Representations

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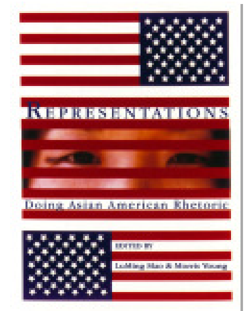

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"ARTFULBIGOTRY & KITSCH"

A Study of Stereotype, Mimicry, and Satire in Asian American T-Shirt Rhetoric

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Prior to starting graduate school in the spring of 2004, I, Vincent, worked as a substitute teacher at a local high school. When I walked into class one day, one of the students, who apparently identified me as Asian, stood up, shook his hips, and started singing, "She-bangs, she-bangs, she moves, she moves" in broken English, mimicking the rejected American Idol participant William Hung. Coincidentally, in the spring of 2006, I entered a local grade school to help conduct interviews for a fellow graduate student; a small child, probably in first grade, noticed me in the hallway and broke into a performance of martial arts–like hand movements and facial expressions, saying, "Waaaahhh." And, after a recent funeral, my Asian American friend thanked the white host for serving rice at the reception, only to have the host say, "No problem. You know, ching chong," while using her two index fingers to pull back the corners of her eyelids, making slanted eyes.

These examples demonstrate the prevalence of racialized mimicry in private and personal settings. Instances of racialized mimicry are not limited to the private realm, however; they also occur more broadly within popular culture. For example, in 2004, William Hung became famous not for his ability to sing, but for speaking broken English, singing off-key, and lacking rhythm on the dance floor.[1] In January of 2006, Spencer's Gifts released a T-shirt that read, "Hang out with your wang out," with an accompanying image of a bucktoothed and slant-eyed Asian man wearing a rice paddy conical hat and holding his penis (Jackson 2006). Later that year, Adidas released a limited-edition shoe line called the "Yellow

1. This fame was eventually followed by the sale of a variety of William Hung–inspired merchandise and a William Hung album. Josephine Lee (2006) has attended to Hung as an example of "bad performance" that reveals the limitations of stereotype.

series," with the tongue on one shoe featuring a bucktoothed and slant-eyed "Chinaman" with a bowl haircut (BBC 2006).

The examples of William Hung, Spencer's Gifts, and Adidas are just three of the innumerable popular culture events that help demonstrate a relationship between symbolic actions and personal experiences and, for Asian American consumers, the psychic violence of repeated and accumulated instances of private and public humiliation. Repeated instances of public and private mimicry and mockery and of (mis)re-representation function together to imprint on the psyches of Asian Americans and others an indelible caricature: a powerful marker that serves as a social stigma and effective arbiter of power relations, a merging of commodification and capitalism that perpetuates a contemporary kind of racism—not one where dogs are set upon children or protestors are fire hosed in the streets, but rather where image, text, and performance psychologically attack and scar. This is what we would call a "spectacle of racism"—a (mis)represented, mocking, and commodified public performance of race and racialized communities that simultaneously impacts the psychosocial understanding within racialized communities and shapes the psychosocial understanding of those who interact with members of racialized communities and those who ultimately influence policies, structures, and institutions that affect these racialized communities. Debord suggests a spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relationship between people mediated by images (1994, 12). By using Asian Americans and their visual representations in popular culture, the "spectacle of racism" via mass-produced images and products helps mediate the relationships of non-Asians with Asian Americans and among Asian Americans.[2]

In this essay, we demonstrate that mimicry/mockery is one way the dominant white society has helped control racialized communities historically. In 2002, clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch (A&F) produced and distributed a T-shirt that used mimicry and mockery to poke fun at Asian Americans, hence conspicuously displaying its power to represent Asian American identities and in the process reproduce and consolidate unequal power relations between the dominant society and Asian Americans racially. In response, Blacklava, an independent

2. These examples are not the first examples of the "spectacle of racism," however. The spectacle of racism applies to many other marginalized groups, especially African Americans. Images serve as the mediating factor between social interactions where visual culture, such as television and photographs, serve as the only representation of people of color to communities that do not have many people of color.

Asian American–owned apparel company, satirically reworked A&F's representation, using the technology of mimicry of A&F's design to its own end and against A&F in an attempt to reverse the original racializing effects and hence to turn the gaze back onto A&F's original act of racial mimicry and mockery. In this case study, we argue that commodification and capitalism converge to produce a spectacle of racism, but that the cultural products that emerge do not have a singular effect and meaning; the same context allows for re-representation and refigurement of symbols with powerful effectivity. In order to understand this spectacle, we first assess this example in relation to what Said defines as Orientalism and what Bourdieu theorizes as symbolic domination; then, we evaluate A&F's mimicry and mockery of Asian Americans and Blacklava's reuse of that imagery by drawing on Bhabha's theories of mimicry and ambivalence.

Although the response to A&F by Asian Americans came in the forms of public protests, e-mail petitions, we primarily concentrate our analysis on the counter-rhetorical protest T-shirts released by Blacklava afterward.[3] Counter-rhetorical in the sense that, while it challenges an already existing rhetoric event, it is not just a response but becomes a rhetoric itself, articulating its own claims. Thus, it is not merely reactive but is also productive. By analyzing the counter-rhetorical T-shirts of Blacklava, we seek to draw attention to Asian American artists as activists whose rhetoric critiques commodification and symbolic domination through satire, recirculating the images and calling upon Asian Americans to remember, possibly prevent, and ultimately to take actions to deter future acts of commodification, while problematically using the self-same strategy of commodifying the images. We take up Chuh's (2003) challenge to Asian American studies to "imagine otherwise" and

