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Contemporary Popular Culture and the Politics of Asian American
Representation, Resistance, and Cultural Production

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Abstract

Contemporary Popular Culture and the Politics of Asian American Representation,
Resistance, and Cultural Production

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Despite their increasing visibility in mainstream popular culture, problems in Asian American representation continue to manifest. For example, there is renewed interest in infantilizing, colonial images of Asian women, as well as the outright exclusion of Asian bodies, commonly swapped out for white ones for allegedly better marketability. In this dissertation, I articulate the new spaces, discourses, and agents that enable and reproduce these narratives. With a critical focus on agency, meaning-making, and political intervention, I interrogate the representations of Asian Americans in pop culture texts, audience responses to those texts and to protests of the texts, and emergent counter-hegemonic Asian American cultural productions. I pay particular attention to the heterogeneity of Asian and Asian American audiences because they help us to understand how their varying histories and political and ideological perspectives color their negotiations with mainstream American pop culture texts, which, in contrast, tend to cast the figure of the Oriental in homogenous ways as inherently foreign, humorless, unassimilable, or consumable. I argue that this analysis of audience discourses is largely possible because the Internet, and social media in particular, has changed the ways in which we negotiate racial meaning. We now wrestle with racial ideology publicly,

sometimes anonymously with strangers online, which creates an opportunity to investigate ideological beliefs and examine assumptions about how Asian Americans think they fit, or fail to fit, within a white-dominated American society. Finally, I explore Asian American blogs, online cultural productions that continue to illustrate the heterogeneity of Asian American audiences, and also serve as powerful sources of independent, critical perspectives that I argue can help to decolonize the Asian American imagination.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In the 2010s, it is hardly surprising to see Asian bodies and signs of “Asianness” in mainstream consumer culture. From beauty products containing “exotic” botanicals or named after Asian landmarks, philosophies, and cuisines to campy caricatured t-shirts to live-action movies about young kung-fu masters, the “dull dish that is mainstream white culture” has been spiced up considerably with “Oriental” flavor (hooks, 1992, p. 21). But this sort of hypervisibility is cause for closer critique, rather than reason to declare the scholarly examination of Asian American representation in popular culture dead or unnecessary. Popular culture remains a contested terrain that embodies all the conflicts, desires, disgust, and anxieties felt about Asian America. It is where the “categories, representations, distinctions, and markers of race” are defined (R. G. Lee, 1999, p. 5). And thus examining these struggles over meaning in mainstream U.S. popular culture enables us to uncover how America imagines Asian Americans.

Despite our increasing visibility in mainstream popular culture, what forms the foundation of this project is my argument that struggles over meanings in pop culture are important, and problems in Asian American representation continue to manifest. For example, there is renewed interest in infantilizing, and colonial images of Asian women, as well as the outright exclusion of Asian bodies, commonly swapped out for white ones for allegedly better marketability. There is much to be read from these depictions about the white supremacy that defines our dominant and often unquestioned ideology. I look to build upon Sheng-Mei Ma’s (2001; 2000) investigations of Orientalism and Asian American identity and Sunaina Maira’s (2000, 2007) work on Orientalism and feminist new age discourses. I also endeavor to further the trajectory of studies by such scholars as Robert Lee (1999) who laid out the six images of the

Oriental as alien¹, Gina Marchetti (1993) who explored the trope of “yellow peril” and Mari Yoshihara (2003) who examined the formation of American Orientalism. My goal is to articulate the new spaces, discourses, and agents that enable and reproduce these narratives. This includes texts such as feminine consumer products that engage campy Orientalism, virtual spaces online, and audiences that respond in varied and sometimes contradicting ways.

What complicates our understanding of how Asian Americans figure in the broader American imagination is the predominance of colorblind ideology. These beliefs, which acquired particular cohesiveness and dominance in the late 1960s posit that any patterns of racial inequality are actually the result of individual or group-level deficiencies. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that, in fact, “most whites assert they ‘don't see any color, just people’” and that race no longer matters (p. 1). As Neil Gotanda (2000) reveals, proponents of colorblindness typically regard race as a political or “special interest” consideration, but as Ralina Joseph (2009) has pointed out, our “representational landscape is both overdetermined by race and gender and at the same time in denial of its overdetermined nature” (p. 238). The supposed meaninglessness of race in contemporary U.S. society infers that we should all think of race as a mere aesthetic marker, detached from any histories of violence, oppression or exclusion. As the logic goes, if we believe in colorblindness, we ought to be able to tell racist jokes and be expected to “take a joke,” freely reappropriate aesthetics, food and spiritual practices, whitewash ethnic characters, and identify with white characters even as non-white audience members. But Gotanda (2000) reminds us that, “to be racially colorblind...is to ignore what one has already noticed” (p. 36). In other words, not recognizing race in our everyday lives is impossible. But more importantly he points out that colorblindness “ultimately supports the supremacy of white interests” (p. 36).

¹ Robert Lee describes those images as the pollutant, coolie, deviant, yellow peril, and gook

Still, the dominant ideology of colorblindness is broadly defended, even by Asian Americans, and this became evident as I examined the conversations they have about pop culture representations. As such, I also contribute to the growing body of literature on the increasingly complicated struggle over meaning in popular culture by extending analyses beyond texts to include audiences' conversations about them. This focus is partly in response to what Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha Oren (2005) discuss in the introduction of their edited volume, *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*:

Asian American Studies has developed along two parallel streams that largely dominate contemporary work in the field. While one approach explores Asian American representations as “others” in mainstream U.S. media culture, another tradition focuses on Asian American-produced media, literature, and cultural practices within Asian American communities (p. 1).

Quite often, critical work in Asian American Studies focuses on deconstructing texts, and does not cross over into analyses of audience reception (or audience response). But I argue that in order to tell the whole story, these texts – whitewashed, caricatured, derogatory or Orientalist images on the graphic t-shirts, toiletries, and in movies – need to be examined together with responses from and interactions among audiences. In our determinedly colorblind American society, audience responses to and conversations about pop culture texts provide an amazing opportunity to gain deeper insight into how white America envisions Asian Americans, as well as how we as Asian Americans envision ourselves in what Darryl Hamamoto (1994) has dubbed our “white Christian nation.”

What makes this and other audience analyses challenging is that the Asian American audience is not easily defined. As Davé, Nishime and Oren (2005) have noted, “traditional

models for Asian American Studies have been wary of acknowledging and readmitting the complexity of their own immigrant roots and the uncontrollable multiplicity of the populations the field purports to represent” (p. 2). It is hard to establish a stable definition of these audiences as a group because of our political heterogeneity as well as our different colonial histories, languages, and cultures, and as Lisa Lowe (2007) points out, there are also various degrees of identification and relation to homeland, and different extents of assimilation. But regardless of our backgrounds and degrees to which we have developed a politicized oppositional identity, we have much in common. We are conflated and mistaken for one another; perpetually considered the foreign; accused of encroaching on American resources, promoting a self political agenda, and told to go home; the subject of racialized camp jokes; frequently annihilated symbolically; and fail to benefit from colorblind ideologies. The contradictions that diverse Asian American audiences manifest as we contend with these issues is what makes this research interesting.

I examine heterogeneous Asian and Asian American audiences *because* they help us to understand how these varying histories and political perspectives color our negotiations with American pop culture texts, which, in contrast, tend to cast the figure of the Oriental in homogenous ways as inherently foreign, humorless, unassimilable, or consumable. The Internet, and social media in particular, has changed the ways in which we negotiate racial meaning. We wrestle with racial ideology publicly, sometimes anonymously with strangers online. This creates an opportunity to investigate our ideological beliefs and examine our assumptions about how we think we fit, or fail to fit, within a white-dominated American society. I approach audiences in a way that privileges our agency, by examining discussions that have come about organically online in response to racist representations as well as to protests of those representations. The richness of those debates and the candidness of people’s contributions –

especially since many were posted anonymously – is immeasurable. They have allowed me to get at what John L. Jackson (2008) calls “decardio racism,” racism that we keep inside because of expectations of colorblindness; as well as the ways in which self-identified Asian Americans grapple with dominant ideologies that uphold white hegemony.

In addition to examining the debates that emerge in response to Asian American representations and acts of resistance, I explore Asian American cultural productions – blogs that demonstrate the oppositional consciousness of their authors. I interrogate the ways in which these cultural productions continue to illustrate the heterogeneity of Asian American audience responses, but also serve as powerful sources of independent, critical Asian American perspectives that employ a “methodology of the oppressed,” which Chela Sandoval (2000) defines as “a set of processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination” (p. 68).

My analysis of pop culture texts, audiences responses, and Asian American cultural production draws from Cultural Studies because post-structural methodologies like Cultural Studies, argues Hye-Kyung Stella Kang (2010), “maintain a position that language and discourses are not neutral or pure, but biased and partial” (p. 3), which quickly became evident in the texts that I studied. When it comes to race, the bias of white supremacy – which I argue still emerges in situations where people claim colorblindness – can be difficult to detect because as Stuart Hall (1981) asserts, the processes work unconsciously through ideology, which he defines as “those images, concepts, and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (p. 31). The status quo stance is to argue that we live in a colorblind society unscathed by racism and racial inequality. This ideology, however, I will argue throughout this project is used to excuse

white supremacy. Asian American depictions throughout popular culture, employ “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” explains Gina Marchetti (1993, p. 6). Citing Edward Said, she argues that they “create a mythic image of Asia that empowers the West and rationalizes Euroamerican authority over the Asian other” (p. 6). This is an underlying theme across the texts I study and one that also turns up in audience analyses. The idea of ideology is important to highlight because as Hall observes, they “tend to disappear from view in the taken-for-granted 'naturalized' world of common sense” (p. 32). Cultural Studies lends a framework to begin to understand why Asian American audiences fail to question common sense assumptions about white supremacy that place them in a subordinate social position.

Further, a critical approach does not endeavor to predict, prove, or quantify; rather, its purpose is to uncover the ways in which meanings are defined and constructed, and complicate the processes by which racist ideologies become common sense. Effects research in the field of communication insists on a model that attempts to measure impacts on audiences, which is both reductionist and deterministic, leaving out the agency of the audiences and consumers. Thus while social science approaches to communication research takes people out of the equation, Cultural Studies seeks to “enlarge the human conversation by comprehending what others are saying,” and, in fact, claims James Carey (1995), “the inability to engage in this conversation is the imperative failure of the modern social sciences” (p. 372). Cultural Studies is a methodology and practice that acknowledges people, and our active negotiations with texts as “interventions” and “an intervention in the media's construction of race is an intervention in the ideological terrain of struggle” (Hall, 1981, p. 31).

Chapter two opens with a reconsideration of the counter-hegemonic potential of the Internet for ethnic minorities. This is an important foundation because chapters four through six deal with the agency of audiences, and the ways in which they use the Internet to interact and challenge dominant representations in popular culture. In this chapter, I question early claims that the Internet is a protected space that somehow (the actual processes were never made clear) facilitates communication among individuals in marginalized groups, while also providing a means for them to collectively make themselves heard to dominant groups (A. Mitra, 2001, 2004, 2006). The shift to Web 2.0, with its emphasis on user participation in generating and structuring hierarchies of web content through voting, reviewing, commenting, and so on, I will argue, has made the Internet vulnerable to the same pressures we see in real life. Dominant groups colonize spaces of the ethnic Other.

In chapter three, I begin my exploration of the racial meanings over which we struggle in popular culture. To support my larger claim that meanings matter and very limiting depictions still circulate U.S. mainstream culture, I examine fetishistic and infantilizing Orientalist constructions in two lines of women's cosmetic and toiletry products – Blue Q's "Miso Pretty" collection of soaps and lotions and OPI nail lacquer's "Hong Kong," "India," and "Japanese" color collections. Building on literature on camp humor that suggest that mainstream deployments of camp lack a "critical edge," I put forth the argument that not only can they fail to challenge dominant ideologies, camp representations can disguise problematic meaning-making in pop culture that reinscribes an Orientalist, colonial gaze.

Chapter four shifts my focus from texts to audiences. The text in this case is an "Asian-themed" line of shirts sold by apparel retailer Abercrombie & Fitch that drew national media attention for the flurry of protests from angry consumers. Several critical scholars have critiqued

the shirt designs, deconstructed some Asian American counter-narratives, and also considered the broader racial landscape within which such a corporate misstep could take place (Oren, 2005; Pham & Ono, 2008). My contribution is an exploration of how white audiences responded to the mostly Asian American body of protestors. I will argue that despite common claims to our post-race, colorblind existence, the conversations that emerged when Asian Americans became “bad subjects” reveal white supremacist ideologies, resentment, and even blatantly racist sentiment.

While chapter four examines the disgust and anxiety felt about Asian America among audiences of the dominant white majority, chapter five broaches the difficult topic of Asian American audiences who seem to be complicit in their own subjugation. My study of white supremacist narratives that emerge when Asian Americans protest took an interesting turn when I realized some of those who spoke out *against* protestors were also Asian American. Many Asian Americans defended the elimination of the Asian characters from the animated series upon which the film *Avatar: The Last Airbender* was based by posting their arguments on various movie and fan forums. In this chapter, I will address “ideological heterogeneity” among Asian Americans by analyzing interviews with the director of the live action film, M. Night Shyamalan, and online comments posted by self-identified Asian Americans who defended the film’s whitewashing of Asian characters.

In chapter six, my final chapter, I turn to audiences who add a shade of grey to the binary of resistance-accommodation through my examination of popular Asian American bloggers whose actions could be described as an attempt to *de*-colonize the minds of Asian Americans who have been interpellated to expect, or sometimes even prefer, a white supremacist vision of the world. I argue that Asian American blogs, *Disgrasian* and *Angry Asian Man*, serve as sources of independent critical Asian American perspectives on our representation, and help us to tell the

whole story – from how the American imagination imagines us to the ways in which we resist and construct our own subjectivities.

In sum, this project cautions against losing momentum in producing critical work on the popular representation of Asian Americans simply because of our increasing visibility in mainstream culture. I argue throughout that there are still significant issues that emerge – from exclusion, to racist caricatures, to fetishizing, and Orientalizing depictions – and I examine examples of how we neutralize them by deploying post-race rhetorics of colorblindness. And when Asian Americans call out these issues, audiences erupt in further counter-protest, which I explore as clues as to how America imagines us, and how we tend to imagine ourselves.

Chapter Two

Colonizing Web Spaces: Race, Representation, and Resistance in Web 2.0

Almost as soon as the Internet came into popular use in the mid-1990s, scholars began writing about the web as a site of empowerment for the colonized, marginalized, and dispossessed, a virtual (or “cyber,” as it was often termed) space where we could establish a voice otherwise inaudible in the public sphere. Enthusiasts have claimed, for example, that blogs allow anyone’s voice to be heard and resist hierarchical modes of communication (Gurak, 2004). Some scholars have examined the potential for people of color, in particular, to get online to build communities, negotiate their identities, create spaces to make our voices heard, contest oppressive visual and discursive representations, and even dialogue with our oppressors (Burnett, 1999; Gajjala, 2004; Gajjala & Gajjala, 2008; A. Mitra, 2001, 2006; R. Mitra & Gajjala, 2008; Schuler, 1996). The liberating and democratizing potential of the Internet for the dispossessed became a popular trope in critical and social science research conducted in that era. The web was enthusiastically lauded as a site for fresh new beginnings, where race and gender seemed, at times, invisible, changeable, or of little consequence, as one could masquerade oneself in limitless ways. The potential for the transgression of dominant ideologies of race seemed infinite -- We could release the constraints on our representations and challenge the power dynamics that fix “Othered” identities in “real life.”

The idealistic tone of scholarship about the Internet’s importance for marginalized communities of color was tempered by research dealing with issues of access -- the gap between “the haves and have-nots” or “digital divide” which typically formed along racial lines (Hoffman, Kalsbeek, & Novak, 1996; Hoffman & Novak, 1998; Mack, 2001; Norris, 2001). The

issue of Internet access within the United States and Canada is slowly fading away as the main issue of the contention as access continues to increase steadily, and some scholarship on the use of the Internet by oppressed communities continues to carry a celebratory tone (Harrison & Barthel, 2009; R. Mitra & Gajjala, 2008). There is a related issue, however, that has gone largely without comment -- how people navigate the web and interact with other users differently now that the technology has shifted from a Web 1.0 to a mostly Web 2.0 environment. Our entry to the web – both in terms of the technologies we use and the ritual practices we have constructed around those technologies – changes continuously, and some of the biggest changes were those brought about by Web 2.0, which gained momentum in the early to mid 2000s.

According to Tim O'Reilly (2005) of O'Reilly Media, founder of the Web 2.0 conference and the first to give a name to this shift in the employment of web technology, Web 1.0 was characterized by, among other things, a tendency to *publish* content to a web site. Similarly, Davidson (2008) suggests that “Web 1.0 is best characterized under the general rubric of data: primarily Web sites and tools that allowed for massive amounts of archiving, data collection, data manipulation, and searching, sites and tools mostly created by experts or commercial interests” (p. 709). This was, for the most part, a unidirectional process, wherein the content producer, experts, and commercial interests such as Britannica, controlled the content that they posted to their sites using whatever directory structure *they* felt would most suitably organize their content for their readers. There was little interaction with visitors to web sites beyond clicking on hypertext links and, perhaps, email and basic commenting functions. Users generally kept track of web sites they liked with bookmarking capabilities in their web browsers. Participation and interaction with web users would come later with Web 2.0.

Web 2.0 technologies have enabled a far greater level of user involvement through such activities as interactive content creation, commenting, ranking, sharing, and evaluation. As Davidson suggests “Web 2.0 describes not only the new set of tools but also the new relationships between producers and consumers of those tools... [and] is best defined by interactivity and user participation” (p. 709). The well-known *Wikipedia* and other wikis, for example, allow people to collectively write and publish content that, joined with other contributors’ written submissions, become one big online user-generated encyclopedia; *Amazon* features customer reviews of their books and tracks the popularity of each of the products they sell; *eBay* relies on user-generated star ratings to establish the credibility of sellers and buyers; *Flickr*, *Facebook*, *YouTube* and many other Web 2.0 sites allow users to tag and geocode photos, videos, and other shared, user-generated content, replacing author-generated taxonomies with user-generated “folksonomies;” *Google PageRank* analyzes link structures among web sites to return higher quality search results; *Digg* gives users a way to “digg or bury” web content to produce daily lists of web sites ranked by popularity or, as they claim, “Digg surfaces the best stuff as submitted and voted on by the community;” and sites like *del.icio.us*, *reddit*, and *StumbleUpon* replace personal bookmarks saved on client web browsers with an entire system of web-based “social bookmarking” where users can, again, rank, tag, and comment on web content for the purpose of sharing with other users. O’Reilly describes all this activity as “harnessing collective intelligence” wherein web applications become more valuable as more users take part.

These shifts reflect an evolution in the way we interact with the web and other users. They also decenter such notions as “authorship, publication, refereeing, collaboration, participation, customizing, interdisciplinarity, credentialing, expertise, norms, training, mastery, hierarchy, taxonomy, professionalism, rigor, excellence, standards, and status” (Davidson, 2008,

p. 712). As such, they demand a critical look at the Internet's potential to affect something at a far more theoretical level—signifying practices. It is absolutely critical to consider how Web 2.0 technologies and their accompanying rituals and practices might actually change the circulation of public discourse about, and representations of, the racialized Other. Web 2.0 practices that initially appeared to be transformative, transgressive, and liberatory, as it turns out, can reproduce the very hegemonic oppression it appeared to undermine in the first place. Using this personal case study, I interrogate the specific elements of Web 2.0 that might be complicit in continuing to circulate, or even increasingly circulating, the same colonial ideologies and power structures that sustain themselves offline and were an obvious presence in Web 1.0. In particular, I reveal the particular ways in which Web 2.0 might enable or even encourage dominant groups to construct differently (discursively and in an ideological sense) or manipulate the online acts of resistance performed by racialized Others.

My Web 2.0 Day of Fame

My starting point is my inadvertent and rather public involvement in Web 2.0. This involved a photograph of me in an army green t-shirt posted online, which catapulted me to Internet fame for a day. The shirt, which reads “I will not love you long time,” references a scene from Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket* in which a Vietnamese prostitute says to an American GI, “Hey baby, you got girlfriend Vietnam? Me so horny. Me love you long time.” The line “me so horny” has since been reproduced in countless pop culture texts, including rap group *2 Live Crew*'s song *Me So Horny*, which reached number one on the U.S Billboard Hot Rap Singles in 1989. Earlier constructions of Asian women as prostitutes actually predate Kubrick's film by nearly a century. According to Robert G. Lee (1999), more than ten thousand Chinese women were forcibly brought to the United States as prostitutes in the late 19th century,

a visceral reinforcement of Edward Said's (1999a) claim that the West had Orientalized the East by exotifying Asian women. Since then, many pop culture texts and western practices have reproduced this narrow construction of Asian women as sexual playthings, particularly for white men.

My shirt was intended to be a statement of resistance to the construction of Asian and Asian American women as objects of white male sexual fantasy, both in *Full Metal Jacket* and in the broader American imaginary. By wearing the shirt, the statement became my own as I attempted to disrupt the narrative of the apolitical model minority, while contesting the popular construction of Asian women as sexual playthings. As Kent Ono and Vincent Pham (2008) explain, wearing or producing activist counter-shirts that requires linking knowledge of Asian American history to humiliating stereotyped constructions of Asian Americans is itself a rhetorical act. Using the "knowledge of flawed colonial representations to produce a rhetoric of resistance" (p. 180) allows us to be seen, not as passive model minorities, but rather as activists and political participants.

What transpired after, however, was not liberating or worth celebrating as online experiences for some people of color might have been in the Web 1.0 era. I have an acquaintance by the name of Jeff Croft who, as a web designer, speaker, and co-author of several books on web design, is extremely popular online. He has, at last count, an impressive 9,003 followers on Twitter and, on the less popular photo-sharing site Flickr, 430 friends (still a relatively high number). When he posted my photo to his Flickr album, it was not long before someone who follows him on Flickr chose to "digg it" on the Digg website with a click on the "thumbs up" icon. Millions, in fact 24 million unique visitors per month, follow the Digg bookmark-sharing web site to seek out popular blogs, video, news and other content on the web, making it one of

the top web sites in the world according to Inc.com². The page hosting my photo on Flickr made it to number one on Digg.com on February 8, 2008, with 5706 “diggs.” The Digg web site displays a thumbnail of the page being “dugg” and allows people to vote by clicking “digg” (clicking the thumbs-up icon) or “bury” (clicking the X icon) to move the page up and down its ranks (see Figure 2.1).

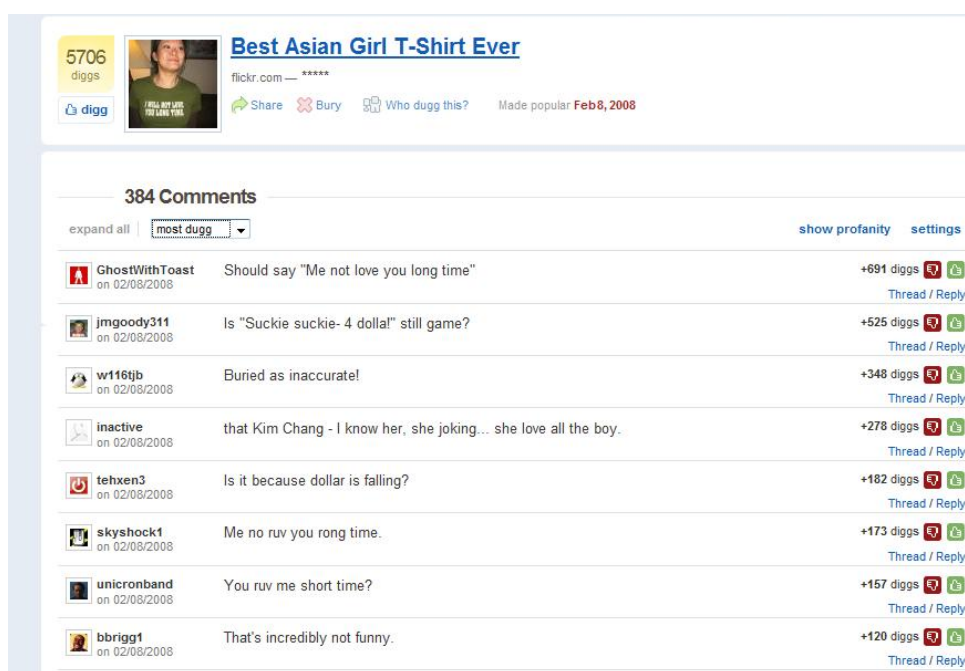


Figure 2.1 Ranking content on Digg.com by clicking “digg” or bury

Users can also make comments on the content or pass it along to others via Facebook or Twitter (both of which rely on Web 2.0 applications), or “old-fashioned” email. Sharing content using Web 2.0 technologies such as these is rapid-fire and can reach thousands of web users in seconds. Content is picked up by Web 2.0-based social networking and bookmark-sharing sites, where information is quickly shared, and then shared again and again seamlessly across web

² <http://inc.com/magazine/20080701/horse-race-searching-for-the-next-digg.html>

sites and blogs and other applications. This user-directed, participation-dependent pattern of usage is, of course, what characterizes Web 2.0.

In this case, it became clear that some people “dugg” the Flickr page hosting the photo of me while making critical remarks about my intentions, my politics, or even the way I looked, perhaps as a way to ensure an audience for their own racist comments. For example, one commenter named [jmgoody311](#) posts “Is ‘Suckie suckie- 4 dolla!’ still game?” while Thomashauck writes, “Just because you have a big nose...” and Poidh posts, “Looks like you loved someone long time (for twenny dolla) then regretted it. And now you are bitter.” There is even an additional layer of participation on Digg because users can not only digg (or vote their approval for) web content, they can also digg or bury the comments that other people post such that some comments can get “minus” diggs and be prioritized “below viewing threshold” until the user clicks “show” to view them. This is undoubtedly a Web 2.0 level of functionality still quite new to the web. Jmgoody’s comment, for example, has the second-most diggs at +525. As one commenter Seantubridy pointed out, “It’s really disturbing how so many racist and sexist comments are getting dugg.” But Seantubridy was outnumbered by the users who were making those racist and sexist comments. After the shock and horror of being thrust, almost unbeknownst to me and certainly without my consent, into the virtual spotlight, and of reading the relentless online racist and misogynistic commentary from participants of what became somewhat of an online sideshow, it occurred to me that I was not feeling liberated, centered, lifted, or heard the way many people claimed they felt as people of color making a presence online in the Web 1.0 era. This feeling is perhaps shared by other academics and critics for whom, according to Geert Lovink (2008), excitement for Web 2.0 is rather low. My inadvertent

and uncomfortable online journey signaled to me an end of innocence, if that is not too dramatic, of the web for the colonized, marginalized, racialized Other online.

Theorizing about the Other in Web 1.0: The Good Old Days?

