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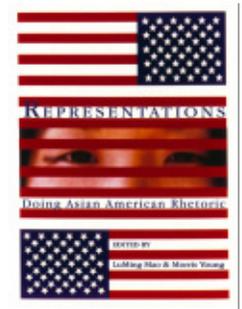
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BEYOND "ASIAN AMERICAN" AND BACK
Coalitional Rhetoric in Print and New Media

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During the summer of 2003, I worked as a volunteer organizer for an annual arts festival in San Francisco called APAture, a program of the Kearny Street Workshop (KSW). The KSW office was housed in a warehouse with other community arts nonprofits in the South of Market neighborhood, and often we had to raise our voices over the African drumming in the room next door, or the hammering of a new group show being installed in the gallery. The volunteers met at night, after our day jobs as journalists, college students, corporate cubicle dwellers, Web designers, nonprofit junkies, and teachers like myself. I think some of us were still reeling in the post–dot-com era, trying to figure out how to fund our socially conscious art habits after the generous venture capitalists had fled town. As for myself, I was trying to reconnect with the city after a couple of isolated years in grad school, desperate for a community of heady idealists who also liked to have a good time. And so I found myself at KSW with the other volunteers, all of us responsible for selecting and curating submissions from musicians, performance artists, poets, fiction writers, spoken-word collectives, photographers, painters, dancers, and filmmakers from throughout the Bay Area. We were responsible for putting on a good show, and that's exactly what we did: one and a half weeks of sensory overstimulation in our warehouse gallery and performance space.

APAture is a play on the word *aperture*, the opening through which light passes onto a lens of a camera. While the wordplay may seem a bit enigmatic, the "APA" clearly stands for Asian Pacific American. This makes sense if you are familiar with the nonprofit's thirty-plus years of "arts activism," beginning in its original location in the International Hotel, or the I-Hotel, a well-known flashpoint of the Asian American

movement during the 1970s. KSW is a grassroots neighborhood arts program, its mission to build coalitions of local activists, writers, artists, performers, and students that are intergenerational and multiethnic.

While aware of KSW's activist history, I never really gave the "APA" or Asian Pacific American part of APAture much thought. "APA" seemed to be more of a pragmatic title rather than an actual identity—no one *I* knew would ever call him- or herself an Asian Pacific American. At KSW I made friends with people who were Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, South Asian, of mixed ethnicities, Taiwanese, and so forth. It wasn't until I read through the submissions for the literary category that I began to think about what we were trying to achieve as a multiethnic coalition of artists and community leaders under the somewhat ambiguous title "Asian Pacific American." After the nth spoken-word piece utilizing food as a metaphor for an essential Filipino-ness, or expressing grievances because the author felt he could never be "American enough" by virtue of being Chinese, I began to experience what I call *identity fatigue*—a weariness brought about from prolonged exposure to others' nonimaginative representations of their cultural and/or ethnic identity. This condition was not felt only by members of the literary committee; the film committee was also heavily hit. Soon, organizers in performance and visual arts also began to express the question on my mind: Why were so many young artists so focused on rigidly constrained representations of racial identity? And why were many of the very same proclamations and grievances surrounding an "Asian Pacific American" identity repeated year after year? It became clear to us that we were not the only audience adverse to this type of art, and we began to advise each other to curate pieces that "didn't focus so much on identity."

But that advice didn't make sense, because in some of the most magnificent pieces, the artist's identity was teased out with the subtlest word, fragmented in colors, or self-mocked in song. The problem that then stymied us was how we could encourage and nurture artists and performers who were truly visionary in articulating the endless permutations of what it means to be human, let alone "Asian American." A collective of such people, I imagined, would no longer be ruled by the need to represent positive images nor respond to negative stereotypes in mainstream media. Instead, we might acknowledge the instabilities of both as part of an ongoing, complex conversation in which identity is treated like an open-ended question, the answer to which is ephemeral, and the pleasure is in the pursuit.

Now, as I pursue my research interests in rhetoric and composition, at the forefront of my inquiries are how collective subjects mobilize public articulations of identity as rhetorical practice. Identity claims such as those that I observed as an APAture organizer engender a rhetoric that seeks to create coalitions among otherwise unlike people, typically for specific political ends. And yet I have observed that, much like some of the young artists in APAture, those who purport an authoritative Asian American identity foreclose what such an identity might mean, and coalitions that once sought political agency under the aegis of Asian American are frightfully constrained. What I would like to examine in this analysis of Asian American discourse is the effectiveness of different rhetorical approaches in creating coalitions with political agency. In my reading of Judith Butler's seminal text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), I was struck by how her post-structuralist approach to language, subjectivity, and political agency resonated with my own observations and thoughts of how Asian American identities are articulated through rhetorical practices. Thus influenced, I decided to apply Butler's theory of performativity to my analysis of Asian American discourses, and such is the methodology of my argument.

