considering the rigors of frequent transfers and relocations, especially during wartime. Younger and less educated women, also newcomers to the Web, may also find personal “live” testimonials from “real” mothers less alienating and more reassuring than medical discourse and statistics.

Beyond this, women’s creation of digital signatures enables genuine resistance to institutional forms of identity management that only continue to proliferate in daily life. While the seemingly free spaces of composable identities evident in build-your-own avatar games like MMORPGs continue to instantiate stereotyped images of women, as Rodowick observes, “there is still an unequal division of power in the data images that count—for access to credit, medical insurance, voting and residency rights, ownership of property, and so forth—and they are still culled, collated, and controlled by a few large corporations and marketing organizations.” What are the “data images that count,” the avatars that matter, in relation to women’s reproductive labor online? While pregnancy bulletin boards may at times affirm normative domestic behavior in terms of pregnancy and child rearing, the digital signatures on several pregnancy Web sites are evidence of eclectic digital production that reflects the reality of reproductive labor and its attendant losses.

Women’s production of digital signatures not only re-embodies themselves as pregnant subjects but also visualizes holistic visions of family that embody the paradox of pregnant women’s empowerment and invisibility. While women who are on the Internet are empowered in a sense, certainly in relation to their sisters in other parts of the world where access is extremely scarce for any gender, they are still subject to the regulation of images of “proper” pregnancies and visual cultures. The gendered and classed nature of their signatures, as well as their mode of arrangement and visual ranking, which includes pets, political affiliations, and displays of communal belonging with other members of the online community, shows the development of a digital vernacular modernism. Pregnant women represent themselves exuberantly in the form of their digital avatars, and this energy and joy in self-representation take on all the more significance in a dataveilant society that continues to regulate pregnancy through imaging technologies. In representing themselves and their babies, pregnancies, babies yet to be, and lost children, women graphically embody themselves as dual subjects of interactivity in digital visual culture, thus publicizing bodies and lives previously unrepresented by the women living them.

What are the racial politics of visibility on the Internet? To understand the visual culture of the Internet, we must know who uses it and how users are counted or seen. To some extent this question has been conceptualized as an empirical one; scholars and policy makers rely on reports based on demographic data gathered by organizations like the Pew Internet and American Life Foundation, the National Telecommunications and Information Agency (NTIA), and the U.S. Census. David Rodowick observes: “Without access, there is no interface to digital culture—one cannot be included in its social networks or forms of exchange whether for good or ill. The question of access is therefore one of the principal political questions of digital culture.” What do we mean when we speak of “Internet access”? What are the cultural politics of measuring Internet users in terms of race, and how do the categories used in demographic studies of Internet users evaluate and influence assessments of online participation and power? As Wendy Chun, Lee and Wong, Palumbo-Liu, and my prior work has noted, Asians and Asian Americans are already figured as having a privileged relationship to cybertechnologies in some ways. Despite characterizations of Asian Americans as uniquely privileged technology consumers, they inhabit a range of positions in relation to the Internet: Robert Lee writes that “Asian Americans, particularly immigrant Asian workers, have a highly visible position on both ends of the post-Fordist economy, in what urban sociologist
Saskia Sassen has called "global cities." Asian Americans, most of whom are working-class immigrants and refugees in contrast to popular conceptions of this group as a professional upper-middle-class "model minority," indeed live on both ends of the networked information economy, both as low- and high-skilled workers and as consumers.

However, demographic studies of Internet use emphasize only Asian Americans' position as consumers. Many of these surveys design questions that hew to this paradigm by querying respondents on what types of services and activities they engage in, rather than asking them about their cultural production, such as postings to bulletin boards or creation of Web sites or other forms of Internet textuality or graphical expression. Thus Internet use by racial minorities may be misunderstood as being on a par with usage by the white Internet majority in the United States if "access" is the only criterion considered. The premise of this book is that women and racial and ethnic minorities create visual cultures on the popular Internet that speak to and against existing graphical environments and interfaces online. Surveys of race and the "digital divide" that fail to measure digital production in favor of measuring access or consumption cannot tell the whole story, or even part of it. Failing to query users about their level of participation on the Internet perpetuates a model of Internet "activity" that discounts production of Internet content as a key aspect of interactivity. At worst, by overrepresenting minority participation, studies may deepen the digital divide by leading to mistaken policy decisions regarding whether or not public Internet access is needed in local communities.

