May 2015

"Look Pon Likkle Chiney Gal": Tessanne Chin, *The Voice*, and Digital Caribbean Subjects

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"Look Pon Likkle Chiney Gal": Tessanne Chin, *The Voice*, and Digital Caribbean Subjects

At the end of the blind auditions for the fifth season of the vocal competition show, *The Voice*, which aired on September 24, 2013, something interesting happened. After having successfully gotten all four celebrity musician judges/would-be coaches – Adam Levine, lead singer of the pop band Maroon 5, Cee Lo Green, an alternative/quasi afro-futurist hip hop artist who started out in the Atlanta based hip hop group Goodie Mob, pop singer Christina Aguilera, and country singer Blake Shelton – to turn their chairs, Tessanne Chin was subjected to the customary post performance interview. First, Cee Lo Green asked Chin for her name and where she was from, and with her accented delivery of "I'm from Kingston, Jamaica," to quote Adam Levine, the "dirty fight" began. Cee Lo Green then commented to Chin that she "sang that song like a grown woman," to which she responded, "I am a grown woman." Blake Shelton, noting the polish in her performance, asked Chin about her experience, to which she responded that singing was her "bread and butter back home." A chorus of appeals erupted from the coaches. Levine asked if she could repeat the phrase "bread and butter," and Aguilera, with intermittent ecstatic moans exclaimed, "Oh my God, Can you just talk to us?" Shelton then claimed that he was "fascinated" by her.

In direct response to this legible fetishism, Jamaicans and many others in the Caribbean basin and diaspora took to social media and networking sites to both support Chin and question the "gaze," to poke back at the territorializing eye to which she was subjected. One such challenger is the YouTube sensation, Russhaine Jonoy Berry, or rather his persona "Dutty Berry" and his YouTube vlog he began in 2006, *The Dutty Berry Show*. I read *The Dutty Berry Show* as a nodal point along a digital network of intersecting local and global battles for cultural, political, and economic autonomy, and those self-identified Caribbean subjects who took to this platform as engaging in the complex process of inscribing a Digital Caribbean diasporic identity. Their participation on the "people's archive," ranging in activities from "likes," "shares," "views," commentary of support, critique, and "troll management," challenge limited and limiting discourses of embodiment and offer an intervention into the construction of historical and national memory.

Each coach attempted to ply Chin for the opportunity to work with her. Levine, after deploying his now trademark "intense stare" and standing erect on his chair to signal his enthusiasm, informed Chin that his favorite music, although he fails to name Jamaica specifically, "comes from where [she] comes from." Aguilera noted that Chin was a "power house" and appealed to what she perceived as Chin's kindness and warmth. Cee Lo Green's pitch alluded explicitly to her Caribbeanness, suggesting that having come from Jamaica, Chin knew "something about being down in the valley" and travelling difficult roads. With this appeal to Chin's presumed relationship to class and Caribbean spirituality, Green offered to accompany her on the hard road to success. Levine then

interjected that what Chin needed was "platonic company" and pointed out Chin's wedding ring to his fellow coach in an interesting moment of displacement. Levine deflects any question or notion of impropriety or sexual desire for Chin onto Green, the Black American male, but it was Levine who noticed the ring; and to notice one has to look, and look with interest.

In this scene of projected fantasy and desire, a palpable disjunction was articulated by the coaches who seemed incapable of reconciling the phenotypically Asian looking woman, on which they could project an orientalist gaze, with the Caribbean looking body and sounding voice, on which they could project yet another set of fetishistic identifications. She was, to borrow from Mary Douglas by way of Stuart Hall, "matter out of place,"[1] an unsettling hybrid body that disrupted the spectators' definitions of both Asianness and Caribbeanness. The cartographic impulse of empire, the mapping of discourses onto the "exotic" that went into motion in her first post performance interview later became an ideological juggernaut over the course of the competition as judges incorporated personal narratives of their vacations to the Caribbean when speaking to Chin. Chin's coach, Adam Levine, repeatedly invoked the specter of Bajan pop singer, Rihanna, when discussing the particular "flavor" Chin brought to the competition. For Levine, particularities of "place" do not exist; all of the Caribbean islands collapse onto the female body in a context of converging transnational networks of production, circulation, and consumption.

Originally the brainchild of Dutch television producer, John De Mol, the same producer who brought us *Big Brother*, the reality vocal competition show, *The Voice,* has become a global phenomenon, and currently airs in over fifty countries. In terms of format, previously vetted contestants walk out onto a stage where they are visible to studio and television audiences but not to a panel of celebrity musician judges/coaches. Contestants then sing for approximately a minute and a half with hopes of impressing one of the four coaches enough for them to turn around their chair marked "I want you." Once chosen, coaches choose songs, offer support, and provide professional advice as contestants endure the next four stages of competition (Battle Rounds, Knockouts, Live Playoffs and Live Performances) in which contestants face elimination competing against and performing with team members and those under the tutelage of other coaches. In the last stage of competition, the surviving twelve contestants compete for the public's favor. Television and social media communities become the arbiters of contestants' fates. If more than one coach turns their rotating chair around, it is then the coaches who compete to sway the contestant to choose them. These "blind auditions" supposedly provide opportunities to those who have not been able to secure commercial success for a variety of reasons, chief among them the

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[1] See Stuart Hall's *Race, the Floating Signifier* (1997).

failure to meet aesthetic limitations of an image driven industry. In the American context, the voting process itself affects a complex intersection of product/ network tie ins.[2] Contestants compete for and may be offered recording contracts from NBC/Universal Republic records. Voting can be done through: Facebook, iTunes purchases from Apple, calls to a toll free number, and via text message with Sprint service carrier (up to ten per user). Last, but not least, Twitter can be used to "save" a contestant from elimination.[3]