3. In stating "counter-rhetoric" and "counter-rhetorical," we draw upon public and counter-public theories. In citing Fraser's (1993) seminal piece, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Asen and Brouwer (2001, 7) argue that "counter-public spheres voice oppositional needs and values . . . by affirming specificity of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or some other axis of difference" in order to highlight the multiplicity of publics. In labeling the T-shirt "counter rhetorical," we seek to highlight the recurring oscillation between encountering and countering symbolic violence and racist rhetoric and the affirming actions for counter publics, while downplaying the event that spurred the "protest," despite being located in that event. Protest might indicate a temporal dimension, whereas counter rhetorical implies a continuing struggle, one that continues after the offensive T-shirts are removed and the protests fade away. Thus, a counter rhetorical shirt deals with the racist imagery of A&F but also becomes a rhetoric against racist imagery and corporate practices beyond the A&F event.

to extend studies past topical discourse, to move beyond simple representational objectification into the realm of the epistemological, which might be considered "rhetorical."[4] Even though our chapter interrogates A&F's representational objectification of Asian Americans, we are more interested in the counterrhetoric of Asian American activists than in simply demarcating instances of racist discourse, such as A&F's T-shirt.[5] Even though the actions of A&F draw upon Manicheanistic dualities and divisions as applied to Asian Americans, the dialectical tension of art and offense emerge in A&F and then resurface within the Blacklava T-shirts under a newly reconfigured Asian American rhetoric.

Finally, the rhetoric of the Blacklava T-shirts demonstrates that we are not helpless within a world where commodified racism persists and that all is not hopelessly overdetermined. The Blacklava counter-rhetorical T-shirts demonstrate that Asian Americans can and sometimes do perform what Tina Chen (2005) calls "double agency": the critique of institutions that represent Asian Americans as "aliens," that simultaneously functions as a claim to U.S. American identity in the process. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to connect postcolonial studies, rhetorical studies, and Asian American studies through a study of the counterrhetoric of Asian American arts activism against the corporate racism of A&F and to suggest the possibility of social change regarding the positions of Asian Americans.

SYMBOLIC DOMINATION, MIMICRY, AND AMBIVALENT IMAGES

Said's (1979) well-known conception of Orientalism has implications for our theory of rhetorical discourse. In this vein, Orientalism is a communicative discourse that dominates, restructures, and maintains authority over the Orient. The Orient, figured in Said's Orientalism as the West's Other, is a historical accretion juxtaposed against the Occident that renders the tropes of Orient and Occident in a binaristic relation of power

4. Other Asian American scholars have looked beyond critical studies on topical discourse. For example, Gudykunst's (2001) book, *Asian American Ethnicity and Communication*, takes a social science perspective on Asian American communication. However, as Ono and Nakayama (2004) argue, Gudykunst's objectivist social science perspective overlooks the political and activist implications of the term "Asian American."

5. We suggest here that simply documenting how racialized and racist images relate to particular racialized bodies may, as a rhetorical move, tend to reproduce and possibly sediment social relations without the study of an actional/activist counterrhetoric. Hence, the study of activist counterrhetoric also seeks to deterritorialize and de-sediment racist social relations.

(5). This binary relation occurs through the production of Orientalist knowledge that reifies the notion of difference, the superiority of the West, and the inferiority of the Eastern Other. The production and perpetuation of Orientalist knowledge requires that the Occident, which characterizes the West as "normal," saves and civilizes the Other through ritualized and repeated acts of domination (Ono and Buescher 2001). Thus, Orientalism requires the creation of an Other, and we argue it also requires what Bourdieu (2001, 5) calls "repeated acts of symbolic domination" to help maintain power.

Symbolic domination is a result of continual and repeated symbolic violence: a violence that Bourdieu (2001, 5) states is "exerted through purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), or even feeling." Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, 5) define symbolic domination as the means by which violence is exerted and domination attained and maintained, a method that works through symbols and is "the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power."[6] Within this definition of symbolic domination, racialized mimicry and stereotype serve as tools to enact symbolic violence and reify symbolic domination.

Both racialized mimicry and stereotype play a role in the history of symbolic colonial domination. Bhabha (1994, 85) states that colonialism "repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce" and uses mimicry as an "elusive and effective" strategy for perpetuating colonial power and knowledge. In addition, Bhabha (70) states that "the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself." Stereotype serves as the template from which racialized mimicry is performed and enacted; its representation is performed and propagated. Colonial mimicry desires a "reformed, recognizable Other *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" when compared with the colonial people and power (86). Thus, colonial mimicry employs the stereotype as a tool to exert power, control, and symbolic domination over its subjects through the stereotype's ambivalent and contradictory mode of representation. Mimicry is effective at contributing to an environment of symbolic domination

6. However, DeLuca and Peeples (2002, 138) interpret symbolic violence differently and define it as "acts directed toward property, not people, and designed to attract media attention."

because of its ambivalence. Ambivalence is the uncertainty and coexistence of opposing attitudes toward the subject of domination that continually produces a slippage between what is different and what is the same. Cloud (1992, 314) addresses the role of ambivalence in her study of the television show *Spenser for Hire,* stating that "these mechanisms of ambivalence" can help us "understand the discursive representations of urban blacks in the United States." Like Cloud, we study ambivalence, stereotype, and mimicry as a way to understand the representations and the rhetoric surrounding marginalized communities, in our case, Asian Americans. Thus, mimicry is a strategy of dual articulation that appropriates the Other at the very same time that it functions to visualize power through ambivalence. Mimicry signals what is inappropriate in the Other, while delineating who has power and who is dominant, thus reinforcing unequal colonial power relations. The representation of the difference of the Other becomes a process of disavowal: the Other's difference is the reason for its inferiority, but through mimicry that difference is denied and yet rendered mimickable. Young (2004, 2) states that literacy "has been key in the construction of a person's identity, legitimacy, and citizenship when that person is racially marked as 'Other.'" While Young recognizes standards of literacy proficiency as a marker of difference, we also add here the physicality and image of bodies to text: the representation of difference via mimicry articulates a discourse of reform, regulation, and difference, which attempts to control what the "Other" can and should be. Bhabha argues, however, that mimicry also provides a space of resistance for the colonized. While the colonized are well aware of the colonizers' representations of them, the colonizer, entrenched in the stereotype, does not understand that colonized representations can be flawed. In the rhetorical context, mimicry and stereotype expose a space for potential resistance from the colonized, and the colonized can use this space and knowledge of flawed colonial representations to produce a rhetoric of resistance.