If the specter of a post-structuralist analysis sends rhetoric and composition specialists questioning the relevance of this argument for the field, let me suggest to the reader that a post-structuralist or deconstructive reading is "supremely rhetorical," as Stanley Fish asserts, in that such a reading questions the underlying structure of assumptions that naturalizes or legitimates hegemonic power (1998, 53). Such a reading practice is useful in interrogating the coalitional rhetoric that is mobilized by social movements based on cultural identity, such as Asian American activists. Stuart Hall maintains that there are at least two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first view proposes that people affiliate with one another based on a common understanding of race and ethnicity that is fixed and stable, defined by "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self.'" The second view purports that cultural identity "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.'" Summing up these two perspectives, Hall writes: "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (2003, 234–236). In the analysis to

follow, I focus on two case studies of rhetorical practices that illustrate both of Hall's perspectives of cultural identity.

Using Judith Butler's concepts of performativity and parodic subversion as a framework for further discussing identity, subjectivity, and agency, I focus this discussion on two contemporary magazines devoted to Asian American or Asian cultural production: *Hyphen* and *Giant Robot*. Drawing on examples from both the print and online versions of the two publications, I examine the rhetorical approaches to building coalitional readerships—or publics—organized around particular narratives of Asian and Asian American identities. My reason for doing so is to examine rhetorical practices enacted under such political and cultural identities for ways they may engender viable and inclusive coalitions. In order for Asian American coalitions to attain the liberatory aims they often claim as a goal, they must shift away from a rhetorical approach that tries to prescribe and represent a fixed "truth" about an Asian American identity and experience. Rather, agency is gained through rhetorical practices that resignify cultural identities through shared practices of popular culture, in ways that endlessly create and contest the possibilities of what is intelligibly Asian American.

ASIAN AMERICAN PUBLICS

Before I look more specifically at *Hyphen* and *Giant Robot*, it is necessary to explain why I focus this analysis on print and new media rather than other cultural objects such as music or film. Earlier, I mentioned how the magazines' readership also constitutes a public. To clarify, I am drawing from Michael Warner's definition of publics: a public is a space of discourse that comes into existence "only in relation to texts and their circulation"—an audience that comes into being by virtue of being addressed, self-organized around discourse and comprised primarily of strangers (2005, 66–67). Jürgen Habermas, whose analysis of the public sphere has become the classical reference for all subsequent revisions in public sphere theory, connects the formation of modern publics with the onset of modernity in seventeenth-century Europe. Prior to that time, the ancient notion of the public was one of citizens administering legal and military affairs. However, with the onset of Enlightenment ideals, including an emphasis on individual reason, this administrative function shifted to the modern formulation that focused on private citizens debating on civil society. Habermas attributes this shift in large part to the evolution of literary journalism. In British magazines such as

the *Tatler* and the *Guardian*, for example, representations in mass media articulated the bourgeois society's relationships to family, private property, culture, and social conventions in dealing with others in the middle and merchant classes—representations in which the reading public recognized itself and accepted this portrayal as reality. This mutual recognition between readers and culturally sanctioned texts, through which "the public held up a mirror to itself," constitutes the formation of the bourgeois subjectivity within its corresponding ideology (1989, 41). In other words, there was no such thing as a bourgeois subject before literary culture (an extension of the British Empire) described individuals—readers of the *Tatler* or the *Guardian*, for example—as such, and the public accepted this identity.

Since then the magazine genre continues to focus on contemporary discourse—news, trends, interviews, gossip—the temporal flow of which is organized by punctual circulation patterns: daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly. The twenty-first-century online equivalent complicates circulation with a more continuous, incessant flow. Readers may post their responses to articles on most sites whenever they want, to be read by others throughout the world, creating a new vitality and tempo in public discussion. Discussion boards and blogs have expanded opportunities for dialogic exchanges and public claims of identity, as I will look at more in depth with the illustrations I provide for my argument. *Publicness* describes our relations with strangers within these discursive spaces of dialogue, and our participation in the public sphere constitutes us individually as much as we constitute the public sphere by virtue of addressing it.