Communication scholar Larry Gross (2007) suggests that the Internet enables a “disembodied performativity” in a space where “no one knows you’re a dog, or whatever you choose to present yourself as” (p. VII). Rahul Mitra and Radhika Gajjala (2008) argue that it is this very disembodiment that makes the Internet an inherently queer space, which opens the doors to so many possibilities in research on race, representation, and identity. The potential for negotiating and performing one’s identity had become a trope in Internet research, as was the democratizing potential of online participation. Citing the use of email discussion lists by South Asian women, Gajjala (2004) posits that the Internet serves as a means for furthering “equality” and giving a voice to the voiceless. She explains that women in the third world can build “feminist safe spaces” online where they can network and dialogue with one another (p. 1). Likewise, Ananda Mitra (2006) sees the Internet as a “cybernetic safe place” in a world of increasing xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment where the dispossessed can be protected from the public gaze and, at the same time, find a space to voice themselves and correspond with dominant groups that yield power over the dispossessed. He argues that many Indian web sites remain unknown and unlikely to be stumbled upon, which serves as a natural protection from the gaze of the dominant culture (clearly, he had not discovered the web site StumbleUpon). Ananda Mitra and Eric Watts (2002) also assert “the centrality of any voice is always open to challenge...because of the unique structure of hypertext, where any page or utterance is necessarily connected with other pages and utterances without any particular page having an intrinsic power over the other” (p. 487). In an earlier article, Mitra (2001) also offered the

optimistic prediction that, because the Internet decentralizes the means of message production, “anyone can produce and circulate messages, and those messages that are voiced could lead to a realignment of power relations” (p. 43). He posits that, in fact, “there has never before been as much opportunity for dialogue as offered by the Internet, where the marginal can not only speak, but can expect a response” (p. 32). So long as the call “is eloquent enough,” he claims, the dominant will inevitably face a “crisis” – whether to acknowledge it or not (p. 32). Mitra does not provide specific details of how and where on the web such dialogue would be initiated and sustained, or explanation for why the powerful would suddenly take an interest in the marginalized and oppressed.

Tasha Oren (2005) views the Internet as a place where “racial grievance” can be displayed by the Asian American community. Corporations, she explains, frequently “miscalculate the ‘sensitivities’ of Asian Americans” when they produce offensive representations of Asians and Asian Americans on apparel, advertisements and other consumer products. Abercrombie & Fitch’s 2002 line of Asian-themed graphic tee-shirts featuring buck-toothed, slanted-eyed caricatures of Chinese men and Adidas’s 2006 \$250 limited-edition Y1 Huf shoes imprinted with a similar graphic are prime examples that have recently infuriated the Asian American community (see figures 2.2 and 2.3).³

³ News of the Adidas Huf shoes was even reported by the BBC in this article <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4895898.stm> while Emil Guillermo wrote a particularly insightful piece for *SFGate* about Abercrombie & Fitch available here http://articles.sfgate.com/2002-04-23/news/17538190_1_abcrombie-fitch-t-shirt-asian-american



Figure 2.2 Adidas Huf shoe



Figure 2.3 Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirt

Oren (2005) argues that these offenses occur because there is a lack of association between Asian Americans and racial anger in Americans' collective cultural imagination, which facilitates our positioning as a demographic "free of past grievance—in short as honorary whites" (p. 353). In other words, Asian Americans might not be the target of racial insensitivities as often as we are if, perhaps, there were more visible public expressions of Asian American anger about our stereotyped and humiliating representations. Oren names the web sites of *Secret Asian Man*, *Angry Asian Man* and *Big Bad Chinese Mama* as texts that use anger and media

criticism to publicly voice such racial grievance and anger (see Figures 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6)



Figure 2.4 Big Bad Chinese Mama website



Figure 2.5 Angry Asian Man blog

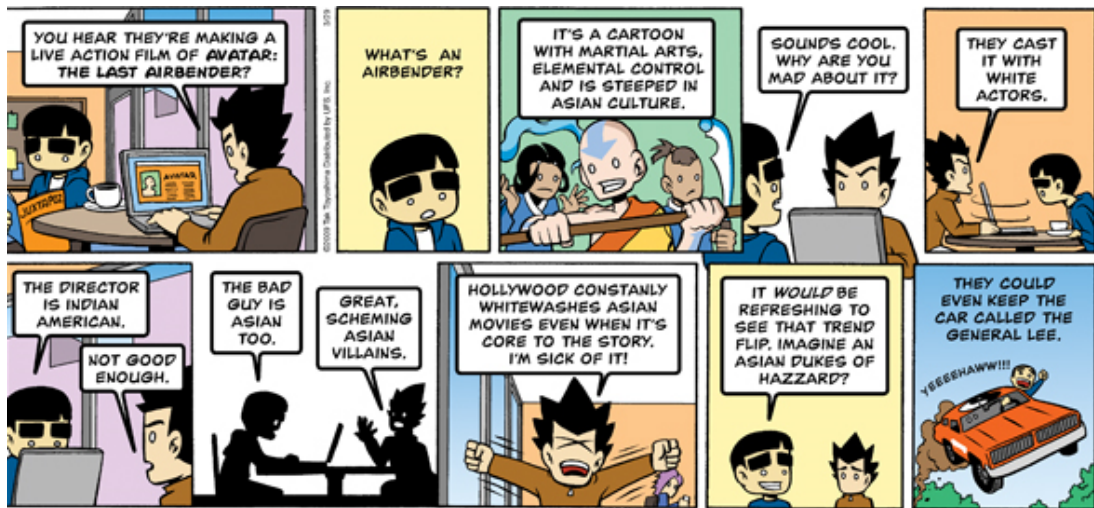


Figure 2.6 Secret Asian Man comic

She calls these “bridging texts” because they bring Asian American grievance into the realm of mainstream popular culture thereby disrupting the trope of Asian repression. Oren explains that they are effective because “mainstream expressions of racial grievance, of anger, of a refusal to ‘suck it up’ are at once metaphoric and actual interceptions. In their textual presence and performance they can short-circuit old ‘oops’ formulas by insisting on the specificity of [Asian American] experience” (p. 356). These arguments are similar in tone and consistent with much of the other research on the impact of Web 1.0 for oppressed communities. But these Web 1.0 spaces they examine in their work as detailed above are clearly different from the Web 2.0 environment in which my day of fame transpired. Gajjala’s work, for example, is heavily focused on email distribution lists and static web sites created by third world women’s organizations. Gross interrogates the notion of disembodied performativity on static web sites as well, and, in a recent publication, Gajjala, in partnership with Rahul Mitra, analyzes queer blogs that did not seem to have any Web 2.0 functionality. Similarly, Ananda Mitra’s studies center

primarily on static web sites as does Oren's look at "bridging texts" such as *Big Bad Chinese Mama*, *Secret Asian Man* and *Angry Asian Man*⁴.

There are general themes common to theories about how colonized and marginalized Others carved out a space online in the Web 1.0 era. They focus on the allowance for marginalized people to find a space for their voice, to dialogue, and to perform public grievance over their visual representations. They also point to the somewhat contradictory notion of safety from the gaze of the colonizer. Finally, in the era of Web 1.0 there were only minor concerns about the impact of evolving web technologies and practices for people of color. For example, Gajjala and Gajjala (2008) recently noted that panics over social networking, a Web 2.0 phenomenon, generally fall into one of two camps: being "misunderstood," or being "deceived" for someone else's gain. These are issues, they point out, which originated with the use of earlier asynchronous communication technologies such as bulletin boards and listservs. In other words, they claim that the problems arising from Web 2.0-driven social networking sites — miscommunication and deception — are nothing new and, it seems, little to be alarmed about.

Complicit practices and enabling structures in Web 2.0

Lisa Nakamura (2008) is one of few scholars who has commented on the impact that these technologies might have in critical studies of visual culture, race, and identity. She explains that research in the Web 1.0 era focused on the Internet as an alternative reality where people could control their representations of self and embodiment, including race and gender. The topics of self-representation via online avatars and racial passing online are, in fact, among the topics covered in Nakamura's (2002) book *Cybertypes*. However, research on Web 2.0, she argues,

⁴ The "Secret Asian Man" comic by Tak Toyoshima and "Angry Asian Man" (Phil Yu) have a presence in various Web 2.0 spaces today, including Twitter and Facebook, but Tasha Oren's discussion primarily focuses on their respective web sites which, for the most part, do not enable Web 2.0 features such as tagging, commenting, voting, sharing, and so forth.

needs to critique the claim that the web harnesses collective intelligence by allowing users access to equal participation⁵. She comments that “the bits of microcontent generated by the Web 2.0 technologies are “incomplete, poorly articulated or even inarticulate-seeming, evocative rather than denotative” (p. 194). With this, Nakamura invites other scholars to continue to critique the idealistic belief that Web 2.0 actually enables a so-called “collective intelligence.” In Lovink’s (2008) analysis of blogging and Web 2.0, he notes that even in the liberal and tolerant Netherlands, blogs have been dominated by bloggers who, under the banner of free speech, go on openly racist online diatribes.

What is it about Web 2.0 that most profoundly changes the rituals and practices of navigating the web such that, *instead of* forging a collective intelligence, we merely reproduce colonial patterns of power that exist offline? While there are countless characteristics, practices and technologies that comprise Web 2.0, there are several I consider to be of particular consequence in the ideological construction of the racialized Other:

- (1.) User rankings and, as a result, hierarchical structuring of web content
- (2.) The sharing/reposting of web content (to indicate approval *or* disapproval with that content)
- (3.) Functionality that enables users to hijack or colonize web space to displace the author’s content with oppositional, often racist, views.

There are many examples of the ways in which these distinctly Web 2.0 practices force us to realize that there is less of a collective intelligence forged, and more of an intricate and dynamic system that reifies existing colonial power structures.

⁵ This is related to race and representation online even though Nakamura does not explicitly make that connection. But she does touch on some of the observations about online racial discourse I share in this paper.

Reposting and “post-race”: Reconsidering colonized voices in Web 2.0

Dominant ideologies and the privileging of content. The rhetoric of Web 2.0 sites suggests that they put more power in the hands of the people, but this also means that there are new ways by which voices are elevated or suppressed, privileged or lost. The very common practice of ranking or voting in Web 2.0 is often used to establish one’s online credibility or popularity (or the quality of one’s posts). For example, buyers and sellers on eBay are awarded a star for each transaction to indicate their experience doing business on the site. Stars of various colors are awarded by eBay as users rise up the ranks, and particularly productive sellers can even earn a “power seller” icon. Buyers who pay on time and sellers who sell their goods in the condition described and in a timely manner generally get positive comments from other users who have interacted with them. There are also other means by which users with more votes, stars, diggs, or whatever measurement the website uses are highlighted. On Digg, shared/reposted content with the most diggs from other users rise to the top of the rank and occupy a position at the top of their home page when users sort by “most dugg” (this is where a thumbnail of my photo from Croft’s Flickr resided for a one long, nerve-wracking day). Furthermore, because comments posted to Digg are collapsed and hidden from view unless they too have multiple votes or diggs, or the user chooses to view posts with “minus diggs,” what happened in my case is that the comments that reproduced the humiliating construction of Asian women as prostitutes or of Asians as inept at speaking English, or that made light of my act of resistance, were dugg and rose to the top of the page. So of the 346 comments posted to Digg, the most highly ranked (most dugg) comments read like this (see Figure 2.7)

384 Comments

expand all | | [show profanity](#) [settings](#)

























 GhostWithToast on 02/08/2008	Should say "Me not love you long time"	+691 diggs  
Thread / Reply		
 jmgoody311 on 02/08/2008	Is "Suckie suckie- 4 dolla" still game?	+525 diggs  
Thread / Reply		
 w116tjb on 02/08/2008	Buried as inaccurate!	+348 diggs  
Thread / Reply		
 inactive on 02/08/2008	that Kim Chang - I know her, she joking... she love all the boy.	+278 diggs  
Thread / Reply		
 tehxn3 on 02/08/2008	Is it because dollar is falling?	+182 diggs  
Thread / Reply		
 skyschock1 on 02/08/2008	Me no ruv you rong time.	+173 diggs  
Thread / Reply		
 unicronband on 02/08/2008	You ruv me short time?	+157 diggs  
Thread / Reply		
 bbrigg1 on 02/08/2008	That's incredibly not funny.	+120 diggs  
Thread / Reply		

Figure 2.7 Ranking comments on Digg.com

While all web content might start out on the proverbial “level playing field” where anyone can have a voice, Web 2.0 enables the dynamic production of hierarchies of users and content. That is not to say that the technology is in any way deterministic, but ranking systems that preserve the supposedly democratizing potential of the Internet are not as liberating, transgressive, or empowering as might have been assumed during the Web 1.0 era. Instead, in Web 2.0, values and points of view that are privileged and made more visible and accessible on Web 2.0 reflect the dominant culture’s ideologies just as in real life. Kathy Sierra’s (2007) notion of the “dumbness of crowds” presents some validity here. Having a great mass of users participate in the ranking of content for other users does not always produce a collective intelligence, but can instead produce a collective stupidity that reflects and recirculates dominant status quo ideologies.

Negotiating the dominant gaze. In the era of Web 1.0, Mitra (2006) noted the transgressive potential of the web when he referred to the Internet as a “cybernetic safe place”

where the “dispossessed” can be both protected from the public gaze and allowed a space to voice themselves. Marginalized others could connect and dialogue, yet be protected from the gaze of the colonizer because of its vastness and, by definition, the absence of a system to link everything together in any meaningful way. That has changed. Web pages no longer stand alone in a vast web of sites loosely connected by simple hyperlinks. Rather, social media that harness Web 2.0 technology make it nearly impossible to hide in plain sight. There is no longer protection from the public gaze once content is picked up by Web 2.0-based social networking, bookmark-sharing and content-aggregating web sites, where content is quickly shared, and then shared again and again seamlessly across websites and blogs and other web 2.0 environments. In Web 2.0, content and links to content move quickly. Not only is there no protection from the dominant gaze, there is greater power for web users to *redirect* the gaze sometimes squarely in your direction when you least expect via content reposting and tagging. Links among like-minded bloggers characterized the primary means by which Web 1.0 content producers established networks and drove web traffic to one another’s websites. Neil Talbot (2002) uses the term “inter-linky-loving goodness” (p. 131) to describe this relationship among bloggers.

Web 2.0 has restructured the way content is related. Websites that engage Web 2.0 technologies enable and indeed encourage users to redirect or repost content from one web site to another quite likely without your knowledge, much less your consent. This clearly happened in my case. While I knew to go to Croft’s Flickr web site to see the photos from the weekend, I did not realize that the page with my photo on it had been “dugg,” or linked to and voted on at Digg until a number of friends, acquaintances, and even a professor in my department emailed me to express their surprise at my instant Internet fame and sympathies for the racist, highly sexualized, and just plain insulting slew of comments that sometimes anonymous visitors to both

the Digg and Flickr pages were posting. What replaces the “inter-linky-loving goodness” among like-minded members of a particular online community is something more like a virtual spotlight that anyone can take hold of and point in your direction whether you want it or not. Indeed, this makes it nearly impossible to make any assumptions about who your audience is and who is looking. The web’s transgressive potential thus becomes compromised in a manner predicted *well* before the dawn of even the digital age when Socrates, in the Phaedrus (247c), lamented that the word, once written, could be abused by anyone without the consent of the original speaker. Web 2.0, while introducing new challenges, also appears to resurrect older ones.

An added complication to the rapid moving and sharing of content and resultant out-of-your-control shifting of the public gaze is that many websites that host reposted content or links, such as Digg and Facebook, have their own commenting functions independent of any sort of commenting function of the original site hosting the content. So even if one deletes the original content (my photo on Croft’s Flickr, for example), comments and dialogue can remain visible so long as the person who reposted the content or link chooses to leave them there. Not only does it become impossible to hide from the public gaze, there are traces left behind of voices of those who might fervently contest one’s point of view, or wish to publicly ridicule one’s attempt to express it. With Web 2.0, it is hard to tell who is looking, why they are looking, and with whom they are sharing this gaze.

Re-signifying practices and colonizing space. A theme that belies all of these shifts with the introduction of Web 2.0 is the loss of control over one’s voice and the space in which that voice is heard. Gajjala (2004) studied “espaces” wherein the main problems were participants’ chattiness and persistence of banter tangential to the original topic. However, she was, of course, examining email distribution lists and basic web sites. In the Web 2.0 environment, dialogue

takes place in spaces that are far more technologically complex and more open to public participation. Chattiness and off-topic posts from people within the community seem like comparatively insignificant problems given the oppositional, “against the grain,” and often racist dialogue that commonly erupts on discussion boards and online comments pages in a Web 2.0 environment. Nakamura (2008) examines one such case in which the Asian American community set up an online petition to protest a *Details* Magazine article titled “*Gay or Asian*” which features the photo of an Asian American man with captions inferring that Asian men are effeminate and indistinguishable from gay men. Nakamura explains that while most signatories decry the racism of the *Details* article, some use the site “against the grain” by employing the space of the online petition to “protest the protest” (p. 194). This hijacking or colonizing of web space becomes a far more prevalent occurrence in the Web 2.0 environment precisely because of its highly user-driven nature. It is not long before a counter-hegemonic space is recolonized. The original mode of counter-hegemonic transgression becomes stifled, foregrounding a reactionary transgression that is reassertive of the dominant ideology.

With this in mind, Oren’s notion of a “bridging text” demands particular re-consideration. Again, she asserts that expressions of Asian American grievance or anger in mainstream popular culture disrupt the trope of Asian repression. Oren explains that narratives of Asian American passivity can lead to miscalculations of our tolerance for racially offensive cultural significations. But when audiences can contribute to the production of a bridging text, such as on the Flickr and Digg pages that hosted my photo, they can shift the meaning of the text itself. Users of social networking web sites sometimes even reignite expressions of traditional or “old fashioned” racism, which Chesler, Peet, and Sevig (2003) define as the “expression of traditional negative prejudice, bigotry, stereotypic beliefs about the inferiority or even dangerousness of

people of color” (p. 219), particularly when readers can post their contributions to the dialogue anonymously. Although theorists including Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) argue that a more socially acceptable “color-blind racism” has replaced old-fashioned racism, old-fashioned racist sentiments seem to flourish when identities are hidden or falsified online. At least half of the comments on either Digg or Flickr could not be read, even generously, as a support for, or recognition of my act of grievance. Instead, many of the comments are anonymous insults and ad hominem attacks condemning my opposition to problematic representations of Asian women. Often they are neither subtle, nor color-blind. For example:

Sie Sind Schwach says: So, you won't "Love me long time", you're scrawny, and quite angry. What use are you then? Are you good at math or something? It doesn't seem like you have a developed sense of humor. I thought plain looking girls were supposed to try harder.

lossjim says: *[to the owner of the Flickr page]* you have one friend with SERIOUS issues, and, to boot, comes off like most "holier than thou" asian chicks, with a low self esteem, but need to be seen/appreciated? whatever, good luck with your "good friend"

Other comments re-inscribe the very discursive construction I was contesting, the Asian woman as prostitute/object of white male sexual fantasy, or they perpetuate other humiliating constructions of Asian Americans such as the non-English speaking foreigner. For example:

jonolan says: No boom-boom, no visa!

promqu33n says: needs more chinglish. me no love you longtime.”

slider527 says: ahahaha me want fly lice with that asian girl.

The narratives created in these spaces – one that condemns and ridicules my act of grievance, and another that reproduces and re-inscribes humiliating archaic constructions of Asian Americans – overshadow and displace expressions of Asian American grievance both literally and discursively. In other words, they become secondary, parasitic transgressions of my original counter-hegemonic transgression.

Oren points out the importance of bridging texts in interrupting narratives of Asian American passivity but the construction of a whole new text – pages upon pages of online reader-generated comments – clearly take up more space in a literal sense than the original “bridging text” on the web page. Social media sites like Digg and Flickr invite public dialogue which effectively becomes incorporated as *part of* the text, thereby enabling this secondary reactionary transgression. This type of transgressive potential was absent from Web 1.0 sites such as Angry Asian Man, Secret Asian Man and Big Bad Chinese Mama. Space allotted to an act of grievance can now be effectively taken over to reignite even older expressions of racism. What happened on Flickr and Digg around my voicing of racial grievance suggests that, while any disruption of the persistent narrative of passive model minority is important, it is crucial to consider how the text might produce different meanings when it is visually and discursively colonized.

The voices of the dispossessed and marginalized get lost as they are visually and discursively displaced, hijacked or silenced by those who speak louder, or in greater numbers, especially as content is voted on and elevated in status and visibility. The nature of the reposts and comments indicate that we are, in fact, far from existing in a post-race society in which racial equality has been achieved and is thus a by-gone topic. In contrast, the online racial discourse observed in my case study as well as in the *Details* Magazine case discussed by

Nakamura, and certainly others as well, indicate that many people readily subscribe to very conservative, static, bigoted notions of race and these technologies seem to serve as a ready arena for the re-circulation of these racial meanings. It is interesting to reflect on early observers of the web who envisioned it as a space where “users can float free of biological and sociostructural determinants” (Dery, 1994). Hobson (2008) explains that what has actually transpired is the reproduction of offline power dynamics that can manifest online in “disturbing and retrogressive ways” (p. 212). New media, he argues, perpetuate old ideologies, undermining previous narratives that posit a web-enabled “transcendence from race, class, gender, and other markers of difference” (p. 112). Web 2.0 practices of ranking, reposting, and commenting and then another ranking, reposting and commenting on *those* comments, have enabled the recirculation and privileging of bits and pieces of incredibly disturbing and regressive racist discourses as demonstrated by what transpired on my day of fame on Digg.

Mocked and misunderstood performances of resistance. Ono and Pham (2008) explain that mimicry, a notion interrogated at length by Homi Bhabha, is a tool used by the colonizer to control the colonized, one that signals what is appropriate for the Other. They point to the aforementioned Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirts bearing offensive caricatures of Asians as one instance of such mimicry at work in the control of the racialized Other. These acts of mimicry enacted by the dominant group, they argue, serve to reify their colonial power. However, as Pham and Ono point out, mimicry can also create a space for the colonized to resist, and in that space, they can point out flawed colonial representations.

In my own case study, I was indeed contesting a “flawed colonial representation” by wearing a shirt that read “I will not love you long time.” I was, of course, pointing out that I am cognizant of the popular construction of Asian women as objects of white male sexual fantasy

that was sedimented in the American imaginary by the popular film, *Full Metal Jacket*. Further, I was demonstrating my rejection of that narrow colonial representation of Asian women. Based on a reading of the comments posted on Flickr and on Digg, it is clear that some commenters demonstrated, however, what Stuart Hall (1973) would call an oppositional reading. Many, because they seemed unaware that the irreverent phrase on my shirt referenced a scene in a particular film, read my shirt differently – they seemed to think that I conceitedly believe that others want me to “love them long time.” This is a clear case in which my message and intentions were misunderstood entirely due to the commenters’ ignorance of the shirt’s popular culture reference. For example:

Vspazv on 02/08/2008: I'm trying to figure out if the double entendre was intended. (as a side note entendre isnt in the digg spell check)

inajiffy on 02/08/2008: Can someone explain to me the origin of this phrase? Apparently I live under an internet rock (which, most of the time, I'm okay with).

sloppjyoe890 on 02/08/2008: I go to a college where my dorm is like 80% black, they make fun of me constantly, you wanna know the best defense. Laugh and talk shit on them i have made so many friends crossing racial boundaries by making racial jokes, its all in good fun and if someone gets offended by it then just apologize. my generation is a dave chappelle generation we can joke about this stuff, i'm sure if that asian girl didn't want to be made fun of she wouldn't have worn that shirt. i realize my grammar a sentence structure is wrong go ahead and make fun of me, its all in fun.

michaelb1 on 02/08/2008: Probably looking for sum yung gai.

albinorhino101 on 02/08/2008: Who's long tim?

AndrewWiggin on 02/08/2008: Am I square because I don't get it?

In fact some of the commenters posted comments trying to explain the joke or point out that other commenters misunderstood the message the shirt was trying to convey:

TheCount on 02/08/2008: I think you may be missing the point of the joke. It's not supposed to be another cliché, it's supposed to go against it.

Coffedemon on 02/08/2008: Full Metal Jacket. The second half when they get to Vietnam. Its part of a conversation where Joker (I believe) is in negotiations with a prostitute over the price of her services.

bjs3171 on 02/08/2008: way to miss the point.

brickbat on 02/08/2008: Apparently used by Vietnamese hookers to attract Foreign GIs during the Vietnam war. Its referred to in Full Metal Jacket

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Full_Metal_Jacket

Papillon Soo Soo as Da Nang Hooker: A prostitute who approaches Joker and Rafterman at a street corner during the first scene in Vietnam. She is memorable for the sales-pitch phrases: Me love you long time, me sooo horny and Me sucky sucky, in exchange for fifteen dollars.

In other cases, there were people who, at some level, demonstrated some recognition of my shirt's reference to a very specific line from *Full Metal Jacket*, but contested or trivialized my performance of resistance by mocking and mimicking me (see Figure 2.8).

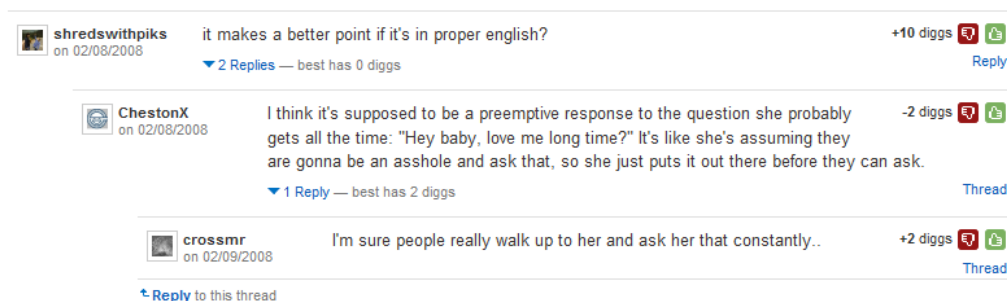


Figure 2.8 Comments trivializing my act of resistance

Comments left on Croft's Flickr page also mocked and mimicked:

katipunera76 says: this is an old, trite shirt. i would suggest she express her and your pseudo-progressive outlook with a tool NOT from urban outfitters.

plus, it was probably made in a sweatshop.

Zod's Pics says: Here are some other t-shirt ideas:

"No, I don't wok my dog."

"No, my other car is not a rickshaw."

"No, I don't eat fried lice."

Just curious: are those offensive? If so, is her shirt also offensive? Really, you think this t-shirt is saying something profound about stereotypes and racism, but actually you are just reinforcing them. It would be like a black guy wearing a shirt that said, "No, I can't dunk a basketball." or "No, I don't steal cars."

It would be more effective if you just wore a shirt that said, "F*ck off, whitey." Which really makes this no different than the white racists it is aimed at.

What happens when contestations of mimicry, or expressions of “racial grievance,” are transgressed; themselves mocked, mimicked, or misunderstood? To put it another way, what does one make of the colonizer mocking and mimicking the racialized Other precisely *because* we are demonstrating resistance and racial anger at our subordination? It becomes clear that there is a mutually reinforcing dynamic at play. Multiculturalist rhetoric has us believing that Asian Americans have entered some sort of post-race existence as model minorities. It would follow that, if this reflects the dominant ideology, then it is unsurprising that people react to our acts of resistance and demands for apology and recognition with transgressions of their own to reassert hegemonic racial ideologies. Oftentimes, as in my case, commenters expressed this through their mockery and mimicry of my performance of racial anger and contestation of their portrayals of Asian women. They did not react to my display of racial anger with support.