In short, colonial mimicry disavows the Other's grounds for articulating a legitimate identity based on difference while simultaneously attempting to appropriate the identity of the Other. The strategic desire of colonial mimicry, however, is to have objects that represent what Bhabha (1994) calls the *metonymy of presence,* where a referent is used to identify and also to substitute for the person. A repeated stereotype, then, is metonymic: it is an inadequate substitution for the Other—and

constructs discriminatory identities across "cultural norms and classification," such as the historical "Simian Black, the Lying Asiatic" or the contemporary Arab terrorist. The metonymy of presence and metonymic nature of stereotype strategically confuses the meanings and representations of the colonized. For relations established and maintained through mimicry, the Other becomes an "*object* of regulatory power" (90).

The process of mimicry creates the binary power relations of Orientalism and the construction of the "Other." Mimicry splits discourse into two attitudes and ways of thinking about the Other: one takes reality into account while the Other rearticulates a "reality" constructed by mimicry (Bhabha 1994, 91). For example, mimicry can work through language, as in the mimicking (and making a farce of) African American ghetto dialects and images. Thus, the farce of mimicry denies marginalized groups the ability to represent themselves and claims the power to represent the Other; in short, the issue of mimicry is an issue of representation.

Bourdieu (2001), Bhabha (1994), Said (1979), and others argue that the symbolic violence, Orientalism, and mimicry enacted through images work together to reify colonial power. Corporations like A&F play a particular role contemporarily in this realm of colonial power. Where colonial powers have affected national boundaries, corporations have played a larger role in shaping the transnational landscape. Corporations in this postcolonial and postmodern world have found a new place, not only as producers of products but also as ambassadors to other countries and producers and distributors of cultural products, such as music, clothing, and movies. Examples of such phenomena include the circulation of Nike and McDonalds commodities worldwide. Masao Miyoshi (1995) comments on the propagation of products by transnational corporations (TNCs), such as Nike, that dictate global economies and local industries; he explicates how these TNCs also prevent the possibilities for resistance. Instead of colonialism, we have "corporationalism," where corporations enact rules and norms that attempt symbolic domination and symbolic violence, not in the name of civilizing or manifest destiny, but rather in the name of profit.[7] Yet, as much as corporations are working in the name of profit, McMillian (1987) reminds us that they are also public and persuasive entities.

7. The documentary *The Corporation* by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott (2005) traces the rise of the corporation within the United States and the global effects of the transnational corporations.

Symbolic domination by corporations does not attempt to civilize as much as to commodify the Other. The commodification of racism and attempts at symbolic domination via mimicry signal an opposition to a folkloric era of corporate social responsibility.[8]

In the case of A&F, corporate social irresponsibility is enacted through the commodification and sale of racist and offensive dominant representations of Asian Americans, thus reifying colonial relations through capitalist practices that are often seen as apolitical and race-neutral. By analyzing A&F's T-shirts, we can see the prevalence of corporate irresponsibility as a spectacle of racism. The Blacklava T-shirts as an example, however, provide us the opportunity to see how marginalized groups of people hold A&F accountable for corporate social irresponsibility. We can see how Asian American rhetoric positions itself as a mode of self-representation and as an area of artistic and cultural production and how it participates in the public and social enactment of ethics to combat corporate attempts at symbolic domination.

AN EMERGING ASIAN AMERICAN RHETORIC

In 2002, the Ohio-based clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch released a line of T-shirts that spurred many Asian Americans into action.[9] After much protest from Asian American student groups, A&F issued a formal apology and ultimately recalled the T-shirt line. In response to the release of the A&F line of clothing, Blacklava designed its own T-shirt using some of the same offensive images on the A&F shirts but reading "ArtfulBigotry & Kitsch" instead of Abercrombie & Fitch. Thus, Blacklava reproduced the offensive images on T-shirts and in the public

8. McBride (2005) criticizes A&F's institutionalization of elite whiteness and racism in its stores and manuals, albeit from a cultural studies perspective. From an organizational communication perspective, Lammers, Barbour, and Duggan (2003) argue that the organizational phenomenon of institutionalization can easily copy and propagate instances of corporate social irresponsibility, especially if they prove to be profitable. Lammers, Barbour, and Duggan (320) call for the advent of an institutional perspective that "emphasizes the rules, values, and beliefs that surround organizations and their members as critical components of behavior and communication practices," and recognize that corporate social irresponsibility can easily be copied and enacted by fellow corporations. McBride and Lammers, Barbour, and Duggan attend to the spread of corporate social irresponsibility, such as the case of Spencer's Gifts mimicking A&F's T-shirt designs, but from differing disciplinary perspectives.

9. We decided not to describe the T-shirts at this point in the essay. A brief description would not adequately illustrate why A&F's T-shirts offended the Asian American activist contingent. We present a full description of both A&F's and Blacklava's T-shirts later in the essay in the context of our analysis.

sphere but did so in order to produce an ostensibly new cultural, potentially resistant, meaning. Blacklava's T-shirt satirically mimics A&F's actions, while urging those who wear or view the T-shirt to remember A&F's original act and prevent future instances of mass-produced and mass-marketed racism.