This illustrates Butler's famous argument undermining the logic of identity politics, or the idea that an individual must claim an essential "true" identity before she can take political action. Butler argues that "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed"(1999, 181). Let me rephrase her argument so that it may apply to this analysis of Asian American discourse: there is no true "Asian American" identity behind the articulation of one. Rather, Asian American identities are constructed in various ways through the act of articulation. *Hyphen* and *Giant Robot* and their readerships are examples of Asian and Asian American publics that are mutually authoring in this way. However, before a closer look at the publications, let us return to Judith Butler's theory of performativity and subversion as a framework for thinking about subjectivity and agency.

TROUBLING RACE: WHAT RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION MAY LEARN FROM GENDER TROUBLE

Since its original publication in 1990, Butler's *Gender Trouble* has had tremendous impact on feminist and queer studies and how we think about gender, identity, and political agency. At the heart of *Gender Trouble* is Butler's examination of a universal understanding of gender, specifically of "woman," that has prevailed as a main point of contention in feminism. Butler employs a post-structuralist approach to think critically about the basic vocabulary used in feminism, and the conditions in which certain vocabulary maintains positions of power. We can, for example, speak of gender in descriptive accounts that take into consideration what is possible, or we can speak of gender in normative accounts that mandate which expressions of gender are acceptable and which are not. Normative descriptions, Butler asserts, operate within existing power regimes that are often implied and thus necessitate further interrogation, as normative behavior renders all other behavior marginal or even unintelligible and therefore powerless. Such a construction is supported by the subject/object binary of traditional western ontology, the history of which Butler delineates as a "distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body [that] invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy." Within this binary, the mind is associated with masculinity, while the subordinate body is associated with femininity. Given this, Butler calls for "any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction . . . to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized" (1999, 17). The problem this binary presents is that what is normal or "intelligible" becomes naturalized against what is not; identity thus becomes fixed in nondiscursive language of the prevailing discourse, and reproduces the conditions of power regimes. How we come to know accepted understandings of "woman," for example, may be constructed in patriarchal terms, consequently reproducing the conditions of female subjection to male dominance as an accepted, uncontested "reality," thereby closing off the potential for agency.

The goal for examining the intersection between identity and politics from this post-structuralist approach is to identify ways that the articulation of identity creates the agency to meet political goals. To this end, Butler describes her theory of performativity, in which identity is constituted through language and other signifying acts. In

Gender Trouble, Butler contends that gender is constructed through language, is brought into being through language, as identity is an effect of these signifying practices. Furthermore, there is no a priori subject who "chooses" an identity; rather, identity is constituted through language within a preexisting ideology of culture, economy, family, etc. We can think of an example that Butler uses in *Bodies That Matter,* her follow-up to *Gender Trouble:* the doctor exclaims, "It's a girl!" when an infant is born. The doctor's language is the first in a lifelong chain of signifying practices that prescribe the gender identity of "girl" to the infant, according to the norms of what constitutes such an identity as intelligible. Throughout its childhood, the subject will be compelled to reiterate this identity by, for example, compulsively walking through doorways marked "Girls" rather than "Boys"; if she does not, she will be subject to disciplinary measures from the school or other institutions, as well as being ostracized by her schoolmates.[1] This institutional and ritualistic rendering of gender is what naturalizes it in culture, while the disruption of this ritual is the potential site of agency, which is "located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (Butler 1999, 185). A subversion of this repetition through signifying practices is an act of agency because it iterates new possibilities of what is intelligible in culture. To illustrate a subversive act, Butler uses the example of drag performers, whom she describes as revealing the imitative and unstable nature of gender through parody.

This bare-bones explanation of performativity serves to lay the framework for thinking about what may constitute an Asian American identity and the type of agency it engenders. Of the relation between performativity and race, Butler clearly states that identity must be examined through multiple lenses that acknowledge the coexistence of racial, gender, and sexual categories, and how they articulate and reproduce institutional models of power and control (1993, 116–117). To the effect that race is performative, she replies in an interview that since it has no biological basis, then the concept of race is produced through language in the service of institutional racism. However, she also clearly asserts that we cannot afford to dismiss racial categories as purely linguistic constructions with no material consequences, as doing so "would

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1.   Butler explains the performative and citational power of "girling": "This is a 'girl.' However, who is compelled to 'cite' the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject" (1993, 232). The second example, regarding the bathroom doorways marked "Girls" and "Boys," is a famous example from Lacan (1957).

misrecognize the power that the category wields, but also the possibilities of resignification that is has and does carry" (Blumenfeld 2005, 11). Butler furthermore states that although she is always skeptical of rigid uses of racial identities, she must insist that "racial identifications and identities have to be mobilized against the racism by which they were spawned" (11–12). Clearly, Butler identifies a situation in which the most effective rhetorical approach would be to organize around an identity politics–based articulation of race as a strategy to counter the institutions that created race in the first place. This position illustrates that the debate surrounding articulations of identity—here let us think of Asian American identity—is not a matter of identity politics vs. post-structuralist approaches. Rather, the question must be reframed so that we begin to ask: What rhetorical approaches will best serve to meet the political goals of Asian American coalitions?