If mimicry and mockery are indeed tools used by the colonizer to control the colonized and to signal what is appropriate for the racialized Other, then it seems my transgression through my contestation of colonial representations was deemed *inappropriate* and perhaps threatening. I had redeployed the strategy of mimicry against the colonizer, the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1984), but comments about my performance of mimicry (of *Full Metal Jacket*) mimicked me, making for a rather complicated network of mimicry. But does their mimicry and mockery render our display of racial anger through the production of “bridging texts” ineffective? Simply disrupting the trope of the repressed Asian, as suggested by Oren, clearly falls short when readers can disrupt *my* disruption, or effectively transgress my counter-hegemonic transgression by adding to the text and images on the web page with their own commentary to redirect the readers’ focus. One clear message of racial grievance, or bridging text, transforms into a cacophony of voices occupying the space, some supporting the original message, others contesting it or mocking the author, and still others involved at some level in the back and forth banter. There appears to be no privileged position situated outside of this endless circulation of disruption/transgression, rendering these critical interventions “interminable analyses” (Derrida, Bass, & Ronse, 1981). In sum, visiting a space on the web sometimes involves, not just reading the author’s message, but rather using the original content as a starting point for dialogue, discussion, contestation, and argument which not only decenters the original text, but also creates a space for mimicking and mocking it. This is far more consequential when that original message is one from the marginalized voices of racialized Others with a serious message (even if conveyed with tongue in cheek) about how we are constructed by the dominant group.

Conclusion

The democratizing potential of the Internet for the dispossessed became a popular trope in scholarship during the Web 1.0 era. The web was lauded as a site where race and gender seemed invisible, changeable, or of little consequence. The vastness of the web and selective creation of hyperlinks among sites was said to provide natural protection from the dominant gaze where marginalized Others could dialogue with one another and even seek responses from the dominant group if they wished. Asian Americans could even disrupt the trope of passivity and repression through the display of bridging texts.

Themes common to these theories about how colonized and marginalized Others have been liberated by the internet in the Web 1.0 era focused on the opportunities for us to find a space for our voices, to dialogue, and to perform public grievance over our visual representations. Few scholars discussed the significant drawbacks to online participation aside from excessive chattiness and off-topic posts, or being misunderstood or deceived for someone else's gain. But the web and the ways users interact with it have undergone significant changes. Web 2.0 technologies have enabled a far greater level of user involvement and interaction through such activities as content creation, commenting, ranking, sharing, and evaluation.

I have challenged models of empowerment of early Internet scholars that focus on the liberating potential of the Internet for racial minorities by interrogating the ways in which these new Web 2.0 structures and practices are complicit in circulating online the same colonial ideologies and power structures that dominant groups sustain offline. Web 2.0 can actually enable reactionary transgressions in response to the counter-hegemonic transgressions initiated by marginalized groups. Voting on and ranking content on social media websites, for example, is

ubiquitous and often determines how content is placed on a page (or not). This reproduces the status quo rather than opening up a space for marginalized voices. Further, the rapid-fire sharing and reposting of web content happens out of anyone's control, consent or even awareness and the participatory and collaborative nature of Web 2.0 can render one's intentions, as an author of web content, irrelevant. It becomes impossible to maintain a public online safe space or hide from the public gaze particularly when users from the dominant group shine the spotlight on us with the intention of inviting public condemnation, ridicule or even threats of violence. Users intent on sabotaging expressions of racial grievance and other voicings can quite easily colonize web spaces. And, as in real life, marginalized voices get pushed out as dominant voices support other dominant voices and they, both figuratively and literally, rise to the top. What this demonstrates is that transgression in Web 2.0 is neither linear nor uni-directional, but is instead multi-layered and transactional. Counter-hegemonic attempts to transgress status quo racial ideologies are often met with reactionary transgressions reassertive of the dominant social order. Web 2.0 enables this dynamic and complex system of spaces and voices that can be shared and republished, recolonized and resignified, mimicked and mocked. But these transgressive acts are still as critical as they are difficult to protect in our Web 2.0 environment. Through this constant cycle of tensions, shifts in meaning, and stolen spaces, there will be *moments* when the marginalized racial minority transgresses the dominant racial order, even if those moments are fleeting and sure to be reappropriated, resignified or reclaimed. The need for further critical attention to the dynamics of power that circulate and sustain Web 2.0 structures and practices is obvious. The question now is how we are to intervene.

Chapter Three

Camping the Oriental in Consumer Culture: A Case Study of Blue Q's "Miso Pretty" and OPI's Japan, Hong Kong, and India Collections

The appearance of nail polish maker, OPI's, "global" color collections and Blue Q's "Miso Pretty" line of Asian-inspired toiletries comes at a time in which the peddling of Orientalism to western female consumers has almost become standard. Columbia Pictures recently released, for example, the book-turned-movie *Eat, Pray, Love*, starring Julia Roberts. This is a text that is sincere in its depiction of a white American woman who goes to India to pray with a guru in order to "find herself." An earlier comedy film, *The Guru* (2002), on the other hand, mocks white upper class women like her for being gullible, fetishistic, and Orientalist. It is within this complex pop culture landscape that I examine the campy humor deployed in the creation of feminine brand identities for OPI Nail Lacquers' Hong Kong, Japan, and India collections, and Blue Q's "Miso Pretty" toiletries.

Increasingly media savvy audiences have developed a taste for clever and irreverent humor and have made camp a staple in consumer culture. Soap operas, TV sitcoms from the 1980s that come to a happy resolution in a half hour, celebrity endorsements used in infomercials, and so on – these pop culture texts are often considered dated, cliché, and predictable. Camp, in contrast, often pokes fun at such texts through satire, while exaggerating its seriousness and sincerity. The 1995 film remake of *The Brady Bunch*, for example, pokes fun at itself -- at its 1970s-esque formulaic plots, the predictability of the characters, and so forth. Several theorists have commented on camp. One of the earliest and most commonly cited works on camp is Susan Sontag's (1964) *Notes on Camp* wherein she lists camp's characteristics:

Failed seriousness, a love of exaggeration, the privileging of style over content and “being alive to the double sense in which some things can be taken” (p. 277). Camp’s irreverent over-the-top humor honors audiences by making jokes at its own expense. In describing camp, Helene Shugart and Catherine Waggoner (2008) remark, “theatricality tinged with humor rules as people, artworks, and artifacts are enmeshed in a performance of celebratory fakery -- an embracing of the artificial with a tone of failed seriousness” (p. 21). In this article I argue that OPI Nail Lacquers’ Hong Kong, Japan, and India collections, and Blue Q’s “Miso Pretty” toiletries demonstrate the deployment of a camp style that is complex and appealing in unique ways. This, however, makes it particularly difficult to detect the racist perspectives and Orientalist ideologies embedded in those texts.

Defining Camp

My definition of camp consists of the elements common to the definitions of camp drawn up by some of the most cited works on the subject, authored by Jack Babuscio, Susan Sontag, Richard Dyer, Pamela Roberston, Mark Booth, Caryl Flinn, and others. Those common elements align with what Jack Babuscio (1977) claims are the “four features basic to camp”: (1) Irony (2) aestheticism (3) theatricality (4) humor (p. 119).

Irony

Irony is about “celebrated fakery,” a feigned ignorance while presenting what is opposite of one’s intended meaning. Irony often manifests in the performance of appreciating something that is bad *because* of its badness, which works only if we share norms and assumptions, and have the “general expectation of sincerity and coherence” (Colebrook, 2004, p. 17). It is irony that “infuses camp,” according to Sue-Ellen Case (1999), or put differently, it “is the subject matter of camp” (Babuscio, 1977, p. 41). In other words, camp requires some element of irony

because camp is, by definition, “a form of ironic representation and reading” (Robertson, 1996, p. 4).

Aestheticism

Richard Dyer (2002) argues that camp is “style for style’s sake.” Camp texts he argues, “don’t have ‘serious’ content...and the actual forms taken accentuate artifice, fun, and occasionally outrageousness.” (p. 113). Likewise, Booth (1999) accuses camp of “emphasizing style at the expense of content” but also of being “démodé” (p. 67). In other words, camp ironically celebrates dead aesthetic styles of the past, things that are past their “use by” date (Flinn, 1999). But, as Fredric Jameson (1991) sums up, camp style is depthless, ahistorical superficiality. Camp makes no claims of seriousness and is thus free from any expectation that it does anything but borrow from outmoded styles and aesthetics from our recent history just for fun.

Theatricality

Camp is inherently performative. One must perform in an exaggerated manner in order to achieve irony that is recognizable as irony. Since the cultural artifacts that are the topic of this article do not involve any component of live performance or even movement, I broaden this definition to include artifice and exaggerated presentation. Camp presents itself as shamelessly insincere. Fabio Cleto (1999) says it is mock sexy and mock glamorous, and also “far fetched,” “bogus,” and “patently ludicrous” (p. 69). Babuscio (1977) uses musical theater as an example of the ways in which camp is a performance of exaggeration that indulges in sentiment, mood and nostalgia.

Humor

Camp is, by definition, a mode or style of humor -- one that deploys a theatrical and stylized form of irony and theatricality in order to formulate its punch line. What makes camp humor funny is that it pretends to be sincere while “ironically relishing an indulgence in what is being so bad it’s good” (Babuscio, 1999, p. 10).

Who camps? Who’s *being* camped?

Who is the subject? Who possesses agency in producing camp jokes? The complicated layers of appropriation, parody, and irony that comprise OPI’s and Miso Pretty’s camp make it difficult to detect who is being hailed, and whom it “others” in the process. Shugart and Waggoner (2008) assert that, “while the parody is a part of camp's aesthetic and could easily slip into cynicism, it does not. Camp is about self-love and not contempt; camp performances have an attitude of tenderness within the parody” (p. 34). While I agree that this certainly can be the case, it isn’t always the case. As Robertson (1996) explains, camp is an ironic viewing and is, thus, a reading practice only available to an elite audience and one that depends on the presence of a bifurcated audience for its irony: “For there to be a genuinely camp spectator, there must be another hypothetical spectator who views the object ‘normally’” (p. 17).

The origins of today’s commercialized camp -- gay camp -- involved a knowing wink to an audience of sexual minorities in the pre-Stonewall era. The mainstream camp that exists today, Robertson warns, is not necessarily aligned with progressive politics because camp has been co-opted and commodified as it has become part of the dominant code of humor. So what happens to this elite audience? When everyone is “in on the joke” there is little use for a wink, but that exchange still takes places symbolically as that is what makes campy ironic humor. What I argue through these case studies is that the subversive wink once shared among

marginalized populations when camp was considered a primarily gay aesthetic has turned into what can more accurately be described as a knowing *smirk*, as Thomas Hess (1965) calls it, in this now mainstream style of humor directed at the dominant majority in a mainstream audience. That hypothetical unknowing, naïve audience can get thrown into the spotlight as the *subject* of the racialized camp joke instead of as its agent. This is how OPI and Blue Q achieve their camp joke – they participate in an othering of the Oriental using irony, aesthetics, theatricality, and humor. In the following sections I will examine the ways in which they “camp the Oriental,” the reasons this may be appealing to consumer audiences, and the ways in which it can disguise or distract from their embedded racist and Orientalist ideologies.

OPI Camps

On its website, OPI proclaims itself the “worldwide leader in professional nail care,” with distribution to over 100 countries on six continents⁶. OPI takes credit for being the first to come up with clever, but often non-descriptive, names for their nail lacquers, such as “I’m Not Really a Waitress” (Meyer, 2006). They have attempted to stir consumer interest by introducing new colors as part of “collections” released twice per year. OPI explains on its website that some of these collections are themed “around a specific geographic location” to create a “global culture of color” (See Figures 3.1 and 3.2). This is effectively what bell hooks (1992) calls a “commodification of Otherness,” this tends to be a successful marketing strategy because the racialized Other “is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal [that is, *White*] ways of doing and feeling” (p. 21).

⁶ <http://www.opi.com/>



Figure 3.1 Display for OPI's Japanese Collection



Figure 3.2 Display for OPI's India Collection

The classic tropes of Orientalism make frequent appearances in the names and descriptions of the nail colors that make up the Hong Kong, Japan, and India collections. For example, they repeatedly reference Eastern philosophies, spiritual practices and Asian foods familiar to Westerners (see Figure 3.3), and make light of Asian accents and errors in speech, often by stringing all these things together in punny rhymes and alliterations.



Figure 3.3 Indian woman meditating in a print advertisement for OPI's India Collection

These Orientalist tropes join together with camp style to produce a spectacle that makes OPI's Global Collection of Color appealing, and less subject to critique. But the appeal of irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor disguises what are ultimately unsettling and Orientalist representations of race that play on difference and exoticism.

Irony

Ironic parody or, perhaps what might be more accurately described as mockery in this case, is an underlying theme in OPI's global collection of color. For example, there are such descriptions and product names as "kung pao wow," "Dim Sum Plum," "berry delectable," and "Lend a panda a hand-a." Mispronunciations and the breaking up words into one-syllable utterances mimic what OPI assumes that English speakers hear when people speak Chinese. This is also commonly known in school yards across America as a [fake] "Chinese accent," which Elaine Chun (2004) defines as an "ostensibly playful rendering of an imagined variety of American English" (p. 263). Because the accent play is invoked ironically, as signaled by other elements that make OPI ironic (such as its long, non-descriptive and thus functionless product names discussed in the next section), OPI suggests that there is humor in the uncouthness of such mockery. They are being ironic by inviting the consumer to take pleasure in the badness, unexpectedness, and social unacceptability of parodying the accents of Asians.

It is worth pointing out that OPI also has other foreign country-inspired themes for their nail colors including their French Collection which includes such shades as “A Oui Bit of Love,” “Bastille My Heart,” and “Parlez-vous OPI.” However, the social identities associated with the French language and accent are not been tied to histories of exclusion by race. There is no pressure to discipline a French accent as it carries a different, privileged social currency. In contrast, what Elaine Chun (2004) calls “mock Asian” or “fake Chinese accent” has historically been used in mean-spirited jokes and childhood taunts such as “Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these” (holding out one’s shirt with both hands to form breasts) and “me Chinese, me no dumb, me stick finger in Daddy's bum. Daddy go fart and me go zoom. That's how I get home so soon!” (sung to the tune of *This Old Man*). OPI’s product copy has a similar ring, making it ambivalently anti-PC, so potentially inappropriate that it’s “good.” Irony serves as an alibi for ambiguous texts -- that they were not being sincere in poking fun, but were rather celebrating badness of this sort of teasing in a society that refuses to acknowledge race, color, or ethnicity.

Ironic performances of accent mockery are problematic also because ironic performances of racism, like what the creators of television sitcom *All in the Family* intended with its racist older white male character, Archie Bunker, can be a way to critique racism⁷. But OPI’s silly puns, sing songy rhymes, and “mock Asian” that appear throughout the Hong Kong and Japan collections are not presented as any critique of using a “fake Chinese accent,” the way that Archie Bunker was used to highlight the inappropriateness of blatantly racist behavior. Rather, OPI employs mock Asian in a way that makes the “Oriental” the butt of the joke. Thus, while Asian Americans often attempt to unmark themselves by disciplining their speech, OPI pretends at being bold, and uncouth enough to make fun of accents in a society that tries desperately to

⁷ Even though some audiences did not decode the character as he was encoded, instead identifying with him because of his ostensibly racist tendencies and verbal outbursts.

ignore race. Despite the ironic presentation, accent mockery still gestures at our foreignness and inassimilability and reaffirms the dominant status of whites who are the ones who could derive pleasure from even an ironically presented overstepping of boundaries.

Aestheticism

OPI privileges style over content and this is observable in their rejection of conventional, descriptive names for their shades of nail color. Often cosmetics are given names that, in some way, indicate the color of the product. Cover Girl, for example, has shades of eye shadow like Emerald, Copper Penny, Black Tie, and Raisin. OPI chooses a “detachment from the tyranny of conventional standards” (Babuscio, 1999, p. 120) by bucking cosmetic naming convention with names like “Suzi says Feng Shui” or “Meet Me at the Star Ferry.” By subverting “commonly received standards,” namely failing to provide a clue as to the product’s actual shade of color, they offer they extend an invitation to share in the appreciation of camp style and sensibility. However, OPI upsets convention at a rather superficial level, not critiquing dominant representations of Asians as different and exotic, but rather perpetuating those very ideologies using a style that feels frivolous, unserious, and fun.

Another way in which OPI camps is through the aesthetic contrast between its cheesy animated online game (see Figure 3.4) and its glamorous, fast-paced, behind-the-scenes video of a photo shoot in Hollywood posted to the same website for the Hong Kong Collection. The cartoonish interactive game creates a campy, incoherent juxtaposition with its short, flashy video documentary featuring OPI’s marketing team, a top executive, make up artists and models. The campy interactive game demonstrates Babuscio’s (1999) observations about camp aesthetic: “Camp is often exaggerated” and “the stress on style is 'outrageous' or 'too much'” (p. 122).

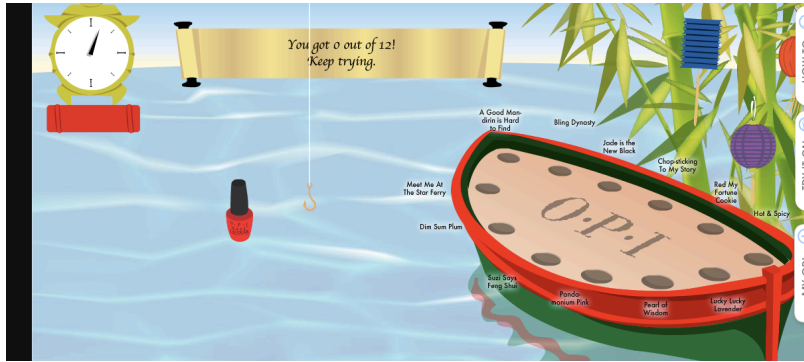


Figure 3.4 OPI’s online game for the Hong Kong Collection

The game starts with a gong sound to mark the start of the clock counting down your time to complete the task of clicking and dragging bottles of nail lacquer to their names printed next to slots on an Asian fishing boat floating among bamboo and Chinese paper lanterns. OPI uses the animated game to continue its camp theme while fulfilling a more practical need – to help consumers learn to identify the shades of nail lacquer from their non-descriptive sing songy “fake Chinese accent” infused names. The clock keeping time has a pagoda roof and your score is presented on a scroll. The animated interactive game possesses a highly stylized camp aesthetic, a performance of excess in pointing out the “Orientalness” of its Hong Kong Collection. That is what makes it camp -- it is *so* Orientalist, it is funny. And recognizing irony, says Ken Feil (2005), is appealing because it confers upon the knowing audience a sense of superiority for “getting” the camp joke, or attending to the irony.

Theatricality

OPI also plays at being theatrical, by being “over-the-top Orientalist” with such product names as “Panda-monium Pink,” “Jade is the New Black,” “Red my Fortune Cookie,” “A Good Man-darin is Hard to Find,” and “Chop-sticking to my Story” from the Hong Kong Collection (See Figure 3.5). They focus on Asian foods, broken English rhymes and puns, and stock

signifiers representing the Orient. From the Japanese Collection there is also “You're Such a Kabuki Queen,” “Don't Be Koi with Me,” and “Holy Pink Pagoda” (See Figure 3.6). The India Collection features such colors as “Curry Up Don't Be Late” and “Black Cherry Chutney.”



Figure 3.5. OPI Hong Kong Collection

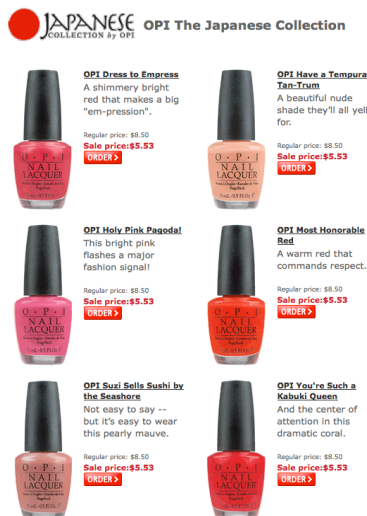


Figure 3.6 OPI's Japanese Collection

Sau-ling Wong (1995) coined the term “Oriental effect” to characterize novelist Amy Tan’s literary obsession with “stock images” of China, such as lions, goldfish, and latticed edges.

Tan's China, Sheng-Mei Ma (2000) argues, is "highly imaginary and fabricated but... nevertheless assuages the Western need for the other" (p. 108). The Oriental effect is also invoked through one of the primary ways in which whites have been known to "make contact" or satisfy Western desire for the Oriental Other – through food (hooks, 1992). The theatricality is invoked through its excess and indulgence in "sentiment, mood, and nostalgia" (Babuscio, 1977) in its numerous references to Oriental culinary delights. From the OPI Hong Kong Collection, of twelve colors, there are six references to Chinese food: "hot," "spicy," "sizzling," "delicacy," "dim sum" and, the ever famous Chinese American delight, "kung pao" (chicken). This is not inclusive of the accompanying mentions of chopsticks and fortune cookies. From the Japanese collection there are also "Have a Tempura Tan-Trum," "Let Them Eat Rice Cake," "Miso Happy with This Color," and "Suzi Sells Sushi by the Seashore" (See Figure 3.5). Eating ethnic food invokes a particular sentiment or mood because it is thought of as something out of the ordinary (among Whites), a special treat or indulgence. Thus, OPI's colorful and excessive references to Westerner's favorite "Oriental foods" use campy theatrics while it exploits Orientalist desire, thereby reinscribing the notion that the exotic other is to be "eaten." OPI capitalizes on satiating the appetites of white consumers for aspects of the Others' culture (hooks, 1992; Joo, 2008), in this case in a very literal sense, by indulging symbolically in our foods.

OPI presents an equally excessive Eastern mysticism to produce its theatrical camp style. For example, one shade of nail color, "Suzy says feng shui," is described as a "serene cobalt blue to balance your yin yang." These product names and descriptions are barely more than a random assortment of colors and words from various Eastern spiritual practices strung together into statements that do not make sense. For example, there is also the Japanese Collection's "Color of The Zen-tury" which asks that you "Meditate on this peaceful shade of silvery violet!" A shade

from the India collection follows the same formula: “Yoga-ta Get This Blue” (See Figure 3.3). The description for this color reads, “Make this deep, dark blue your fashion mantra.” These offer a distinct appeal for Western women who have already developed a taste for spiritual practices from the East. As Sunaina Maira (2007) observes, white women made it exotically fashionable to wear bindis and saris during the popularity of new age feminism in the 1990s in their appropriation of Indian practices. OPI’s allure is in its invitation to be theatrical and play with the idea of “putting on” the Orient through its references to yoga, meditation, mantras and so forth. But this sort of “role play” (Babuscio, 1999) involves a campy, overblown performance of appreciation for Eastern philosophies and spiritual beliefs. The unintended consequence here is that it trivializes them by inferring that its practices are to be tried on like costuming, while it also reinscribes an Orientalist worldview that the East, and by association people “from” the East, are strange, different, and exotic.

Humor

Humor is the defining characteristic of camp because camp is a joke, an ironic, exaggerated, style of humor. That quirky camp sense of humor is OPI’s signature, even outside of their global collections of color, but there are some interesting elements within the Japan and Hong Kong Collections that evoke nostalgia through references to racial humor in a very literal sense: Confucius jokes and comedic imitations of film and television character, Charlie Chan. Confucius, a Chinese philosopher, has long been a staple of American popular culture with his proverbs on honor, wisdom, respect, luck and prosperity. These find their way into several of the product names and descriptions. For example, there is “Pearl of Wisdom- For smart girls...” “Lucky Lucky Lavender” for girls who want to be “pretty and prosperous,” and “Most Honorable Red- A warm red that commands respect” from the Japanese Collection. While

Confucius really did have a strong influence on several East Asian cultures, he is not known in popular culture as a serious philosopher. Rather, we know of him through the circulation of so-called “Confucius say” jokes that explicitly mock Asians’ supposed inability to speak English while more conspicuously gesturing at the naivety and absurdity of Eastern ways of thinking. “Confucius say” jokes are increasingly recognized as offensive and not terribly funny with our current American cultural taste for ironic and satirical humor, and general understanding that making fun of people’s accents is sophomoric and blatantly racist. But in OPI’s Hong Kong and Japan collections these racial jokes are referenced quite liberally because presumably, they are “so bad they’re good.” Confucius jokes are camp because they are not just humorous, they also satisfy two other defining conditions of camp – irony and theatricality.

Like “Confucius say” jokes, Charlie Chan references are revived out of a similar sort of ironic nostalgia. On TV and in film, Charlie Chan was a bumbling, subservient detective who dispensed wisdom with heavily accented speech in grammatically incorrect sentence fragments. Those fragments sound much like several of OPI’s product descriptions, such as “a berry delectable delicacy” and “that’s a kung pao wow.” Citing Americans’ affection for Charlie Chan, Rosina Lippi-Green (1997) argues that Americans “are uncomfortable with Asians unless they correspond to the stereotypes we have created for them” (p. 227). OPI’s imitating of the halting, accented speech of Charlie Chan and borrowing from “Confucius say” jokes reveals that those types of stereotypes that still exist. Contemporary expectations of “political correctness” have discouraged people from talking about race, ushering in an era where we simply pretend not to see it at all. But OPI offers up relief from those restricting social expectations by presenting racial jokes in a campy, ironic way. References to “Confucius say” jokes and imitations of Charlie Chan’s speech are presented as though to say, *it’s awful to imitate old TV characters that*

unabashedly made fun of “Orientals” and to tell ‘Confucius say’ jokes, and that’s why we’re doing it ironically, in a campy way. This is not to be confused with critiquing this type of mocking racial humor. Rather, OPI uses camp as an *excuse* to attract attention by recirculating old, previously deemed offensive jokes made at the expense of the “Oriental.” Thomas Hess (1965), asserts that “camp exists in the smirk of the beholder” (p. 53) and since OPI’s camp humor takes jabs at the “Oriental,” this smirk is shared with a white audience. This turns camp completely upside down – rather than serve as a knowing wink among the oppressed, it serves as a vehicle for the dominant majority to exchange racist smirks in plain sight.

Miso Pretty Camps

BlueQ, based in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, one hundred forty miles west of Boston capitalizes on camp as an aesthetic, style, and brand of humor in selling otherwise mundane products. BlueQ products have been described by the media as cheeky, politically incorrect, bawdy, stylish, witty, hilariously absurd, and trendy silliness. In a 2005 interview for the Boston Herald, co-founder Seth Nash described his products as “silly, sardonic...they have intentionally bad humor” (Radsken, 2005, p. 24). Blue Q sells such products as “Total Bitch” chewing gum, “Dirty Girl” soap, the “Looking Good for Jesus” mirror compact, and “Instant Irish Accent” breath spray. At the height of its popularity, the Dirty Girl line of products alone made \$3 million per year. The Miso Pretty line of toiletries was introduced in 2004 in a follow up to its success. The Miso Pretty products, like OPI’s collections, have a very distinct camp appeal with their unique deployment of irony, aesthetics, theatricality, and humor. At the same time, they serve as an interesting contrast because their approach to camping the Oriental is different from that of OPI. While OPI mocks and parodies from the position of the dominant majority, Miso Pretty masquerades *as* the “Oriental.”

Irony

With a heavy dose of irony, Blue Q has created an entire line of toiletries that masquerade as export goods of unclear East Asian origin, though some of the products are marked as coming specifically from Tokyo. Most of the products are labeled “exotic” and “far away beauty,” while the real product information on the labels reveal that they are actually made in the USA (See Figure 3.7).



Figure 3.7 Miso Pretty masquerading as exported beauty products

To achieve this campy parody of Asian consumer products, “English” is used quite liberally. For example, the production description on Miso Pretty’s website for the hand and body cream reads, “bamboo oil extract and muru muru butter make for longtime soft skin.” The label for the hand and body cream reads, “long time soaking friend” while the shower gel’s label includes the phrase, “long time shower friend.” “Please to enjoy” and “special recipe” appear on several products (See Figures 3.8 and 3.9).