Bhabha's (1994) notions of mimicry and stereotype and Said's (1979) "Other" demonstrate the neocolonial nature of dominant representations of Asian Americans. Mimicry and stereotype work together to exert symbolic domination (Bourdieu 2001) over Asian Americans and thus reify Asian Americans' status as the "Other." These neocolonialist tendencies are exemplified in dominant rhetoric and representations of Asian Americans, most notably the A&F shirts. In short, A&F's use of mimicry and stereotype demonstrated their colonial relationships of symbolic domination and attempted control over Asian Americans. Nevertheless, in this context, we can see the emergence of an Asian American rhetoric through the Blacklava case study.

Asian American communication studies and Asian American studies have recently highlighted the malleability of Asian American identity. As we have seen, however, Asian Americans are publicly constructed and represented by dominant discourse as a specific "Other." Thus, Asian Americanists have seldom attended to *how* Asian Americans publicly construct themselves through rhetoric. In addition, the field of rhetoric has rarely attended to communities of marginalized people through an analysis of their own vernacular discourse and public rhetoric. Through a conception of Asian American rhetoric, we can see *how* Asian Americans can publicly construct and put forth these messages in addition to seeing how these constructions were developed for and by Asian Americans through a critique of what Ono and Sloop (1995) call "vernacular discourse." A critique of vernacular discourse is a critique of the rhetoric of the everyday, including the rhetoric produced with, for, and by communities on the margins (27). By drawing upon vernacular rhetoric, we theorize Asian American rhetoric as both a resistant and self-representational discourse; Asian American rhetoric is an act of self-articulation and control by Asian Americans. Asian American rhetoric serves as a stabilizer—a fixing of a particular identity in a certain political and social context or situation. In this case, Asian American rhetoric arises as a minority discourse to fix, both spatially and correctively, the meaning and identity of Asian American activists. Asian American rhetoric resists by complicating the symbolic registers

Asian Americans inhabit, in this case by satirically reproducing the images within a politicized space of a T-shirt. In the process of resisting, Asian American rhetoric also serves as a mode of representation, positing a more complicated representation of Asian Americanness; in this case Asian American activists are cognizant of the symbolic violence being perpetrated.

"TWO WONGS MAKE IT WHITE"

A&F is a nationally known clothing retail corporation that heads four different brands: the flagship A&F; the children's version, simply named abercrombie; the surf-and-turf-themed Hollister; and the upscale adult Ruehl. A&F describes itself as an "All-American" organization, with the label dating back to 1892 (*A&F History*). A&F boasts on its website that they have outfitted numerous famous Americans, such as Charles Lindbergh, former president Teddy Roosevelt, and writer Ernest Hemingway (A&F History 2006). Since 1998, however, A&F has refashioned its image to become a "lifestyle brand"—consumers purchase the clothing for the image and lifestyle it portrays rather than for functionality.[10] Currently, the A&F corporation operates 355 A&F stores, 201 Abercrombie stores, 447 Hollister stores, and 22 Ruehl stores in the United States. For the fiscal year of 2007, the A&F corporation "reported sales of $3.75 billion, up 13% from the previous year, and net income of $475.7 million" in U.S. dollars (Abercrombie & Fitch 2006). Despite its financial success, A&F has had its share of controversy that extends beyond recent Asian American outrage. Parents were infuriated with A&F's 2003 "Christmas Field Guide" catalog, equating some of the photographs with soft-core pornography marketed to impressionable teenagers (Kadzin 2003). In November 2005, high school–aged female teenagers and others spoke out against T-shirt slogans that were emblazoned across the chest: "With These, Who Needs Brains" (Tecson 2005). Most recently, A&F was indicted for discriminatory hiring practices for denying jobs to people of color and for moving employees of color to the back to do inventory while keeping white employees on the sales floor (NewsSource13 2008).

10. Dwight McBride's (2005) "Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch" documents an excellent history of A&F and its shift from outdoors clothing in the early 1900 to the current brands. He also explains his disgust with A&F because of its marketing of elite whiteness. McBride cites the Asian-themed T-shirts as an example of A&F's lack of representation of people of color while demonstrating their proclivity toward whiteness.

These indictments of A&F demonstrate that A&F is explicitly engaged in creating a spectacle of racism and implicitly practicing discrimination in its policies. A&F has continued to be an emblem of fashion on college campuses and in shopping malls, however, despite these boycotts and protests.

In the spring of 2002, A&F released Asian-themed T-shirts that were "designed to appeal to young Asian shoppers with a sense of humor" (Strasburg 2002). Much to A&F's chagrin, the T-shirts infuriated many Asian Americans and resulted in a boycott of A&F and a petition to the company demanding the removal of the T-shirts. The activist movement against A&F began in California, when the China Community Development Center in San Francisco notified the Asian American Students' Association at Stanford University about the T-shirts (El Boghdady 2002). From that starting point, the story of A&F's T-shirts quickly spread around Asian American e-mail listserves and was forwarded on through people's e-mail address books (Strasburg 2002). While these e-mail notifications were being passed on, public protests were also occurring in front of A&F stores in places such as the San Francisco Bay Area of California, central Indiana, and Boston (B. Li 2002). After public e-mail protests and a deluge of phone calls by Asian American activists, A&F pulled the T-shirts from the shelves, an uncommon act for any clothing retailer (El Boghdady 2002). In addition, a spokesperson for A&F, Hampton Carney, stated, "We personally thought Asians would love this t-shirt. We're very, very, very, sorry. It's never been our intention to offend anyone" (AP 2002; Guillermo 2002). However, Carney also noted that A&F parodies all groups, not just Asian Americans, and referred to previous T-shirt designs as evidence. Despite A&F's half-hearted excuse, some Asian American activists were not satisfied with the apology, stating that a formal apology must come from the CEO, not the spokesperson.[11] The formal apology never came, however, and A&F moved on; if A&F's profits were adversely affected, any declining revenues appear to have been short-lived. There is no doubt that Asian Americans still shop at A&F (AP 2002). Indeed, current college-aged Asian Americans may have little to no recollection of the symbolic violence, racial mimicry, and stereotype that A&F invoked for humor and profit in this campaign.