When considering the question of racial minority use of the Internet in the United States, it is also especially important to consider the way that language use is handled in demographic studies that count numbers of Internet users broken out by race. Studies such as the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports and the NTIA reports that are based on the Current Population Survey gather data by conducting telephone surveys and doing paper surveys, and they do not survey in Asian languages, a reasonable decision considering the difficulty and expense of employing multilingual surveyors. However, the majority of Asians who identify as Asian alone in the United States—seven out of ten, according to the 2000 U.S. Census—were born outside the country, and many of them do not speak English fluently enough to participate in a telephone survey or fill out a form in English. This means that reports that cut out non-English speakers are looking at a very small slice of the Asian American population, one that is already selected for affluence and linguistic assimilation. Thus these influential, widely read, and widely cited reports overcount Asian Americans as Internet users, representing them as far more connected to the Internet than they actually are. Asians are a notoriously difficult group to count, partly because of the linguistic challenge presented by their recent immigration patterns; the 2004 Recommendations of the Census Advisory Committee on the Asian Population recommends that "in the 2005 or 2006 Census Tests, the Census Bureau should identify areas across the nation with a high concentration of non-English speaking households, making forms and promotional materials, and identifying census tracts with a high concentration of, not only Spanish speakers, but also Asian speakers." Even the U.S. Census, a very thorough and comprehensive survey indeed, is trying to correct the possible undercounting of Asians who do not speak English, demonstrating that they fear that they are undercounting Asian-language-speaking populations. Reports on Internet usage that only count English-speaking Asian Americans perpetuate a damaging racializing formation that perpetuates digital inequality. Asians in America are far from the wired "majority." On the contrary, when we count non-English-speaking Asians, they inhabit a painful paradox: they are a digital minority whose racial formation and public perception are that of a digital majority.

In addition, releases in the popular press and representations of Asian Americans as a "wired" minority may result in especially intense marketing directed to them on the Internet, which may interpellate or hail them as consumers in a more powerful way than it does other users. If we wish to measure interactivity rather than "access" as broadly defined, it is crucial that minority participation in free-response sites like bulletin boards and petitions sites be measured as well to acquire a more nuanced view of racialized participation online. When we do, we see that minority groups such as Asians who have been believed to be especially "wired" have less interactivity than previously thought.

Much demographic research has conceived of the Internet as a "passive" media like television, asking questions regarding what types of activities users engage in, rather than what they produce, share, or post. "Kill your television" bumper stickers are popular in many American cities, and we have all come across people who deliberately abstain from watching TV. They are not framed as backward or on the wrong side of a technological divide. If anything, they are considered to know more than the norm about media. Their position usually garners respect because it represents a critique of television's oppressive mass-media qualities such as manipulative commercials, ethnic and racial stereotyping, and sexualized violence. As I discussed
in chapter 2, television has long been denigrated as “antisocial” and “repressive” in contrast to textual media forms. The Internet benefits from both its textuality and its interactivity, and the two are linked in users’ and scholars’ minds in a way that adds to the Internet’s cachet. Non–television watchers are often perceived as intelligent, savvy, and discriminating consumers who have a critical perspective on media. And it follows that members of oppressed and marginalized groups are those who lose the least by killing their televisions, since theirs are the images most frequently exploited, commodified, and misrepresented by that medium.  

The assumption in much discourse regarding the digital divide is that the Internet is somehow exempt from the critiques that we make of television, and that it is de facto “enriching.” In addition, the Net is paradoxically thought to have more in common with “popular” media forms versus mass ones because of its supposed openness and interactivity; theoretically any user can post his or her own content to it. In practice, however, as McChesney notes, “The most striking change to occur in the late 1990s has been the quick fade of euphoria of those who saw the Internet as providing a qualitatively different and egalitarian type of journalism, politics, media, and culture. The indications are that the substantive content of this commercial media in the Internet, or any subsequent digital communication system, will look much like what currently exists.” Gans agrees, asserting bluntly: “Some innovative, marginal, and deviant culture that is devoid of economic resources and beset by political opposition may find a home on the Internet. The Internet can transmit only symbolic culture, but in theory, at least, it has room for everything if not everybody. Unfortunately, the more the Internet becomes a mass medium, the more likely it is to attract censors that now place limits on TV and the other mass media. Assuming that the Internet can remain outside the cultural power structures is illusionary.” Beacham agrees with this rather gloomy perspective, noting that the Internet has shifted from “being a participatory medium that serves the interests of the public to being a broadcast medium where corporations deliver consumer oriented information. Interactivity would be reduced to little more than sales transactions and email.”  

Despite this state of affairs, in the popular imagination the Internet gets to have it both ways; unlike television, film, or other mass media, the Internet is still perceived as inherently educational (perhaps because it is both a new medium and one that involves computer use), and thus a contributor to democracy and equality, although it is not accessible to nearly as many users as other mass media are. It is interesting to note that people of color, a newly expanding and overwhelmingly young group of new Internet users, value the Internet most highly for its educational properties and are most enthusiastic about it for the sake of their children, if they have them: “About 53% of online blacks have a child under the age of 18 at home, while 42% of online whites are parents of children that age. Users often perceive gaining access to the Internet as an investment in the future and this seems especially true in African-American families.” This is also the case for Hispanic families, 49 percent of whom have a child at home. “Hispanic parents, like other parents, often see the purchase of a computer and Internet access as an investment in their children’s future.” I would venture that few Americans of any race would frame television access as an “investment in their children’s future”; the language of progress, class mobility, and education is generally lacking in discussions of that medium. Yet scholars like McChesney claim that the differences between the Internet and other popular noninteractive media like television are eroding if not already functionally gone. Thus families of color are putting their faith in an Internet that is coming to resemble less an “information superhighway” than a sprawling suburban shopping mall. It is becoming increasingly clear that people of color missed the “golden age of cyberculture.”  