Figure 3.8 “Please to Enjoy”



Figure 3.9 “Special Recipe” and “Long Time Shower Friend”

“Engrish” is a term that refers jokingly to Asians’ failed attempts at English, particularly as seen on English language signage, advertising, and product packaging in or originating from Asia. The term Engrish is itself “mock Asian” as it pokes fun at the tendency of native speakers of Japanese to mix up Rs and Ls in their speech, but the Engrish is less about accent mockery as it is about finding amusement in reading the labels of Asian export products with copy that gets lost in translation. In fact, there is an entire website dedicated to sharing photo examples of Engrish in product labels and signs riddled with mechanical errors and nonsensical translations that read like poorly written imitations of American advertising copy (See Figure 3.10).



Figure 3.10 English.com

This is particularly troubling when considered as part of a long history of whites posing as the Oriental Other. Miso Pretty is comparable to yellowface enacted, for example, by Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in which he parodies a bumbling buck-toothed Japanese man. His representation, like Miso Pretty's, is demeaning and gestures at the bizarreness and incoherence of what comes from the Orient, but Miso Pretty uses ironic campy style as a cover for doing the same thing -- exploiting a privileged position to represent the other as foreign and inassimilable. In other words, Miso Pretty's campy style suggests to the consumer audience that what might normally be considered a rather insulting mockery of Asians using English, should instead be regarded ironically. Thus, they have a built-in mechanism for deflecting critique -- that which is *camped* is meant for ironic -- not serious -- consumption. Their camp humor infers that there is no need to call foul because the English was used as part of an ironic joke and not an insult. We are not laughing at innocent errors of non-native English speakers that can produce comedic results as seen on English.com. Rather we are laughing because Miso Pretty is posing

as the Oriental and we are laughing at its feeble and failed attempt at blending in. Thus, Miso Pretty's brand of camp enjoys a ready-made response to potential critics - "we are just imitating them imitating us."

Aestheticism

The primary aesthetic style of Miso Pretty's rather elaborate illustrations is described by its British designer, Fiona Hewitt, as being influenced by "communist-era propaganda" and the "colours and design-style of all things Chinese," things that inspired her after spending three years in Hong Kong⁸ (Figure 3.11). Her Orientalist appropriation of Chinese poster art forms an awkward union with camp humor in the construction of Miso Pretty's bizarre narrative and aesthetic style.



Figure 3.11 The design influence of "Communist-era propaganda" in Miso Pretty

The communist China propaganda posters are camp, as defined by Andrew Ross (1999), because they are objects whose power is spent. Like the mod appropriation of the British flag, and Victoriana for Sergeant Pepper, Chinese propaganda posters are camp because they, at least from a Western point of view, bear little meaning or power in the U.S. Or as Flinn (1999) asserts, "camp has always been fascinated with, and has fashioned itself on, the outmoded, the out of date, the artifact past its prime" (p. 55). Sontag (1964) would say these objects are camp because

⁸ From Hewitt's website <http://www.fionahewitt.com>

they are “démodé” (p. 31). Similarly, Jameson (1991) describes camp as an “imitation of dead styles.” But Hewitt adds post-modern flair to this démodé style of illustration by combining it with the aesthetics of contemporary Japanese anime characters, which are recognizable by their enormous sparkling eyes and wide array of bright hair colors. There are strikingly similar pink-haired characters on the peony-scented body mist, shower gel, and lotion, while wide-eyed orange- and red-haired female characters decorate the labels for the lip lacquer, lip balm, glitter ball and bath sake (See Figures 3.12, 3.13, and 3.14). Jameson describes this style of camp as “postmodern pastiche.” Miso Pretty is camp in part because it employs a mix of aesthetics styles, some old, some new, and also incorporates objects that, for its audience, wield no power but have a certain nostalgic aesthetic appeal.



Figure 3.12 Lip lacquer



Figure 3.13 Body mist



Figure 3.14 Glitter ball

Miso Pretty appears to be celebrating cultural diversity and perhaps demonstrating appreciation for non-Western aesthetic styles. This sort of campy stylistic chaos is interesting but, at the same time, troubling. As Flinn argues, camp mocks what is outmoded, but also who (p. 443). Andrew Ross (1999) echoes this notion, when he suggests that the “fun and pleasure of camp is enjoyed

at the expense of others.” It’s possible only through “exclusion and depreciation.” In other words, through what seems like a playful appropriation of a particular aesthetic is actually a *mockery of the people*. This becomes even more evident when considered along with the exaggerated performative characteristics of Miso Pretty that make it an unmistakably Orientalist camp object.

The random assortment of different Asian ethnicities represented on Miso Pretty’s products serves as an example of the type of aesthetic that makes the products camp. The bubble bath product is called bath sake, named for a Japanese spirit; and the image of a mountain on the cherry lip balm (Figure 3.15) looks unmistakably like Japan’s Mount Fuji. But the surroundings in an image of a woman slicing tropical fruit (See Figure 3.16) would place her in the Philippines or Hawaii; while many of the characters are illustrated wearing a traditional Chinese dress. The Asian script illustrated on most of the labels is also Chinese.



Figure 3.15 “Deluxe” and “Exotic” Cherry Lip Balm



Figure 3.16 Pineapple Lip Balm

This is part of a broader trend in pop culture representations of Asia and Asians. As Michael Omi (2000) observes, “This blurring within popular culture has given us supposedly Chinese characters who wear kimonos; it is also the reason why the fast-food restaurant McDonald’s can offer ‘Shanghai McNuggets’ with teriyaki sauce” (p. 532). In contemporary camp, artifice tends to manifest in its postmodern tossing together of ethnicities as though they were simply aesthetic markers, and not distinct cultural identities that carry with them varied and uneven histories of war, colonialism, immigration and other interactions with the West. Our existing familiarity with the flattening of Asian identities into some vague notion of Orientalness makes Miso Pretty fairly standard in its application of Orientalist camp.

These representations are appealing in part because they are quite in line with dominant conventions of style, which are dictated by a postmodern camp aesthetic; one that borrows from different cultures and eras in history, with little regard for the histories of oppression that they might come with. This casual conflating of Asian ethnicities and geographies also has the tendency to perpetuate the Orientalist fiction that the “Orient” and its inhabitants are homogenous and/or interchangeable; in contrast to those who make up the comparatively complex, diverse and highly differentiated West. Miso Pretty’s chaotic and arbitrary mixing of

ethnicities simultaneously conflates and flattens and is, for this reason, a symbolic act of violence against Asian Americans.

Theatricality

Theatricality is also central to camp. Miso Pretty performs, or masquerades, for a hypothetical audience that ironically longs for the classic lotus blossom representation of Asian women. Many of the packages feature illustrations of young Asian women bathing or swimming, such as on the packages of the Beauty Bar (Figure 3.18) and Body Wash (Figure 3.19), or cavorting about in tight dresses while smiling seductively, such as on the package for the Lip Lacquer (Figure 3.20).



Figure 3.17 Shower Gel



Figure 3.18 Beauty Bar



Figure 3.19 Body Wash



Figure 3.20 Lip Lacquer

Their dated, exoticized and hyper-feminine representations of Asian women make them camp, as do the excesses of the cliché, eager-to-please and servile Oriental woman produced in the copy on the cherry lip balm, which reads (in false broken English): “Please to enjoy” and “thank you.” These are words of excessive gratitude that one never see on U.S.-made that demonstrate Miso Pretty’s deployment of *ironic* nostalgia, defined by Flinn (1999) as “unlike more conventional forms of nostalgia, which mandate a much more earnest consumption of texts” (p. 56).

The campy theatrics manifest also in several illustrations on Miso Pretty products that feature female characters engaged in various types of low technology labor. The pineapple-scented lipbalm with “fresh cut flavor” (Figure 3.16), for example, depicts a woman cutting pineapple by hand, while the body wash with “pearl powder” (Figure 3.19) features a woman freediving to collect pearls. Several other products show women manually feeding flowers,

fruits, and pearls into hand-cranked machines (Figures 3.21, 3.24 and 3.25) as part of the supposed manufacturing process. Feminine foreign labor is also depicted on the package for the Miso Pretty body cream and lip lacquer – a woman with boxes stacked atop her scooter is shown alongside text that reads “delivered fast subtle flavour included no extra charge,” a rather shameless reference to the image of the Oriental as the low wage Chinese food delivery service worker (Figure 3.22).



Figure 3.21 Cherry Lip Balm



Figure 3.22 “Delivered Fast”



Figure 3.23 “Fresh from the Factory”

These scenes are campy and theatrical because they read as so impossibly absurd. Each label depicts a scene that tells a funny fictional story, but they contain a troubling subtext that is not terribly easy to tease out *because* of the elaborateness of its absurdity. It is also difficult to read these as intended for anything other than ironic consumption, but ironically presented or not, those depictions reproduce colonial fantasies, cast a subordinating gaze upon Asian women and reinscribe the notion that while they can take up a variety of roles, those roles are restricted to the enthusiastic provision of service and labor, particularly for Western consumers.

Humor

The campy humor in Miso Pretty running camp joke is that the toiletries are manufactured and shipped from overseas. Many of them are, literally, marked “overseas delivery” above an illustration of an airplane and a post office address in Tokyo (Figure 3.24).



Figure 3.24 “Overseas Delivery”

The campiness of the joke is reinforced by depictions of young women working in this supposedly foreign factory alongside anthropomorphized animals including birds, bears, rabbits, elephants, and squirrels, using primitive steam and manually operated machines to process the ingredients they are also shown harvesting (see Figures 3.24 and 3.25). It is by placing Asian women back in positions of subservient, menial labor to produce products for western consumers that “the glory days of American imperialism” are evoked.



Figure 3.25 Childish, Orientalist fantasy world depicted by Miso Pretty

Part of the irony in Miso Pretty's "fresh from the factory" for "overseas delivery" joke is that Tokyo is known, not for its factory work, but for its pioneering high technology. This contradiction keeps Miso Pretty from being read as a critique of outsourced manufacturing and instead simply trivializes that labor, while infantilizing the women who perform it (J. H. Park, Gabbadon, Nadine G. & Chernin, Ariel R., 2006). As Omi and Wintant (2009) have observed, racial jokes, when told across color lines like this, "will, despite its 'purely' humorous intent, serve to reinforce stereotypes and rationalize the existing relations of racial inequality" (p. 121). Miso Pretty is, at its core, a case of whites telling jokes about foreign female labor but it uses campy ironic humor in order to deflect potential accusations that they are representing these subjects in a manner that is denigrating.

Conclusion

Camp is recognizable by its irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor, and these characteristics are found in abundance in these two cases in which camp meets contemporary, commodified Orientalism. OPI's Hong Kong, Japan, and India Color Collections and Blue Q's Miso Pretty line of novelty toiletries demonstrate the ways in which campy Orientalism satisfies contemporary tastes for ironic humor, and postmodern tendencies to blindly reappropriate ethnic cultures. The products are appealing also because they feel unconventional and disruptive in their aesthetic and discursive style with their bizarre illustrations, impractical labeling, and absurd narratives, but this is not to be mistaken for critique or contestation.

OPI and Miso Pretty deploy camp to make their products seductive and appealing, which actually disguises assaults on the Oriental. Ironic nostalgia is used as a cover for the revival of images and jokes long ago considered racially offensive. The characteristically camp privileging

of aesthetic style over content allows problematic representations to be excused as merely dressing and suggest that these depictions are not to be consumed seriously or literally. The theatricality, exaggeration, and artifice that comprise camp, thus, serve as alibis for the outrageous and Orientalist juxtapositions of ethnic signifiers that actually flatten and symbolically subjugate the Oriental. When camp humor meets commodity Orientalism, the complex and multi-layered spectacle that results demands particularly careful and critical consideration.

Chapter Four

Containing Protest: Post-race and the Abercrombie & Fitch Debacle

“Who cares what you think? We don't market to slant-eyed seaweed eating cocksucking gooks anyway, so it doesn't matter to us what you think.”

- Anonymous comment posted to the Boycott Abercrombie & Fitch petition online, 2002

In 2002, Abercrombie and Fitch (A&F) introduced a line of graphic t-shirts emblazoned with grotesque Asian caricatures reminiscent of racist popular culture images of the Chinese that circulated throughout the late-1800s gold rush era. One of the shirts, for example, features an illustration of two Chinese men with buck teeth, slanted eyes, and conical rice paddy hats and text that reads “Wong Brothers Laundry Service. Two Wongs can make it white” (See Figure 4.1)



Figure 4.1 Abercrombie & Fitch shirts that sparked a nation-wide protest

Another shirt featuring a similar slanted-eyed, conical hat-wearing character reads “Wok-n-Bowl Chinese Food and Bowling.” The Pizza Dojo shirt says “eat in or wok out,” in a typeface known as “Chinese take out,” commonly used as shorthand to signal “Oriental” and there is one that features the illustration of another character in a conical hat, this time pulling a rickshaw. These shirts outraged the Asian American community and many concerned Asian American college students and citizens groups campaigned successfully to have the shirts recalled the week of April 20, 2002⁹. In fact, Jeff Chang (2002) named it one of Asian America’s five most successful online protests. Their success relied on a multi-pronged protest strategy that included staging protests outside stores, calling upon mainstream media to cover the events to increase the campaign’s visibility, and circulating an online petition¹⁰.

Several scholars have examined some facet of the campaign. Vincent Pham and Kent Ono (2008) shared their rhetorical reading of a “protest” shirt that one clever protestor designed during the campaign, which read “Artful Bigotry & Kitsch.” Lisa Nakamura (2008) has commented on how the online petition functioned as a “highly ambivalent responses to issues around the visual culture of race in the U.S.” in her study of racialized bodies online (p. 186).

What I am interested in is the “counter-protest” that erupted on the campaign petition, which suggested to me that ambivalence might be an understatement. 3,681 of the 8,700 digital signatures posted to the petition were accompanied by a comment, (not required in order for people to “sign” the petition) and 227 of those comments communicated the authors’ sometimes angry reactions to the campaign. This makes up only 6% of the comments posted to the petition, and an even smaller proportion of the total signature count. But, I found the images, taunts, name-calling and racist epithets so highly disturbing and in such sharp contradiction to

⁹ (“Controversial Abercrombie shirts auctioned online,” 2002)

¹⁰ <http://www.petitiononline.com/BCAF/petition.html>

contemporary understandings of America as a “post-race” society, that I decided they required a closer inspection.

As Ralina Joseph (2009) observes, we have entered a “new millennium representational landscape overdetermined by race and gender and at the same time in denial of its overdetermined nature” (p. 238). She asserts, “in its very denial of the uses of ‘race,’ post-raciality remains embroiled in precisely what it claims not to be... ‘post-race’ is an ideology that cannot escape racialization” (p. 239). The highly racialized, often racist, comments posted to the Boycott Abercrombie & Fitch petition embody this contradiction. Post-race ideology, in many ways, helps to explain how Abercrombie’s creative teams might have thought this line of merchandise would appeal to Asian American consumers. Within a post-race framework that supposes the absence of racism, racist jokes become “just jokes.” But the angry and racist comments that peppered the campaign petition indicate quite clearly that we are in no such position. In fact, it seems there is a racist rage boiling just below the surface veiled by this post-race ideology.

In her study of the hateful violent emails she received after publicly protesting David Horowitz for listing her among the “101 most dangerous” intellectuals in the United States in his book *The Professors* (Horowitz, 2006), Dana Cloud (2009) argues convincingly that hate mail is not just a “random expression of deviant individuals,” and it “originates not in the minds of ordinary people but rather in the political conflicts among contending groups in society” (p. 459).

Likewise, the petition affords the opportunity to get at the inner thoughts and feelings people might censor in everyday conversation, what John L. Jackson (2008) calls “decardio racism,” so that we may begin to construct a picture of the tensions between Asian Americans

and whites who feel the need to maintain America's threatened whiteness. The antagonistic and often racist comments left on the petition are particularly raw because they are almost always posted anonymously, and also because there is a performance aspect to their action. Their comments are available to anyone who clicks "view signatures," so the author's intention may be not only to convey their disgust to the administrator of the petition, but to share that message with all those who come across the website and are curious enough to browse through the petition. There was a waiting audience for what they had to say about the campaign, its supporters, or Asian Americans in general, and they could express themselves freely without revealing their identities.

Pushing post-race

The 2000s marked a decade in which feel good sentiments about America moving beyond racial discrimination circulated through popular discourse as rampantly as anti-affirmative bills were passed¹¹. The passing of such legislations relied on proclamations that proverbial playing field has been leveled. Their proponents insisted that programs designed to make up for the material consequences of racial discrimination suffered over generations could simply be discontinued. There are no data to suggest that such parity has been reached in terms of educational achievement, career placement, salary and so forth, even for Asian Americans, often held up as model minorities who "prove" that race is no longer an obstacle to success¹². There is also no shortage of explicitly racist acts being committed against people of color, even by high profile leaders in the community. As recently as 1992, a psychiatrist named Frederick

¹¹ Nearly 70 anti-affirmative action bills and resolutions were introduced across the nation in the three years leading up to 2000. <http://aad.english.ucsb.edu/docs/06-20-05AFCreport.htm>

¹² In fact, according to Kim (2010) "native-born Asian American men have an 8 percent earnings disadvantage relative to measurably comparable white men" (p. 954)

Goodwin, who compared black youth to monkeys, resigned from his job but was later hired by the National Institute of Mental Health. The Wall Street Journal defended him, while accusing the “speech police” for going after him for without just cause (Jackson Jr, 2008).

Despite the proven inequalities that still plague people of color, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, in May 2010, signed into law a bill that bans the teaching of ethnic studies at the K-12 level in the Tucson Unified School District. Ethnic studies courses focused on the contributions and influence of Black, Mexican American and Native American groups throughout history and in U.S. literature (Lewin, 2010). This took place despite serious concerns issued in a statement by six United Nations human right experts, who noted that that all people have a right to learn about their own cultural and linguistic heritage¹³. Tom Horne, the state’s former Secretary of Education, championed the bill and in his “Open Letter to the Citizens of Tucson”¹⁴ posted on the website of the state’s Department of Education, he performs a well-rehearsed routine of rhetorical gymnastics as he claims that ethnic studies is a form of “destructive ethnic chauvinism” and is, in fact, oppressive for whites. Citing Martin Luther King Jr., he argues that “schools should teach the students to judge literature by its content and not by the race or gender of the author,” inferring (and not subtly) that the literature of white writers is superior in content. Horne insists that Ethnic Studies is “vehemently” anti-Western and anti-United States because it does not reflect his belief that “students should be taught that this is the land of opportunity, and that if they work hard they can achieve their goals.” Horne’s belief reflects the flawed “bootstrap” model of achievement, built upon a myth of meritocracy – that we succeed equally based on merit alone when we clearly do not.

The blind insistence on our society’s post-raciality, even with evidence of the contrary,

¹³ <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/teachers/in-arizona-bad-ethnic-studies.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.ade.state.az.us/administration/superintendent/AnOpenLettertoCitizensofTucson.pdf>

operates in popular culture and mainstream media as well. Especially with the election of Barack Obama, our first Black president, in 2008, and the steadily (but slowly) increasing number of people of color appearing in popular media, the argument that we are post-race seems more easily substantiated. In fact, it is within post-race ideology that our culture industries, retailers like Abercrombie & Fitch, can dabble in racist “joking.” Whereas the 1990s were marked by “political correctness,” the 2000s have demanded that people of color be able to “take a joke” since race is decidedly apolitical, merely aesthetic, and detached from histories of racial violence, discrimination and exclusion.

A number of theorists have brought to light the ways in which racism still circulates, only disguised through racially coded messages that make no explicit mention of race. Colorblind racism, symbolic racism, polite racism, neoracism, and post-civil rights racism are some of the names given to their theories. (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Guinier & Torres, 2002; Jackson Jr, 2008; Joseph, 2009; Sears & Henry, 2003), and while they are significant in their contribution to the understanding of racial discourses, they tend to focus on black-white relations. This makes them a poor fit for considering the unique social, political, and historical trajectories of Asian Americans’ lived experience (Wu, 2002). Rita Chaudhry Sethi (1994) asserts that insistence on binary constructions of race leaves Asian Americans out of the picture altogether:

Our cultural, linguistic, religious, national, and color differences (...) exist on the periphery of offensiveness. The racial insults we suffer are usually trivialized; our reactions dismissed as hypersensitivity or regarded as a source of amusement (p. 235).

Robert S. Chang (1993) argues that scholarship can complete the picture only by recognizing that Asian Americans are “differently situated historically with respect to other disempowered groups” (p. 1249). The 227 comments posted to the Boycott Abercrombie & Fitch petition

presented themselves as an obvious starting point for analyzing common tropes or themes that emerge when people talk about Asian Americans, particularly those of us who fall out of line and perform an act of public grievance by protesting offensive merchandise. Often these comments were posted anonymously or with a clearly phony name (such as “white girl that hates Asians” or “Eggfu Young”) as the online petition did not check the credentials of those who posted a signature. People are quite pointed, and sometimes outright hostile, when posting comments online, especially when they do so anonymously¹⁵. Hostile anonymous comments on the Internet are often dismissed as the work of Internet trolls, whose primary intent is to provoke anger and elicit an emotional response for their own entertainment (Shachaf & Hara, 2010). I argue that this is exactly what makes anonymous Internet comments, on petitions, blogs, news articles and so forth, *particularly* interesting. The racism hidden away in hearts and minds, or what Jackson (2008) calls “de cardio racism,” is exposed for all to see.

There are a number of themes that I observed in my analysis of the petition comments posted by people angered by the campaign to boycott Abercrombie & Fitch. I named these themes using phrases taken directly from those comments: (1) Stop being babies and get a sense of humor (2) America has freedom of speech (3) You owe us (4) Go home (5) Fuck you slant-eyed gook. The first theme captures the many petition comments that infantilize Asian Americans and/or suggest that the problem is not the disturbing graphic and textual representation on the shirts, but rather a cultural defect that prevents us from to appreciating humor. The idea of “freedom of speech” is the defining characteristic that marks the comments

¹⁵ Julie Zhuo (Zhuo, 2010) explains, “Trolling, defined as the act of posting inflammatory, derogatory or provocative messages in public forums, is a problem as old as the Internet itself, although its roots go much farther back. Even in the fourth century B.C., Plato touched upon the subject of anonymity and morality in his parable of the ring of Gyges.” (p. 31).

discussed in the second section. The authors of many of these comments exclaimed that Asian American campaigners are issuing their complaints on American soil at an American corporation, and Abercrombie's right to speak freely must be protected. The name of the third theme, "you owe us," refers to the belief harbored by some whites that Asian Americans have taken more than their fair share of space and resources in America. Reverse discrimination is one of the accusations discussed here but this section also explores the commenters' misguided understandings of American colonial history and U.S. military action in Asia. A number of the posts instruct the reader to "go home," rehashing the persistent trope of the Oriental as alien, or the "foreigner-within" (Lowe, 1996). The comments that are most at odds with claims of our post-raciality are explicitly racist, and discussed in the section named for an insult that appeared *throughout* the petition comments, "Fuck you slant-eyed gook." The comments I analyze here are undeniably racialized, and also *race-specific*. Thus they reveal the sometimes contradictory narratives and ideologies that fix Asian Americans, and the complicated anxieties from which they emerged.

Stop being babies and get a sense of humor

Many of the petition comments infantilized Asian Americans by using the term "crybaby" (or some similar variation), or by referring to our whining, crying, needing a diaper change or needing to be coddled by "mommy." A sample of these include: "All you Asians need to pull your winey [sic] head out of you A\$\$!," "you idiots claim 'oh we're being oppressed in this free country bitch bitch bitch,'" and "Stop crying and have your mother change your diaper." The author of this comment "Honestly, it's a little cartoon character, stop being such babies." These paternalistic remarks echo of early colonial constructions of Asians as infantile, and not

fully developed as human beings compared to whites (Day, 2002), as well as weak, meek, and sensitive by comparison (S. M. Ma, 2000).

Similarly, a number of comments metaphorically “cut down” the Asian by tapping into characterizations of us as nit-picky, uptight, and humorless. Many diagnosed Asian Americans as having a decidedly stunted sense of humor while pointing out their own ability to “take a joke.” Asians, they claim, suffer from a collective inability to “lighten up,” such as in these comments:

“Get a life AND a sense of humor!”

“cant you people take a joke? get over it.”

“you guys are taking it too serious. Its funny”

“ABERCROMBIE WAS JUST TRYIN TO MAKE A JOKE ! ITS NO BIG DEAL!!!”

“You guys need to get over it and find your sense of humor. The messages on the T-shirts are hilarious!”

“[It’s] just humor. It made me laugh. So stop complaining.”

“Doesn't anybody have a sense of humor??...Come on you people, I'm sure your first impression was too laugh”

“I have a Jap friend. I make fun of him for being Japanese. He thinks it's funny. What's all of your problem? Didn't get enough rice today?”

It is interesting that the characteristics assigned to Asians in these petitions have truly stood the test of time. More than 125 years ago in the “John Chinaman” writings, Bret Harte wrote, “They seldom smile, and their laughter is of such an extraordinary and sardonic nature – so purely a mechanical spasm, quite independent of any mirthful attribute – that to this day I am doubtful

whether I ever saw a Chinaman laugh” (Harte, “John Chinaman” 14:220). Even earlier on in history, Marco Polo returned from his travels to the Cathay in 1275 to describe a “swarming bestial Mongol army that was mechanical” (Okihiro, 1994, p. 19). The frequency with which this occurred, as well as the ease with which commenters accessed the trope of the “humorless Oriental” reveals the extent to which Asian Americans are denied our humanity, we become constructed as robotic and less than human.

America is about freedom and equality

The freedom and equality afforded by America became a central theme in many of the petition comments, and there was no shortage of enthusiasm for the protection of these rights from the disruptive and humorless alien Asian. Equality was the often invoked as a condition of being American but was defined in negative terms. In other words, the authors of some comments did not discuss the equalities we enjoy, but rather the humiliation inflicted by the “equal opportunity offender.”

Freedom of speech also became a particularly common trope as many commenters defended Abercrombie & Fitch’s right to profit from whatever images and texts sold more merchandise. They also insinuated that freedom was something Asians had a hard time understanding (again reaffirming our cultural misfit and inadequacies.) The argument they made was that we all possess the freedom as consumers to decline a purchase and “walk away” from whatever we find bothersome or offensive but clearly failed. Our failure to embrace our freedom and just walk away reasserts the notion that Asian Americans are backward and unassimilable.

Equal opportunity is another mantra of post-race and it dictates that no one is entitled to special treatment. For example, a frequent trope is that everybody must then have “equal

opportunity at being the butt of a racist joke. One self-identified white male's comment exemplifies this belief:

You people are ridiculous!! [sic] Everything is always about being racist! I happen to be a white male, and if AF made a shirt to harrass my race the world would think that its funny and so would i!!! get over it and quick being so damn defensive!!”