IDENTITY POLITICS AND HYPHEN

The term "Asian American" was first and foremost a political identity constructed during the civil rights movement and student struggles during the 1960s–1970s (Chin, Feng, and Lee, 2000, 274). Historically, Asian American cultural production has sought to establish a collective, pan-ethnic voice and presence in mainstream American culture, challenging both the exclusion of Asian Americans from mass media and stereotypical representation. One prevailing stereotype challenged was that of the "model minority"—a concept that in itself implies a hierarchal dynamic in which the "minority" is seen as exemplifying model behavior as regulated by the "majority." In this model, mainstream media concede portrayals of Asians as educationally and economically successful, usually illustrated through portrayals of Asians as producers and consumers of technology and electronics; yet at the same time the intimate portrayal of family life and individual particularity remains lacking in mass media.[2] Considering this, it is no wonder that contemporary approaches to production and analyses of Asian American culture continue to evoke what Chin, Feng, and Lee call "the rhetoric of liberation, visibility, presence, voice, and consciousness-raising"—reflecting the prevalent belief in Asian American communities that cultural representation is an effective means of countering nationalist portrayals of

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2.   For content analysis research on the portrayals of Asians in American-market magazines, see Taylor, Landreth, and Bang 2005.

Asian Americans as threatening and foreign (272).[3] Rhetorically, the strategy of representation seeks to give marginalized subjects visibility and legitimacy as political agents—an empowering strategy considering the historical elision of Asians in U.S. mass media.

A corollary to this is the focus on representation in the feminist movement, which Butler acknowledges as a necessary and empowering political act. However, she also warns: "It is not enough to inquire into how women might become more fully represented in language and politics. Feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (1999, 4). Butler urges women to focus their political goals beyond seeking recognition within a patriarchal structure, for this will only reproduce their conditions of subordination. Likewise, racialized minority groups must not focus on greater representation if liberation from racist structures is their end goal; rather, they must also understand how their racialized identities are produced so that they may find the agency to disrupt the very conditions that constrain life. Returning to an examination of *Hyphen*, I would like to keep in mind how Butler's warning may inform a critical examination of representation in Asian American–produced media.

Since its launch in 2003, *Hyphen: Asian America Unabridged* has evoked the rhetoric of liberation through positive representation; the editorial from issue 6 (Summer 2005) encourages readers to "take action." What is striking in Editor in Chief Melissa Hung's editorial is her articulation of the magazine's intention: "We seek to change the way that America looks at its Asians." It seems that *Hyphen* is producing the magazine for "America" for the purpose of changing the way that (non-Asian?) *America sees its Asians.* The last four words denote a dynamic that positions "America" as a subject with agency ("sees") and "Asians" as its object ("its Asians"), reflecting the subject/object hierarchal power structure positioning "Asians" as subjugated to a central, powerful "America," a prevailing nationalist ideology that is both the effect and cause of cultural and institutional racism. Yet the editors and readers of *Hyphen* not only accept this position, they also recognize themselves in this dynamic as a necessary condition of being Asian American, and much of the magazine's content focuses on justifying and defending this rigid racial identity.

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3.   Also, in her notes, Parikh (2002) cites a survey of scholarship that addresses the topic of the "foreign" and "unassimilable" Asian, including works by Lisa Lowe, David Leiwei Li, and David Palumbo-Liu.

Hyphen, no. 6 (Summer 2005). Reprinted by permission.