Tessanne Chin's ascendency in *The Voice* competition became the occasion for the digital Caribbean subject to articulate itself. Commenters and subscribers came from all over Caricom and throughout the diaspora to demonstrate their support, a support legible quantitatively in the hundreds of thousands of hits/views, shares, downloads, and likes transposed across digital platforms like Facebook, Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter, etc. Supporters took to digital platforms to share well wishes and defend Chin from the inevitable vitriolic "trolls," often citing their own island of origin or affinity in the process, despite the inability to "legitimately vote" for Chin.[4] At a moment when piracy is at an all time high, Caricom subjects purchased music in record numbers as a show of support. Some also sought to get around the geopolitical and commercial borders preventing their participation by seeking alternative methods of voting from attempted hacks to the procurement of SIM cards. With Chin as the focalizing point, intra-island political conflict receded and a larger formation of a digital diasporic Caribbean identity took precedence. In comment sections, heated debates about history, the role of the Chinese in the Caribbean, and who could claim what "body" in terms of nation took place.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND DIGITAL DIASPORA

In order to talk about the Digital Caribbean subject, one has to first get situated in a vernacular terrain marked by disparity and division. When media scholars

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[2] *The Voice* is a property of United Artists Media Group (an MGM company), Talpa Media USA Inc. and Warner Horizon Television. John de Mol functions as executive producer along with Mark Burnett, CEO of United Artists Media Group and producer of several "reality" series: *Survivor, The Sing Off, Shark Tank, The Apprentice, Beyond the Tank, Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader*, and several cable series; Audrey Morrissey, long time producer of MTV Music Awards and executive producer of Marc Jansen; and Lee Metzger, producer of several reality series.

[3] http://www.nbc.com/the-voice/instant-save/rules

[4] Television Jamaica (TVJ) purchased exclusive rights to air the show in Jamaica, preventing Flow cable network users from accessing the NBC program, which was "blocked" during airing times. Because it conflicted with TVJ's Prime Time news, the show aired in Jamaica two hours later, thus denying the public immediate access and social media participants the ability to create media hype. http://www.caribdirect.com/tvj-buys-rights-to-air-the-voice-exclusively-in-jamaica-jamaica-news/ November 7 2013.

approach the Caribbean, outside of Puerto Rico and Cuba, it is with either a political economic or anthropological lens. It has been de rigueur in Web/Internet technology usage studies to focus on unequal access, specifically the "digital divide." The digital divide refers to and arguably (re)produces raced and classed disparities in computer literacy, access to services, and technology. As several theorists have noted, these studies consistently represent black bodies as existing "outside of" and the Asian body as "merging with" technology.[5] Many studies on the impact of the digital divide recite data from the Nielsen Company or utilize Pew Research Center data, but as an instrument, I found this data ineffectual at best. For example, the Pew Research Center has only recently started disaggregating "Asian" populations and tracking Twitter data, and the last engagement with YouTube as a platform was in the summer of 2012. When the instruments used to collect, and the data itself, do not account for the complexity of race as it is lived or enacted, we invariably get data mining studies that privilege North American articulations of a kind of cosmetic techno-cosmopolitanism that perpetuates the divide and splits along a pattern of access organized around axes of racial difference.

The United States indeed has "greater control of the internet itself (and by extension what the Internet means) than any other single nation" because of its proximity to technological innovators, innovations, and entertainment sectors (Best 8). This preeminence is clearly observable in the geopolitical aspects of YouTube. In 2007, mobilized by market logic but under pretexts of cultural sensitivity and promoting "localized" content, YouTube started offering local/region/nation specific versions of the site. At stake were regional specific advertising dollars. More interesting for this reader is the relationship of the platform to choice, place, and the geopolitical. When one sets up a YouTube account, you can choose "global" as an option. This "global" setting is default designation for the United States (Burgess 86).

This digital divide is chimeric, with one head signifying the rhetoric of the digital world as a cyberutopia where users are no longer bound by pedestrian concerns of the corporeal. In this always-deferred digital paradise we can all be free of restrictive social constructions of sex, gender, class, and body type. A second head invokes seemingly inescapable discourses of embodiment inherited from and informed by racist pseudoscience from Enlightenment theory found in the play of violences enacted in both literal and virtual spaces, painfully

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[5] For more on the "digital divide" see Brandi Wilkins Catanese's "'How Do I Rent a Negro?,'" Mary F. E. Ebeling's "The New Dawn: Black Agency in Cyberspace," Oscar H. Gandy Jr.'s "Matrix Multiplication and the Digital Divide" on datamining and self-reporting, Mark B. N. Hansen's "Digitizing the Racialized Body or The Politics of Universal Address," Lisa Nakamura's *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, Anna Everett's "The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Public Sphere" and *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*.

illustrated by: reductive race based studies, intentionally incendiary content, "trolls" who hurl racist, sexist, and homophobic invectives at other users, content or content uploaders; or equally problematic "identity tourists" who, by virtue of a nexus of privilege and privileged corporeality are able to engage in "superficial, reversible, recreational play at otherness" (Nakamura *Cybertypes* 55). The third chimeric head is commerce, which functions as an opportunistic virus exploiting fantasies of escaping and being reducible to the body and of a presumably already existing democratizing Internet. This divide and the liberatory promise of the Internet have "become the unacknowledged frames of reference for understanding race in the digital age" (Nelson 5).

There are very few studies that consider the diasporic flows of bodies, capital and goods that have produced a highly "connected" digital Caribbean or that account for the exchanges and proliferating connections between bodies that stand outside of exegetical frameworks that depend on binaries of black and white, East and West, or the West and the Rest. When scholars turn to explicitly theorize "digital diaspora," they often combine discussions of a fractious digital divide that coheres along lines of myopically defined categories of race and class *with* celebrating the diversity of "foreign" information workers whose mobility and access is predicated on privileged relationships to transnational conduits of capital. Few consider Caribbean digital and social network participation as enactments of an ever-evolving technocratic sensibility necessarily cultivated by diasporic subjects. Forays into digital environments by diasporic subjects have been preceded by formal and informal networks: snail mail/letters, newspapers, phone calls, Western Union, sacred and secular sites of community (church, market, and shop). The digital diasporic subject uses technology much in the same way they have utilized other technologies: to create, maintain, and foster connections with other like subjects, to articulate individual and collective identity in a realm where fierce debates about what constitutes netizenship, and by extension citizenship, in our contemporary moment emerge. Analyzing how diasporic bodies use digital platforms allows a theorization of diaspora that takes into account contiguous, overlapping diasporic formations, thus intervening at the level of episteme. The language used to engage with diaspora thus shifts from nautical metaphors of moorings, vessels and the oceanic to contemporary technical formations of dbase, algorithm, and networked "identities."[6]