Despite these critiques, the Internet does still retain at least a potential for interactivity that television lacks, particularly vis-à-vis minority digital visual cultures. Studies that discount users’ cultural production hew to a market research model that forecloses studies of this interactivity. This is a crucial omission, for the distinctiveness of new media and the Internet in particular is the possibility of interactivity in the form of cultural production. In a chapter of his book The Network Society titled “The Culture of Real Virtuality,” Manuel Castells lays out what he sees as the dangers regarding access that ought to concern new media users in the future. In contrast to McChesney, Castells thinks the Internet is better than television in several basic ways: he advocates a multimodal, horizontal network of communication, of Internet type, instead of a centrally dispatched multimedia system, as in the video-on-demand configuration. The setting of barriers to entry into this communication system, and the creation of passwords for the circulation and diffusion of messages throughout the system, are critical cultural battles for the new society, the outcome of which predetermines the fate of symbolically mediated conflicts to be fought in this new historical environment. Who are the interacting and who are the interacted in the new system, to use the terminology whose meaning I suggested above, largely frames the system of domination and the process of liberation in the information society.”
In this chapter, I wish to discuss the ways that users of color are framed as interacted and interactors, subjects and objects, of interactivity.

It would be a novel idea to suggest that it might not be an unmitigated ill for people of color to be absent from the Internet. In recent years only a few cultural critics have been brave enough to buck the trend of Internet boosterism, and Coco Fusco and Kim Hester-Williams are the most perceptive of these. Their critique cannot be ignored. Neither espouses a Luddite antitechnological stance; rather, they "examine the price that is exacted for participating in corporate-mediated cyberspace that take advantage of our search for 'beloved community' on the net by reifying and subjecting our identities to the law of the market." The question "Does the Internet really offer spaces of representation and resistance constructed 'for us' and 'by us'?", is answered in the negative by Hester-Williams. Fusco's critique is similar; she notes that the alliance between globalization and the commodification of cyberspace has enabled the "techno-elite's search for a more efficient work-force, which at this point means better trained at the top, less trained at the bottom, and more readily positioned for increased consumption of commodified leisure." She also rightly notes the racial dynamics of this stratification of cyberspace: the gap between power-users and the power-used is widening, and it is most often people of color who are left digitally divided from the ranks of the techno-elite. However, Asians occupy a unique position in this racial landscape, for they constitute members of both groups. In this chapter, I assess the ways that this racialized political economy is worked out in cyberspace's Asian spaces and propose theoretical models with which to evaluate the meaningfulness of Asian American participation in shaping online discourse. Have Asian Americans successfully made their cultural influence felt online? Do they enact the familiar stereotype of nonthreatening and apolitical "model minority" in cyberspace? And in what ways, if any, is this model subverted on the Internet?

It is a widely accepted notion that media interactivity is power. If this is true, then scholars and institutions wishing to create an equal and fair society have an interest in measuring types and degrees of digital interactivity as it is distributed among different social groups. We must create nuanced terms and concepts for evaluating participation to assess the impact of cultural power differentials on the ability of people of color, youth, senior citizens, and others to deploy their identities on the Internet. Rather than focusing only on the question of Internet access, a clumsy binary model of participation that ignores crucial questions about kinds of access, more recent scholar-
and have an impact as well on what users can create, nonetheless opportunities exist for the production of surprising modes of media creation within these constraints. Relative latecomers to the Internet, such as people of color, women, youths, and working- to middle-class users, have never owned the means to produce cultural texts on the Internet in the same way that more technically skilled and better-capitalised users have. Indeed, "complex and contradictory ‘living room wars’ are taking place wherever and whenever television (and other media) sway people’s daily lives in the modern world."17 However, “dailiness” varies across subject positions of various users, and assessing it must involve considerations of place and context of use as well as the racial and gender identity of users. The wars over the Internet’s visual culture are taking place in settings that include the living room, but also extend outward in ways that other media have not. The Internet intervenes in people’s daily lives across social spheres and public spaces such as public libraries, cybercafés, and school classrooms and across platforms like the cell phone, the PDA, and the television. Though, as Anna McCarthy notes, television itself has become an “ambient” medium, newly common in waiting rooms, vehicles, and public spaces, television’s migration out of domestic space and into public space has been driven partly by the influence of digital media. The Internet is a paradox: notable for the ways in which scholars have predicted its “ubiquity,” it is nonetheless far from universally accessible inside or outside the context of the living room.18