It would make sense within the bounds of post-race ideology to equate jokes about whites to jokes about people of color, who have been historically subjugated by whites because post-race dictates that these jokes are detached from such histories of oppression and racist violence. One commenter presents a comparison of Asian Americans to other ethnic minorities to argue this very point, “Mexicans don't care about their car and liquor t-shirts, blacks don't care about their Fat Albert t-shirts, so I don't see why you should care about this.” Also “Yeah so I think it is really funny how you stupid asians are still bitching about this when there is a mexican derogatory shirt that says [sic] ‘Juan more for the road’ ...and you dont hear them causing any shit do you?” Sometimes other people who identified as ethnic minorities jumped in to claim their ability to laugh at ethnic jokes directed at them. For example, “I am a proud mexican, and I can recall enjoying the "Frito Bandito" adds when i was young.” This comment excuses the offensive depictions on the shirts by making an “equal opportunity” argument that echoes in a lot of post-race rhetoric – If everyone gets their turn at being the butt of a joke, it somehow nullifies or cancels out the offense. There is, in fact, no equality or equalizing accomplished this way, and thus E. San Juan ” (1992) calls for the “the hegemonic discourse of race in which peoples of color are produced and reproduced daily for exploitation and oppression under the banner of individualized freedom and pluralist, liberal democracy” (p. 96).

Unfortunately people who authored comments defending Abercrombie & Fitch mention this individualized freedom countless times. They accused protesters of even *discriminating* against Abercrombie & Fitch for restricting their ability to do business and engage in “free speech.” For example the author of one comment wrote, “I will CONTINUE to support them through this. I also believe in FREE speech, what America is based on,” while another orders the campaigners to “leave abercrombie alone, they have the right to create, sell, market, etc... everything and anything they want to, and it's their right as a us-registered [sic] corporation.” The preposterous reverse discrimination narrative of the rescued third-world victim turned opportunist and master manipulator of (white) American resources figures strongly in the petition comments. The charge of reverse discrimination reveals an American understanding of the Asian as inherently Other, while the American corporation is produced as something to be protected by the consumer citizen from exploitative and separate Asians.

Generic arguments about rights and freedoms were also tied to the consumer. The language of *consumer* freedom often appears in the comments, for example in this comment that reads:

If you don't like shit, don't buy it, or look at it. No one's forcing shit down your throats.
 if u dont like it then dont buy it...simple as that....there are tv shows that show offensive stuff and materials...do u watch it?? no u d son't...u either change the channel or turn the tv off....spend ur time on something else

In a similar vein, someone explains “I am a middle class white American that chooses not to buy their clothes because they are simply too expensive...If you don't like A&F, walk by the store, I'm sure they won't mind.” Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and Peter McLaren (2003) argue

that the contemporary political sphere is “modeled on the marketplace, and freedom amounts to the liberty of all vendors to display their different “cultural” goods” (p. 154). I would add that freedom is also defined here as consumers’ right to walk away and pay no attention, instead of disrupting Abercrombie’s business, and symbolically working against America.

These comments are misguided because often we cannot walk away. Controlling images and discourses permeate our lives online, through mass media, in our public and private spaces. But more importantly, couching this discussion in terms of “rights,” Sherene Razack argues, (1998) leaves no room for a discussion of histories of subordination. Rights thinking is based on the liberal notion that we are all individuals and each have maximum personal freedom, which means there are no marginalized people and no historical relations of power. The message that Asian Americans have a hard time taking advantage of our consumer freedoms also comes with a subtext, that we are out of step with American values and continue to prove our alien inassimilability.

Those who proclaimed Abercrombie & Fitch’s innocence based on equal opportunity and freedom of speech were often quick to offer a patronizing suggestion that campaigners direct their attention to “real” problems that are, according to them, worthy of protest. A commenter posted emphatically, “WHY DONT YOU GUYS FIND A REAL CAUSE TO WHINE ABOUT. THERE ARE SO MANY PROBLEMS IN THE WORLD TODAY AND ALL YOU GUYS CAN DO IS BITCH ABOUT A CARTOON CHARACATURE ON A T-SHIRT! ITS REALLY PATHETIC!!!!” Unsurprisingly many people took the opportunity to punctuate their message with a racist joke, for example, “Please you need find something a little more important to complain about, like the size of an asian guys [sic] penis.” The authors of some comments provided examples of what they believe to be “real issues” such as in the post that read, “why are

you making a deal about this? you want to fight for something? fight poverty. you aren't fighting racism by doing this” and another post that argued “With world hunger, Terrorism and the Aids pandemic (...) you people need to get a life.”

The so-called “real” issues – poverty, terrorism, world hunger, people starving in America, the lack of healthcare, the AIDS epidemic – were often articulated as problems of the world and of the nation that appear out of nowhere, disconnected from issues of race, nation, colonialism, and power. In actual fact, many of these issues *are* indeed linked to race but these connections are overlooked -- social and economic problems tend to disproportionately plague people of color and with greater severity. These narratives make it easy to forget that global inequalities in care, safety, public health and so on are tied to histories of European and American colonization and military action, unfair global trade practices and extremely lopsided distributions of wealth.

Complaints about “real issues” being overlooked by protestors concerned with allegedly trivial matters of representation fail to recognize the interdependence of race and representation and more observable examples of oppressions. The comments suggesting that representation is not a “racial” issue are blind to the fact that material and symbolic oppressions are intertwined. Problematic representations of race have material consequences and those who are privileged materially tend also to be those who control the representation of themselves and others. Echoing Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall argues that common sense understandings or ideologies are constituted *through representation*, and representation operates as a hegemonic maneuver that keep people from questioning inequalities including their own (Hall, 1981, 1986). Instead, the messages some people posted reflect their belief that rights and freedoms are about protecting the rights of American corporations, rights to enjoy the freedom to offend equally if it enables them

to make a profit, even if they exploit the images of already marginalized groups, whom they claim should simply exercise *their* right to look away.

You Owe America

The superiority of America in protecting its citizens' rights and freedoms is often deployed in contrast to other Asian countries' supposed lack of rights. William Petersen's article "Success Story, Japanese American Style," published in *New York Times Magazine* January 9, 1966, which marked the first appearance of the *model minority* in public discourse, attributes the success of Japanese Americans to a Japanese social system that thrives on authoritarianism, and even lacks a word for "civil rights." Similarly, James Fallows describes an Asia that is "tied down to a bureaucratized Confucian system will be overtaken by a more vital and imaginative 'west'" (David Palumbo-Liu, 2001, p. 224). In other words, Asia will always remain the subordinate and the qualities that make Asians successful are unsuitable in American society.

Asia also continues to be envisioned as primitive and in danger of economic collapse, yet slyly intent on taking over the world, "Fuck u asians, saying that asians are gonna dominate the world, yay dominating with toilets in the kitchen in the floor?" and, in this instance from a complicit self-identified Asian commenter, "we dont even have toilets in China till 2 years ago, we use to have holes in our floors, yea boycott that." One person taunts, "What are you Asian's [sic] gonna do trade rice for technology? NOT!" and another, "How in the fuck do you rule when your country dosen't [sic] have shit?" Orientalist notions about the backwardness of Asians and Asian nations are reinscribed in many of these sensational, misguided, and baseless comments. One person also observes that "Asia wont let any americans [sic] in, because there [sic]...over populated" while another one reports that, "U guys overflowed china by fuckin ur own family

memebers [sic]. I heard theres like 5 guys to one girl.” Even child abuse gets thrown into the mix as typical Chinese behavior: “BOYCOTT CHINA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! THEY ABUSE CHILDREN...” These posts recall of early “yellow peril” depictions of the Chinese in the American west as strange uncivilized hoards, from some barbaric place that restricts the rights of its inhabitants. These anxieties about a renewed yellow peril, perhaps in the face of news that China’s economy is growing exponentially while North Korea displays its agitation through military testing incidents, figure prominently in a number of posts.

The problematizing of Asia, Asians and Asian culture lends itself naturally to claims that America “saved” us from the perils and poverty of our own homelands, which is, first an erroneous understanding of Asian immigration history, and second, a very misguided interpretation of American imperialism and military action. One person, for example, observes that “Whats so funny is that America has the descentsy [sic] to let asians [sic] into America,” while another also emphasizes the American government’s altruism. “America was nice enough to let asians [sic] in our country.” In actuality, many Asian immigrants were not simply “let in” as a kind gesture. Rather, most influxes in immigration were the result of America’s need for low wage labor, such as during the coolie trade of the mid-1800s and for the construction of railroads by Chinese workers. America also actively recruited Japanese, Koreans and Filipinos for agricultural work, mining, and domestic service (Chan, 1991; Osumi, 1982). In other words, Asian immigrants do not owe a debt for entry, but the narrative of the great white savior appears repeatedly. In another example, the author insists that America gave them rights that they did not have in the past, “GET THE FUCK OVER IT IF IT WAS'NT [sic] FOR THIS COUNTRY YOU WOULD'NT [sic] HAVE ANY RIGHTS.”

Another commenter signs off with “DAMN COMMUNIST NATIONS,” a somewhat more

specific articulation of the problem from which s/he believes Asians are fleeing. Communism itself did not cause the perceived mass influx of Asian immigrants, rather it was the consequence of heavy handed military action in Southeast Asia, such as the dropping of one hundred thousand tons of bombs in Cambodia in 1969 to deny sanctuary to the Viet Cong. As Sucheng Chan (1991) explains:

American generosity is quite selective and is based on ideological grounds: The United States favors escapees from communism above all others...By accepting escapees from communism, the United States can perhaps finally prove that the generals, presidents, legislators, and citizens who supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam were right, after all (p. 164).

These comments paint America not as a colonial power or the direct cause of third-world political strife and poverty, but rather a rescuer that altruistically offers international aid and intervention to undeserving Asians, and for this we owe a significant debt. Gary Okihiro (1994) reminds us:

Asians, it must be remembered, did not come to America; Americans went to Asia.
Asians, it must be remembered, did not come to take the wealth of the America;
Americans went to take the wealth of Asia. Asians, it must be remembered, did not come to conquer and colonize America; Americans went to conquer and colonize Asia (p. 28-29).

Once Asians cross borders into America, the problem becomes the taking of resources from (white) Americans and demanding changes for our own benefit. This narrative is constructed through such comments as, “the Asians who come to our country and then expect

Americans to cowtow to them need to get a life” and “they come over her [sic] to our country, live off of our people, and try to change the U.S. Citizens.” These comments suggest a zero-sum game in which resources are limited and Asians are demanding to take more than their share. But in fact, many Southeast Asian Americans who entered as refugees, products of American military actions, are still *underrepresented* in American universities, living in below the poverty line and in great need of public assistance that tends to be denied as we define our times as post-race. What might be the most troubling aspect of these comments, though, is that there is also no room allowed in this narrative they construct for the possibility that Asian immigrants might actually become naturalized U.S. citizens themselves. The fact that the integration of yellow bodies into American society still creates such a stir places the claim of our post-raciality on very shaky footing.

The idea that Asian Americans have gained too much often leads to the argument that Asians have gained so much that, in fact, whites are the ones who are losing out. Charges of reverse discrimination run rampant in this petition. Some of the comments note that whites have to endure equally offensive racist name calling, for example, “WHITE PPL GET PICKED ON TOO! DO U F*****N THINK WE LIKE TO BE CALLED ‘CRACKERS’!~!’?!?! JEEZ! YOU DAMN PPL NEED TO GET A LIFE!!!” One comment accuses the campaigners of being the racists, “I HAVE SEEN MANY OF YOU WRITE THINGS ABOUT WHITE ‘UPPERCLASSMEN’, CALLING THEM ‘CORN FED WHITE BOYS’ AND ‘WHITE DEVILS’. WELL GUESS WHAT, YA’LL ARE JUST A BUNCH OF RACIST ASSHOLES TOO, YOU’RE JUST RACIST AGAINST WHITE PEOPLE.” These comments are demonstrative of what Michael Omi (1996) observes is a crisis of white identity caused by the post-civil rights racializing of whites. Some whites are clearly uncomfortable with losing the

privilege of being the “transparent” race, and having their whiteness and/or its associated privileges called out provokes anger. This new racializing of whiteness, however, also enables whites to claim that their race is actually a handicap, especially as the proportion of ethnic minorities continues to grow. One commenter shares “I had a friend who tried getting a job at a chinese restaurant and wasnt given the job because he was white. boo hoo , should i go file a lawsuit now?” The false equivalence of supposed discrimination based on race for whites and anti-Asian discrimination relies on the belief that racism is about individual acts, which ignores the fact that “overcoming” racism requires the “shaking up [of] the power structures that constitute the context of racism” (Davis, 1996, p. 42). Asian Americans are especially prone to accusations of reverse discrimination because of our standing as the model minority. As Sethi (1994) explains, whites deny Asian Americans the right to speak out about racism because it “tarnishes their image of Asians as ‘model’ minorities” (p. 236), while other people of color reject our claims of anti-Asian racism because they believe that *they alone* endure real racism. To other people of color, we are regarded as the valorized “honorary whites” (Tuan, 1998, 1999) even though we do not actually enjoy the privileges of whiteness.

Go home

Carol Schmid (2000), in her study of the English-only movement in the United States, links increased immigration with fervor for Americanization, which can clearly be read in this contemptuous comment that celebrates the “red, white and blue” in the face of the Asian: “THREE CHEERS FOR THE RED WHITE AND BLUE *ALL THESE FIREWORKS FLY ALL OVER THE PLACE WOOT WOOT BOMBDIGGITY WOOT WOOT *DANCES TO DANCE, DANCE*” Many comments continue to suggest that to be American is to be white. Frank Wu reminds us that, “in race matters, words matter too. Asian Americans have been

excluded by the very terms used to conceptualize race. People speak of ‘American’ as if it means ‘white’ and ‘minority’ as if it means ‘black.’” (p. 20). There is little acknowledgement that Asian Americans exist at all. Divisive language, such as “they,” “them,” or “you,” that excludes Asian Americans appeared frequently on the petition. “We” and “us,” is used to refer to (non-Asian) Americans, delineating quite clearly who is, and who is not American. For example, “go back to hong kong” and, with exaggerated exasperation, “PLEASE STOP THIS. YOU ARE PITIFUL. NOBODY CARES ABOUT YOUR CAUSE. IN AMERICA, THERE IS SOMETHING CALLED FREEDOM OF SPEECH. HERE, WE ARE ALLOWED TO SAY AND WRITE WHAT WE FEEL.” The second half of the comment is quite patronizing, as s/he also maps the “cause” to Asian Americans, suggesting that whites have no reason to take an interest in race. Only Asians who are too alien to understand the concept of “freedom,” they suggest, would bother to protest something so “pitiful.”

This comment, “just wanted u to note that most of the names on this petition are asian names and they live in AMERICA and ABERCROMBIE is an AMERICAN clothing line not asian,” operates in much the same way. It points out that supporters of the campaign are mostly Asian (as s/he deduces from the names of the signatories) and that the retailer is American and “not Asian.” Therefore Abercrombie is for *white* Americans, not Asian Americans. The author of one comment describes the campaign as about being “worried about Asia,” even though the retailer is American and the petition was circulated, for the most part, throughout the United States. There is nothing about the campaign that has anything to do with Asia but s/he posts, “if your [sic] so worried about Asia then take your ASS back over there.” Lisa Lowe (1996) names the immigrant Asian as the site upon which the United States projects its anxieties about threats to the coherence of (white) national identity which “has been constructed in opposition to Asians

and Asian Americans—who are categorized as ‘foreigners’, in contrast to ‘citizens’” (Aoki, 1996; Gotanda, 1985, 1992). It is not just the immigrant Asian, but also naturalized Asian American, who continues to be cast as non-citizen by virtue of our race (and not just the result of conflation).

Many comments that direct the reader to “go home” tie Asian Americans to a homeland that is not ours. One such comment reads, “why do asians complain about these shirts when we are in AMERICA not in japan or wherever u whinning [sic] bitches are from.” There is no going “back” for Asian Americans who were born in the United States, and have never been to the land of their ancestors in the first place. One comment exclaims, “IF YOU DON'T LIKE THIS, THEN GO BACK TO CHINA” while another does this while continuing to lecture on the topic of freedom, “well if its [sic] a free country, then anyone is entitled to thier [sic] opinions and can do whatever the fuck they want so you should respect that, or move your happy asses the fuck back across the sea.” We are told to respect expectations of real Americans for freedom, while we enjoy our time as guests in their country as we are clearly not a part of the fabric that makes up America. “Go home” is a familiar taunt for Asian Americans, and it is rooted in a long history of exclusion by force and at the hands of the state, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to name just one. In contrast, African Americans, the typical subjects in contemporary race scholarship, are rarely constructed as foreigners to America whose access should be restricted or excluded to prevent “invasion.” Kim’s (1999) theory of racial triangulation helps to illuminate the differences in constructions of Asian Americans vis-à-vis blacks. She proposes that opinion leaders and elites partake in a public discourses that establish “racial positions.” While Asian Americans tend to valorized as superior relative to blacks. Asian Americans tend to be constructed as unassimilable and foreign, while African Americans are granted insider status.

These discourses need to be understood as part of an ongoing narrative that is tied to a history of violent resistance to Asians calling America home.

In this comment, the author extends the offer of inclusion, albeit with a heavy dose of exasperation and sarcasm, “You are in America, you are an AMERICAN, nothing more. Saying you are something else when you LIVE in America is ridiculous. If an ‘Asian-Pacific-American’ visits Japan, who are they when they are in that country? An American or an Pacific - Asian-Pacific-American? See what I'm getting at?” But by the end of her post she reverts to “go home” rhetoric, “Give it up and live with one label, American, or get out.” S/he contests the decision of Asian Americans to self-identify as anything other than just American, a universal raceless subject central to post-race ideology. This of course, overlooks the fact that, no matter how hard Asian Americans try to “act” and identify as American, it is non-Asians who fail to recognize us as true Americans (Tuan, 1998). Gina Marchetti (1993) has also recognized this contradiction in the American psyche “between the liberal ideology of melting pot and the conservative insistence on a homogenous white Anglo-Saxon American identity” (p. 5). Exclusionist rhetoric specifically directed at Asians and Americans continues to persist even into the 2000s, and the obvious ease with which people access the trope of “going home” in their petition posts suggest that we had never really been included.

Fuck you slant-eyed gook

Wu (2002) calls it “compassion fatigue,” when white Americans tire of hearing about the problems of ethnic minorities, but “fatigue” would not begin to describe the deep anger and hostility directed at the campaigners, and Asians/Asian Americans in general. Some expressed their antipathy quite directly with comments “asians can go to hell” and “YEAH!!! I hate u asain

types.” In many others, however, explicit name-calling and the use of ethnic slurs amplified and often racialized the message, for example, “Stop crying you little pussies,” “go back to being smart, make some nintendos or go sit in a rice paddie for all I care,” “two wongs can make it white you slant eye gook.” These shockingly offensive -- comments that Kristen Myers (2003) calls “race talk” -- are dehumanizing and demeaning and serve the purpose of constructing whites as a unified and superior group. It is interesting to note the similarity in tone and language between these comments and a line in *Ah Sin* (1877) over a hundred years ago. In it, Mark Twain and Bret Harte describe the growing California Chinese population as a “slant eyed son of a yellow jaunders...you jabbering idiot,...you moral cancer, you unsolvable political problem” (Moy, 1992, p. 259).

Valerie Scatamburlo (1998) notes that demonizing and dehumanizing is a strategy that Umberto Eco (1995), in fact, equates with the early stages of fascism. It is also very reminiscent of late 19th century discourse about the Chinese as demonstrated in a speech by Chairman John F. Miller of the committee on the Chinese:

Were the Chinese to amalgamate at all with our people, it would be the lowest, most vile and degraded of our race, and the result of that amalgamation would be a hybrid of the most despicable, a mongrel of the most detestable that has ever afflicted the earth.

(Osumi, 1982, p. 6)

The focus on physical differences reinscribes the Asian as a lesser species, subordinate to whites, was a tendency common in Chairman Miller’s era, but one that also appears frequently in the Boycott Abercrombie petition. The author of this comment demonstrates Daniel Bar-tal’s concept of “delegitimization” by way of “trait characterization” as she points out the defects of the Asian body compared to the beauty of her own unmistakably white body, “yall are butt ugly

with slanty funny eyes...face it. I'm pretty- 5 foot 6, 105 lbs, naturally blonde, tan, blue blue eyes, not slanted eyes, D boobs.” Thus framing the Oriental “by foil” as unattractive, and of inferior shape, proportions, and color (Cloud, 2009). She continues, “- and I have a 4.1 GPA in college and a life!” demarcating herself as also superior by virtue of her intelligence *and* social life. These dehumanizing constructions of the Asian Other are throwbacks to earlier racisms based on the common belief that Asians were an inferior species, and hardly consistent with post-race, colorblind frameworks that suggest we have reached a point in which we do not “see race.”

Anger and hostility is also expressed through a number of comments that use metaphors that suggest war, conflict, or violence. This chilling comment boasts about European colonization and the rightful ownership and control of America by whites: “End Racism Now- send 'em all back to their homelands. We colonized this continent: it is ours.” This brazen statement quite explicitly claims America for whites for their successful conquest of those colored bodies that were there before them, and also denies the existence of Asians who are American by birthright. Any argument that foregrounds European colonization and, if even jokingly, suggests that colored bodies pollute the whiteness of America and need to be removed undeniably contradicts post-racial claims that America sees no color.

War and conflict with the Asian as enemy (“the enemy within” as articulated by Lisa Lowe (1996)) is invoked in an alarmingly significant number of comments that use the term “gook,” a racial epithet used during the Vietnam War to refer to the Vietnamese, whether they were enemy or ally (R. G. Lee, 1999b). For example,” “FUCK YOU FUCKING GOOKS GO SMOKE FUCKNIG COCKS GO WORK IN YOUR SWEATSHOPS” and “Who cares what you think? We don't market to slant-eyed seaweed eating cocksucking gooks anyway.” In addition to

the insult of using a term that assigned people to the category of enemy by their race, these highly racialized comments rely on degrading references for their impact, in particular to demands or instructions related to “cocks” and “cocksucking,” which are clearly hypermasculine expressions of power over the “gook.”

The war metaphors emerging from the petition comments seem to come to a head with this comment that nonchalantly suggests the sexual taking of an Asian woman, just like soldiers at war after conquering the enemy: “I THINK I NEED TO GO BANG THAT ASIAN CHICK SOME MORE WITH MY WHITE DONG WITH MY A+F SHIRT ON.” He inflicts symbolic violence with this expression of sexual domination and violence, and makes sure to emphasize its racialized nature by specifying that he intends to penetrate with his “white dong.” He also emphasizes his wearing of an Abercrombie shirt as a particularly vile means of demonstrating his contempt and racial superiority. Ruth Seifert (1996) helps to clarify this connection in her observation that in many societies “woman represents the symbolic system of a group, the construction of the community being produced and made visible in her person, body, and life,” which means “the rape of women of a community, culture, or nation can be regarded -- and is so regarded -- as a symbolic rape of the body of that community” (p. 39). The violent hostility expressed in a number of the petition comments reveal a climate of hate, and not a liberal post-race utopia in which nobody is interested in engaging in conversations about race, and it is inconsequential anyways.

Conclusion

While Asian Americans typically suffer from what David Palumbio-Liu (1999) calls “benign neglect” in the media, this petition suddenly turned Asian American protesters into

hypervisible and audible threats to an existing social order that also tends to hide in plain sight, shrouded by post-race rhetoric. Ironically, the reaction from some consumers was not only intensely hostile, but also high racialized. The set of comments I have categorized under the heading “stop being babies and get a sense of humor” infantilize Asian Americans, representing us as a group prone to whining and complaining. This stunting or belittling of Asian Americans symbolically restricts us to subordinate positions, below and, perhaps dependant on, those who *can* function as fully developed beings. This reeks of colonial discourses around “ethnics” and our inability to sustain self-governance, discourses that still linger in the reporting of the January 2011 protests in Egypt calling for the resignation of their president, Muhammad Hosni Sayyid *Mubarak*. Asian Americans are further denied our wholeness and agency as human beings in comments that reference our inescapable robotic tendencies. Many of these comments suggest that we are not only lacking in emotion and stunted in our appreciation for humor, but we are culturally, or perhaps racially, incapable.

Our inability to be funny or “take a joke” becomes a trope used to point out the incompatibility of the Oriental in America. In other words the nation is better off uncontaminated by Asians, who are also unsuitable for American citizenship because we fail to appreciate “freedom” and “equality.” In many instances, commenters instruct the reader to take note of these core American values. They cite our annoyance with a retailer that operates in a free country, in which they can exercise free speech, and offend all colors of people equally, as indication that we do not actually understand what freedom entails. Freedom was articulated within a consumerist framework. They reminded us that the real problem is our refusal to exercise our *own* freedom to “walk away” from offensive merchandise.

Evidence of our inassimilability even in post-race America continues with constructions of “Asia” as an undifferentiated mass of people in some strange, crowded, and poverty-stricken place. In comments that mention America’s rescuing of Asian Americans or their extending of freedoms (that evidently go unappreciated) to us, many suggest that we, in some sense, owe America. This absurd distortion of what is actually a history of colonialism, labor exploitation, and violent military intervention demonstrates Chela Sandoval’s (2000) notion of “privation of history” (p. 119). When histories are forgotten or grossly misunderstood we can begin to generate myths that enable narratives such as post-race to make sense.

However, post-race becomes difficult to justify when explicitly racist sentiments that are targeted at Asian Americans continue to circulate public discourse, and in a way that is frighteningly consistent and frequent. The message to “go home” rang throughout the collection of comments criticizing the campaign and its supporters, indicating that the exclusion of Asian Americans throughout history is still stored within our collective memories. There are other instances in which the commenters take delight in drawing from events in our past that were particularly violent or oppressive, such as in their revival of the wartime term, “gook.” This dismissive, dehumanizing term is used to assert power over the Asian and put us in our place. Another comment even shares the commenter’s vision of his symbolic rape of Asia, punctuated by his wearing of the racist Abercrombie shirt during the act. These are violent and disturbing discourses that demonstrate once again, that the notion that we have entered the era of post-race is deeply flawed. What needs to be brought into focus now is how to infiltrate the systems of myths circulated in public discourse. These myths continue reinscribe “yellow peril” understandings of Asian Americans as problematic, foreign, and less than fully human. Sadly, the tools to properly recognize and articulate these problems in representation are taught in

ethnic studies classes. And those classes are in jeopardy across many states because assertive defenders of “equality” deem them unnecessary, which proves that post-race is not just a problem of ideology. It is an ideology that manifests real life consequences.

Chapter Five

In Defense of Whitewashing:

The Case of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

“I could have cast anybody I wanted to. You're talking to one of the only Asian filmmakers in the world who has complete control. “

– M. Night Shyamalan Quoted in *TIME Magazine*

In 2008, Paramount Studios released a casting call for young actors to bring an animated Nickelodeon television series called *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (A:TLA) to life in a big budget live action film directed by M. Night Shyamalan. The original animated series, developed by Americans, Mike DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, reflected their keen interest in sharing nuanced elements of Asian philosophies and cultural practices. They noted:

We wanted to create a mythology that was based on Eastern culture, rather than Western culture. Although ‘*Avatar*’ isn’t based on a specific Asian myth, we were inspired by Asian mythology, as well as kung fu, yoga, and eastern philosophy. We were also inspired by anime in general.¹⁶

This is why many fans of the original cartoon series and Asian American moviegoers eager to see a film that featured a cast of Asian American actors were shocked and disappointed by a casting call that read “Caucasians, or other ethnicity.” Many were able to read between the lines and recognize that the live action A:TLA was going to whitewash a unique cartoon series that was appealing primarily because it incorporated elements of religious beliefs, architecture, art, costuming, people, and cultural practices from Inuit and East Asian cultures.