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11. Chia-Chi Li (2002), Bethany Li (2002), and the Asian Student Alliance (2002) are examples of Asian American activist groups that perceived the apology as half-hearted.

Protests centered on four of five different designs; the "Wok-N-Bowl," "Buddha Bash," "Wong Brothers," and "Pizza Dojo."[12] Overall, though the T-shirts vary in color, they all have the same layout: a large design on the back with a shrunken version on the front in the left upper chest area. After A&F recalled the T-shirts, Blacklava followed with a release of its own satirized version. As rhetorical artifacts, T-shirts occupy both visual and textual spaces in the form of imagetexts, where the relations between the visual and textual are inexplicably linked in their interpretation while drawing meanings from each and producing new ones in conjunction.[13] In addition, with the marketing of A&F as a lifestyle brand and the prevalence of "branding" as a function of clothing, T-shirts display the social status and/or identity that the wearer chooses to put forth for the public to see.[14] Thus, it is important to consider both the A&F and Blacklava shirts as public displays of imagetexts along with the private reinforcement of social identity. A&F T-shirts display the imagetext of dominant representations of Asian Americans and demonstrate a spectacle of racism where the imagetext serves to reify the stereotypical notions of Asian Americans. The imagetext on the T-shirts serves as a mediator of social relations with whoever comes into contact with the T-shirt, whether in the store or, more likely, on the streets. The T-shirts' commonalities lie in their display of stereotypical roles: the forever foreigner's lack of fluency in the English language, yellow peril imagery. In the following sections, we will describe A&F's four controversial T-shirts before moving on to an analysis of Blacklava's counterrhetorical T-shirt.

12. There was a fifth T-shirt, "Dragon Lady," which also drew some attention, although not as much as the four described here.

13. Art historian W.J.T. Mitchell (1995) explains the relationship between image and text by defining three terms: image/text, imagetext, and image-text. "Image/text" is the gap in presentation between the text and image, "imagetext" is the composite or synthetic works that combine image and text, and "image-text" is the relation of the visual to the textual (89). The A&F T-shirt images are not separated from text as in the "image/text"; both image and text are interconnected and require a reading that takes both into account. In addition, the A&F shirts are more than just a relation between the visual and verbal, like the caption to a photograph, which can be read separately from the image. Thus, the A&F T-shirts resemble "imagetext," where the image and text are combined.

14. Kalle Lasne's (2000) *Culture Jam* and Naomi Klein's (2000) *No Logo* explicate the nature of branding and its impact on U.S. American consumer culture. Both scholars are influential in the *Adbusters* movement, which stresses antibranding. The process of branding is so prevalent in modern advertising, however, that even logo-less brands, like American Apparel, have a reputation that functions as a brand. In the case of American Apparel, the company brands itself as a nonsweatshop, made-in-the-U.S.A. brand.

ABERCROMBIE & FITCH'S T-SHIRT RHETORIC

The "Wok-N-Bowl" T-shirt features a cartoon with a profile of an Asian man posed in a lunging position with a bowling ball in his right hand, pulled back as if he is about to swing the ball forward to let it loose. The left profile of the face shows an extended round nose, an open mouth, and a sharply slanted eye. The clothing of the Asian man emphasizes a round conical "coolie" hat, stereotypical of depictions of Asians working in rice fields, with a white T-shirt and colored pants. The image of the Asian man appears directly above a text box that displays the A&F logo, as if the box were the floor where the man is running and bowling. Below the A&F logo a line of text reads, "Chinese Food & Bowling." Directly to the left of the man is another line of text that reads, "Let the good times roll." To the right of him is an unknown Chinese character. Above the Asian man is the main text, "Wok-N-Bowl," a take on "rock 'n' roll" subtly implying an Asian and Asian American disfluency, an oral and verbal error in the use of words in the English language.[15]

The "Buddha Bash" T-shirt displays the religious figure Buddha as a proponent of partying. We see Chinese characters on the left, next to and partly covered over by the words "Buddha Bash," written in white, with the Buddha to the right of the logo. Above is the A&F logo, this time with no graphic outline, and below the words "Buddha Bash" is a line of text that reads, "Get your Buddha on the floor."

On the "Pizza Dojo" T-shirt, "Abercrombie's" appears at the top in yellow, with "Pizza Dojo" written below it in a "chopstick" font, thus indicating that it is "Abercrombie's Pizza Dojo," that A&F possesses the Pizza Dojo. Below the "Pizza dojo" lettering is an image of an Asian man wearing a robe and tight-fitting cap with his hands holding a pizza dish and fork and smiling, looking at the viewer, as if to offer the pizza to the viewer. To the left of this image is text that reads, "You love long time." Below the man is a text box that reads, "Eat in or wok out" and below that "Call us at 1–888–520–PEZA," both texts stereotypically depicting the verbal Asian accent when speaking English.