In "Digital Diaspora: Definition and Models" Michel S. Laguerre defines "digital diaspora" as "an immigrant group or descendant of an immigrant

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[6] My conception of the term "networked identity" comes out two conference papers I presented with media scholar, Benjamin Aslinger, at the 2013 ICA and IASPM Conferences entitled "Networked Jamaican Reggae: Recording, Performance, and Race in a Transnational Music Industry" and "YouTube C'yan Done: Networked Jamaican Reggae, Performance and Genre" respectively.

population that uses IT connectivity to participate or maintain contacts for a variety of political, economic, social, religious, and communicational purposes that, for the most part, may concern either the homeland, the host land, or both, including its own trajectory abroad" (50). For Jennifer Brinkerhoff, digital diaspora is an explicitly political project in which diasporic subjects use digital platforms to express diasporic consciousness and articulate complex hybrid identities formed in and through diasporic practices and processes to negotiate the terms of identity, share experiences of inclusion, exclusion, generational conflict, strategies for navigating political, economic and social quagmires in their host nation as well as virtual spaces along with fostering and retaining cultural and political connections through linkages to "home" (55-57).

The digital Caribbean subject, with its inherited "vestiges of a long history of conquest and exploitation, and working out of imperialist politics" is not outside of transnational corporate power (Best 192). It uses technological conduits, created and maintained by transnational corporate interests, to reimagine and reconfigure their relationships to space, shifting from literal, tangible home, parish, province, and nation to the processual, to the digital, to virtual spaces and new constructions of mobility.[7] The struggles of the digital Caribbean subject for cultural survival, for subjectivity developed in opposition to dehumanizing effects of colonialist ideological apparatuses, are evidenced in this subject's engagement with the platform.

YOUTUBE AS THE PLATFORM AND *THE DUTTY BERRY SHOW* AS THE CASE

It is a given that YouTube, with its "partnership programs" and algorithms linking content specific advertising to videos is both a "commercial enterprise" as well as a "platform designed to enable cultural participation by ordinary citizens" (Burgess and Green 75).[8] As a digital platform, the file-sharing site, created in 2005 by Steve Chen, Jawed Karim, and Chad Hurley, three former employees of PayPal and then acquired by Google in 2006 for a cool $1.65 billion, currently dominates online video distribution (Burgess and Green 75). The founders originally imagined the site as a digital archive where uploaders would use it as a

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[7] Here, I am working with Lisa Lowe's discussion of the immigrant's relationship to transnational capital in *Immigrant Acts* and Carolyn Cartier's discussion of the shifting spatial focus of the Asian diasporic subject (Lowe 103, Cartier 385).

[8] In May 2007 the YouTube Partner Program based on Adsense, a Google program designed to allow website publishers to earn money based on views and "clicks," became available. If an uploader enters into a partner program, the uploader shares the revenue produced by advertising on the site. YouTube takes 45% of advertising revenue from videos in the partner program and the uploader 55%.

kind of digital video photo album, but it has become so much more.[9] There are those who read YouTube solely as a database, which it is at the level of technology, storage of data, deployment of algorithmic code accessed by users to engage in searches, it is.[10] As an archive, YouTube counters paradigms that relegate the popular to ephemera, creating and communicating new conceptual maps and language. It has also been likened to a laboratory and TV-like medium (Snickars and Vonderau 13). For others, YouTube is a mechanism where participants can upload what Patricia G. Lange calls "videos of affiliation," videos that attempt to connect uploaders to social networks with the goals of establishing and "maintain[ing] feelings of connection with potential others who identify or interpellate themselves as intended viewers of the video" (71). From the "bedroom confessional" to cinematic shorts and long form works with high production values, uploads function as gestures of and toward affiliation, identification, and communication.

YouTube is a site of participatory culture where users have, to a large degree, the semblance of agency in that they are variously "and to varying degrees audiences, producers, editors, distributors, and critics" (Burgess and Green 82). This participation can be multimodal and traverse multiple platforms. Users have a range of technology at their disposal from laptop and cell phone video capture to professional cameras and production software to create their uploads which can then be linked to other social media sites through hyperlinks and sharing to: Twitter, Facebook, Google plus, Blogger, Reddit, Tumblr, Pinterest, Linkedin, Stumbleupon, Livejournal, Digg, etc. YouTube participation is an explicit engagement with the popular, where spectators, creators, and commercial interests meet.

In terms of ideology, this platform relies on the aspirational, the promise of an egalitarian demos where the vox populi can make one a "star," or at the very least a YouTube celebrity. With YouTube's loose controls, anxieties and ambivalences about fluid file sharing and authorship, the people's archive is a site where "processes of collective, collaborative and associative individuation" have the possibility of expressing and enacting a "highly contributive society" (Stiegler 54), where those who have not been in a socioeconomic or political position may, with the right video and the right timing, "incidentally change the course of history" (Snickars and Vonderau 11). Further, the digital has been imagined as a "safe place for participants to negotiate their sense of self and express their hybrid

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[9] YouTube was, and still is, the fastest growing web site in the history of the Internet, at a peak phenomenal rate of an increase in users of 75% per week. For more see Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau's "Introduction" to *The YouTube Reader.*

[10] In *Spreadable Media* Henry Jenkins explores this metaphor in his claim that "the kinds of appraisal taking place in YouTube are much closer to those performed by curators at museums, archives, and libraries than those performed by dealers in antiques or secondhand books" (94).

identities or to demarcate what it means to be a member" of diaspora (Swaby 2013 and Brinkerhoff 2009) and a site where despite being a nexus of economic interests, narratives of resistance can emerge (Stiegler 56). These are heady claims that conflate myths of American egalitarianism, enterprise, exceptionalism, and upward mobility and map them onto a seemingly stable, if not illusory, ideological core of YouTube's infrastructure. I am suspicious of utopic formations, particularly when dealing with any man made technology that "does not introduce totally new ethnic dynamics, but rather magnifies those that already exist" (Warschauer 167).