Take, for example, an article on a Seattle-based stage produc-
tion, "Sex in Seattle," which dramatizes relationships from "an Asian
American perspective." One of the show's creators, Serin Ngai, is quoted
as saying, "We wanted to infuse the idea that Asian Americans have love
lives and normal lives just like everyone else, which is rarely displayed
in mainstream media" (*Hyphen* 2006, 17). On one level, the production
company seeks to represent Asian Americans in a way they find miss-
ing in mainstream media—as the subjects and objects of romantic and
sexual desire—an important goal in legitimating and describing the
intersections of race, sexuality, and desire when such language is lacking
in theater as well as in mass media. Yet Butler exhorts us to go beyond
an identity politics rhetoric; if we follow her interrogation of the rela-
tionships between representation and power, then we see that the desire
to be seen (by the State, by an all-powerful Other, by "America") as

having "normal lives just like everyone else" reproduces the same power structure that subjugates Asians in the first place, one that mandates what can and cannot be described as a "normal" life. In this sense, the identity politics rhetoric does not lead to the liberatory goals of Asian Americans, but instead replicates the very same power structures from which they seek freedom. Furthermore, such rhetoric is exclusionary (who will be described as normal?) rather than truly coalitional.

NEW MEDIA SPACES: WHEN IDENTITY POLITICS WORKS

The question then arises: What identity does an Asian American "voice" circulate throughout mass media? Toward what political goal does such a rhetoric work, that a unitary voice is needed to represent a varied coalition of ethnicities? This representational voice is extended into the online version of *Hyphen*, as editor in chief Melissa Hung blogs, "[*Hyphen* is] trying to sell the idea . . . that this world needs a progressive, independent Asian American magazine. That we need a voice to represent us" (2006). The identity politics approach of representing positive stories and regulating negative representations of Asian Americans is as prevalent on the Web site as it is in the print version. However, the *Hyphen* blog space and discussion board also allow an active public, through actual voices, to organize and create itself around participative dialogue. In this way, an identity politics rhetoric is successful in inviting collective discussion of the issues and challenges of race relations throughout the country under the umbrella term "Asian American"—a worthy political goal in itself in that it generates and organizes civic discussion in specific American polities in a way that is easily accessible from home or office on a daily basis.[4]

New media also open up a space that allows for new articulations of identity. One thread that demonstrates this is titled "Hawaii's Unique State" (fourteen posts from July 13, 2006, to July 24, 2006). The original poster, "Harry," a journalist from the San Francisco Bay Area, blogs about his experience attending the 2006 Asian American Journalist convention in Honolulu, and his impression of "how well the various racial

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4.   February 2007 was an active month for the *Hyphen* blog: archived stories include a detailed report of a forum on ethnic media and their role in reporting race relations, organized by the Chinese American Citizens' Alliance in San Francisco; a documentary on U.S. Army first lieutenant Ehren Watada, the first commissioned officer to resist deployment to Iraq; and interviews of Japanese Americans who refused the draft during WWII on the basis that their constitutional rights were taken away during their "relocation" in Japanese internment camps.

and ethnic groups who have landed on the islands have intermingled, intermarried and intermixed" (Hawaii's Unique State 2006). Such an impression sparked a dialogue among readers living in the continental United States and those with ties to Hawai'i as either former or current residents. What I find interesting are articulations from readers who counter the unitary Asian American identity ("intermixed") reflective in the editorial voice of *Hyphen*. Furthermore, the correct definition and usage of the identity *kama'āina*—a Hawaiian word that means "native born" (Kahananui and Anthony 1987, 407)—is debated, as well as the usage of the term *Hawaiian*, which is frequently misused to refer to anyone from the state of Hawai'i, much as one would refer to native Californians or Texans. The following are examples of identity claims made by participants:

> *Response to Harry from "local girl" regarding his use of "kama'āina":* Coming from someone who was born and raised in Hawaii and of Japanese [descent] . . . kama'āina does not mean "not a native, but someone who's lived in Hawaii a long time."
>
> *Response to local girl from "mainland asian":* So, local girl, what is your opinion? I'm not sure what you're getting at, except that there is a wrong definition of a word.
>
> *Response from "K. Kamasugi":* I was born and lived 30 years in Honolulu. I'm also a fourth-generation Japanese American. "Kama'aina" is used to describe both people who were born in Hawaii, but also residents, no matter how long they've lived in the state. And you can still be kama'aina even if you don't live in Hawai'i anymore.
>
> *From "Haoleboy":* I'm a kamaaina and a caucasian with native hawaiian blood.
>
> *"M. Louie," who describes herself as "a quasi- kama'āina who's comfy in both Hawaii & the 'mainland,'" clarifies:* "Hawaiian" should only be used to describe Native Hawaiian (the AP Stylebook finally just made that an official rule a few months ago).
>
> *Finally, "L. Liet" writes:* I was raised a Jersey Asian. (*Hyphen* 2006)