The theme of the last T-shirt is the "Wong Brothers" laundry service. In large letters appear the words "Wong Brothers." In a smaller font

15. In what Elaine Chun (2004) calls "mock Asian stylings," she gives a linguistic perspective on the mockery of Asian accents when speaking English as a second language by non-Asians. She draws upon the examples of Shaquille O'Neal, Adam Corrolla, and more recently Rosie O'Donnell, discussing their use of "Ching-Chong" language when imitating Asians.

and below that are the words "A laundry service," and below that and to the right is a phone number. Partially superimposed onto these images is an image shaped like a clothes hanger that is broken up by that text and placed among soap bubbles. On the left and right of the T-shirt are the Wong brothers, smiling and looking jovial. Both the brothers are wearing Chinese peasant clothing and conical coolie hats and are looking out at the viewer. Their faces are round and they have slanted eyes. In the space between the two brothers and connecting them is a small banner with small print that states, "Two Wongs can make it white." The A&F logo inhabits the space directly below the banner.

"ARTFULBIGOTRY & KITSCH": COUNTERING A&F

Asian American activists understood A&F's T-shirts as an act of symbolic violence. College student activists recognized the spectacle's ability to mediate the "social relationship between people" (Debord 1994, 12). Student protesters were outraged by the commodification of the Asian American experience. Austin Chang from the Asian-focused magazine Monolid put it best when he wrote, "You have to ask yourself, who benefits, who gets empowerment, from these kinds of 'images'?" (Strasburg 2002).

In the first phase of the anti-A&F movement, Asian American activists redirected consumer buying power into a boycott to pressure A&F to remove the Asian-themed T-shirts. This phase strategically utilized new media through a combination of forwarding e-mails, contacting listserves, and online petitions.[16] Although we do not focus on this part of the anti-A&F movement by Asian Americans, we do recognize that the use of technology allowed for a quick response and the application of consumer pressure, which led to an apology and ultimately the company's withdrawal of the T-shirt. What we do focus our attention on is the counterrhetoric of Blacklava's T-shirt that addresses A&F. Originally started as a surf-inspired clothing line in 1996, Blacklava is one of the leading producers of Asian American activist-inspired merchandise and clothing, primarily through consumer access to their Web site and connections with Asian American activists.[17] In an interview with an Asian

16. In her book *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, Lisa Nakamura (2007) focuses on Asian American use of the Internet when dealing with A&F and other instances of retail racism.
17. As this essay demonstrates, Blacklava is one of the more well-known Asian American–inspired clothing lines among the Asian American activist community.

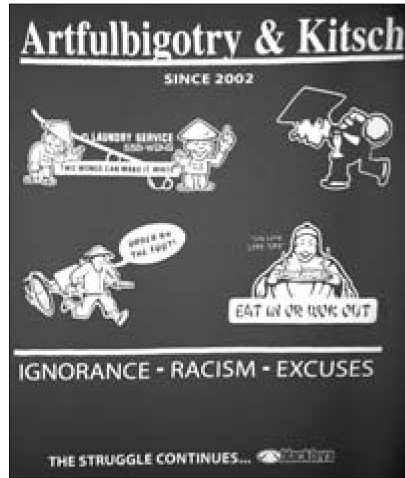
American movement webzine editor, Ryan Suda, the founder and owner of Blacklava, stated that his inspiration for the turn from "cheesy logo driven artwork" to an Asian American politically conscious clothing company came from his experience in an Asian American studies class at Cal State Fullerton; his professor distributed a poem titled "Asian Is Not Oriental," which opened his eyes and helped him to "look at things in a different way" (Pangilinan 2005). From this experience, he printed a T-shirt called "Asian is NOT Oriental." Additional T-shirts were designed by other Asian American artists and then distributed by Blacklava; among them are T-shirts with a simple single line of text across the front that reads: "I suck at math," "I am not white," or "I speak English."[18] The rhetorical purpose of these T-shirts is to deconstruct stereotypes of Asian Americans; statements like "I suck at math" play against the popular stereotype that Asian Americans are inherently good at math and science. The antistereotype T-shirts, however, also have the ability to appeal to numerous groups, albeit with different associated meanings (A-zine 2004).

The counter-shirts point to the differently creative nature of Asian American rhetoric. Within two weeks of the A&F debacle, Ryan Suda had designed an anti-A&F T-shirt.[19] The front of the T-shirt is adorned with a reconfigured A&F logo; it reads "Artfulbigotry & Kitsch," a satirical mimicking of the original A&F logo. "Artfulbigotry & Kitsch" is underlined in large print with "Ignorance·Racism·Excuses" and "since 2002" appearing below it in an upside-down pyramid formation. The "since 2002" text highlights the year that A&F released their Asian-themed T-shirt. The back of the T-shirt is slightly different: the text reappears, but with A&F Asian images framed by the Blacklava text. "Artfulbigotry & Kitsch" is underlined with "since 2002" directly below it in small print. Then the four A&F images of the Wongs laundry service, the bowling Chinaman, Asian pizza dojo, and a rickshaw man are centered. Below the images, "Ignorance·Racism·Excuses" serves as the bottom border. The very bottom of the T-shirt says, "The Struggle Continues . . . Blacklava," suggesting, perhaps, that the struggle against racism toward Asian Americans and the general struggles of being an

18. You can see the various T-shirt designs at the Blacklava's Web site, www.blacklava.net.

19. Suda, e-mail to authors, March 25, 2006. Regarding the T-shirt's sales, Suda states, "It was definitely one of my best selling shirts back then mainly because so many people knew about the controversy and were so upset."

Front view of the Blacklava shirt. Detail of a photo by Vincent Pham; permission courtesy of Ryan Suda.



Back view of the Blacklava shirt. Detail of a photo by Vincent Pham; permission courtesy of Ryan Suda.