YouTube is an interesting case when we think about digital diasporas and race. YouTube is not a "black and white" digital world, but this does not mean that a racial logic is not present in the way that the platform has been theorized.[11] From its inception, between three and six of the top ten "YouTube celebrities" have been Asian.[12] Many aspiring Asian artists who have been denied access to traditional routes in the entertainment industry have found in YouTube a space to create and create their own markets. This platform, according to Lisa Nakamura in *Digitizing Race,* allows members of the Asian diaspora to "perform identity in ways that are impossible elsewhere" (205). YouTube has thus been deemed an "Asian" space.[13] While threatening to collapse into techno-orientalist stereotypes of Asian hyperconnectivity, it is instructive to think through how a Digital Diaspora is configured in online spaces, in which YouTube becomes a hegemonic platform and *The Voice* a hegemonic form.[14]

Russhaine Jonoy Berry, or Dutty Berry as he is known, has been a YouTube vlogger since 2009.[15] Upon Tessanne Chin winning her first "battle round" of the 2013 season of *The Voice,* Berry began uploading comedic recaps of the shows and in his second offering, commemorating Chin's win of her first "knockout round," Berry gave Chin the moniker, "Chinita Goodaz," a play on her

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[11] See Evelyn Hu-DeHart's discussion of the State's reliance on this binary to function in "21st Century America: Black and White and Beyond" in *Race in 21st Century America.*

[12] Fruzsina Eördögh's "Why Asians Rule YouTube" considers Asian participation on YouTube and interviews Freddie Wong, a director of cinematic shorts with over million views for each of his videos. Wong has expanded into a web series format and turned down offers from major Hollywood studios. See also Christine Bacareza Balance's "How It Feels to Be Viral me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance."

[13] Linda Leung goes so far as to claim that the Asian Diaspora, occupied by "techno-elites," is "experienced largely over the internet" (10).

[14] If YouTube is "Asian," then most assuredly Twitter is "Black," with "black" signifying a position of sociopolitical critique, not necessarily a racial marker. Please see the work of André Brock, Amil Dash, Charles Wilson, Farhad Manjoo, Feminista Jones, Brandon Meeder, Kimberly C, Elis Shani, O. Hilton, Apryl Williams and Doris Domoszlai and the curatorial project on *In Media Res,* "#ABCReports and Black Twitter," by Benjamin Aslinger and myself.

[15] Berry grew up in St. Andrew and graduated with a degree in Language and Communications from the University of the West Indies, Mona.

name, collapsing together the Spanish for "little Chinese girl" and the Jamaican colloquialism "goodaz," meaning "good as gold" or the best girl.[16] At the level of form, *The Dutty Berry Show* is multimodal.[17] He deploys a concatenation of signifiers, cobbling together clips from local, national, and mainstream media, commercials, classic reggae music videos, stage performances, photographic stills, screen caps, mockumentary "style" interviews with talking heads (the majority of which are Berry affecting alternate personas), to create a visual pastiche with his rapid fire running commentary, filled with slang and the vernacular, and delivered using a voice modulator to comedic effect. With Berry's recaps, his vlog went from a one-man show to having a production team, technical support and followers dubbed the "Berridos." Before getting into the particular kind of interventions that Caribbean digital subjects make on this platform, I would like to return to *The Voice* and the complex specularization and interpolation of Tessanne Chin into discursive fields of Orientalism and Caribbean stereotypes.

The fetishizing of Caribbeanness crystallized throughout the season with the songs chosen for Chin to perform. Despite her explicitly and repeatedly articulated desire to be a "global" artist, not pigeonholed as a reggae artist, and insistence on her own diasporic complexity, she was given three reggae songs to perform: "Many Rivers to Cross" by Jimmy Cliff, "Redemption Song" by Bob Marley, "Underneath It All" by Gwen Stefani of No Doubt which was produced by the prolific Jamaican production team of Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare (Sly and Robbie), along with a reggae version of "Let it Be" by The Beatles. When Chin performed non-reggae pop tunes, the coaches went so far as to demand that she "be more herself," more "authentic." The desire for authenticity apparently affected the very sound of Chin's voice. After Chin's performance of "Underneath it all," Aguilera said of her performance that "she'd finally heard something she was searching for, and [as a result felt as if she had gotten] to know the singer much better."[18] The following week, after Chin's performance of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song," Aguilera declared that with each week she heard "that Jamaican accent get a little bit stronger" and exclaimed that was what she

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[16] Berry created a total of seven vlogs dedicated to Chin and *The Voice* with Tessanne Chin, Michael Cuff, and a host of entertainment figures appearing as guests in the final episode.

[17] In *Reading Images* Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen define a multimodal text is "any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code" (177). They further qualify, in *Multimodal Discourse,* that multimodal texts use multiple forms of media to create pastiches of semiotic modes by cobbling together elements from disparate sources to create something new (126, 132).

[18] See Ashley Lee's "'The Voice' Recap: Good Decisions and Gimmicks Hit the Top" http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/voice-recap-good-decisions-gimmicks-660044.

"loved." [19] Blake Shelton, to his credit, went against the party line and chastened Aguilera for relegating Chin to one genre, but by and large, Tessanne Chin was asked, if not demanded, to perform "otherness," "Caribbeanness," for these armchair tourists.