¹⁶ <http://web.archive.org/web/20071217111256/http://www.nicksplat.com/Whatsup/200510/12000135.html>

The suspicions of A:TLA fans were confirmed when Shyamalan revealed in an interview that the cast would consist of white actors, Noah Ringer, Nicola Peltz, Jackson Rathbone, and Jesse McCarthy, in the starring roles of Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Zuko (See Figure 1). McCarthy later backed out of the project citing scheduling conflicts and was replaced by Dev Patel, Indian-British star of the Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*.



Figure 5.1 Original animated characters and actors of the live-action remake¹⁷

“Some anonymous folks (some with professional ties to the franchise)” began an anonymous letter writing campaign on the LiveJournal website called “Aang Ain’t White,” in December 2008, immediately after the principal cast was announced. Soon after, the blog evolved into a website with its own domain name, Racebending.com (See Figure 5.2).

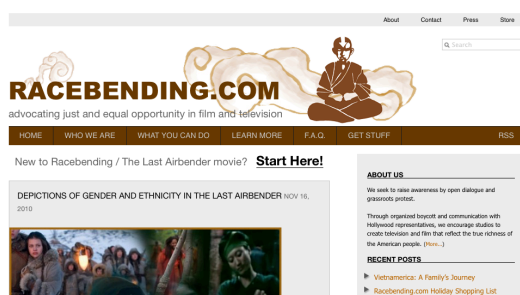


Figure 5.2 The Racebending.com website

¹⁷ From <http://abagond.wordpress.com/2010/06/14/the-casting-of-the-last-airbender/>

The name Racebending was a playful reference to the abilities of the show's characters to "bend" or manipulate earth, water and air; but also speaks more seriously to Paramount's changing of the characters' race for marketability, inferring, of course, that white protagonists are more marketable (Lopez, 2011). Racebending.com became the central repository for information about the campaign, and an online community for its more than 1,200 supporters, as well as for newcomers interested in learning about the protest.

As the campaign grew, so did the number of Asian Americans who expressed their disapproval of Racebending.com's mission to boycott the film, in part because such a move might cause Paramount Studios to cancel plans to produce two live action sequels of A:TLA. Asian American defenders of the whitewashed casting flooded online spaces, including fan forums, blogs, IMDB discussions, comment spaces that follow news articles about the film or interviews with Shyamalan, and even Racebending.com's forum for "dissenting opinions." The director, himself an American of Indian descent, also defended his casting decisions in interviews posted online by various news and entertainment agencies. The discussions around the Racebending.com website became quite impassioned, with each side accusing the other of being racist. The issue of who *was* or *was not* being racist -- those who defended Shyamalan's whitewashing of an Asian-themed film and others who wanted to see Asian Americans in the main roles -- was surprisingly unclear. In fact, at one time, Facebook deleted Racebending.com's group page after some people flagged it for racist content¹⁸.

My interest in this chapter is not so much to point out the rhetorical flaws in the arguments of Shymalan and fans who defended the whitewashing of Asian characters in A:TLA. In fact, the Racebending.com leaders already did this --they cleverly collected the arguments that

¹⁸ <http://www.racebending.com/v3/press/racebending-facebook-group-taken-down/>

surfaced repeatedly in these web spaces and produced a written FAQ and videos with carefully researched, sophisticated counter-arguments¹⁹. I will also be setting aside the slippery issues of cultural appropriation, authenticity, and the essentializing of Asian identity in the original animated series, topics with which leaders of the Racebending.com movement grappled. Lopez (2011) also interrogates these issues in her discussion of the racial politics of *A:TLA* fan-activism. I am, rather, interested in highlighting the ideological landscape within which the director, M. Night Shyamalan, and other self-identified Asian Americans defended the casting decisions. To this end, I examine in this chapter, interviews, blogs, forum posts, and comments posted to various web spaces by the director, M. Night Shyamalan, and also by Asian American fans who defended his casting decisions. I do this to seek answers to the following questions:

- What arguments are they making in defense of the director's casting decisions?
- What are their critiques of the Racebending movement and, in particular, of Asian American Racebending supporters?
- What do their arguments tell us about dominant ideological beliefs about race and representation?

The primary issues that emerged, and which define the structure of my argument, include the predominance of colorblindness as a frame for understanding race – or the only other option – that talking about race is racist. Asian American audiences' framing of race, almost without exception, as an issue tied to a frivolous, liberal political agenda. As I explore each of these issues, I will attempt to uncover the underlying irony of these views, and the ideological beliefs that enable Asian American audiences to justify them. First, I will summarize main critiques of *A:TLA* from Racebending.com as well as other blogs and cultural commentators.

¹⁹ <http://www.racebending.com/v3/general/frequently-asked-questions/>

Whitewashing, racebending, and symbolic annihilation
in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

The original series creators, two white Americans, Mike DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, explicitly stated in interviews conducted before the live action film was in the works, that they wanted to “wanted to base [*The Last Airbender*] on Asian culture and kung-fu and Eastern religion and thought.”²⁰ When asked to sum it up in one sentence they said it was "epic, Asian-influenced martial arts, fantastical action, adventurous comedy, and dramatic showings of the four elements!"²¹ DiMartino and Koietzko had hired a martial arts consultant to advise on the “bending” movements, visited China to take photos of the architecture that made up the background of their Asian fantasy world, and bought “dozens of books” in order to gain an understanding of the East Asian and Inuit cultures and traditions.

The idea of the “avatar,” they explained is based on Hindu religious beliefs, while a talented Chinese American calligraphy artist was brought on to work on all the Chinese calligraphy featured in the cartoon. As DiMartino and Konietzko stated plainly, “we're just trying to pay homage.” But in director, M. Night Shymalan’s live action remake, the two Inuit protagonists, Katara and her brother Sokka, and the East Asian main character, Aang, are whitewashed, and East Asian members of the Fire Nation are darkened through the casting of South Asians to represent a merciless and corrupt warring tribe. In addition, the Chinese calligraphy that was featured in the animated series was turned into an “Asian-inspired” pictorial language invented for the live action movie. In other words, the culture and ethnicity that was so carefully researched by the animated series’ creators were stripped out and the villainous Fire Nation became marked by their dark skin, among a cast of white heroes.

²⁰ <http://blog.newsok.com/nerdage/2010/07/01/avatar-the-last-airbender-2006-interview/>

²¹ <http://www.awn.com/articles/production/its-elementary-iavatar-last-airbenderi>

Dao Le, one of the animation editors for the original series, shared his frustration with the whitewashed casting:

It's been a huge disappointment to hear about the casting for Avatar's live-action movie. The show was heavily influenced by Asian culture, some of the characters were even modeled after Asian members of the crew. But now, with the pre-dominantly white cast, it feels like all the Asian/Eastern influences, origins, what have you, were just a backdrop for these characters...The appreciation Mike and Bryan [the series' creators] had for Asian culture, the interest it generated in the fans, gave ME greater appreciation for my own culture. So it's just hard to believe they couldn't find one Asian actor to hold any of the lead protagonist parts. Not one? This film is going to feel like some other Avatar story.

Other critics pointed out that Shyamalan's reconfiguration of ethnicities created a cast of white heroes who save their fantasy universe from dark-skinned villains.

One popular entertainment blog suggested that silence from the animated series' creators spoke volumes about their positions on Shyamalan's casting:

DiMartino and Konietzko have had any number of chances to speak out in support of the film, yet they have taken none. The controversial casting choices that have dogged the film's marketing ever since they were announced have received no endorsement from either creator... DiMartino and Konietzko have practically unlimited credibility with fans of the show; with a single positive interview they could turn thousands of *A:TLA* fans into advocates for the film. A better box office return surely puts money in their pockets. Yet their silence is deafening. Why?

There is only one reasonable conclusion: They aren't saying anything positive because they don't have anything positive to say.²²

The creators were likely obligated, under contract, not to critique the film, though Konietzko, did post a rather explicit message on his band's MySpace that read, "AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER FANS PLEASE NOTE: Thanks for all the support and interest! However, ... I have NOTHING TO DO WITH THE CASTING WHATSOEVER for the feature film."²³ When you put the pieces together – anger from the animation team over the casting and creators gone suspiciously silent after the release of the big budget film – it becomes clear that the casting decisions, and elimination of Asian cultural elements did not sit well with many people close to the series.

This sort of exclusion of Asian bodies in American mass media is well documented. According to *The 2010 Asian Pacific American Media Coalition Report Card on Television Diversity*²⁴, "there has not been a primary cast of APA actors since Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl* in 1994," and Asian Americans continue to be outnumbered by actors from other racial groups in primary roles. In film, the *New York Times* declared this year "the whitest year for Hollywood since the post-Richard Pryor, pre-Spike Lee 1980s"²⁵. Urban dramas, superhero, fantasy and action dramas, and even buddy movies were all "drained of color." When characters who were meant to make up an Asian fantasy world were brought to life using white actors, this was a *particular* kind of exclusion – it was a "race bending" and more specifically, whitewashing. There are several recent examples of race bending – one is the 2008 Hollywood film *21*, about a group of MIT students who cheated casinos out of millions of dollars by

²² <http://sodapopjournal.com/soundboard/the-last-word-on-the-last-airbender/>

²³ <http://www.myspace.com/ginormousmusic>

²⁴ <http://www.napalc.org/2010-diversity-report-card/>

²⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/movies/awardsseason/13movies.html?_r=1

counting cards while playing blackjack. In it, Asian American and real life member of that team, Jeff Ma, is played by white actor, Jim Sturgess.

“Racebending,” in addition to making a clever allusion to *A:TLA*’s characters, is a play on the term “gender bending.” Informed by theories presented in Judith Butler’s (1990) seminal book, *Gender Trouble*, gender bending refers to the transgression of gendered expectations – behaviors, dress, speech – and was celebrated as a means of enabling people to perform their gender in a way that is not determined by desire, biological sex, or cultural expectation. The removal of restrictions implied in gender bending is liberating, but *racebending* has different implications. Instead of broadening possible identities, yellow bodies are swapped out and replaced with white bodies that are already almost all we see in popular media. This particular type of racebending, in which carefully developed Asian characters set in Asian Fantasy worlds are whitewashed, takes away opportunities for us to see ourselves in the picture, both literally and figuratively. What is particularly troubling in this case is that it demonstrates certain deliberateness, and not just a “benign neglect” (David Palumbo-Liu, 2001), where producers seem to just forget to include yellow bodies.

Numerous media scholars have commented on the meanings produced through this practice of exclusion. Gaye Tuchman (1981), in her interrogation of the ways in which women have been represented in the media, argues that failure to represent a group in an affirmative manner implies symbolic annihilation, “either condemnation, trivialization, or absence” (p. 169). Symbolic annihilation suggests that the group being left out is unimportant, unworthy of mention, and invisible in the collective imaginary. The characters’ race was changed (bent) in a way that privileged the majority white viewer by constructing white protagonists with whom they could allegedly more easily identify. This belief has been observed by many critics,

including Laura Kang (2002), who argues that popular film continues to envision a white, male audience. This also is symptomatic, argues Darryl Hamamoto (1994), of a long history of Asian exclusion and white supremacy that is reflected in television and other media.

Insisting on Colorblindness

The arguments Shyamalan and Asian American fans of his made in defense of his casting decisions reveal their unwavering commitment to an ideology of colorblindness. This is an ideology that insists on the invisibility of race and denies the existence of racial inequality, while it interprets whiteness and the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives as natural (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Whether or not this is an earnest commitment, or one that is performed because of its predominance and perception currently as the most “fair” perspective, is beside the point. What is interesting though is the way Shyamalan and Asian American fans of *A:TLA* invoked colorblindness in their discussions of the film’s casting.

For example, Shyamalan insisted that characters in the animated series, and in anime in general, are actually racially ambiguous, not Asian. In an interview published in *Time Magazine*, he asserted, “anime is intended to have ambiguous features. That's part of the art form. It's not meant to have a specific ethnicity behind it,”²⁶ “the features of the [anime] characters are an intentional mix of all features...That is completely its point”²⁷ and “I don’t know any Inuits that look like Katara on this planet, I don’t know any Asian kids that look like Aang. That’s because there’s a misunderstanding here — the art form of anime, in its genetics, has ambiguous

²⁶ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2001008,00.html>

²⁷ <http://io9.com/#!5504967/shyamalan-addresses-airbenders-race-controversy-and-answers-your-questions>

features...”²⁸ However, the book, *Avatar The Last Airbender: The art of the animated series* makes it clear that there was no ambiguity. The creators of the original series described Aang as “a young monk from the Air Nation, a peaceful society inspired by Tibetan and Buddhist cultures,” a character inspired by a young monk doing feats of acrobatics in a DVD about Shaolin monks (Konietzko & DiMartino, 2010, p. 14). There is no doubt as to the race of the characters in the original series. The belief that anime, more broadly, showcases ambiguously raced or white characters has been explored by several scholars including one, Matt Thorn, a cultural anthropologist who studies and translates manga. He wrote an article for his blog on the topic, titled *The Face of the Other* (2004):

Japanese readers should have no trouble accepting the stylized characters in manga, with their small jaws, all but nonexistent noses, and famously enormous eyes as “Japanese.” Unless the characters are clearly identified as foreign, Japanese readers see them as Japanese, and it would never occur to most readers that they might be otherwise, regardless of whether non-Japanese observers think the characters look Japanese or not.²⁹

Shyamalan’s annihilation of the manga-styled animated Asian characters was the subject of comment by legendary film critic, Roger Ebert, who summed it up like this:

The Last Airbender is an agonizing experience in every category I can think of and others still waiting to be invented...Shyamalan has failed. His first inexplicable mistake was to change the races of the leading characters; on television Aang was clearly Asian, and so

²⁸ <http://www.slashfilm.com/video-interview-m-night-shyamalan-on-the-last-airbender/>

²⁹ <http://www.matt-thorn.com/mangagaku/faceoftheother.html>

were Katara and Sokka, with perhaps Mongolian and Inuit genes. Here they're all whites.³⁰

It becomes clear that Shyamalan insists on the non-specificity of the animated characters' race -- even when the clues to the characters' race are obvious, and the creators themselves confirm their Asian and Inuit roots. By insisting that the "good" characters are not marked by race, he leaves himself an opening to whitewash them. Ultimately, he had to choose "whoever is best for the part" -- talk about a merit-based system is common rhetoric heard in conversations about colorblindness. And he picked white child actors for whom this was to be their first big part. The actors were blasted by critics for their terrible acting in their portrayal of the "good guys." Shyamalan's defaulting to white actors serves as a salient example of the way in which colorblindness tends to support the supremacy of white interests (Gotanda, 2000).

There are several instances in which people of color appear in *A:TLA*, albeit in limited ways. Shyamalan points to the number of Indian characters in his film, including the character, Prince Zuko (Dev Patel), who is a key protagonist. Prince Zuko is, however, among the villains in the story, leaving an all-white cast of heroes. But even Zuko was originally supposed to be played by a white actor as well. Patel, a British Indian actor, was cast only after white teen pop singer, Jesse McCartney, had to pull out of the project due to scheduling conflicts. This means the entire original cast of main characters, including both heroes and villains, he had planned was going to be white. In addition, many of the supporting characters are family members of Prince Zuko, so a white Zuko would mean the secondary roles would also have been played by white actors, whitewashing both the main characters, and the secondary ones. In speaking of the switch from McCartney to Patel in an interview, Shyamalan states, "That helped for all of us to kind of

³⁰ <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100630/REVIEWS/100639999>

have the courage to go a different way with Zuko, which I was really excited about,”³¹ This statement eliminates any doubt that there was indeed an *original* way that featured an all-white cast of key protagonists. And Shyamalan is almost apologetic when he talks about casting Patel for the part of Zuko:

I gave him (Patel) to the studio with a couple other guys and I said, “This is a totally different way to go for Zuko and I'm not sure I'm saying I want this.” Also, since he was Indian I was feeling a little bit like, “Oh, don't jam your own peeps down everybody's throat.”

He sets up “Indians” and “everybody” as mutually exclusive categories, a sign perhaps that he does not envision people of his own ethnicity as part of “everybody.” Asian Americans are hailed as honorary citizens in this white-dominated society, and acceptance of this interpellation is sometimes given away in our discourse, such as when we do not see ourselves as part of the “everybody,” and effectively accepting an identity thrust upon us as always the foreigner-within (Lowe, 1996).

In reference to the casting of Indian Americans, he also makes a joke about “Indian washing,” “You can definitely accuse me of Indian-washing. Definitely. There are more Indians in this movie than any American movie ever made.” W.E.B. DuBois (1905) called this phenomenon, “double consciousness,” when one looks “at one's self through the eyes of whites” (Smith, 2000). As Dayal (1996) explains, “double consciousness compels us all to see ourselves and our others in the same mirror” (p. 49). We reflect on ourselves, but also on how others see us, and this can lead to a maladaptive response according to Moore (2005), which might include

³¹ <http://www.superherohype.com/features/articles/103182-exclusive-m-night-shyamalan-on-the-last-airbender->

taking on the characteristics and point of view of the oppressor. This is a common response and one that is demonstrated by Shyamalan when he wipes out people like him – other Asians -- from his film’s cast of hero-protagonists, and apologizes for the few people who share his ethnicity in the background, or as second pick for villains.

Shyamalan privileges whiteness again in his allegedly colorblind argument about how children identify with characters:

my oldest daughter is literally a photo double of Katara in the cartoon. So that means that Katara is Indian, correct? No that's just in our house. And her friends who watch it, they see themselves in it.”³²

He makes a rather big claim -- that audiences universally identify with characters no matter their race. This is the classic colorblind expectation. Neil Gotanda (2000) correctly points out the impossibility of racial colorblindness arguing that, “you can't not think about it without having first thought about it;” thus, “to be racially colorblind...is to ignore what one has already noticed” (p. 36). To assert that young audience members really see themselves in a character that does not look like them is a stretch, but the belief that we ignore race is critical to upholding colorblind ideology. Shyamalan claimed that children identify cross-racially, but then, ironically, created an all-white cast of heroines, which infers that he considers white characters perhaps *more* universal and relatable for all. Shyamalan’s point of view is one that reflects the tendency, when we claim not to see race, to make whiteness a natural default. As Toni Morrison explains, colorblindness sees the “gaze of whiteness as the unacknowledged norm” (Andersen, 2003, p. 24). It is the invisible social position that implicitly stands for what we consider “right and normal” (p. 21).

³² <http://io9.com/#!5504967/shyamalan-addresses-airbenders-race-controversy-and-answers-your-questions>

The deployment of colorblindness has meant defaulting to white, and therefore, an allegedly universally appealing set of protagonists. But every racial ideology involves some level of negotiation, as Gramsci and later Hall would say, in order to maintain the hegemony of whiteness. And in the casting of *A:TLA*, that reconciliation happens through the inclusion of what is considered second-most universally appealing. That is, actual racial ambiguity, characters that are not white, but who are still identifiable for the audience because of their mixed, and thus ambiguous, race. Noah Ringer, whom Shyamalan chose to play Aang is actually white, but looks ambiguously raced. He recounted, “I didn't know their backgrounds, and to me Noah had a slightly mixed quality to him. So I cast the Airbenders as all mixed-race.” In other words, the characters that have the most universal appeal from his point of view are best “unmarked” but are also acceptable if they are “ethnic” and we are hazy on their origins. The dominant white hegemony that comprises the current racial landscape makes possible this logic. Shyamalan had the power to determine how race would be represented in his film, but still fantasized a world that diminishes the visibility, and, therefore, worth of Asian Americans. In sum this tells us that those who are part of the oppressed minority might still – or perhaps should even be expected to – favor a colonial culture and worldview.

Our common privileging and naturalizing of whiteness as “normal” and unmarked, is demonstrated also in the discourse of Asian Americans in the audience, who slammed the Racebending activists. A number of them stated that they were neither surprised nor alarmed by the whitewashing of *A:TLA* cartoon series. For example, one IMDB reader noted, “for this movie, race doesn't bother me. I grew up in Philly, so I'm a real minority here and got use [*sic*] to Hollywood not using many Asians. I just love movies.” While he is aware of the underrepresentation of Asian Americans in film, he is not bothered by it, and chooses not to take

issue with it, which demonstrates what Antonio Gramsci called a “fragmentary contradictory conception of consciousness,” and not simply what Marx called a “false consciousness” that plagued the masses. In other words, author of that comment is cognizant of his subordinate status in real life – in Philly – as well as in Hollywood’s representation of people who look like him. But he also expresses his acceptance of his subordinate status. Stuart Hall articulates this phenomenon as a product of white supremacy, “they had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as 'Other.' AND also accept subordinate honorary status ” (Hall, 1994, p. 395).

The expectation of white dominance from a number of the Asian American members of the audience was also evident in a forum post that read, “A lot of people here thought it was too much [sic] Caucasians on screen, imo, I was surprised the movie had less [sic] Caucasians then I thought, for a movie this big. So i had no problem with the casting”³³. Similarly another individual in that forum posted, “eh... I'm going to enjoy the movie anyway. From the beginning, I could've told anyone that the cast would be mostly white. At least we have a few Indians in the film.”³⁴ They quite nonchalantly point out that they recognize the white supremacy that pervades popular film, but also draw attention to the fact that they not only expect it, but that have an easy time of tolerating it (“I had no problem with the casting” and “at least we have a few Indians”). Gramsci’s concept of interpellation applies here as these commenters appear to be interpellated as the non-white “honorary citizens” existing on the margins of a white society where whiteness is an invisible, or unrecognized norm , so invisible that it might even be more accurately described as an “essence” than a “construction” (Nakayama & Martin, 1999, p. X).

³³ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0938283/board/thread/166013618?p=9>

³⁴ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0938283/board/thread/163687956?d=163928287&p=13#163928287>

In response to a question about the Racebending protest from movie blogger, Jordon Hoffman, Shyamalan argues, “overall, it is *more* than they could have expected [emphasis added].”³⁵ Shyamalan’s understanding is that he went above and beyond the expectations of even that “tiny group of people with an agenda.” Similarly, another commenter reminded other readers that there wasn’t a *complete* absence people of color in the film, “you’re making it out to be that there aren’t any whites at all”³⁶ Thus the producers of the film should, in fact, be commended for their efforts. This sprinkling of color that appears in the media is viewed as evidence of a noble and altruistic – but unnecessary -- effort on the part of corporations to be inclusive which makes sense in a broader racial landscape supported by the unquestioned assumption that America is, as Darryl Hamamoto (1994) calls it, a “white Christian Nation.”

A comment from “facepalm” suggests that America is a country *for* whites, and thus any efforts to include non-white bodies should be considered an act of goodwill:

The admirable thing about Hollywood is that it does try to present a multi-colored environment in its movies even though America is mostly white, even if Asia is mostly Asian.³⁷

While it’s true that the majority of Americans, currently, are white, facepalm demonstrates a very rigid understanding of America as “mostly white,” population-wise and, thus, entitled to greater representation in the media, and perhaps in other spheres as well. As a point of comparison, facepalm also reminds readers that Asia is “mostly Asians,” which suggests that

³⁵ <http://www.ugo.com/movies/shyamalan-on-racebending?cmpid=rss-movies>

³⁶ <http://glockgal.livejournal.com/375625.html?thread=9688393#t9688393>

³⁷ <http://www.lastairbenderfans.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=342&start=40#p6033>

there is no inequality from a global standpoint because each ethnicity has its own piece of the world – Asians belong to Asia, and whites to America. This understanding of America as a white nation shows up again in this forum post from the same author:

White people are very rarely seen in Asian entertainment, including shows and movies inspired by Western fantasy. Because of this, I simply cannot begrudge Hollywood Americanizing Avatar.

Facepalm’s remarks reveal her ignorance of racial politics that entrench Asian America, or the basic understanding that people of Asian ethnicity are equally as entitled to the term “American.” When she uses the term “Americanizing” to describe the white washing of ethnic characters, she is not only reinforcing a colorblind ideology, but also demonstrating her consent to the general understanding of “America” as a *white* nation where Asian Americans should not expect to be included in the same way.

In one particularly telling comment from another forum poster, zamree taunts others in the forum: “im asian and i dont like to see any asians in a hollywood movie..is that racist?? 🤔”³⁸ His/her post was more troubling than others discussed so far because it goes beyond accepting “honorary citizen” status, to stating outright that s/he would *prefer not* to see people who look like him in the media, and with some measure of “attitude” as suggested by his sunglasses-wearing emoticon. His wishing for non-representation begins to seem less illogical when you consider the power of white supremacy, especially on body politics. What Charles W. Mills (2003) calls the “somatic sphere” dimension of white supremacy (p. 42), which dictates a white body ideal and stigmatizes other bodies as alien, other, or grotesque in contrast. Accepting

³⁸ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0938283/board/thread/166222451?d=166233698&p=4#166233698>

the status of second-class, honorary citizen in your home country begins to make sense when you are also immersed in a body politic that signals white dominance. It is difficult not to succumb to whiteness when one internalizes that subordination as natural and normal (S. M. Ma, 2000).

If you're not colorblind, you're racist

Arguments and comments from Shayamalan and his supporters demonstrate that there is a gap in our ability to consider the importance of issues of race and representation without resorting to dichotomies of colorblind-versus-racist. Colorblindness – the refusal to acknowledge race – is so predominant that the mere mention of race often provokes misguided knee-jerk accusations of racism, and often that finger is pointed at ethnic minorities by other ethnic minorities. There is no room in between to talk about the way race has shaped our histories, experiences, and opportunities. This seems to be a reflection of two things: the fact that existing power race structures built along race are made invisible by colorblindness, and that Asian Americans are frequently interpellated as “honorary citizens,” to use Fanon’s (1967) term. As marked subordinated subjects, Dayal (1996) argues, we will never be one of them, but instead will achieve “honorary citizenship” at best, as a token for display for future immigrants.

Because the hierarchies of power are made invisible, disguised by colorblindness, reactions to the mere mention of race were heavily critiqued by some Asian Americans. For example, Racebending’s official statement on the casting did not make any demands for specific Asian actors, rather it suggested that the film “was an opportunity to witness heroes and heroines of color” and explained that they were boycotting because “it systematically excludes people of color from heroic roles.” They also pointed out that *A:TLA*’s casting call, which sought actors who are “Caucasian or any other ethnicity” is an “active rejection of the full diversity of the

American people.” But a number of the movie’s fans interpreted Racebending’s critiques of the film’s casting as “racist” because they merely asked questions about race. For example, a commenter named Theo took issue with Racebending’s suggestion that the actor cast for the role of Aang was white when, in fact, they were not sure of his ethnicity. He angrily wrote “to assume to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he's white, is wholeheartedly, unabashedly, ignorantly racist”...making you the “proponent of the very racism you CLAIM to battling against.” He also called out race consciousness as problematic when he continued, “a persons [sic] race really isn't anyone's business.” Race must be, then, something kept private, not talked about and that we pretend not to see. Theo’s comments reflect a sensitivity he has developed potentially because “many Americans react so vehemently to the charge of ‘racism...that we lose the shades that distinguish types of racial thinking” (Wu, 2002, p. 28). Any mention of race is perceived by a number of people in these discussions as a politically motivated assault on whites.

