of function. In the American context, these appear to be community- and identity-directed in a situation where the Vietnamese are confronted by their own heterogeneity on the one hand and their relations with American society on the other. (97)

At once then, a tango can evoke a particular past as well as create an immigrant Vietnamese present. In this way, a tango speaks of the past in a way that lends sense and order to the borderlands of the diaspora. It is a frame for a particular historical moment, a momentary stopping-off point maintained in the face of tremendous odds. James Clifford suggests we consider traveling as the central metaphor of the colonial and postcolonial eras, and that we look at the narrative force of the migrations and immigrations that, indeed, created the Other. He says, "If contemporary migrant populations are not to appear as mute, passive straws in the political-economic winds, we need to listen to a wide range of travel stories" (1992:110). Vietnamese karaoke is a travel story par excellence, always told in the first person. This brings me to some further thoughts on karaoke as a cross-cultural phenomenon as well as its specific importance for a refugee Southeast-Asian people.

Cultural studies theorist Jody Berland has proposed that the study of transnational cultural production must involve not just the song and its audience (for instance) but also the study of the space it inhabits and establishes. She suggests that

5. Although filmed in Vietnam, the video "Bai Tango Cho Em" was intended for immigrant markets in California. The visual narrative is an idyllic and nostalgic voyage to daily village life. The lyrics read, "The sound of music, harmonious and soft/As you move ever more gracefully." (Videotape still by Deborah Wong)



Bai Tango Cho Em (A Tango for You)

Translated by Mai Elliot

MAN:

Tu' ngay co em ve

Since you came back to me

nha minh tran anh trang the.

My house is filled with moonlight

Dong nhac tinh da tat lau.

Love was absent from my heart for a long time

Tuon trao, ngọt ngào nhu giông suoi.

And now it overflows like a rushing stream.

Anh yeu phut ban dau, dep nghieng nghieng dang em sau.

I loved you the first moment I saw you move in sadness

Trong mat em buon ve mau.

With sadness quickly clouding your eyes.

WOMAN:

Anh o'i co khi nao, lan gap day cho mai sau

Could this meeting last forever

Tieng dan hoa em ai.

The sound of music, harmonious and soft.

MAN:

Nhip bu'oc em them la lo'i,

As you move ever more gracefully,

the production of texts cannot be conceived outside of the production of diverse and exacting spaces: that much of the time we are not simply listeners to sound, or watchers of images, but occupants of spaces for listening who, by being *there*, help to produce definite meanings and effects. (1992:39)

Karaoke presupposes and is structured around an empty space, a place meant to be filled by a live, not-canned person whose performance will merge with the package, a person who fills sonic and social and historical space, and whose performance becomes larger than life. Or is the technological frame so imbued with power relations that the performer is necessarily coopted? Ethnomusicologist Charles Keil admits in his important article on mediated and live musics in Japan that:

Until a few years ago my position on all the electronic media was basically Luddite, a desire to smash it all on the grounds that it substituted machines for people, replaced live music with canned, further alienated us from our already repressed sensoria, [and] enabled capitalists to sell us back our musical and emotional satisfactions at a profit. (1984:92)

Cung dieu buon cho'i vo'i,
The sad melancholy tune hovers in the air,
Doi tam hon rieng the gio'i.
Our two souls are lost in their own world.

WOMAN:

Minh diu sat di anh,
Hold me tightly as we dance,
De nghe lan ho'i chay, trong tim nong nan.
So I can feel the burning of your passionate heart.