This is a dialogue between people who state that they were born in Hawai'i and are of specific ethnicities (and therefore are *not* "Hawaiian") and people from other states, often referred to as "the mainland." "Local girl" introduces to the thread two identity categories that are not familiar to most people outside of Hawai'i: *local* and *kama'āina*. Her critique of Harry's misuse of *kama'āina* causes "mainland asian" to reply,

somewhat aggressively and dismissively, that her point is lost on him, except to say that "there is a wrong definition of a word." "K. Kamasugi" names a specific identity of "fourth-generation Japanese American," then clarifies the criteria for which one can properly be described as *kamaʻāina*. "Haoleboy" immediately responds by claiming the identities of *kamaʻāina* and Caucasian (reflected in his name, *haole* being the Hawaiian word for "Caucasian") (Kahananui and Anthony 1987, 404). Through the performative force of their claims, each participant brings into being the identities they name in this new media discussion space, an important rhetorical move given that such identities are little known outside of Hawaiʻi. In this way, identity politics is used as an empowering rhetoric to articulate the nuances of race and race relations as lived in the geopolitical and neocolonial context of Hawaiʻi. The bloggers from Hawaiʻi actively resist being subsumed under a unitary and homogenizing Asian American identity, successfully employing identity politics as a political rhetoric to voice *variation*. Perhaps following suit, one blogger from "the mainland" also subverts the essentialist Asian American identity by claiming to be a "Jersey Asian," pricking the imagination with the fascinating possibilities of what this may mean.

GIANT ROBOT: PARODY, POP CULTURE, AND POLITICAL AGENCY

"Once upon a time there were magazines that tried in vain to define what it means to be Asian American, rather than simply experience what is really out there." So begins coeditors Eric Nakamura's and Martin Wong's editorial for *Giant Robot*, issue 41 (2006). Whether or not this is a direct reference to Hyphen is unclear; it is apparent, however, that Nakamura and Wong set their own editorial mission apart. First of all, the tagline of *Giant Robot* reads "Asian Pop Culture and Beyond"—opening up coalitional possibilities that go beyond racial and nationalist identities and extend into the transnational. Specifically, Nakamura and Wong's editorial vision is a survey of Asian-produced or Asian-inspired popular culture—a landscape of ever-shifting and morphing acts of signification. Perhaps this has been the persuasive appeal of *Giant Robot* since Wong and Nakamura first began publishing it as a punk zine in 1994: the endless variety of "what is really out there" as opposed to constraining definitions of what is Asian American. In this way, readers of *Giant Robot* align with each other in their quixotic practice of pop culture and form a readership that engenders agency through variation.

Giant Robot, no. 42 (July/August 2006): the "Fearless" issue. Reprinted by permission.

Earlier, I described Butler's theory of performativity as the construction of identity through repetitive, signifying acts sanctioned by the prevailing power structures of culture or the law. Identities are thus normalized through repetition according to the discourses that govern what constitutes legitimate and intelligible humanity—the "reality" that is invoked when people desire to be "just like everyone else." However, subjects are not "fixed" in these discourses, but may find agency in signifying practices such as parody. Butler writes that through parody, what is "authentic" and "natural" is juxtaposed with its failed imitation. The resulting effect is the destabilization of the "original" or the "real," exposing the illusion of naturalized identities as performative as well. Parody becomes subversive because it forces us to question what is normative and proposes variations of the possible. The implications for thinking about gender, Butler explains, expose the idea of fixed or natural gender identities as illusory. She writes: "As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an 'act,' as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (1999, 187). All gender identities are thus performative and, I suggest in this section of my argument, all racial or cultural identities are performative as well.

Parody is a common feature of *Giant Robot* issues, often as a technique used by the artists that they feature. In issue 42, for example, Hong Kong

actor Daniel Wu pens a how-to article for those interested in forming a "boy band," based on his experience with his own band, Alive. He writes: "Although we are all in our 30s, being Asian and still passing for 18 was a definite plus for us" (2006, 33). In a photograph accompanying the article, members of Alive (Hong Kong actors Conroy Chan, Andrew Lin, Terence Yin, and Daniel Wu) are dressed in costumes that clearly reference the Village People, the 1970s disco ensemble famous for their hit songs of gay flirtation ("Y.M.C.A," "Macho Man") as well as their overtly gay camp personas (leatherman, construction worker, police officer). Alive is similarly costumed in hot pants, fringed boots, chaps, and—my personal fave—Daniel Wu's sequined underwear emblazoned with a dollar sign on the crotch. Wu's acknowledgment that they may still pass for adolescent boys despite being well into their thirties lacks the indignant preoccupation with "positive" representations of masculinity that is prevalent in Asian American culture. And clearly, they relish the opportunity to parody what is probably one of the most iconographic bands in western gay culture, embracing nonheteronormative gender performance as part of their boy band shtick. Wu ends his article by offering this advice to readers of *Giant Robot* (and boy band wannabes): "I can't guarantee boy band success, but if you're prepared to follow these steps, work yourself to the bone, and maintain metrosexual cool, you'll be fending off teenage groupies before you know it" (34). *Metrosexual* in the popular culture lexicon refers to "straight urban men willing, even eager, to embrace their feminine sides" (St. John 2003), and Daniel Wu's willingness to embrace his fringed chaps-wearing self exposes the "phantasmatic" status of a "true" Asian masculinity through his parodic performance.