“Facepalm” also demonstrates how we can believe in the colorblind myth of sameness in difference. She argued, “if I, an Asian, complain about Caucasians playing Asian characters - it's like I'm a white person complaining about Will Smith playing characters who were originally white.”³⁹ Of course, the power structure is such that whites are dominant, and mainstream media enforce a white hegemony. It is Asian Americans, not whites, who are regularly annihilated, demonized, or limited to shallow or stereotyped roles in popular media (Dave et al., 2005; Feng, 2002; Hamamoto, 1994; S. M. Ma, 2000; Ono & Pham, 2009). But facepalm and other Asian Americans showed their commitment to the dominant belief that there is no racism and thus we must not relate race to issues of power. The Racebending collective, they determined, was pushing a selfish political agenda that somehow made *them* the “racists.”

³⁹ <http://www.lastairbenderfans.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=342&start=40#p6033>

Likewise, Shyamalan framed Racebending and its supporters as the dysfunction of a few who had a racist “agenda,” as Shyamalan called it -- “They’re bringing a lot of baggage to the film and “it saddens me that there has to be a tiny group of people who have an agenda.”⁴⁰ But Gotanda (2000) reminds us that regarding race as a political or “special interest” consideration is a component of colorblind ideology. This agenda, many who commented on the blogs agreed, involved Asian Americans who must, therefore have been maliciously conspiratorial, self-serving, and underhanded. As one blogger described the situation, “This is about Asians screaming MINE, MINE, MINE”⁴¹. There were many mentions of “reverse racism”; that is, the Racebending supporters were allegedly intent on unfairly victimizing whites. One commenter posted this in her argument defending Shyamalan’s decision to cast a white actor for the part of Katara, an Inuit character in the animated series:

He fell in love with Nicola for the part of Katara? Is that wrong because she's white? That seems like a pretty racist way of thinking to me.

This accusation of anti-white “racism” came up again in several posts from blogger, Hollywood Dump, who assessed the situation as the activists wanting “to dictate who gets to be picked for what roles.” He argued:

They would have been more pleased if there were no white people in the film at all. Shut them out like a Bollywood film or Japanese studio film. Because it is ok to shut out white people, because these same white people enslaved blacks and made them pick cotton and they made the Chinese work on the rail roads all for less than nothing. Oh and less [sic]

⁴⁰ <http://www.slashfilm.com/video-interview-m-night-shyamalan-on-the-last-airbender/>

⁴¹ <http://www.hollywooddump.com/2010/04/racebending-stupid-thinking-pt-1.html>

forget they killed American Indians during the creation of America and put Japanese in concentration camps during WWII. They deserve to suffer for what their nasty, evil ancestors did. MAKE THEM SUFFER!

Hollywood Dump listed a series of racist historical events in which people of color were victimized by whites, but did this with exaggerated, mock anger. And he suggested at the end that this is all part of a conspiratorial revenge fantasy from overzealous Asian American activists who want simply to exact unjustified revenge on whites for racist acts their ancestors had committed. People like facepalm and Hollywood Dump accused other Asian Americans of being racist in their misguided quest for revenge on the white man. Another comment posted “they would have been more pleased if the casting call said, ‘Seeking ONLY Asians.’ Don’t pussyfoot around what you really mean.” He then continued to make the case that whites are unfairly treated by people of color in his rant about the acceptability of racial jokes that target whites:

So white [sic] can mock themselves but no one else. Everyone else can mock their race and white people. Especially black comedians, they can mock white people up and down the lame joke ladder, but you best not mess with them cause that’s racist. No that’s not racist you idiot, it’s fair... we, at Racebending.com, only complain when it’s white people that stomp on us...

Hollywood Dump did not ask why whites are the subjects of contention for the Racebending group, and mistakes calling out white privilege with “being racist.” Terms such as “the race card,” “race baiting,” and this idea of reverse discrimination often appeared in angry comments critical of the Racebending group. For example, AyeYamMower⁴² posted on Gene Yang’s

⁴² <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0938283/board/thread/165706499?d=165806017&p=4#165806017>

website, “I’ve never defended Paramount, nor will I. I simply point out the hypocrisy of the race-baiters involved.” Another commenter, who goes by the username, Damaged Garden⁴³, added, “Well honestly, I AM part Chinese (god I hate playing THAT card but it's true so...)”⁴⁴

“*That card*” is undoubtedly the “race card,” a term constructed by whites to suggest that people of color are seeking out undeserved privileges, and that reparations for past wrongs are unnecessary. Colorblindness makes sense within this logic because it operates on the assumption that there is no longer any racial “baggage.” Asian Americans, argues Wu (2002), are particularly prone to this accusation that they “play the race card” because Whites think Asians aren’t touched by racism. Michael Omi understands “playing the race card” to be a term that was used to racially code political issues (p. 184) and argues that this idea that Asian Americans are just attempting to use race for political leverage “implies that bigotry has been brought on by the victims” (p. 69). In other words, they argue that Racebending supporters are actually giving whites a reason to be racist by making baseless complaints about race.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1990) has described the New Negro of the early 20th century as one who “speaks the language of the oppressed” to defy the “language of the oppressor.” But these are examples of the opposite, where the oppressed is speaking the language of the oppressor. Extending the definition of language from what he had intended in his observation about French spoken in colonial Algeria, we can think of these loaded terms – “race baiting,” “playing the race card,” and so forth – as part of the language of the oppressor as well (Wu, 2002). They are part of a rhetoric that denies the existence of racial inequality and the significance of race, in general.

⁴³ <http://damagedgarden.livejournal.com/profile>

⁴⁴ <http://glockgal.livejournal.com/375625.html?thread=8873545#t8873545>

There is no room in between colorblindness and alleged “racism” to talk about the way race has shaped our histories, experiences, and opportunities. This is also a reflection of Asian Americans knowingly, or unknowingly internalizing their second-class honorary status (Tuan, 1998, 1999). This was made evident by the commenters who, in defending colorblindness, framed Racebending as a fringe, special interest group. Shyamalan also minimized the Racebending community by calling them a “very small group that has gotten a lot of attention for no reason whatsoever.”

Others distanced themselves from those “bad subjects” by emphasizing how they were different and at odds with those other Asian Americans. For example, a number of supporters expressed that Racebending is so unreasonable that their protest was “embarrassing” to them, and probably to other Asian Americans in the audience. A commenter named Theo posted a comment on Gene Yang’s website in reference to what he believed was the political game playing of the Racebending group and their supporters, “Embarrassing. Absolutely frickin' embarrassing.” Michael Omi (1996) points out that there is a stigma for whites, of being perceived as the “oppressors of the nation,” and Theo made it evident that he addressed a dominant white audience when he expressed his embarrassment of others who share his race, when they made unjustified statements about racial inequality, or participated in so-called “racebaiting.” They vilified the group even further by suggesting that they are not only “racist,” but possess a revenge complex that drives them to commit deliberate acts of pro-Asian, anti-white “reverse racism” in a way that some noted was “embarrassing.” In sum, these reactions to Racebending are tied to a hyper-consciousness on the part of many Asian Americans who are wedded to the myth of colorblindness. Their comments demonstrate the ease with which they

internalize an “honorary status,” and reveal the discursive maneuvers they use to marginalize and minimalize those who resistance.

Conclusion

The whitewashing of Asian characters by an Asian American movie director prompted a largely Asian American contingent of protesters to form a nationwide collective with an online presence called Racebending. But there was, perhaps surprisingly, a number of Asian American voices that spoke out in defense of Shyamalan’s act of symbolic annihilation, which they justified by arguing instead for “colorblindness.” Their comments revealed the construction of a rigid dichotomy that dictated that one is either rightly colorblind, or is, by default, being “racist.” What appears to make this possible the invisibleness of dominant power structures when we apply a colorblind ideology, and also the subtle internalization of our own status as secondary to whites, as much as that seems to run counter to the purported fairness and quality of a colorblind framework.

Decolonizing minds that have been indoctrinated into white supremacist “colorblind” ideologies, argues Mazrui (1993), requires first the “liberation of people of colour from *themselves*” (p. 361). Dayal emphasizes the need for diasporics to regain a double consciousness in order to “help deflate a Eurocentric manipulation of the machinery of representation, as in neo-colonialist signifying regimes (Dayal, 1996, p. 54). But openly resisting the “oppressor's manipulation of their mind” (Moore, 2005) is impossible if you are, paradoxically, being manipulated and thus unaware of such manipulation. In other words, how would you know? Liberating people from themselves is a complicated task, but one that I will argue in the next chapter, has been taken on by some Asian American bloggers who help to deconstruct the signifying practices of a white dominated media society.

Chapter Six

Shaping an Asian American Oppositional Consciousness

Chandra Mohanty (2003) challenges the notion that “being a woman, or being poor or black or Latino, is sufficient grounds to assume a politicized oppositional identity” (p. 77). This applies especially to Asian Americans, who have the additional burden of societal expectations that we are passive and politically apathetic, too busy overachieving to rock the proverbial boat. In fact, we are *triangulated*, to use Claire Jean Kim’s (1999) term, as the successful model minority vis-à-vis allegedly trouble-making blacks. In other words, being Asian American is not sufficient grounds for assuming an oppositional identity, *and* we are not expected to be political which, with the continued denigration of Asian Americans, is problematic. David Palumbo-Liu (2001) expands on George Lipsitz’s observation that “ethnic people are faring very badly,” with his assertion that, “Asians are deemed inadequate to America, marginalized, or excluded in order to (re)consolidate the nation’s image of its [white] ideal self” (p. 170). We continue to be seen as perpetually foreign, and are also subject to unfair treatment in the media and popular culture as we are in “real life.”

However, Asian Americans are not always cognizant of this. We have not all developed a politicized oppositional identity. In chapter 4, for example, I examined the film, *The Last Airbender*, and arguments from its Asian American fans and Indian-American director, M. Night Shyamalan, in defense of whitewashing the Asian characters upon whom the live action film was based. Shyamalan and some of his Asian American fans demonstrate that they are convinced of

the inconsequentiality of being “symbolically annihilated” in the film (Tuchman, 1981). Whitewashing Asian characters in *The Last Airbender*, *21*, *Akira*, and other Hollywood films, reflects and reinscribes a white supremacist ideology, and Lisa Nakamura (2008) has observed a large “pan-Asian American body politic” that has formed “vigorous” online petition communities, such as those I examined in Chapter 4, that came together to protest the now infamous Abercrombie and Fitch t-shirts. But there are also many Asian Americans who operate within an ideology in which racist representations and outright exclusion make up a “sort of racist ‘common sense’” according to Stuart Hall (1981), who insists that the normalizing of these practices has become pervasive in our society (p. 28). Often, the *Last Airbender* fans I discussed in Chapter 5 made arguments that demonstrate that they operate from a post-racial color-blind framework that, as Nakamura puts it, allows “avoidance of all discussion of race in favor of concerns that were perceived as more ‘universalist’” (p. 2). This framework appears anti-racist because it touts universalism and inclusiveness, but it ignores the underlying race-based inequalities that persist. Recognizing that race is still an important signifier to acknowledge and to link to issues of power and representation requires an oppositional consciousness that has to be learned, even among members of marginalized, subordinated groups.

In this final chapter I turn to Asian American blogs that I believe employ a “methodology of the oppressed,” which Chela Sandoval (2000) defines as “a set of processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination” (p. 68). Angry Asian Man and Disgrasian are sources of independent, critical Asian American perspectives on current topics in Asian America and serve as evidence to support the claim that “while the Internet is one of the drivers of the present hypercapitalist economic system, it also makes resistance possible” (Cammaerts, 2008, p. 372). Using a combination of emails exchanges, personal interviews, and textual analyses of the

blogs, I hope to bring attention to Asian Americans, not only as audiences, consumers, and gazed upon objects, but also as engaged online participants, producers, and agents who play an active role in exposing white supremacist ideologies. In particular, I consider the appeal of each of the blogs as technologies for decolonizing the imagination, by examining how they might encourage and aid audiences to recognize problematic representations, deepen their casual observations of racism in the media, and even take action toward unsettling existing structures of domination that oppress us in the media.

Angry Asian Man

Angry Asian Man is a blog authored by Phil Yu, a self-proclaimed “regular guy” with a somewhat exaggerated “Angry Asian Man” persona that he performs online. Lisa Nakamura’s assessment of this blog is that it “serves some of the same functions as old media Asian American newspapers and magazines in that it tracks and reports instances of anti-Asian racism in the media in a fairly denotative way, as ‘news’” (p. 185). While I agree that what *Angry Asian Man* does is report instances of anti-Asian racism, I challenge Nakamura’s assertion that his delivery is merely a denotative delivery of news. In this section, I take a closer look at Yu’s blog to uncover some of its unique characteristics; qualities that make his style disarming and his blog pleasurable to read, and also the ways in which it serves a pedagogical function that helps readers as they develop an oppositional consciousness.

Viet Thanh Nguyen (2002) observes that the increasing assimilation of Asian Americans is breaking down the “solidarity of identity and ideology” among the Asian American middle class (p. 20). As such, he asserts that the dichotomy of “resistance or accommodation” does not sufficiently describe the range of responses from Asian Americans to dominant depictions of us as the dangerous and “inevitably foreign threat (‘the bad subject’) or as an exemplary example of

domestic integration – the ‘model minority’” (p. 7). Nguyen explains that the bad subject is to be punished or expelled while the model minority is exploited for complicity. Even critics from the discipline of Asian American Studies “end up prioritizing and idealizing Asian America as a bad subject that is dangerous because it is politically resistant and oppositional” (p. 23). These dangerous, bad subjects are frequently accused of being hyper-sensitive and also annoyingly overzealous in trying to convince others of the seriousness and frequency of anti-Asian racism.

Angry Asian Man breaks up this binary of model minority and radical activist, creating a space for other possible subject positions that can also oppose and critique dominant representations, without being dangerous or threatening. This blog serves as a salient example of one among the “ocean of possibilities that lie between acquiescence and revolt” (Soriano, 2012, p. 199). Yu’s blog originated with posts that actually mocked the excesses of so-called “Asian Pride,” a stance which exemplifies what Chela Sandoval (2000) calls the “supremacy” mode of resistance -- wherein being part of a subordinated group provides a level of insight that makes one *superior* to those among the dominant majority. The supremacy mode of resistance is not what Yu deploys in his blog and not the kind of resistance that appeals broadly or encourages people who fear “rocking the boat” to develop an oppositional consciousness. He describes *Angry Asian Man* on his blog:

[He has] the special gift of hypersensitivity towards Racism and could detect it anywhere and everywhere... The picture of the Asian in this magazine ad? Racist. The yellow traffic signal light? Racist. It was all Racism with a capital 'R'... Mind you, as I mentioned before, it was all very facetious. A big joke about hyperbolic, misguided Asian pride. And most people knew I was joking, save for a few who just got annoyed at my “zeal” or

those who were truly concerned that I might actually lead some sort of dangerous Asian uprising⁴⁵.

Another section of his “about” page reads, “the views expressed in the contents of this website will inevitably be ridiculously zealous and exaggerated.” His satire of “misguided Asian pride” has the potential to be read in a number of contrasting ways. There is the possibility that audiences fail to detect the sarcasm and mistakenly believe that he is sincere in his zealousness and “hypersensitivity.” As Yu states, for example, “my context for discussing these problems often came from comic exaggeration, because at times, it was the only way to make such ugly issues open and approachable.” Angry Asian Man’s “comic exaggeration” could be used as proof of the supposed tendency of Asian Americans to launch unjustified complaints about racism (R. G. Lee, 1999b). That is, audiences could potentially read his blog incorrectly, as a critique of Asian American challenges to power more generally. However, I argue that Angry Asian Man is not prone to this misreading because his tone and content are actually not over-the-top or excessive at all. Instead, he occupies a subject position that neither embodies the docile, complicit model minority nor the dangerous, oppositional bad subject.

While the blog originated as a parody of what Yu has described as “misguided Asian pride,” it has kept its humor while shedding what might have been a potentially confusing voice. Part of Yu’s style involves signing off with an assertive “that’s racist!” which does have the ring of overzealous protest rhetoric, but *Angry Asian Man* tends more toward offering sharp observations delivered with dry wit, and sometimes even a dismissive tone. For example, in his description of Ken Jeong’s character, Mr. Chow, in the 2011 film *The Hangover Part II*, Yu states, “I don’t have much to say about the return of this infamous international man of

⁴⁵ <http://www.angryasianman.com/about.html>

wackiness, except that there's a lot more of him, his over-the-top Oriental schtick, and his jangly bits,”⁴⁶ the latter of which references Jeong’s frontal nudity in the film. Another instance of *Angry Asian Man*’s sarcastic tone appears in his assessment of a character in a Paramount Pictures film that demonstrates the media’s frequent conflation of Asian ethnicities. He writes, “dude, I don't know any Korean people named ‘Peng.’” This humor in his writing style is part of what makes reading the blog “approachable,” as Yu himself describes it, and also a pleasure to read.

Another characteristic that demonstrates the interesting position that *Angry Asian Man* occupies between model minority and radical activist is something that also makes reading the blog a low stakes game for those who might be hesitant about any form of resistance or opposition. Yu makes explicit claims about his disinterest in changing minds and “rallying troops,” so to speak. We see this in *Angry Asian Man*’s biography page:

I'm not trying incite riot, and definitely not trying to win anyone over...It's just me, a regular Asian American guy, writing about a few things that I find particularly noteworthy or interesting.

He adds:

Don't write in complaining about my lack of objectivity. This is just a place for me to express some of the things I observe and encounter, living my life as a regular Asian American guy in the United States... You'll notice a large part of this site deals with Asians in pop culture and entertainment. Just stuff I dig, I guess.

His claim is that he is just recording thoughts on “Asians in pop culture” and not interested in

⁴⁶ <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2011/05/hangover-part-ii-just-like-first-one.html>

changing anyone's behavior or views. Thus, there is no strategy or motive hiding beneath the message, which complicates Angry Asian Man's subject position as neither entirely accommodating nor dangerously radical. And, as a blogger, he emphasizes that he has no obligation to be objective, which echoes the view of other high profile bloggers who see themselves as "free-floating commentators" and describe their writing as "a liberated form of commentary, and as something better than journalism" (D. W. Park, 2009, p. 260).

Angry Asian Man's stance is disarming particularly for those Asian Americans who might be leery of people they deem "bad subjects." In an interview I conducted with Yu, he talked about the scariness of rocking the proverbial boat for some Asian Americans:

I understand that people are coming from a place of different views engaging politically. Understandably the Asian American community has a lot of new immigrants who are really interested in just doing their work, be obedient and kind of not so much subservient but kind of mind their own business and make a living, and live the best life they can. Those plans do not include causing trouble, even in the face of injustice or when they're faced with some kind of prejudice. I understand (personal interview).

So for such audiences who cling to a more classically "model minority" orientation, his having no agenda, hidden or otherwise is disarming. Also, while he has an M.A. in Film Studies from the University of Southern California and, thus, a strong theoretical foundation upon which to build his critiques, does not proclaim to write as an academic, professional blogger, journalist, or activist. His "regular Asian American guy" persona, and claiming to be driven by nothing but personal interest and curiosity puts at ease readers who might be sensitive to those who make a career of their activism and opposition. In other words, he can be trusted *because* of his lack of

connection to existing institutions. His views are his own and quite explicitly tied to ideological assumptions (Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010; D. W. Park, 2009). Yu maintains his right to simply assert an alternative, but equally legitimate vision of the social world, which is common among bloggers who are neither journalists nor academics (Hove, 2009).

However, Yu is quite humbly understating his impact when he says he is just “writing about a few things that I find particularly noteworthy or interesting.” His deployment of a comedic style of reporting racist incidents softens what are actually very sharp critiques that are clearly articulated and very compelling. This style of commentary encourages readers to consider new oppositional perspectives and also provides tools for articulating them. For example, in one recent post about the whitewashing of the film *Akira*, he writes:

It's the Hollywood Whitewash doing its usual scrub. But this one definitely stings a little more, not only because the source material is a revered Japanese classic, but because taking it out of its original context and transplanting the story to “New Manhattan” completely changes the underlying issues and anxieties behind the story. This movie could be so rad. But in the end, I guess it just boils down to making a big-budget movie about two white dudes named Kaneda and Tetsuo⁴⁷.

In this short post, he teaches vocabulary (“whitewashing”) for naming a persistent issue in race and representation in popular culture. Also, Yu cites the source material for *Akira* (a revered Japanese classic) and mentions that it’s “the usual scrub,” which suggests that whitewashing Asians is, in fact, a common and problematic trope in Hollywood. The pedagogical function being that he helps readers to realize the importance of investigating histories and looking outside a given media text when assessing its racial meanings and uncovering tropes.

⁴⁷ <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2011/03/live-action-akira-adaptation-starring.html>

Yu encourages audiences to broaden their thinking when considering the significance of a film's representation of Asian Americans and deploys tools for building critiques. Another way in which he educates readers is by drawing attention to patterns in dominant representations cross-racially. For example, in his description of the upcoming sitcom *The Chin Chens*, *Angry Asian Man* draws parallels to *The Cosby Show*. He also references extant texts such as the character, Long Duk Dong, of *Sixteen Candles*, who embodies the bespectacled, wimpy, Asian male nerd:

Got this casting call passed along to me, for an upcoming Paramount Pictures feature film called *Fun Size*. It's for an Asian character named "Peng," a "Debate Team nerd" who "talks twice his size, and sports thick glasses that darken automatically in sunlight." That raises a few red flags. Is this another Long Duk Dong waiting to happen?⁴⁸

In another post, he critiques the CBS pilot sitcom *Two Broke Girls* by referencing the trope of the great white savior and also the confused, perpetually foreign Oriental, "Isn't it great? These kind, know-it-all white girls teaching the wide-eyed, dumbass new immigrant about American customs and holidays?"⁴⁹

By highlighting these tropes, presenting historical contexts and drawing links to representations of other people of color, *Angry Asian Man* teaches readers to look for patterns in representation and recognize that they are not singular instances, but rather evidence that white supremacist ideologies permeate our popular culture. As Stuart Hall (1981) asserts, ideologies predate us. We "formulate our intentions *within* ideology." And further:

⁴⁸ <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2011/01/asian-nerd-alert-casting-call-for-fun.html>

⁴⁹ <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2011/02/cbs-pilot-two-broke-girls-seriously-you.html>

We have to 'speak through' the ideologies which are active in our society and which provide us with the means of 'making sense' of social relations and our place in them. The transformation of ideologies is thus a collective process and practice, not an individual one (p. 32).

Critical perspectives on Asian American media representation are not commonly available to general audiences, but *Angry Asian Man* incorporates sharply critical insights and models the use of precise and useful vocabularies in his very accessible and entertaining, sometimes comedic, commentary on popular media.

Angry Asian Man teaches vocabularies, shares critical perspectives, and sometimes also provides a multimedia experience in his critiques, all while maintaining his position as a blogger who is merely thinking out loud, and has no intentions to force people to take on his point of view. Glenn Omatsu (2000), citing Raymond Williams's tendency to assign key words to study historical periods, described the Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s with words like community, liberation, consciousness and participatory democracy. The 1990s, he argued, could be defined by such terms as empowerment, advocacy, access, and legitimacy. Twenty years later, *Angry Asian Man*, I would argue, can be described with ideas such as complexity in resistance, deepening critique, decolonization, and the role of technology, online media in particular, in reaching out.

While *Angry Asian Man* maintains a relatively reserved persona, one that occupies a subject position somewhere between assimilationist model minority and radical, dangerous activist, he does often provide links to oppositional media on other blogs and websites that are more protest-oriented. Thus, for those readers who decide they do want to read further or take some sort of political action, *Angry Asian Man* provides the option to seek different, perhaps

more radical, perspectives on the topic. For example, in his critique of the whitewashing of the Japanese classic, *Akira*, *Angry Asian Man* directs people to a more action-oriented protest site:

I'm already over this movie. I was over it a long time ago. More from the folks over at Racebending: "AKIRA" adaptation courts white actors. They've also put together an event/petition for fans who are pissed off about this: Don't Whitewash AKIRA! - Virtual Petition⁵⁰.

Additionally, linking to other blogs and mentioning other bloggers creates a sense of community among like-minded bloggers. By pointing readers to other blogs, *Angry Asian Man* underscores his position outside of mainstream media, unattached to academic or corporate institutions, while suggesting that the blogosphere is not merely comprised of disconnected individuals but rather a community that together establishes its own authority and legitimacy. Thus blogs that are critical of the media form a “we” or “us” that is separate from “them,” or big mainstream or Hollywood media (D. W. Park, 2009, p. 266), something that Cammaerts (2008) calls “alternative citizen journalism” that enables “citizens and activists to produce their own content, as a social platform to communicate...and as a vehicle for airing (counter-hegemonic) viewpoints” (p. 358).

Through his casual musings, ridicule of “misguided Asian pride,” and insistence that he does not care to incite riots or even change minds, Yu demonstrates for his readers that one can critique status quo in a tempered, even tongue-in-cheek manner, without having to identify as radical or take radical actions. The methodology of the oppressed applied by *Angry Asian Man* to decolonize minds involves highlighting the racialized subjects constructed by entertainment media and the ways in which they both reflect and reaffirm dominant white supremacist ideologies that position Asian Americans as foreign, inassimilable and in need of cultural

⁵⁰ <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2011/03/live-action-akira-adaptation-starring.html>

guidance from whites. And keeping true to his persona, *Angry Asian Man* does not launch protest campaigns; however, he does point readers to other blogs that feature different Asian American voices, where they can continue their journey in nurturing their oppositional consciousness.

Disgrasian

The blog, *Disgrasian*, authored by Los Angeles residents, Jen Wang and Diana Nguyen, shares a number of similarities with *Angry Asian Man*. Its authors write in a disarmingly conversational, humorous, and sometimes snarky tone, often critiquing ways in which Asian Americans are represented, or fail to be represented, in popular culture. And also like *Angry Asian Man*, they are cognizant of the diversity in Asian Americans' willingness to take on an oppositional identity and speak out against structures of power that subordinate us symbolically and ideologically in the media. Wang and Nguyen even recognize the comfort of complicity:

I think a lot of Asians expect out of themselves and others to not be outspoken, and to quietly achieve but don't stir the pot. Allying yourself with the bully because they'll end up safer⁵¹.

But the authors of *Disgrasian* do not claim any authority on the topics they discuss; in fact, Wang and Nguyen define themselves against academics and journalists. They claim that emails from readers who disagree with what they write actually *tend to be* academics who accuse them of being imprecise in their language, or problematic in their assessment of Asian American issues of representation. Nguyen explains:

Part of what we're writing is what is in our brain and I would say a lot of times when people are coming in with interesting criticism, it happens to be from an academic or

⁵¹ Diana Wang, Personal Interview.

journalistic standpoint. Blogs reside in a gray area that borrows from both those palates (personal interview).

In this statement, she suggests that it is institutions like universities and the media industries that care to launch such critiques. Disgrasian's reaction to these critiques mirrors those of popular political bloggers (D. W. Park, 2009). For example, Andrew Sullivan argues that one "advantage of the blogosphere" is that "we don't give a damn. And by and large, we say what we believe" (December 10, 2002). Glenn Reynolds described blogging as "a labor of love," "a hobby, not a job" (July 8, 2002), and instructed his readers, "[i]f you disagree, get your own [blog]" (April 8, 2002)⁵², echoing Wang's and Nguyen's insistence that blogging was personal commentary, and they were accountable to nobody, making it a "completely liberated practice" (D. W. Park, 2009).