I focus here on the ways that influential and widely cited demographic studies of Internet users broken out by race, such as those released by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and the NTIA, represent Internet users as more or less passive mass audiences and “selective individualized consumers.” This characterization of Internet use creates a discourse of race and the visual culture of the Internet that envisions minorities as more or less successful consumers of a commodity or information source rather than as producers or active audiences. Even in cases in which Internet users of color do engage with the Internet mainly as consumers, participation in online petitions used to protest retail racism, as in the case of the Abercrombie and Fitch T-shirts, and media racism, as in the case of a controversial “Asian or Gay?” article in Details magazine, demonstrates not only that users of color use the Internet to organize and protest, but more importantly how they use the form of the petition itself to enable discourse that reveals ambivalent, complex and rich understandings of racial identity. Already-existing cultural representations of Asian American men, in particular, as queered and emasculated in terms of their identities as consumers of retail goods, are extended by studies of Internet use that emphasize access, or consumption of the Internet, rather than production. Asians, and in particular Asian men, are thus imagined primarily as shoppers.

Until recently, surveys of Internet use have tended not to query for race. In 1998 the Hoffman and Novak study studied African American Internet users and measured their activities and levels of access in relation to white users but did not look at other ethnicities or races.19 The Pew Internet and American Life survey and the NTIA reports from 1995 to the present are an improvement because they examine four ethnic groups: African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and whites. This potentially allows a more nuanced discussion of minorities online, what their presence consists of, the specific areas of cyberspace in which they are present or absent, as well as an examination in more complex terms of how race matters. I focus primarily on the ways that Asian Americans have been singled out as the most wired racial group in America, “the young and the connected,” as the title of the Pew report on Asian American usage of the Internet calls them, and the repercussions of this particular categorization for Asian American Internet audiences and digital visual culture.

Robert Lee’s analysis of the “model minority” myth in the United States critiques U.S. Census data for misrepresenting Asian Americans as possessing a higher SES (socioeconomic status) than they actually enjoy: “The suggestion of parity between Asian Americans and non-Hispanic white Americans is, therefore, deceptive. The figure cited most often to illustrate the Asian American success story is the median income of Asian American families ($42,250 in the 1980s and ’90s), slightly higher than the median income for white families. When controlled for geography and the number of wage earners per family, however, the income of Asian Americans falls short of that for non-Hispanic white Americans.”20 Similarly, dubbing Asian Americans as “the most wired group in America” deceptively represents them as subjects of interactivity in a way that other users are not—Castells’s “interactors” rather than the “interacted.” They are thus classed as honorary or approximate whites in a way that obscures their actual oppression and position as material labor base rather than as privileged consumers of Internet- and IT-based services and media. As the Pew report did not sample non-English-speaking respondents, it is unlikely that it was able to survey immigrants or recently arrived and undereducated Asian Americans, exactly
those people most likely to work as the “interacted” in the circuit of  informatic labor.

Members of Castells’s Fourth World are irrelevant to global flows of informatic power. Asian Americans are not members of this group. However, neither are they necessarily privileged digital model minorities. As Wendy Chun writes, “The Internet is not inherently oriental, but has been made oriental.” The ongoing cultural association with Asians and Asian Americans and high technologies is part of a vibrant and long-standing mythology.21

The most important development in terms of Internet users between 2000 and 2005 is the radical increase in the number of women and ethnic and racial minorities online. In the early years of the Internet’s massification, cybertechnology scholars discussed race online with only marginal references to online media and computer-mediated communications produced by blacks, Asians, and Latinos, instead focusing on representations of racial and ethnic minorities produced for consumption by white users and audiences.22 Things have changed a great deal since then: English is no longer the majority language of the Internet, and vast numbers of new Asian users have made it inaccurate to speak of the Internet as a primarily Western medium. Cultural critics of new media as well as research foundations and policy organizations have much at stake in the way that race online is counted and tabulated. Neither are Asian American scholars free from bias when it comes to measuring Internet participation. There is much at stake in race-based measurement of Internet usage for them as well. As Lee and Wong note: “On the whole, scholars in the field of race and cyberspace remain critically hesitant to emphasize Asian Americans’ differences from other racial groups in terms of their cyberpractices, in part due to legitimate worries over the way such claims to distinction can play into old divide-and-conquer tactics that set minorities against (model) minorities.”23 Scholars have strategically ignored Asian Americans as Internet power-users because this characterization separates them from other minority groups and implies that their priorities have more in common with the white majority. Unlike the Pew Internet and American Life Foundation, they are anxious to avoid characterizations of Asian Americans as a “digital majority.” Lee and Wong are right to emphasize the difficulties created by this strategy: if it is not possible to acknowledge Asian American advantages vis-à-vis Internet access, discussion of their cultural production is foreclosed. Even worse, representations of Asians as possessing “dangerous expertise” vis-à-vis the Internet because they are less disadvantaged than other minority groups exacerbate anti-Asian sentiment.24 Reports that characterize Asians as more connected than whites capitalize on fears that even a slightly higher percentage of Asians online constitutes a large and potentially worrisome majority.