Requests for a linguistic performance of a reductive "Caribbeanness" were compounded by wardrobe and hair choices made by the show's stylists. In an interview published in *The Gleaner*, Erin Hirsh, stylist for *The Voice* stated that they "[took] shopping cues based on the contestants' personalities" [20] when making wardrobe selections. But how was Chin's "personality" being read? Shawn Finch, hair stylist for the show, cited the desire for her to be a study in contrasts:

> Each week, I worked with the wardrobe department to determine what hairstyle I thought would work best with Tessanne's outfits. I must say, the more sophisticated I thought a dress was, the more I felt the urge to keep her hair edgy/contemporary, and vice versa. I think the *ying-yang* philosophy worked the best for Tess. (My emphasis)

The projective qualities of this "vice versa gaze" are obvious. They wanted her classy and subdued, edgy and modern. She is a "powerhouse" yet "sweet," dirty and nice, but always "other." The stylists' formula for "pushing the envelope" was simply more of the same reductive rendering of gendered and racial stereotypes, and all in the name of "style." The hair stylist's faux pas of "ying yang" instead of the correct "yin and yang," referring to the Daoist philosophical concept of complementary oppositional characteristics and forces, highlights the orientalist gaze to which Chin was subjected. Tellingly, the one element of Chin's style that was unique to her, her bright matte lip colors, disappeared over the course of the season and was replaced by lighter, more neutral tones and "red."[21]

To tease out the ways in which Chin is "orientalized," I necessarily turn to Edward Said's polemical *Orientalism* in which he defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident,'" a style of thought

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[19] See Ashley Lee's "'The Voice' Recap: Top 6 Sings Double Duty" http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/voice-recap-top-6-sings-661388.

[20] See "Styling Tessanne Chin" by Heather Elliott.

[21] When pressed to address the absence of Tessanne Chin's trademark lip colors, Hirsh replied, "We LOVE Tessanne's bright matte lips! I love it when you can brand your image and then a lip colour or a certain make-up style can be your look. For example, the 'Rihanna look' or what Scott Barnes did to create the 'JLo glow' look." While claiming that the "time in the chair" became collaborative, one cannot see the references to Rihanna and Jennifer Lopez as anything but a collapse of all "Caribbean" women, and by extension all of the Caribbean, onto one body.

that privileges the West and works to retain unequal positions of power (2, 7). These armchair tourists occupied the space of ontological certitude. Their geopolitical reality and positionality is contingent upon a privileged relationship to the other. This privileged location, according to Said, is formed through a particular configuration of "encounter" in which "the sites [the orientalist] has visited, the people he has met, the experiences he has had, are reduced to a few echoes in his pompous generalizations. The last traces of particularity have been rubbed out in the 'résumé politique'" (179). The masculinist construction of Said's formulation is inescapable as it posits "Orientalism [as] a homogenous discourse enunciated by a colonial subject that is unified, intentional and irredeemably male" (Lewis 17-18).[22] I would like to push at this construction, as the mapping of the exotic in *The Voice* is not so much "male" as it is masculinist and expresses a fluid Anglo American orientalism that, according to Vijay Prashad, is "inherently ambiguous and heterogenous," and anchored to American imperialism, multiculturalism, and anxieties about labor and economic infra-structures (187-190).

Over the course of the season, Levine and Aguilera refer to Chin countless times as "sweet," "humble," "warm" and "kind." She is, in effect, cast in the role of the idealized "oriental female" whose "sexuality is always measured in terms of self-denial/self-destruction (and often internalized racism)" (Shimikawa 26). From Chin's post blind audition interview, in which Aguilera clairvoyantly claims that she could tell how sweet and warm Chin was, onward, there was a consolidation of Americanness as gendered whiteness mobilized. Aguilera's role, with her bleached white blond hair and powdered skin, would appear to be that of an instrument of collusion with white American dominance. She is a literal and symbolic embodiment of whiteness and by extension the hyperfeminine in opposition to Chin whom she refers to as a "powerhouse," which is interesting given that she, Aguilera, has been deemed a vocal powerhouse. Aguilera's demand for "authenticity" from Chin establishes and attempts to concretize Chin's difference, her "Caribbeanness," and allows Aguilera to function as an agent of supplemental whiteness synonymous with masculinist patriarchal power.[23] In a fascinating and interesting move, Aguilera literally cedes her "power" to Adam Levine during their competition for Chin by acknowledging his appeal and salesmanship. In effect, she becomes an imprimatur of his authority.

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[22] For more on the gender dynamics of orientalism, its critical praxis and theory, please see Lisa Lowe's *Critical Terrains* and *Immigrant Acts*, Meyda Yeĝenoĝlu's *Colonial Fantasies: Toward a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Reina Lewis' *Gendering Orientalism: race, femininity and representation* and Chilla Bulbek *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms*.

[23] See David Eng's *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* on the relationship between white masculinity and a concealed alignment of white femininity that undergird white heteropatriarchy (142-144).

The specularization of Chin as "exotic other" is further reinforced by her sexualization at the hands of Cee Lo Green. I would like the reader to recall Green's comments to Chin in the post audition interview that she "sang that song like a grown woman." The simile "like a grown woman" is not just an allusion to vocal maturity, but to phenotype, body type, sexual maturity, and availability. Within the discursive field of Green's gaze, Chin is not the Oriental "veiled woman" subject to the "uniform association between the orient and sex" that is the subject of Said's gendered analysis (188). She is neither the passive "lotus blossom," submissive, yielding and signifying "total acquiescence and total subjugation to patriarchal forces and masculinity," nor is she the dangerous phallic woman (Bulbeck 50-51). Here, she is "grown," a Black American vernacular term often used derisively to describe a young person engaging in sexual behavior characteristically associated with adulthood. If you are "grown," then you are ready and willing. For Green, who links Chin specifically to Jamaica when that specificity escapes Levine, Chin signifies a fecund, sumptuous, abundance associated with the Caribbean and, by extension, a "kind of" blackness.