But at the same time, the authors of *Disgrasian* make it clear that they are aware of their potential impact as bloggers:

We are viewed as an Asian American voice, or an Asian American women's perspective, and we realize that carries a certain weight and responsibility. At the same time, we aren't staking a claim. We don't all look alike or all think alike and as more and more voices come through, you just see that we are one Asian American perspective. Or one perspective that is obviously informed by our experiences being Asian American and being women⁵³

Their refusal to be labeled as the voice of Asian America at large is a lesson in itself; they insist that theirs is only one voice among many in a community that is as diverse as it is large, and at

⁵² Cited in Park, D. W. (2009). Blogging With Authority: Strategic Positioning in Political Blogs. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 250-273.

⁵³ Wang, personal interview.

the same time recognize their racialized and gendered subject positions and how that informs their perspective. But more importantly, it is a draw for readers because they come across as just a couple of women throwing their ideas out there with no “agenda,” a term that M. Night Shyamalan used to describe Asian American activists who critiqued his film and, in his mind, sought to persuade others to adopt their point of view. In essence, Nguyen and Wang establish credibility with politically ambivalent readers by maintaining their position outside of mainstream journalism and academia, disclaiming power, and insisting theirs are only two of many voices in Asian America.

In fact, they even seem to flaunt their resistance to traditional authority in much the same manner as bloggers in the Persian blogosphere whom Alireza Doostdar studied (Doostdar, 2004). He sees blogging as an “emergent speech genre” and argues that bloggers construct counter-hegemonic positions that contest the unequal access to cultural capital, such as that possessed by academics and journalists. And they do this, not only through the content of their messages, but also by employing some level of “vulgarity” in their speech. Likewise, *Disgrasian* flaunts its critical and independent voice through sharp critique using a rather vulgar style – it reads like a celebrity gossip rag and uses language that would not be fit for air on network television. Their irreverent, sarcastic, and sometimes playfully mean-spirited posts firmly establish them as not only non-academic, but a little frivolous, irreverent and provocative. Their critique of TV show, TMZ’s, “Asian-themed” party episode provides an example:

According to TMZ, this over-the-top, “Asian-themed” bash is not one to miss...with organizers dropping roughly \$50,000 to give Boulevard 3 nightclub an Asian-themed makeover in honor of Kobe enshrining his hands and feet at Grauman’s Chinese Theater earlier that day. ... **including a 15-foot custom made dragon.** A CUSTOM MADE

DRAGON! Pish. If we had 50Gs to spend on an “Asian theme,” you bet your ass we wouldn’t party without:

Pai Gow poker

Crab legs

A “Math Bar.” What’s your pleasure: Multiplication, division, addition, subtraction, exponents, integers? You pick!⁵⁴

As Gina Marchetti (1993) puts it, Hollywood media “take up, aestheticize, and symbolically resolve social contradictions, then deny the process by masking their ideological operations behind an apparently seamless, “invisible style” (p. 8). *Disgrasian* calls out these ideological operations by bluntly calling out this style using humor that bears some resemblance to online rants and also to humorous political essays. For example, in a post lambasting a New Mexico businessman who forced employees to speak only English and Anglicize their names, *Disgrasian* posts, “Whitten may or may not be racist, but for absolute certain: he is a REALLY DUMB FUCK, and moreover, a BAD BUSINESSMAN”⁵⁵. In a post mocking Gwen Stefani and her use of Japanese “Harajuku girls” as human props, they write, “the Harajuku Slaves are ‘fun’ and my ‘art project.’ And now you’re saying they have to be PEOPLE, too? God, you’re racist!”⁵⁶. On the same post, they also mock her racial masquerading of Blacks and South Asians – “Me and my Indian boyfriend are done-zo. That’s cool, cuz I’m more into the black thing right now. You know, Jamaica, hip-hop and shit. Check out my nails y’all-they’re bangin’. Here’s me throwing gang signs. I’m so D-OWN!” The performative nature of online invective such as rants and flames, argues Steven Vrooman (2002), serves a function – it comprises a “method of creating a

⁵⁴ <http://disgrasian.com/2011/02/if-you-arent-going-to-be-an-nba-champ-this-year-you-may-as-well-throw-a-sweet-party/>

⁵⁵ <http://disgrasian.com/2009/10/whitten-up/>

⁵⁶ <http://disgrasian.com/2007/04/disgrasian-of-the-weak-2/>

specific kind of curmudgeonly status, of carving out an almost antisocial place where the solo onlooker and critic might then examine and critique the absurdities of society” (p. 55). In other words, their use of joking and dramatic irony make criticism more “palatable” (p. 57). And what becomes palatable is the understanding that we fail to question our public discourses as anything but neutral. Stuart Hall (1981) calls this phenomenon “inferential racism”:

Apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether “factual” or “fictional” which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of *unquestioned assumptions* (p. 36).

Disgrasian directs our attention to these unquestioned assumptions by calling out master narratives of white superiority, “cultural appropriation without acknowledgement,” and the mistaken construction of a society with an “exclusively white genealogy” (Andersen, 2003, p. 42).

The *Disgrasian* dictionary also provides an example of the sarcastic, “curmudgeonly,” yet astutely critical, commentary that makes reading this blog a guilty pleasure. Some of the entries include:

Chinysteria: the alarmist fear that China is our new enemy and wants to poison our food, eat our dogs, take over the country and force us all to speak Ching-Chong.

Gongbang: An assault on the ears of gonging sounds that occurs in movies and television whenever someone or something Asian appears on screen. Example, Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*.

Lifestyle Asiaphile: A person who fetishizes Asian dress, food, religion, and/or culture, often to the detriment of his/her own health and that of others. Example: Jeremy Piven

Mistasian identity: Mistaking one of us for another; a result of believing that we all look alike

Mutasian: A recurring archetype in movies and television who does not have speaking lines. Also known as an Ornamental.

Yellowface: When a non-yellow person wears geisha make-up or slanty eyeliner while speaking mangled English. See also, Racial Drag.

With the exception of “yellowface,” which is a term that derived from Blackface that is commonly used in scholarly literature just as they have defined it, the terms in their dictionary are mostly made up with creative variations on the word Asian. Henry Wu (2002) reminds us that words matter when talking about race and we are often left out, even in this regard, “Asian Americans have been excluded by the very terms used to conceptualize race. People speak of ‘American’ as if it means ‘white’ and ‘minority’ as if it means ‘black’” (p. 20). Fears of Chinese takeover, the use of a gong to signal Asianness, fetishistic Orientalism, the conflation of Asians of different ethnicities, token Asian characters who do not talk, whites pretending to be Asian – these are all issues that commonly make their rounds in popular discourse and media involving Asians, yet we do not (yet) have commonly recognized terms for them. As such, *Disgrasian* provides a very necessary and as yet non-existent vocabulary -- they give names to issues that do not have precise terms to describe them.

Sometimes the vocabulary deployed by *Disgrasian* is provocatively vulgar. For example, in their discussion of a recent incident in which a Chik-fil-A employee named two Asian customers Ching and Chong on their receipts they exclaimed, “So if Lia is the kind of employee Chick-fil-A believes reflects its own principles, then it’s safe to say that the only thing the

chicken joint's serving up these days is a big, fat, juicy bullshit sandwich." Citing Henri Bergson (1956), Rachel C. Lee (2004) sees this flavor of brash, crass humor in the performances of stand up comedian, Margaret Cho, as a deliberate means of "delivering a shock to the automatism of politeness" (p. 125). Laughter, she adds, "releases or works a revenge against that alienation of sensation, a revenge that is not necessarily obverse to historical and political understanding" (p. 125).

Disgrasian also calls out *problematic* terms that circulate popular media. For example in one round up for "Intern Jasmine's Links of the Daysian," Wang and Nguyen ask, "People, can we please stop using the phrase "Asian Invasion" to describe the new Renaissance of Asian fashion designers? KTHXBAI [CNN]"⁵⁷. The anxieties of yellow peril continue to color the language we use when speaking about Asians and Asian Americans. While Intern Jasmine, a guest blogger on *Disgrasian*, does not flesh out this idea in depth, she does bring attention to the ridiculousness of this juxtaposition of war metaphor with fashion commentary, which at least prompts readers to question commonly used terms like *Asian invasion*. *Disgrasian* helps readers to recognize the frequency that such problems and having names for such tropes legitimizes them by pushing back against our tendency to avoid discussions about race, more broadly. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that whites reconcile the contradictions between U.S. color-coded inequality with their belief that race is no longer relevant by subscribing to a relatively new racial ideology called "color-blind racism" (p. 2). *Disgrasian* pushes back by speaking about race issues, as they pertain to Asian Americans, in explicit terms.

Problematic *people* of Asian ethnicity also get called out as Disgrasians --"A disgrace. To the race" -- as the tagline reads on the blog's header, and the idea for which the blog is named. It

⁵⁷ <http://disgrasian.com/2011/02/intern-jasmines-links-of-the-daysian-18/>

is a “weekly dishonor given to someone or something that has done something so foul and terrible that we may all be worse off because of it.” M. Night Shyamalan⁵⁸, whom I discuss in chapter 5, has received this honor, as has conservative Filipina pundit, Michelle Malkin⁵⁹, and Louisiana Governor and birther movement supporter, Bobby Jindal⁶⁰. *Disgrasian* complicates the false dichotomy of model minority and misguided race zealot by shaming other ingroup members who move us backward instead of progressing toward equality in representation. Of course, they also celebrate people they call Amazians, or “amazin’ Asians.” These are Asian Americans whom they honor for accomplishments in everything from sports and entertainment to politics, science and spelling bees. Recent Amazians have included Marshall Zhang, 16, “the kid that may have cured cystic fibrosis,”⁶¹ the late Fred Korematsu, activist who was arrested for resisting internment during World War II, and the “people in panda suits” who reintroduce baby pandas to the wild at the Hetaoping Research and Conservation Centre in Sichuan Province, China. This serves the important function of giving Asian Americans the media coverage they do not get in mainstream media, while also demonstrating the diversity of Asian America, including stereotypical achievements in science, math and medicine.

Disgrasian demonstrates that engaging an oppositional identity can be possible without having to be dry, scholarly, or even serious. They “do” resistance using ironic posturing and biting sarcasm to expose an underlying theme -- public discourse and pop culture representations continue to subordinate, denigrate and marginalize Asian Americans in the U.S. and Asians more broadly in a global capitalist system. Its sarcastic and sometimes vulgar humor upsets

⁵⁸ <http://disgrasian.com/2010/07/the-last-airbender-may-be-the-worst-movie-of-all-time-which-means-there-may-be-such-a-thing-as-karma/>

⁵⁹ <http://disgrasian.com/2009/07/with-my-mind-on-my-malkin-and-my-malkin-on-my-mind/>

⁶⁰ <http://disgrasian.com/2011/05/disgrasian-of-the-week-bobby-birther-jindal-proves-hes-a-us-citizen-and-a-gaping-asshole/>

⁶¹ <http://disgrasian.com/2011/05/amazian-of-the-week-marshall-zhang-the-kid-that-may-have-cured-cystic-fibrosis/>

expectations of politeness. Through posts that have many characteristics in common with online rants and flames, they offer readers a vocabulary to name issues of Asian American representation that tend to be invisible in mainstream media. Wong and Nguyen also expose inferential racism and call out problematic terms, as well as problematic people -- Asian Americans who are complicit in maintaining white supremacy. But they also applaud the efforts of Asian Americans who do good, or who oppose and resist subjugation.

Conclusion

Angry Asian Man with his unassuming, conversational style, feels the farthest thing from the overzealous and misguided proponent of Asian superiority, Yu claims to mock in this blog. Angry Asian Man reads like a journal of casual observations of anti-Asian racism that has no interest in attempting to persuade others, or as he says “win anyone over.” At the same time, he makes no claims of objectivity. He is just one person voicing his opinion publicly. But, in fact, it is this approach to presenting his sharply critical insights that make his blog so disarming. Through his Angry Asian Man persona, Yu demonstrates critical deconstructions of media texts pointing out, for example, persistent degrading representations and exploitations of Asian Americans in film and television, interesting comparisons across media texts, and ties to histories and politics. And often this commentary that he shares with readers become only part of what is a multimedia experience as the nature of this medium means videos, sound and images that he critiques can be consumed immediately. The result of this is that it doesn’t matter if the reader had seen a commercial, for example, that Angry Asian Man gets angry about because as often as he can, Yu includes a sample of the text in question. This makes him both a source of valuable insight and of knowledge of basic concepts for deconstructing media representations of race. He also serves as a model – he’s non-radical “regular guy,” who has a problem with the way we talk

about and represent Asian Americans in mainstream media and public discourse. He makes contestation and disruption a part of normal conversation and not just the talk of activist-types because he incorporates humor and demonstrates critique through sarcasm. And audiences are hearing him, evidenced by his count of 10,273 followers on Twitter and frequent invitations from colleges, high schools and other organizations that ask him to speak at their events.

Disgrasian also claims to speak for nobody but themselves, reminding readers that Asian Americans are a diverse group with many different voices. Theirs happens to be one that combines caustic wit with drama and absurdity. This gives the blog a gossip rag appeal that makes reading it a guilty pleasure in itself, and has at times drawn the ire of academics.

However, Disgrasian is laudable for its explicit definition of key issues of Asian American representation in their Disgrasian dictionary, even giving names to tropes that have not, for the most part, been named. They also play an important role by honoring Asian Americans while shaming others, which attests again to the diversity of our community while also emphasizing the agency that we have whether we use it for progress or in ways that damage.

There is much evidence beyond mere speculation that Disgrasian is serving an important function in awakening oppositional consciousness of Asian American readers. In our interview, for example, they mentioned the fan mail they receive on a regular basis. Wang recounts a numerous letters that confirm the importance of articulating complicated situations for their readers. They say things like “the things you write make sense,” “You wrote what I couldn’t put into words,” or “thank you for writing that I felt so alone.” Particularly interesting was their discovery that their readers are often in high school. Letters have come in that thank Wang and Nguyen for bringing issues to the table they did not know about and even think of them as their virtual “big sisters” which they claim, “happens a lot.” This is particularly heartwarming for

these two women who “grew up in the heartland” and lament, “ when I was in high school and searching for a voice that spoke to me I couldn’t find someone that looked like me” (personal interview). Their demand is further evidenced by their 5,444 Twitter followers at last count and invitation to blog on the Huffington Post.

Gayatri Spivak (1988) has observed that the subaltern “has neither the epistemic capital nor the political position to have a voice because both the capital and power have remained in the hands of the dominant.” However, Yu, Wang and Nguyen have found a way to take that power back, by broadcasting their voices on their blogs, which requires little capital and no political clout. They are participants, producers, and agents and their sarcastic humor and casual, non-confrontational style has garnered them a large readership. The intelligent critiques they post on their heavily trafficked blogs are important to Asian America because they serve as “technologies to decolonize the imagination” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 68).

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that the increasing visibility of Asian American bodies has not lessened the importance of examining the struggles over meaning in our depictions in and exclusions from U.S. mainstream popular culture. They continue to reflect the ambivalence about understanding Asians as Americans. Images such as Chinese caricatures reminiscent of the late 19th century to early 20th century exclusion-era political cartoons still appear on mainstream apparel marketed to teenagers, and some American consumers defend retailers that circulate these blatantly racist depictions. Infantilizing, fetishistic depictions of the Oriental woman veiled thinly by camp style and ironic humor find their way on store shelves, adding exotic flair to cosmetics, toiletries and gift items. And many mainstream cultural productions continue to insist on limiting Asians to marginal roles or positions as agitators and antagonists – the bad guy, or yellow peril – in the narrative, while others practice exclusion by whitewashing and thus symbolically annihilating Asian bodies.

What has added another dimension to my examination of these depictions is the role that Asian Americans play as cultural producers and audiences. Symbolic annihilation in mainstream pop culture can occur even at the hands of Asian Americans who wield the power to determine how we are represented. And when there are derogatory depictions, whitewashing, and outright exclusions of Asian bodies, some Asian Americans protest, but many also defend those decisions with vehemence, and also chastise protestors. What Viet Thanh Nguyen (2002) calls the “ideological heterogeneity” of audiences becomes clear from analysis of the online discussions that erupted when Asian Americans challenged problematic representations in pop culture.

Drawing from Cultural Studies as my theoretical framework was important because throughout this project I have argued that there is a bias and partiality that privileges whiteness (H.-K. S. Kang, 2010). The critical study of popular culture as a methodology has enabled me to begin to understand why Asian American audiences fail to question assumptions about white supremacy that place them in a subordinate social position. It also allowed me to examine the creation of a “mythic image of Asia that empowers the West and rationalizes Euroamerican authority over the Asian other” (Marchetti, 1993, p. 6). This takes place, for example, on campy labels for women’s soaps and lotions that depict Asian women laboring to manufacture export goods for a western consumer. Camp – once a subversive wink shared among marginalized populations -- has turned into a knowing smirk directed at the dominant majority in a mainstream audience where the Asian is the *subject* of the racialized camp joke instead of its agent. This is how OPI and Blue Q achieve their camp joke – they participate in an othering of the Oriental using irony, aesthetics, theatricality, and humor.

Cultural Studies is a methodology that also acknowledges our active negotiations with texts, and as I have argued, studies of Asian American representation in popular culture tend to focus on texts and ignore audiences. Audiences’ opportunities to intervene in what Stuart Hall (1981) calls, the “ideological terrain of struggle” have been bolstered by the proliferation of new web spaces. Forums, blogs, comment areas and other web spaces have created a culture of sharing, broadcasting, and conversation about other popular culture texts. While it is not the democratic utopia that enables anyone’s voice to be heard and to resist hierarchical modes of communication (Gurak, 2004) as I demonstrated in chapter 2, the internet has certainly provided a space for furious debate. What I derived from my examination of audience negotiations with popular culture texts is that colorblindness and its corollary – post-race, the belief that we have

moved on from a racist society to one free of racism – have become excuses for derogatory representations of Asians and, in some cases, for our exclusion altogether.

But I have also chronicled a few voices from the Asian American community – blogs such as Angry Asian Man, Disgrasian and Racebending – that pre-empt the colonizing tendencies on web spaces by turning off or moderating comments, and have risen above the chatter with their sharp well-written critiques. They are participants, producers, and agents and their sarcastic humor and casual, non-confrontational style has garnered them a large readership. Their blogs exemplify “technologies to decolonize the imagination” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 68).

Looking Ahead

My observations about the struggles over meaning and the agency asserted by audiences warrant further analysis of other, new popular culture texts. There are several that have caught my attention recently. For example, the classically racist stereotype of the small-in-stature, emasculated Asian male reappears in the new CBS sitcom, *2 Broke Girls*. In it, Matthew Moy appears as “Han,” essentially a remake of the character, Long Duk Dong from *16 Candles*⁶².



Figure 7.1 Han, center, from the television sitcom, *2 Broke Girls*

⁶² http://www.grantland.com/blog/hollywood-prospectus/post/_/id/41440/yo-is-this-racist-2-broke-girls-and-the-new-long-duk-dong-we-never-asked-for

Camp and the masquerading of the Asian other, as in the case of Miso Pretty, appeared again in November 2011 with the launch of Gwen Stefani’s “Harajuku Mini,” a line of children’s clothing for Target⁶³. Little girls can now wear the “Japanese-inspired” fashions designed by Stefani.



Figure 7.2 Harajuku Mini children’s clothing from Target

How we represent ourselves when given the opportunity to be producers in U.S. mainstream culture is still tainted by double consciousness that encourages us to see ourselves from the perspective of the white majority. Another example of this appears in the campy cute Orientalism in feminine commodities, such as in the “Oriental Girl” necklace sold by Korean-owned retailer of affordable fashionable apparel for young women, Forever 21.

⁶³ <http://disgrasian.com/2011/11/disgrasian-of-the-week-gwen-stefanis-harajuku-mini-for-target/>

FOREVER 21®

TRACK ORDER STORE LOCATOR US MY BAG 0 ITEMS \$0.00

SIGN IN / JOIN enter keyword or item# GO

NEW ARRIVALS APPAREL ACCESSORIES SHOES BEAUTY BRANDS PLUS SIZES MENS GIRLS SALE BLOG

SIGN-UP & ENTER TO WIN A \$210 GIFT CARD: [ENTER HERE!](#) | [FREE SHIPPING ON U.S. ORDERS OF \\$50 OR MORE DETAILS](#)

ACCESSORIES [Womens Accessories](#), [jewelry](#), [fashion trends Under \\$20 | Forever 21](#) > [Necklaces](#), [fashion jewelry](#), [heart necklace](#), [pendant Under \\$20 | Forever 21](#) > [Oriental Girl Necklace](#)

NEW ARRIVALS
BACK IN STOCK
STYLE DEALS
JEWELRY
NECKLACES
EARRINGS
BRACELETS
RINGS & PINS
WATCHES
BAGS & WALLET
HAIR ACCESSORIES
HATS
SCARVES & GLOVES
BELTS
EYEWEAR
LEWEAR
GIFT ITEMS
GIFT CARDS/CERTIFICATES
SALE

Oriental Girl Necklace [Prev Product](#) [Next Product](#)
\$1.50

Qty
Size

[Add To Wish List](#) [Email a Friend](#) [ADD TO YOUR BAG](#)

[Share this Product](#)

Description [Size Chart](#)

Final Sale
Style Deals A curb chain necklace that features a lacquered Oriental girl pendant and a lobster claw clasp. High polish finish. Lightweight.

DETAILS:
- 18" approx. chain length; 0.6" width x 0.9" length
- Imported
ProductCode : 1000032844

Figure 7.3 Oriental Girl necklace from Forever 21

The issue of whitewashing characters originally written to be Asian has also resurfaced in the making of the Japanese anime film, *Akira*. There is only one major character in the film that will be played by an Asian American actor. And as the blog, io9.com, announced in a post headline, “Garrett Hedlund offered lead role in *Akira*. Crap.” That left only one lead role being cast for an Asian American. As Angry Asian Man writes:

Is that it? One role for an Asian guy?

And let's face it, not one of the central characters, and one that ends up -- spoiler! -- getting killed. Seems fitting, in some ways, considering the massive liberties they've taken with the source material. And fans are supposed to be happy they're throwing us a bone?



Figure 7.4 Anime series-turned-live action movie, *All You Need is Kill*, starring Tom Cruise

Hiroshi Sakurazaka's *All You Need is Kill* is another anime series-turned-live action movie that whitewashes a character by casting a white actor for the lead role, in this case, Tom Cruise. The whitewashing of anime when it is remade by Hollywood is an interesting recurring pattern that deserves further scholarly attention.

Blogs like *Racebending*, *Disgrasian* and *Angry Asian Man* continue to offer their critical eye and in unique ways -- employing humor and sarcasm -- bring attention to urgent and complex issues of representation. They have earned legitimacy as trusted source of critical, honest, assessments of how U.S. mainstream culture is doing despite their efforts to strategically resist identifying as experts. Perhaps following their lead, there are more cultural productions appearing recently and some of them take a somewhat different, more abrasive approach to performing resistance. One such production is the independent slasher film, *Chink* a commentary on our double consciousness and colonial mentality in the form of a work of fiction. The

independent film by screenwriter Koji Steven Sakai and producer Quentin Lee is billed as "the first Asian American serial killer movie." According to Angry Asian Man,

Chink is about an Asian American man who has internalized the racism he felt as a child and turned it into a hatred of all Asian [sic] -- including himself. His anger and his desire to be like his hero, Ted Bundy, leads him to violence and ultimately to his dream of becoming the greatest serial killer in history.

The filmmakers write:

It's time for the so-called "model minority" stereotype to die. Take some dynamite and a blowtorch and blow it out of the water. Chink is a slasher movie with a message. With this film, we intend to explore issues about racial identity and self-hate, but stories about identity politics don't have to take themselves so seriously. They can have blood, guts, and sex too.

As of this writing, Sakai, Lee, and their team are still in the process of fundraising. It will be interesting to examine their messages of resistance, as well as how audiences respond to its provocative subtext.

Another emerging voice is that of Andrew Ti, author of the very new Tumblr blog, *Yo, is this racist?*, started November 1, 2011⁶⁴. Taking a cue from *Angry Asian Man* and *Disgrasian*, Ti also starts out with "I am by no means any kind of authority on anything"⁶⁵, and writes in an

⁶⁴

[http://www.alternet.org/story/153628/%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26tilde%3Byo,_is_this_racist%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26trade%3B_andrew_ti%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26trade%3Bs_tumblr_has_your_\(hilarious\)_answer](http://www.alternet.org/story/153628/%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26tilde%3Byo,_is_this_racist%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26trade%3B_andrew_ti%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26trade%3Bs_tumblr_has_your_(hilarious)_answer)

⁶⁵

[http://www.alternet.org/story/153628/%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26tilde%3Byo,_is_this_racist%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26trade%3B_andrew_ti%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26trade%3Bs_tumblr_has_your_\(hilarious\)_answer](http://www.alternet.org/story/153628/%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26tilde%3Byo,_is_this_racist%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26trade%3B_andrew_ti%26acirc%3B%26euro%3B%26trade%3Bs_tumblr_has_your_(hilarious)_answer)

unapologetic, sarcastic tone, and claims no academic authority⁶⁶. But he is by far more abrasive. Channing Kennedy (2012) provides an comparably witty and fitting description of the blog, “Part advice column, part humor site, part schadenfreude shooting gallery.” Ti, a Chinese American raised in the Midwest, answers questions submitted online about whether or not various phrases or social situations are racist. His answer is almost always “yes” and he makes his point using a generous helping of profanity. “If there were a tagline for the site,” says Ti, “it would be ‘Fuck You, You Racist Sack of Shit.’”

One of the most exciting and very recent developments in Asian American anti-racist cultural production is the *YOMYOMF* YouTube channel⁶⁷. Announced in November 2011, this channel will broadcast a wide variety of original content, both scripted and reality series, in such genres as comedy, animation, music, and lifestyle. The founders of the popular blog, *YOMYOMF* (You Offend Me You Offend My Family) include Justin Lin (director of *Fast Five* and the groundbreaking *Better Luck Tomorrow*) and Asian American YouTube celebrities include Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu (KevJumba, who has also appeared on *The Amazing Race*), as well as NBA star Baron Davis and many others. The programs will also feature an impressive cast including Jessica Alba, Far East Movement, *Community*’s Danny Pudi, Joe and Anthony Russo, directors of *Arrested Development*, Harry Shum Jr. from *Glee* and Iris Yamashita (Academy Award-nominated writer, *Letters from Iwo Jima*)⁶⁸.

As Ryan Higa explains, “To be able to create the type of network that I’ve always wanted to see, to help redefine what an Asian American channel can be in the 21st Century and to

⁶⁶ <http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/yo-is-this-racist-tumblr/>

⁶⁷ <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2011/10/yomyomf-network-is-coming-to-youtube.html>

⁶⁸ <http://thenextweb.com/google/2011/11/01/justin-lin-of-fast-five-heading-up-yomyomfs-youtube-original-content-channel/>

showcase the amazing talent out there—this is an unprecedented opportunity.”⁶⁹ And it is indeed unprecedented to have this many influential Asian American cultural producers – bloggers, actors, filmmakers, YouTube celebrities, and others – collaborating on a production that will be broadcast so widely at a time when social media has hit its stride as a means for sharing content. As YOMYOMF was originally a blog featuring social commentary often dealing at least tangentially with issues of race, and the channel’s producers have promised to maintain continuity in its style, it will be exciting to see how critique, cultural production, and content sharing over social media will come together from what Chela Sandoval (2000) calls “a set of processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination” (p. 68).

⁶⁹ <http://youoffendmeyouoffendmyfamily.com/it%E2%80%99s-official-the-yomyomf-network-is-coming-to-youtube/>

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