Race has long been a vexed issue on the Internet. In 1996, John Perry Barlow wrote “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” in which he explains:

Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.

Race is the first thing that Barlow claims will be eradicated in cyberspace. This implies that of all the bodily handicaps recognized as oppressive, race is somehow the most oppressive. Barlow’s statement is part of the first wave of utopian thinking on the Internet.25 However, unlike the original Declaration of Independence, it does highlight an intense awareness of race as a problem of access that needs to be overcome. And Barlow was correct at least in stressing it; data gathered by the Pew Foundation do indicate that significant disparities still exist in Internet access based on race, with African Americans and Hispanics much less likely to be online than whites. Fifty-eight percent of whites have used the Internet, compared to 43 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of Hispanics.26 The Pew Foundation reports that Asian Americans are the most likely to have access: it finds that 75 percent of them have used the Internet, making them “one of the most wired groups in America.”27 What’s more, though the gap in access between people of color and whites is closing, African Americans with access to the Internet do not go online as often in a typical day as whites do: only 36 percent of African Americans go online in a typical day, compared to 56 percent of whites.28 These figures differ from those in the 2002 NTIA report “A Nation Online,” which claims that “computer use rates were highest for Asian American and Pacific Islanders (71.2 percent) and Whites (70.0 percent). Among Blacks, 55.7 percent were computer users. Almost half of Hispanics (48.8 percent) were computer users.”29 These numbers imply at best that whites and Asian Americans have parity when it comes to access, rather than one group being “more connected” than the other or possessing a digital advantage. However, as noted earlier in the chapter, the numbers leave out the majority of Asians in America, as 69 percent of those identifying themselves as “Asian” alone were born outside the United States according to the 2000 Census. The NTIA reports surveyed Spanish and English
speakers; the Pew reports surveyed only English speakers. In addition, the small sample size of Asian Americans counted in the Pew report calls their characterization as especially “connected” into question.30

Past digital divide discourse has tended to perpetuate the “gap” metaphor, stressing the absence of people of color online and implying that this is a state of things that needs to be remedied.31 The Pew Foundation’s study of Internet use and race, which tracks minority participation in four major categories (Fun, Information Seeking, Major Life Activities, and Transactions), examines the ways in which all three minority groups studied participate proportionally more in several activities. For example, 54 percent of the African Americans online listened to music there, while only 32 percent of whites online did. Hispanics and Asian Americans also listened to music proportionally more than did whites online: 48 percent of Hispanics had done so, while 46 percent of Asian Americans had. This represents quite a significant digital divide in terms of use of the Internet as a means to get access to music, with whites on the “wrong” side, despite their superior numbers in terms of general access to the Internet. This divide extends into several different types of activities: when racial minorities get online, the Pew data indicate that more of them spend their time online chatting, sending and reading instant messages, looking for sports information, and downloading music than online whites do. This held true for all three racial nonwhite racial groups, including Asian Americans. It seems clear that their investments in the medium are different from those of white users, and that they are far more engaged with the Internet as a source of expressive or popular culture than is a way to buy or sell stocks, get weather reports, or get hobby information: all activities in which online whites participate proportionally more than do online Hispanics, African Americans, or Asian Americans. Significantly, using the Internet to access music, movies, sports information, and social functions such as chatting and instant messaging are all categorized by the Pew Study under the heading of “Fun.” The titles of the remaining three categories, “Information Seeking,” “Major Life Activities,” and “Transactions,” rhetorically imply that participating in popular culture is not a “major life activity” or a way to get important “information.” On the contrary, rather than devaluing those online spaces where the small but growing numbers of American minorities are spending their time and energy, a reenvisioning of what constitutes a “major life activity” or salient “information” may be in order. In the case of people of color, popular culture practices constitute a discursive domain where they are more likely to see cultural producers who resemble them; and most importantly, these are exactly the spaces that invite participation by users. This is important information in the context of Internet users and their lived realities. Manifestations of expressive cultures on the Internet may thus provide an online oasis or refuge for users of color, most of whom are relatively young and new to the medium.

According to the Pew reports, English-speaking users of color use the Internet quite selectively, tending to favor activities related to expressive culture, such as music, movies, chatting, and using multimedia sources, over others. And though the sample sizes for Asian Americans were quite small in some cases, this is true of racial minority groups who responded in greater numbers. The Pew reports enable a new perspective on what people of color actually do when they are online as opposed to the old focus on the digital divide and information have's and have-nots. Thus the project is very much in the spirit of the Afro-futurist group, which, in a special issue of Social Text and in the collection Technicolor, brings to light neglected examples of “African diasporic technophilia” and its long history, debunking the “underlying assumption of much digital divide rhetoric . . . that people of color, and African Americans in particular, cannot keep pace with our high-tech society.”32 As stated before, there are several areas of online life in which people of color participate more fully, in proportion to their numbers, than whites do. African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans generally participate more often in activities coded as “Fun” by the Pew report. To give a complete list, these are the following:

- Browse just for fun
- Get hobby information
- Send an instant message
- Chat online
- Use video/audio clip
- Play a game
- Look for sports information
- Look for info about music, books, or other leisure activities
- Listen to music
- Download music

As the report notes, this is partly explained by the relative youth of minority groups in comparison to whites. This is especially true of Asian Americans and Hispanics. “The online Hispanic population is very young. . . . About 61% of online Hispanics are 34 or under. In comparison, about 37% of white Internet users and 54% of African American users are in that cohort.”33
Moreover, “the Asian American Internet population is also one of the most youthful on the Web. Almost two-thirds (63%) of Asian American users are between the ages of 18 and 34.” More than half of all people of color who use the Internet are “young.” This has a tremendous bearing on their relation to popular culture, as “youth culture” and expressive cultures tend to cross and overlap in numerous ways.

The Internet is a popular communication medium that is used differently by different racial groups. I also make a case for how minority expressive cultures in cyberspace, particularly those produced and consumed by youths of color, may provide sites of resistance to offline racial hegemonies that call for serious consideration. But we must also consider the relation between expressive or popular culture and racial identity and being in the world. Expressive culture practices like music have always been media spaces where people of color are visible as producers and performers, though of course this should not be read as an unalloyed good. As Herman Gray writes:

Marginalized and subordinated communities have creatively transformed and used popular cultural artifacts such as music, costumes, parades, traditions, and festivals to transgress their particular locations, to express their visions, and invent themselves. What characterizes black youth culture in the 1990s and therefore warrants careful attention is the central role of the commercial culture industry and mass media in the process.

If indeed the Internet has become a mass medium and has lost some of its potential as a space for transgression, expression, and reinvention of mass images of race, gender, and identity, this is alarming, but perhaps less so than it seems. Black youth culture is already closely engaged with the commercial culture industry. As Robin Kelley observes, “In a nation with few employment opportunities for African Americans and a white consumer market eager to be entertained by the Other, blacks have historically occupied a central place in the popular culture industry.” Asian Americans are far less visible as producers of a distinctive and commodified “youth culture” than are African Americans. However, they are overrepresented or hypervisible in media industries such as pornography, a medium that has found a particularly congenial home on the Internet. While this is egregious in that it perpetuates the exoticization of Asian women, it does open up a space for Asian Americans to intervene as critics, artists, and independent contractors. In “Good Politics, Great Porn: Untangling Race, Sex, and Technology in Asian American Cultural Production,” Tu describes how Asian American Internet artists and activists have critiqued Orientalist cyberspace by producing their own Web sites and digital films. Her examples, BindiGirl, BigBadChineseMama, and the independent filmmaker Greg Pak’s digital short Asian Pride Porn! “Are all “hilarious send up[s] of the adult industry.” However, there are shortcomings that come with relying on humor to perform their critique: as Tu writes, “creative works like these, however, are politically tricky, playing as they do with the easily misunderstood tools of humor and irony.” Nonetheless she asserts that their importance lies in their ability to “challenge the representational order that dictates their position.” In other words, these sites work much as does allooksame.com in that they encourage reflection and critique through fairly indirect, satirical means. The angrysasianman.com weblog works in a more straightforward fashion: it serves some of the same functions as old media Asian American newspapers and magazines in that it tracks and reports instances of anti-Asian racism in the media in a fairly denotative way, as “news.” Rather than envisioning Asians as power-users or hyperconsumers, it speaks to its audience as media users and potential activists.

Images of Asian Americans as “wired” consumers both hopped up on the drug of hypercapitalism and endowed with the cultural capital to know their way around cyberspace imply that social power lies in the ability to purchase and take advantage of the network’s most advanced features. Indeed, numerous joke lists that circulate via e-mail attest to this self-identification of Asian Americans as avid and enabled users of the Internet. For example, one of these, “Eighty-two Ways to Tell If You Are Chinese,” contains an entry that reads, “You e-mail your Chinese friends at work, even though you only sit 10 feet apart.” These constitute a useful corrective to digital divide discourse by “casting technology use as one of many aspects of racial identity and practice, rather than vice versa.” Second, and most importantly, cyberspace functions as a vector for resistant cultural practices that allow Asian Americans to both use and produce cyberspace. Indeed, new media’s potential when it comes to Asian Americans has much to do with the powerful ways in which it deploys interactivity to destabilize the distinctions between users and producers, as well as questioning a rigid and essentialized notion of Asian American “authenticity.”