Asian American are continuing ones and that Blacklava supports these struggles and the movement.[20]

RHETORICAL T-SHIRTS AND RECIRCULATED IMAGES

We understand the Blacklava counter-A&F T-shirt, as a rhetorical artifact, in three ways: (1) it critiques and then reappropriates stereotypical and offensive images of Asian Americans as a tool of activist invention that recirculates in the public sphere with creative activist meaning; (2) it exemplifies the dialectical relationship between the wearer of the T-shirt and the rhetoric of the T-shirt; and (3) it satirizes A&F and resists A&F's attempts at mimicry and symbolic domination of Asian Americans.

The Blacklava T-shirt reconfigures the meaning of the original images, taking A&F's supposedly humorous Asian-themed graphics and reformulating them into a damning condemnation of A&F's cultural insensitivity, corporate colonialism, and symbolic violence against Asian Americans and their historical role in perpetuating U.S. racism. Suda states that the intention of the T-shirt was to expose A&F through satire of the A&F brand and that the use of the original images was the best

20. Suda, e-mail to authors, July 26, 2006. Suda refers to the struggle in a very general sense, indicating, "It's more of a general reference to all the things we need to continuously struggle with as Asian Americans. There will always be struggle." Suda implies that the Asian American experience is an experience of struggle.

way to document A&F's actions.[21] Using A&F's original images had a greater likelihood of evoking memories for people who had seen them. The counterrhetorical T-shirt transforms A&F into "Artfulbigotry & Kitsch," implying that one only needs to interpret the company's message in a slightly different way to gain new meaning, that "Abercrombie and Fitch" is only a step and a mispronunciation away from the true discriminatory corporate identity, and that A&F is a euphemism and alias for corporate practices of bigotry and tastelessness.

The counterrhetorical T-shirt also takes A&F's images and recodes them within a new text and transformed context: instead of standing alone with A&F's supposedly humorous text, the new text repositions the images within a discourse of bigotry, tastelessness, ignorance, racism, and excuses. By positioning the images between words, also from A&F's original T-shirt, the Blacklava T-shirt problematizes the images themselves: arguing that the images and the excuses for the images perpetuate racism and bigotry through offensive and tasteless "art" or "humor."

While the image and text work together to create a new meaning, the Blacklava T-shirt recirculates the images that A&F previously tried to hide. After the debacle, A&F pulled the Asian-themed T-shirts off the shelves and thus withdrew the images from public view. Word of mouth and e-mail forward chains became the means of documenting A&F's acts of symbolic violence, while the T-shirts and their images were found only on Internet search engines. The original A&F T-shirts have become collector's items, fetching upwards of $100 on Ebay (as of April 26, 2006), and are no longer worn by the general public. Moreover, A&F has yet to give us approval to reproduce the images, so we are left directing readers toward where the images continue to exist.[22] Blacklava's counterrhetorical T-shirt, however, reintroduces the images into and recontextualizes the images for the public sphere and thus allows the public to view the images that A&F constructed for profit. Furthermore, the counterrhetorical T-shirt exposes those images as acts of symbolic domination and not as hip, humorous, and edgy designs.

The counterrhetorical T-shirts re-mimic and resignify the original images. Blacklava's remimicry inhabits Bhabha's "space of resistance"

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21. Ibid.
22. It is more than likely that A&F will not give us permission to use the images since they are no longer on its Web site. However, a quick Internet search of "Abercrombie & Fitch Asian American shirt" will bring up results.

that can occur through the flawed stereotype. Blacklava mimics the stereotype with recognition of the stereotype's flaws. By doing so, Blacklava's counterrhetorical T-shirt inhabits the space of resistance, resignifying and transforming the colonial images, exposing A&F's symbolic violence.

When the counterrhetorical T-shirts reintroduce the original and offending images back into the public sphere, primarily through consumers wearing the Blacklava T-shirts, T-shirt rhetoric employs the body as a metaphoric public billboard through which the rhetoric is publicized, acknowledging that the site is both mobile and discursive when worn by a person. The relationship between the body of the wearer of the T-shirt and the T-shirt's rhetoric is a dialectical one. By wearing the shirt, the person embodies and occupies the space of the activist and connects him- or herself to the satirical text on the shirt. The wearer thus occupies the position of an Asian American activist who is also anti-A&F. The T-shirt creates, maintains, and reifies the activist spirit for the wearer. In addition, the public nature of the T-shirt invites other people, who may or may not know of A&F's practices, to engage the wearer of the T-shirt, encouraging them to inquire as to its meaning. If the outsider engages with the wearer and shares the same activist mentality, then it may become a site for discussion and dialogue. If the outsider is not aware of A&F's practices, then the wearer may assume the role of educator or radical activist. If the outsider agrees with A&F's practices and chooses to engage with the wearer of the countershirt, then a dialogue and/or dispute may also ensue. That person may also choose not to speak with the wearer of the T-shirt, however, knowing that the wearer of the T-shirt is an activist. Thus, the circulation of the counterrhetorical T-shirt continually produces a discourse around A&F's attempts to commodify an Asian American persona while subjecting the Asian American to a rhetoric of self-representation.