MAN:

Tiec th'o'ng chi, khi tro'i rong thenh thang.
Why regret anything when the sky is limitless.
Vu'o'ng van de roi, mot do'i cu'u mang.
Why harden ourselves with any cares, for they will remain
with us all our lives.
Gio' minh co nhau roi, do'i dep vi tieng em cu'oi,
Now that we're together, your laughter makes life beautiful,
Vu'ot ngan trung, qua be kho'i.
We'll journey a thousand miles and cross a deep ocean
Dat diu cung ve can nha mo'i.
And hand in hand we enter our new home.
Ta xay vach chung tinh,
We'll build a wall of everlasting love.
Nhieu chong gai co tay minh,
We'll overcome all obstacles,
Xin ca'm o'n do'i con nhau,
We're thankful to be together,
Ghi sau phut ban dau,
We'll engrave the memory of our first meeting on our hearts,
Bang bai Tango cho em...
With this tango dedicated to you...

In my estimation karaoke is not the latest insidious step in a long, drawn-out process of transforming consumers into the dupes of transnational industries and technologies; rather karaoke is one of many examples of how people reclaim the mass media and make it their own again. "Mediated musics, sounds schizophonicly split from their sources" (Keil 1984:91), have been around for over 100 years, since Thomas Edison first invented wax cylinder recordings—or even, one could say, since the invention of the telephone. Karaoke is one way that people ensure performative possibility and their own active participation in this process. In her study of lip-synching, Nora Beck cites Lipsyncha, a popular nightclub lip-syncher in New York City who insists that "we are not impersonators, we are song interpreters" (in Beck 1992:2). Craig Rosa, a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* enthusiast and participant, notes that the interplay of the live and the canned is central to any showing (or should I say performance?) of *Rocky Horror*, which he calls "one giant carnivalesque karaoke" (1992). Why does canned performance make us so uneasy? Why should mediation diminish the value of an event? Rosa muses:

There is [...] something unsettling about the live being not yet

completed and the mediated being finished. Maybe it is the sense that the mediated is being reduced to the mechanically registered and reproduced. It is like saying that the finished painting is less interesting than the performance of the painter painting. We're missing a beat, if not the boat. (1992)

Karaoke takes the very notions of live and canned and messes them up, rendering them ambiguous. Performance studies theorist Sharon Mazer suggests that we compare karaoke to the pleasures of watching puppet theater: the puppet, she says, "makes manifest the distinction between alive and not alive because it verges on but never attains the status of 'living'" (1992). Karaoke hinges on the fact that it's not *all* mediated, not canned—is, in fact, alive.

Karaoke in Asian-American Los Angeles is not a single phenomenon, but has acquired profoundly different meanings in different communities. In the new Chinese immigrant communities of Monterey Park and Alhambra, for instance, karaoke bars have become associated with crime and drugs. From December 1992 to January 1993, the City Council of Alhambra denied karaoke permits to several Chinese-American restaurant owners and eventually passed an emergency measure freezing the issuance of such permits for 45 days (see *Los Angeles Times* 1992). One article entitled "Limits" (*Los Angeles Times* 1993), states that: "Karaoke has come under fire from police and residents who worry that it attracts illegal activities, including violent crime, prostitution, and alcohol abuse."¹¹ Nor is karaoke necessarily a unidimensional site for the exploration of ethnic identity: second- and third-generation Japanese Americans in Los Angeles now use karaoke as a means for learning their parents' or grandparents' language (Tawa 1992:JI, 4). Clearly, karaoke is whatever its performers make it, and not vice versa; it is a template for performative possibility.

Conclusion

When La Quian (to return to the beginning of this essay) so emphatically defines himself through rap he doesn't steal grooves as much as he transforms them. When Vietnamese Americans sing karaoke tunes in a Pomona restaurant they freely range between possible selves: for a few moments, they can be transported back to an imagined Vietnam that no longer exists, or they can project themselves into uniquely immigrant versions of the California dream. Either way, it seems to me, these borrowed sounds, genres, videos, and laser discs are a means by which Vietnamese Americans create a moment, however fleeting, and insert themselves into it:

I've got the microphone, I *want* the microphone, and yes, I'm an agent. La Quian might not articulate it as I am, but he knows about agency, its power and its potential. His rap is emphatically about the eye/I, the process of defining a self. In performance, his hands are constantly in motion; one grips the defining microphone, the other points again and again to himself: *I* have the microphone, *I'm* an Asian, *I* will be hard to kill. But this is of course only half of the dynamic. As often as he gestures toward himself, redefining and positioning himself, he then points to the audience—the defining listener.