In March 2004 Daniel Lee’s “Asians against Ignorance” online petition at www.petitionsonline.com called for Asian Americans to boycott Details, a U.S. men’s magazine, as a reaction to a piece it published titled “Asian or Gay?” This short article, a humorous piece on the convergence between “Asian” and “gay” sartorial profiles, galvanized Asian American activists and journalists both offline and online. Online petitions like these indicate the growth of cyberactivism among a racial minority group in the United
States often perceived as politically apathetic. I will examine the development of Asian American online petition cybervolts by analyzing three specific examples of media protest campaigns against racial stereotyping that produced an appreciable online response: the Details’ “Asian or Gay” controversy, the Abercrombie and Fitch “Two Wongs Don’t Make It White” T-shirt protest, and the Ondade Mar Buddhist tankini scandal. Asian American activists launched online petitions hosted at petitionsonline.com in each of these cases. And in the first two, the petitions served to polarize the Asian American community at least as much as they did to unite it. The sites themselves functioned as highly ambivalent responses to issues around the visual culture of race in the United States. The anonymity afforded the petition signers, the persistence of their replies on the site, and the opportunity for users to view them all simultaneously create a space for online discursive play that challenges the notion of race- and ethnicity-based community in the act of creating it.

Struggles over Asian American visual culture are waged on the Internet in all sorts of places, and the online petition is one place that remediates the political process offline. Representations of Asian Americans as laundrypeople or effeminante dandies (if men) and geishas and sexual playthings (if female), as well as visual images of Buddha or bodhisattvas on the crotches of bikinis and men’s underwear, are closely monitored by civil rights organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens’ League, the Organization of Chinese Americans, and the Asian American Journalists’ Association. Asian Americans are extremely aware of how media depictions, in visual media in particular, shape their experiences in the United States. The Asian American press is particularly quick to attribute many of these protests’ “successes” to online petitioning: Caroline Aoyagi of the Pacific Citizen writes that “thanks to the Internet, Buddhists have launched a massive coordinated campaign against swimwear company Ondade Mar and lingerie magnate Victoria’s Secret.” The swimsuits feature “strategically placed Buddhist images all over their itty-bitty bikinis and tankinis,” which the story compares to “the complaint launched against Macy’s recently after the department store carried boxer briefs with the image of Buddha and the words ‘rub me for luck.” The article goes on to say that “Both Trang and Rev. Umezuzi believe that such a use of religious imagery would never have been used if it were Christianity or Islam. ‘I do not believe that this would occur with any other religious images. They would never have put images of Jesus nor Allah on the same spot of swimwear,’ says Trang.”

This conviction that Asian Americans are uniquely suited to, or at least exceptionally drawn to, the Internet as a means of political protest—that is, the notion of Asian Americans as both wired and disgruntled consumers, if not activists—is confirmed in Jeff Chang’s article “Who’s the Mac? The Asian E-mail Circuit Wins Again.”

Asians with a law degree call it “retail racism.” The rest of us call it it fucked up. It’s when you want to go buy something and they flip you on like the KKK. Nothing in the world—not famine, pestilence, segregation, war, not even Steven Seagal—gets us yellows more pissed. It makes us want to steal your parking spot at the outlet mall. It makes us want to scream “Pay respect to the yellow fist or we’ll fry your T3 lines down to a crisp!” Hell hath no fury like an Asian-American with disposable income and an email address.

The article lists the five most “successful” online protests in descending order: the Adobe help line protest, the San Francisco Acura boycott, the Sky Vodka protest (whose success Chang attributes to AsianAvenue.com), Ego Trip’s Big Book of Racism, and the Abercrombie and Fitch online petition. As in Aoyagi’s article, Chang is explicit about the ways that “yellows” use the “Asian email circuit” in a fashion that is different in quality or kind from that of other ethnic groups. Regarding the Sky Vodka e-mail protest, Chang cites AsianAvenue.com CEO Ben Sun as saying in the official press release, “Prior to AsianAvenue.com, most corporations had no way of getting feedback from the very important consumer group represented by Asian-Americans.” Putting this somewhat dubious claim aside, it seems that the rhetoric of online protest evident in this statement assumes that the Internet is particularly suited to addressing the wrongs of “retail racism.” And the eagerness to claim the Internet as an efficacious space of articulation and self-assertion for Asian Americans is further reflected in the following claim regarding the Abercrombie protest: “The resulting flood of angry Asian-American emails, followed by impromptu protests at A and F stores across the country quickly turned the T-shirt line into cleaning rags.” Indeed, the emphasis here is very much on the quickness and profusion of response via e-mail, which produces a “flood,” the production of a voice in the public sphere, and the deployment of Asian American consumer capital as the primary vector for this voice. Indeed, at the end of the article, Chang ironically acknowledges this association between protest capitalism and Asian culture by exhorting his readers to “monetize that struggle, comrades!”