For several issues of *Giant Robot*, Kiyoshi Nakazawa penned a column called "Fight Back!" in which he dispensed self-defense tips (of a dubious martial arts tradition) to readers. A lighthearted romp, the column both pokes fun at and embraces the cultural stereotypes that Asians are inherently facile in the martial arts *and* in personal technology usage. Issue 42 features techniques for using your cell phone as a weapon, with photos to demonstrate such techniques as "The Eye Jab," "The Cell Phone Tracheotomy," and "Call 911." Nakazawa instructs readers to "[p]unch your cell phone into the attacker's trachea, right around the Adam's apple. Find the trachea with the sharpest edge of your phone and keep pushing. . . . Tell the attacker it's a tazer while you make electric sounds with your mouth" (2006, 25). The silliness of the column

Members of the Hong Kong–based "boy band" Alive (from left to right): Conroy Chan, Andrew Lin, Terence Yin, and Daniel Wu. Although this photo is not the same that accompanied Wu's article "Born to Be Alive" in issue 42 of *Giant Robot*, it likewise show-cases the spandex- and sequin-heavy wardrobe that seems, as the *Giant Robot* caption notes, "styled by Tom of Finland." This photograph is a still from the film *The Heavenly Kings* (2006), the mockumentary on Alive and the Cantopop music industry directed by Daniel Wu. Reprinted by permission from Man 5 Production Ltd.

works to expose the idea that both stereotypes are rooted in perfor-mance. Racial stereotypes, like gender-based stereotypes, are "acts" that Nakazawa parodies in his so-called advice column, in which he hyperbol-ically embraces popular representations of Asians, rather than decrying them as "negative" representations. Other Asian American media, such as *Hyphen*, often decry what they see as "false" representations that are not reflective of an implicit "true" Asian American voice. Such protest only serves to ratify and reproduce the logical framework in which these racialized stereotypes find agency and circulate. Nakazawa's parody breaks from this repetition by articulating a variant perspective: the ste-reotype and his imitative parody are *both* absurd performances.

The above are examples of *Giant Robot*-style parody, but are they subversive? Butler acknowledges that there are distinctions in parody: "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand

what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disrup-
tive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and
re-circulated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (1999, 177). The
examples cited may not fall under the category of "truly troubling,"
but they do disrupt the powerful binaries upon which identity politics
is based: object/subject, Asian/American, negative/positive represen-
tation, and so on. These parodies are disruptive because they imitate
popular nationalist stereotypes of Asians perpetuated in mass media, the
main forum of the U.S. national public sphere. The parody intervenes in
the popular stereotypes of the emasculated Asian male and of the ruth-
less, often devious martial arts villain who often acts as the foil for the
courageous, "true" American hero.[5] Through these types of parodying
imitations, the "natural" identity of Asian Americans is revealed as fun-
damentally false, an identity constructed by a racializing and heteronor-
mative ideology that serves to naturalize this hierarchy. The "reality" of
this cultural identity is destabilized through parody in *Giant Robot.*

In the end, does this type of parody and pop culture play create any
real political force to effect change? Here is where we must rethink
our objectives for deploying a coalitional rhetoric, and I reiterate my
argument that the pressing debate is not whether identity politics is
more effective than a post-structuralist approach or vice versa. Rather,
perhaps we have to make distinctions in our political goals, and which
rhetorical means would best serve the ends. As I have shown with my
examples from the print and new media versions of *Hyphen*, there are
specific rhetorical situations that call for the articulation of identity from
an identity politics approach; the performative force of this speech act
brings into being what it names ("local girl" or "kamaʻ ina") to coun-
ter its elision in dominant discourses. However, we must not stop with
"representation" as our ultimate goal, as forming coalitions that focus
on regulating what is "real" about Asian Americans operates under
assumptions that place a specific, exclusive idea of "American-ness" as
the central model against which Asian Americans must constantly prove