The T-shirt challenges A&F's representations and functions as ground-level vernacular rhetoric for those in and outside the Asian American community. This vernacular discourse may spread throughout the Asian American community and encourage Asian Americans to remember and resist mass-produced and mass-marketed racism. The counterrhetorical T-shirt itself is an artifact of Asian American resistance to symbolic domination by a predominantly white corporation; the countershirt also illustrates rhetorical inventiveness through the use of satire when responding to commodifying images and the

commodification and mass marketing of racism. Admittedly, the satirical act also commodifies activism and markets political beliefs; however, the marketing and commodification of activism requires an activist ethos and a commitment to supporting the activist movement of those who contribute to the resistance.[23] Hence, in this instance, arguably commodification occurs in the service of activism. In addition, satirical countershirts respond to instances of symbolic domination, mimicry, and media exploitation through self-identification with activist and political ideas. Here, Asian American activists created rhetoric through products, such as T-shirts, to complicate the symbolic terrain while self-identifying and self-representing in manners and voices that likely would be difficult for corporate clothing companies to co-opt. Blacklava also produced a T-shirt responding to the media exploitation and corporate mimicry of William Hung. This T-shirt, adorned with the text "hung over…," compares the mimicry and mockery of William Hung to past figures like Buckwheat from *The Little Rascals* or Long Duk Dong from *Sixteen Candles*.[24] As someone who experienced a mimicking performance of William Hung as an attempt to enact symbolic violence against me, I, Vincent, appreciate Blacklava's attempt to challenge, critique, and make publicly known the problematic rhetorical effects of such mimicry through the creation of a T-shirt designed to be worn by people who find this kind of mimicry offensive and see its racial and colonial implications. Here, Asian American rhetoric, in reaction to public misrepresentations, seeks to right media wrongs by setting forth a more complicated image that both supports and represents Asian Americans. In this case, the mode of self-representational discourse occurs through the rhetorical acts of producing and wearing activist counterrhetorical T-shirts that require knowledge of Asian American history in connection to current Asian American public humiliation; thus Asian Americans are not represented as quiet and passive "model minorities" but rather as activist and political participants.

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23. The marketing of political beliefs is similar to bumper stickers on cars. In both instances, political beliefs are commodified and sold to activists. However, we believe that T-shirts and bumper stickers differ slightly in their communication interactions. We suspect bumper stickers are often seen from a perspective of a car or in a parking lot, where the ability to interact with the activist is often inhibited. However, the T-shirts are usually worn, and thus the opportunity to communicate with the activists is more of a possibility. Documenting whether or not this happens is beyond the scope of this essay.
24. This comparison is argued in the description of the "Hung Over" T-shirt on the Blacklava Web site ("Hung Over Unisex T" 2006).

LOOKING FOR ASIAN AMERICAN RHETORIC

While Blacklava's counter-A&F rhetoric is satirical and productive, it defines Asian American rhetoric and activism as oppositional, a limited strategy against symbolic domination by corporate entities, such as A&F, or general cultural trends, such as the media exploitation of William Hung, and replaces one form of commodification and consumption with an alternative, yet activist, one. While instances like A&F and William Hung are important and notable, they shift attention away from the lack of media representation by Asian Americans in general; as a friend once said to one of us to justify A&F's representation of Asian Americans: "At least they're showing Asians."[25]

Corporate attempts at symbolic domination and corporate mimicry exemplify the continual struggle over symbols, where the spectacle mediates the reality in which social relationships are based. Potential for creative acts does exist but is often strongly circumscribed by options and strategies existing within our contemporary cultural commoditized environment. While A&F intended the Asian-themed T-shirts to connect with the Asian American demographic, the T-shirts demonstrated A&F's (representational) power over the Asian American minority and simultaneously, through misrepresentation, displayed Asian Americans' lack of power to create, produce, mass market, and distribute self-images and, even more broadly, the overall lack of representation of Asian Americans in U.S. popular culture and politics. A&F's decision to release the T-shirts communicated an act of symbolic violence that targeted Asian Americans. Instead of connecting with the Asian American demographic, the shirts had the reverse effect of alienating part of the demographic A&F sought. A&F's T-shirts also register the metonymy of presence, in which the Asian is always the laundry man, the rice field worker, or the submissive restaurant worker. A&F's T-shirts evoked images of Asians against which the student protesters quickly acted. From the University of Michigan, sophomore Stephanie Chang stated that the A&F images depicted Asian Americans as "uncultured foreigners who can't speak English right" (Khatri 2002). Other one-dimensional stereotypes that the images propagated were Asians as oriental houseboys (Bronski 2002), dorky-looking slanted-eyed men, or as affable, passive, and apathetic workers. This metonymy of

25. Harris (1999) draws upon Clark's four stages of minority portrayal; the first being nonrecognition and the second being ridicule. In this case, the friend seems happy enough with the second stage of portrayal as a display of progress.

presence is evident in the "Wok-N-Bowl" T-shirt, in which the Asian is forever a coolie with a rice hat or a "forever foreigner" who cannot pronounce "rock 'n'roll" correctly but rather does so with an Asian or Asian immigrant accent, thereby marking the Asian's forever "otherness" within the United States.

Neocolonialism seeks to dominate ideological and pedagogical spaces of visual representations of the colonized, employing mimicry and stereotypes as tools of domination and symbolic violence. A&F exerts its symbolic violence through the propagation of stereotypical images, promoting and reproducing a caricature of Asian Americans reminiscent of nineteenth-century America. A&F's T-shirt production is an act of mimicry: the Asian is the "subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite" when compared to the A&F's traditional clientele. Thus, the T-shirt visualizes the power of A&F; the company is able to commodify the Asian American image and situate it within text that belittles the Asian American experience. When clothing corporations seek to commodify Asian Americans and marginalize their voice in the process of gaining profits, they exemplify neocolonial power. However, Asian American rhetoric arises through activist organizations and their specific response to corporate mimicry and their continual advancement of Asian American self-representation. Asian American rhetoric consists of both the public context of the time and a deconstruction of and attempt to uproot historical stereotypes currently functioning as methods of symbolic violence and eventual domination. Thus, as in the e-mail activism and the countershirts, Asian American rhetoric addresses the here and now while simultaneously complicating the past and future of Asian American representation and public identity.

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