That La Quian locates himself through a mass-mediated genre isn't merely a detail—it's a deliberate positioning that draws on and simultaneously reinscribes the power of the genre as defined by African-Ameri-

can performers. La Quian ≠ Ice Cube ≠ Vanilla Ice, any more than Vietnamese Americans become French colonials or Argentinean gauchos when they sing tangos. To return to Clifford's trope of travel, we must look here at the "different modalities of inside-out connection, that the travel, or displacement [...] can pass powerfully *through*—television, radio, tourists, commodities, armies" (Clifford 1992:103). The oppositional voice of African-American rap not only passes powerfully through La Quian as a seemingly stolen commodity, but is transformed in the process into something consciously Asian American, directed (in his Pomona College performance) to a consciously Asian-American audience.

If I present La Quian as an exuberant stealer-of-sounds, as a voice deliberately positioned vis-à-vis other voices, am I guilty of "the optimistic attribution of agency to consumers [...] and the tendency in cultural studies to celebrate fragmentation" (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992:3)? Perhaps. Indeed, I do celebrate La Quian's agency as well as the agency of Vietnamese-American producers and consumer-performers who construct a past and present for themselves through mediated song. But I don't see the process as fragmented. Neither the tango nor rap are monolithic genres that carry a core of essential meaning through their transnational journeys, nor do they fragment a spurious reality. If anything, the mass mediation that carries them from one transfiguring consumer to the next encourages—no, invites—constant transformation.

Notes

1. Some of the lines and phrases of La Quian's rap were indecipherable. I have denoted these places with bracketed ellipses.
2. La Quian is referring to the white rapper Vanilla Ice.
3. Steven Segal is the star of such action movies as *Under Siege* (1992), *Above the Law* (1988), *Hard to Kill* (1990), and most recently *On Deadly Ground* (1994).
4. Jim is the name of La Quian's DJ.
5. For a good overview of the asymmetrical relationship between first-world product and third-world markets, see Peter Manuel's "Introduction: Theoretical Perspectives" (1993:1–20).
6. I experienced considerable indecision in spoken presentations, not sure whether to pronounce the word "karaoke" or "karey-okey," since the latter word and its attendant implications point to precisely the kind of transnational performatives I'm interested in here. In the end, I went with "karaoke," since that's how it's pronounced by most Southeast Asians.
7. Having made these generalized comparisons, I hope someone will be inspired to look more closely at Asian music videos. For insightful essays that problematize my overly general stylistic characterization of American music videos, see Andrew Goodwin's "Fatal Distractions: MTV Meets Postmodern Theory" and Lawrence Grossberg's "The Media Economy of Rock Culture: Cinema, Postmodernity and Authenticity" in Frith, Goodwin, and Grossberg (1993). Goodwin argues that MTV music videos are, and aren't, ideal postmodern texts, and Grossberg suggests that there is no "clear single aesthetic" that unites, say, the videos featured on MTV, VH-1, BET, Nashville, etc. (187).
8. This version of the song is included on a videotape entitled *Karaoke 1: Vietnamese Hit*, produced by Thu Productions of Rosemead, CA (n.d.).
9. This version is from a videotape titled *U-Sing-Along Karaoke: Doi mat ngu'o'i xu'a*, produced by U-Sing-Along Karaoke Superstore of Westminster, CA (n.d.).
10. Two recent movies set in French Indochina, *The Lover* (1992) and *Indochine* (1992), both contain tango scenes.
11. According to one member of PERFORM-L (an E-mail conference that focuses on performance studies) with whom I conversed, karaoke has similar associations in Taiwan, and members of the Taiwanese military are forbidden to patronize karaoke bars.

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