5.   Tasha Oren cites Susan Jeffords's *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity and the Reagan
      Era* in her explanation of the emasculation trope: "Masculinity—even in its purely
      physical expression of power, speed, and size—functions as a complex signifier
      that, as Susan Jeffords has argued, speaks to contemporary definitions of nation
      and citizenship. As Jeffords argues, cultural articulations of national identity and
      politics are often bound up in representations of masculinity as their fixation over
      lost and regained control consistently stage interrogations of race, masculinity, and
      difference" (2005, 343).

themselves, their worthiness, and their authenticity. A coalition formed around this focus must first presume that its members agree upon a stable and unified identity which they will then uphold with positive representations, and against which they will decry negative representations. This becomes problematic when we question what becomes intelligible in this approach to representation; by its normative function, this type of Asian American coalition is exclusionary. Furthermore, operating from this approach also presumes that we accept our subjugation to the powerful institutions that pit us in this binary dynamic, and in doing so, we forego any true hope of agency and liberation.

What if we form coalitions that focus not on articulating a shared identity as the *end goal*, but on making meaning through shared practices such as producing films, making music, publishing comics, curating art shows and so forth? On the rhetorical effect of such practices, I draw on Barry Brummett's definition of popular culture: "If culture means those objects and events that nurture, shape, and sustain people, then popular culture must be those artifacts that are most actively involved in winning the favor of the public and thus in shaping the public in particular ways. . . . The work of popular culture is therefore inherently rhetorical, and it is an arena in which rhetoric as the management of meaning must be most actively engaged" (1991, xxi).

Under the above premises, engaging in pop culture clearly has a political goal, and that is to subvert the prevailing ideology that limits what is intelligible about an Asian identity, in effect redirecting rhetorical practices toward creating coalitions of creative and nonracist people.

CONCLUSION: READING AND WRITING
SUBVERSIVELY, ACTING COLLECTIVELY

The implications of this analysis for the field of rhetoric and composition are perhaps strongest for those who read popular culture as a vibrant civic space where people engage in political work in creative and subversive ways. Furthermore, key scholars in the field such as Min-Zhan Lu (2006) and Bruce Horner and John Trimbur (2002) argue that it is imperative to address how globalization and diasporic publics, such as the many ethnicities subsumed under the term "Asian American," impact our scholarship and teaching. These scholars are at the forefront of a movement in the field to decenter U.S. rhetoric and composition as a globalizing force and instead relocate the teaching and study of writing and rhetoric in English within the wider circulation of people and

languages. Other composition theories, such as place-based writing, like-wise situate public argumentation within the dialectic of local and global discourses. These movements are among those in the field that are often categorized under the broad rubrics of "civic engagement" and "public writing." Given this, we need strategies for analyzing the rhetorical practices of social movements, in which people form coalitions with one another on the basis of cultural identities, and for the purpose of civic engagement and public protest.

Judith Butler's theories of performativity and subversive parody offer a method for analyzing the ideological framework that underlies the rhetorical practices of any social and political movement. Rhetorical practices based on identity politics work to bring cultural identities into being through language and other signifying language. Such an approach empowers subjects by representing them in popular culture when they have been previously subordinated and/or excluded. By reading the online *Hyphen* blogs for implied assumptions deployed by the "mainland" Asians, I observed that readers resisted a unifying "Asian American" identity and sought instead to articulate identities more central to life in Hawai'i, such as *kama'āina* and the distinction between native Hawaiian and *local* Asian identities—a distinction that is commonly ignored in the continental United States. On the other hand, when collective subjects employ rhetorical practices that forego a closure of identity, they destabilize naturalized identities based on race, gender, and sexuality, thereby questioning power structures that rely on these assumptions. Parody is an especially effective method for exposing the fragilities of normative identities, and for opening up spaces for alternative ways of being and belonging.

In my analyses of the rhetorical approaches of *Hyphen* and *Giant Robot,* I employed a post-structuralist reading of the texts, particularly Butler's theory of performativity, to show how identities are consti-tuted as well as destabilized through language and other symbolic use. Even a minimal understanding of performativity is useful when analyz-ing how articulations of identity are mobilized as rhetorical practice in the public sphere. I end this analysis on Asian-produced media in high hopes, as it has helped me clarify for myself why I continue to work with cross-cultural organizations that focus on the arts. Asian American coalitions may gain true agency through shared practices of popular culture in ways that create and contest the possibilities of what is intel-ligibly Asian American.

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