In the second of seven episodes dedicated to Tessanne Chin and *The Voice,* Berry draws attention to the way Levine "looks at" Chin and suggests that it is with more than professional interest. Berry directly addresses Levine, saying, "Adam, your thirst is too real," and explicitly aligns it with the political by comparing Levine's thirst to that of the JLP's for an upcoming national election.[24] In the last episode, "Why Tessanne (Chinita) Won the Voice," Berry links the fetishistic gaze to the camera itself, literal technology to systems of representation and the production of symbolic meaning, in his deconstruction of a rear stage panning shot that, when combined with the stylists' wardrobe choice of the body conscious dress, emphasizes Chin's posterior by making it the axis point. Of this panning shot he expresses worry that Chin's "figurine body…must be a danger a cameraman a capture 360° a yah bumpah." The gaze, cameraman, camera, lighting, hair, makeup and wardrobe, are all instruments, cooperating technologies connecting Chin's body to orientalist and Caribbean stereotypes.

While Berry actively critiques the way Levine, and by extension American media fetishizes Chin, he also consistently references Tessanne's looks, specifically her "champion body." At one point in "How Tessanne Chin made it to the Top 6" Berry halts his reportage to interject: "A moment of silence for Tess Legs dere. For a likkle Chiney gal, she got some serious healthy chunkiness a work wit yuh know. Tess leg dem is what are inspire man for make leggings." This gaze, admittedly an objectifying one, can be read as an attempt to displace

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[24] This is, of course, not the first time we have seen Levine's predatory gaze trained upon an Asian hybrid body. Levine's determined gaze, and standing erect upon his chair for Chin, was a replication of his reaction to Judith Hill, a singer of Japanese and African American descent.

that of the white American male, here represented but Levine. Is this strategy problematic? Yes, but not without its complexity.

There is a discernable "queering" of the gaze legible in Berry's kinetic and vocal performances. The gaze is male, but not necessarily heteronormative. The destabilization of heteronormative desire is created not just by affectation, but by Berry's satirical cobbling together of images. In one of his signature segments, entitled "Tess and the Tessless," the spectator is treated to a montage of still images of Tessanne Chin, Adam Levine, a shirtless Michael Cuffe, Chin's husband, and Dutty Berry which is sutured together with the theme song from the long running American soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*. Berry, whose critical eye shapes our spectatorship, renders desire unstable. With Berry making a fourth point in this "love quadrangle," Levine and Michael Cuff are also, along with Chin, rendered objects of desire. This segment destabilizes white masculinity from its privileged relationship to Orientalized and stereotyped Caribbean subjects. The circuitous gaze of desire undermines representations of Caribbean masculinity as hyperbolically heterosexual or hyperfeminized in relation to colonizers, former colonizers, neo-colonizers and American imperialists.

The terrain over which this "dirty fight" takes place is Chin's body and it is absolutely a skirmish over nation. Berry demarcates national space in digital space by using the Jamaican flag as backdrop/banner to frame clips of Chin's performances as well as other clips. The usurpation of YouTube's presumed America as "global" setting by explicitly incorporating the Jamaican flag confronts representations of the Caribbean being "for" America or American use. YouTube, as a platform, then becomes a way to resist representation of the Caribbean as a site where the commodification of "Other" women's bodies "are simultaneously, contradictorily even, transnationalized and nativized—positioned within systems of transnationalized labor at the same time that they are imagined by the 'West' back into their native' (read colonial) contexts" (Alexander 282). Berry recalibrates the tourist's gaze, unmoors it from heteronormative modalities and makes explicit the ways in which it, the tourist gaze, relies on axes of global capital and discourses of race inherited from colonial capitalism. The tourist mode empowers Aguilera to speak of Chin within stereotypes of the Caribbean as welcoming, warm, and kind and enables Green and Levine to see Chin as "grown," sexually available, and ready within a heteronormative sexual economy.

Berry's objectification of Levine reframes American imperial exploitation which, according Jacqui Alexander, constructs citizenship under the rubric of consumerism in late twentieth-century capitalism. Understanding that "[g]ender is the modality in which race is lived,"[25] I read Berry's queering of the gaze as working against sexualization of Caribbean subjects that "erases lesbians,

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[25] This is Paul Gilroy's extension of Stuart Hall's claim that class is the modality through which race is lived. For more see *The Black Atlantic* (85).

working class gay men, and lesbians and gay men of color" in order to create a Caribbean body that exists only for the tourist (Alexander 287).

The challenge Dutty Berry offers is not just to American imperialistic representational practices and politics but also to domestic configurations of nation. Berry actively incorporates Tessanne Chin into the fabric of Jamaica and Jamaican culture. Even as Dutty Berry marks Chin as a "likkle Chiney gal," there is an inherent pushing back at compartmentalizing Chin, and by extension the Chinese, within a Jamaica specific class construction. Chin, over the course of the show and in interviews, eschewed and continues to resist categorization by demanding to be recognized as a hybrid cultural subject and product of multiple diasporas. Chin's genealogy typifies racially blended Jamaican communities whose roots extend back through the trade routes, commerce, slavery, indentured servitude, plantocracies, micro business entrepreneurship, and colonial and post colonial struggles for sovereignty that make up the economic, labor, and political history of Jamaica.

Berry takes what many would think of as pejorative, "likkle Chiney gal," and makes it a gesture of inclusion not alienation. When Berry reads Chin's hairstyles, the signification changes. Instead of reading them as "edge" created by some American "stylist" to anchor Chin to ambivalent stereotypes of Asian femininity, Berry suggests that Chin got the look from a "shop" on Princess Street in Downtown Kingston.[26] The distinction between Downtown and Uptown Kingston is significant in terms of class markers.[27] We are then treated to a clip of performance footage, and Berry hailing Chin into Princess Street, highlighting what he calls Chin's "#ghettogalgoodazwalkgoshopstrut" and her "#missloulong-timegalminevaseeyoulabrishwalk&wine." Berry incorporates Chin into the fabric of Jamaican culture without ever mentioning or invoking the spectre of the devisive "Missa/Mister Chin" despite literally having a body with that surname.[28]

Chin's genealogy is part of a larger history of Chinese Jamaican relationship to reggae and Jamaican nationalism. Chin's great grandparents migrated from China. Her mother played trumpet and her father the drums in Jamaica's first all-girl group. Her parents were professionally active in the production of music, and her older sister, Tami Chin, achieved moderate success in Jamaica as a recording artist. In relaying this genealogy, Chin locates herself

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[26] See "Why Tessanne Chin Made it to The Top 6 #TheVoice."

[27] In an interview with Sway, MTV and XM host and music journalist, he attempts to locate Chin in terms of a classed topography of Kingston. Sway asks Chin whether or not she was from Uptown or Downtown Kingston, and Chin responds that she is from "everytown." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxUWjVfJFjw

[28] As Anne-Marie Lee-Loy notes "Mr. Chin" was a reductive nickname that signified economic and political anxieties of first colonial administrative bodies and then growing pains of emerging Caribbean nations pre- and post-Independence (23).

and other Chinese Jamaicans as a part of, not apart from, Jamaican society.[29] Tessanne Chin's hybridity illustrates the complexity of the Caribbean, the construction of history, and the role of Chinese Jamaicans in the music industry at local and global levels.[30] From reggae's earliest incarnations in the 50s to now, Chinese Jamaicans have participated at all levels of music industry: production, studio ownership and engineers, record store owners and distributors, backers, DJs, performers, musicians and singers. Chin's insistence on her own hybridity and diasporic complexity is an insistence on "the diasporic nature of Jamaican culture itself" (Chin 103). Chin's "mix up self" wears away at what May Joseph refers to as "the hydra head of myopic cultural singularity" (364). In the context of *The Voice*, and reinforced ad infinitum in Dutty Berry's vlogs, Chin becomes an unstable sign that is at once trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic. The demand for recognition, of her specificity, of her being from multiple diasporas and affinity for Jamaica as "home," push against constructions of Jamaican history that obscure Chinese Jamaican participation in nation building. Chin's claims to kinship and nation reveal processes of negotiating citizenship and identity that challenge "official histories" by revealing them as false or incomplete (Marks 51). In the comment sections of both the NBC official and fan generated content uploaded to YouTube, heated debates about identity, the existence and role of the Chinese in the Caribbean, and who has the authority to claim what body and what nation took place (and arguably are still taking place as users continue to seek out and/or stumble upon the content). Several users have also worked to reconfigure and recontextualize Tessanne Chin by actively uploading and re-uploading earlier music videos, live stage performances and interviews. Participation on this platform articulates a specificity that is communal, based on affinity and speaks directly to Benedict Anderson's claim that "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" and the conception of them through comradeship (6).

DIGITAL GRIOT

> All machines have their mastercodes, and the codebook to the
> cultural machine of the Peoples of the Sea is made up of a network
> of subcodes holding together cosmogonies, mythic bestiaries,

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[29] For more please see Timothy Chin's "Notes on Reggae Music, Diaspora Aesthetics, and Chinese Jamaican Transmigrancy: the Case of VP Records." According to Chin, the "role that Chinese Jamaicans played in the development of reggae also foregrounds the way in which that hybridity reflects the diasporic nature of Jamaican culture itself…the movement and migrations that have been definitive of Jamaica's history profoundly affect reggae's aesthetic features and the nature of its production and circulation" (103).

[30] See Bradley Lloyd's *This is Reggae Music: The Story of Jamaica's Music* and Kevin O'Brien Chang and Wayne Chen's *Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music*.

> remote pharmacopoeias, oracles, profound ceremonies, and the
> mysteries and alchemies of antiquity.
>
> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*

In terms of the digital diasporic subject, there are those who argue that YouTube and other digital platforms provide diasporic peoples "the opportunity to discover the global historical processes that underlie their local histories and personal experiences" and a way to "understand their heritage and identity" (Ignacio 7, Horst 138). This, of course, presumes that agents interpolated into processes of diaspora are ignorant of the nature of the conduits through which capital, property, ideology, and bodies flow. I argue that despite ever-present "large international institutions" in the position to disseminate and control representations of Caribbean culture, in exploring and filling gaps in knowledge and knowledge production, the digital diasporic subject, specifically the digital diasporic subject as digital griot, works in and produces art that is intensely personal, and as Curwen Best suggests, "breathes his or her own virtual life into existence" (17) while working against technological determinism.[31] *The Dutty Berry Show* illustrates the ideological and aesthetic operations of the Caribbean digital subject as Digital Griot.

When I use the term "digital griot" I draw on several sources. First is the classical definition of griot as performer and anthropomorphic archive. The "griot," traditionally, is a member of a class and genealogy of performers in northwest Africa, formerly the Mali Empire, whose functions are that of storyteller, folk-historian, praise singer and musician.[32] I then draw on scholarship that allows me to think through connections between residual vernacular traditions and the sonic landscape Berry creates in contemporary technological and diasporic contexts. Specifically, I turn to Paul Gilroy's meditation in *The Black Atlantic* on the cultural and vernacular inheritances of the contemporary digital griot, the DJ. With Kingston-born Clive "Kool DJ Herc" Campbell as exemplar, Gilroy describes the "dense implosive combinations of diverse and dissimilar sound," achieved through technologies of sampling scratching, cutting and mixing to define a culturally specific aesthetic field as sonic montage. Gilroy goes on to claim that the sonic output of DJs amounts

> to more than the technique they employ in their joyously artificial
> reconstruction of the instability of lived, profane racial identity. An

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[31] In an interview by Krysta Anderson of *The Jamaica Gleaner*, Berry offers advice to the would-be digital artist, "Spend time to work on your creativity and find your truth. Your vlog should represent you."

[32] For more see Paulla A. Ebron's *Performing Africa* and Thomas A. Hale's *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music.*

> aesthetic stress is laid upon the sheer social and cultural distance which formerly separated the diverse elements now dislocated into novel meanings by their provocative aural juxtaposition. (104)[33]

I read Berry's cobbling together of seemingly disparate visual and aural elements as absolutely within a tradition of "remixing" associated with the DJ and his narrative reframing of *The Voice* within oral and storytelling traditions associated with the griot.

A second source for me is London based multimedia artist, Roshini Kempadoo, who defines digital griots as those "who evoke events against a backdrop of imagery that might have happened, is occurring in the present moment, or may occur in the future" (182). Kempadoo's multimodal creations aggregate "factual and fictional re-imaginings of contemporary experiences with history and memory"[34] utilizing montage, layering photography, video, animation, writing, music, and vocal performance. Productive for my analysis is her suggestion that the digital griot, through the conjoining of temporal and visual elements, captures both past and present, with the possibility of endless iteration and futurity through the use of multimodal forms of technology.

Finally, I draw on the work of Kamau Brathwaite, more specifically Brathwaite's Sycorax video style, which was developed out of his aesthetic and poetic experimentation with his deceased wife's Apple Mac SE30 and a Style Writer printer. Brathwaite's Sycorax video style, according to Kelly Baker Josephs in her exploration of the aesthetic ligaments connecting the work of Brathwaite and Edouard Glissant, is inherently processual. It depends on iteration, constant reworking, revision, and play with visual signifiers, fonts, enjambment, technology, and language. Josephs reads Brathwaite's use of the concept of technology, expressed in his utilization of a now antiquated computer, as tool, text, and trope. Of Kamau Brathwaite, Josephs writes,

> when he begins to play with the appearance of the poem in later versions, the connection between his maneuvers on the computer and orality becomes clearer. Like 'nation language' the Sycorax video style brings his poem closer to orality, incorporates the visual dimension that suggests the gestures and body language that the written word occludes. (7)

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[33] Adam Banks' *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Digital Age,* specifically his exploration of the DJ as contemporary griot and his definition of the remix as "a critical reflexive gesture producing the paradox of independent yet dependent texts" was incredibly helpful for me to think through the complex strategies and innovations of the digital griot (90).

[34] http://www.roshinikempadoo.com/section193248.html

The musical pastiche created by the DJ is comparable to Brathwaite's constant remixing of visual and textual signifiers. I use the word "remixing" to get away from any other term that could suggest an "end" or idealized "perfect" version of the aesthetic toward which the digital griot is working. In the case of *The Dutty Berry Show*, Berry's cutting and mixing together of mixed media and the texts' simultaneous location on multiple platforms and mediums facilitates acts of co-creation that locate Berry and *The Dutty Berry Show* within a genealogy of Digital Griots.[35]

The Digital Griot simultaneously innovates community and language. Josephs tracks Brathwaite's radical reworking of intellectual inheritances, how he, as the eye/I of Caliban, exploits "Prospero's tools" and technologies to reach an aesthetic futurity through accessing existing and creating language to communicate [c]overtly with Sycorax in a language and discursive mode that is "not fe dem/not fe dem" (Brathwaite 449). The language of the digital griot is autoreferential, phatic, parodic, and not legible to all. You have to have access to the mastercodes.[36] The slang, vernacular, and phatic expressions Dutty Berry uses function analogously to Brathwaite's "nation language" and "calibanisms" in his Sycorax video style that obscure, "veil," and makes opaque the Caribbean. In the case of Dutty Berry, many of his expressions escape the comprehension of the majority of viewers, including those in the Caribbean and throughout the diaspora.[37] In the last episode of the shows dedicated to Chin, would-be "native informants" throw up their hands in mock frustration, questioning the meaning of one of Dutty Berry's catchphrases, "backscover." Tellingly, no translation is offered by the "natives" or the digital griot.[38] It is his alone.

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[35] See also Ignacio Infante's "The Digital Vernacular: 'Groundation' and the Temporality of Translation in the Postcolonial Caribbean Poetics of Kamau Brathwaite" in *After Translation: The Transfer and Circulation of Modern Poetics across the Atlantic,* Heather Smyth's "The Black Atlantic meets the Black Pacific: Multimodality in Kamau Braithwaite and Wayde Compton," and Lee M. Jenkins' review of Brathwaite's *Magical Realism,* "NewWorld/ NewWord Style."

[36] Dutty Berry also deploys the occasional Spanish phrase beyond referring to Tessanne Chin as "Chinita." By including Spanish, Berry disrupts linguistic territorialities of the Caribbean. Additionally, the aural similarity and potential conflation of his followers, the "Berridos," with "barrios" signals a reimagining of space and connection.

[37] At another point in "How Tessanne Chin Made it to The Top 6 #The Voice," in his commentary on her performance of "Underneath It All," originally performed by American band No Doubt and Jamaican reggae dancehall artist Lady Saw, he claims that "Chinita" had gotten down with some "ching-chong-chop-suey djing" and that he "could not make out the backfoot what she did a say." The explicitly orientalist content of this claim is undermined by Berry's own admittedly often incomprehensible idiom. Additionally, the "ching-chong-chop-suey" moment in Chin's performance is when she sounds, to most spectators, the most "Jamaican," when she is building off of her delivery of Lady Saw's lyrics.

[38] Several commenters write their frustration at not being to understand Dutty Berry, some going so far as to demand that he speak English.

There is always danger for those who take up the tools of representation within capitalist frameworks and social networks. The stakes and dangers can be misunderstood, language, signs and signifiers appropriated, commodified and evacuated of symbolic content. Berry's vlog, with its phatic structures resists appropriation. Not all codes are understood; mastercodes elude and subcodes become subterranean. The Digital Griot does not bend to technological determinism.[39] Released from trappings and traps of genre, Digital Griots are trickster/storytellers that produce at and are the intersections of an aesthetic politics of conjuncture. Remixing tapestries of myth, history, and form, the Digital Griot represents a juncture of multiplicity, a "site" of affiliation, contradiction, and resistance.[40]

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[39] Here, I am using Nicholas Gilewicz and François Allard-Huver definition of "technological determinism" as a doctrine "focused on the technological evolution of information and communication systems rather than on their interaction and their subordination to the society that developed them. Technological Determinism holds that the forms of technology themselves determine how society uses those technologies and that in turn, technology shapes culture and cultural values" (226-227).

[40] In *Critical Terrains* Lisa Lowe's discussion of "a subject who represents the juncture of a multiplicity of social contradictions allegorizes the possibility of a site across which different counterhegemonic movements may be affiliated, through which divers groups and sectors may cooperate to form a 'new historical block'" (197).

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