This characterization of online protest omits some key issues regarding the nature of both political and media activism and online identity. For one, not all protests of this kind are equally popular; the “Stop OndadeMar’s Bikini Exploitation” page on the petitionsonline.com Web site only has 498 signatures, relatively few, especially when compared to the 32,000 gathered
on the Details petition, and extremely few when compared to a petition like the "End the Hate" PetalTalk initiative, which had 192,641 signatures, or even the "Angel Season 6" online petition campaigning for the continuation of a television show, which had 65,184. The enthusiasm for the Internet as a vehicle for social protest against anti-Asian racist imagery clearly exceeds its actual utility. So what sorts of investments and assumptions underlie the notion within the Asian American community and elsewhere that the Internet permits more and more-effective political civil rights protest?

Leaving aside momentarily the question of whether or not online petitions are efficacious, Asian Americans are using the visual culture of the Internet to challenge racism in offline visual media cultures. Asian Americans use petition boards as community spaces in conflicted, rich, and ambivalent ways. Threats to the community are dealt with mostly via identitarian calls to "AZN pride," yet the formatting of the petition space itself encourages and indeed requires that these responses be read in dialogue with other comments, many of which complicate Asianness as a category and (most importantly in my first case, the Details magazine "Asian or Gay" image) oppose queerness to Asianness in ways that suggest limited victories for racial justice. Rampant homophobia among Asian American protesters on this site splits potential community formation and produces online texts that demand intersectional critique.

In "Asian or Gay? Piece in Details Magazine Angers AA Community," Caroline Aoyagi writes: "The national men's magazine Details is drawing loud criticism from the Asian American and AA gay and lesbian communities for a piece entitled 'Asian or Gay?" that is supposed to be a humorous take on social stereotypes."[68]

A photograph in the Details article depicts a full-frontal, full-page photograph of a young Asian man with spiky hair wearing fashionable urban gear such as sunglasses, a shoulderbag, and silver tennis shoes. Numbered arrows to the right of the image point out features such as "Dior sunglasses," "Dolce and Gabbana suede jacket," and "Louis Vuitton bag," along with others such as "ladyboy fingers" and "delicate features." These arrows are keyed to a legend at the bottom left of the image. This concatenation of bodily features and luxury fashion commodities stresses the identification of both Asian and gay men not only as hyperconsumers but also as phenotypic homologies. While the text claims that both Asian and gay men sport labels such as "Evisu jeans: $400" as well as Dior, Dolce, and Vuitton, in some cases the luxury object and its owner's body are conflated in such a way as to make them simultaneously queer and raced through the act of purchasing and wearing

Figure 5.1. "Gay or Asian?" article in Details magazine.

them: Evisu jeans are explained as follows: "A bonsai ass requires delicate tending." The emphasis on the queerness and delicacy of the Asian body as configured by its patterns of consumption and style runs throughout the article; even an item as seemingly innocuous as an unbranded "white t-shirt" is indexed as follows: "V-neck nicely showcases sashimi smooth chest. What
other men visit salons to get, the Asian gene pool provides for free.” This emphasis on the genetic difference of the Asian man configures him as inherently queer. This Asian American man is figured within the discourse of the contemporary dandy or metrosexual at best, outright queer at worst.69 The table of contents gives a subtitle for the article: “One orders take-out sushi, the other delivers it. Enter the gaysia.” This hybrid formulation invokes differences in class and the racialization of labor, particularly in the “global cities” described by Saskia Sassen, in which Asians are visible both as ubiquitous low-skilled service workers and as privileged consumers of sartorial goods, networking services, and other informational commodities. The image thus contains both types of Asian American male bodies: those of “high-tech coolies” and low-tech coolies. This deepens the article’s insistence on the perfect equivalence of gays and Asians, for it emphasizes that one, presumably the Asian, must deliver for the other to receive. Yet gay men are often also misrepresented in terms of class much as are Asian men, as privileged consumers rather than as workers or laborers. In any event, the article’s figuration on Asian men as unparalleled consumers mirrors Chang’s, Aoyagi’s, and Chen’s insistence on the Internet as a remedy to “retail racism.”

As Lisa Lowe reminds us, “In conjunction with the relative absence of Chinese wives and family among immigrant ‘bachelor’ communities and because of the concentration of Chinese men in ‘feminized’ forms of work—such as laundry, restaurants, and other service-sector jobs—Chinese male immigrants could be said to occupy, before 1940, a ‘feminized’ position in relation to white male citizens and, after 1940, a ‘masculinity’ whose racialization is the material trace of the history of this gendering.”50 In his analysis of Asian and Asian American porn and cyberspaces, Darrell Hamamoto notes as well in his discussion of “Mr. Wong,” an overtly anti-Asian and extremely popular Web-based comic strip, “A well-worn strategy for feminizing, emasculating, and thereby disempowering men of color is to cast them as homosexuals.”51 As I discussed in chapter 4, the visual culture of the Internet genders new media production in such a way as to preserve old associations of femininity with decoration, frilliness, profusion, and modularity. Modular means of digital production assume that users “shop” for digital parts to combine into a composited whole rather than building original images. As Manovich notes, this is the structure of all new media objects and is intrinsic to the protocols of digital media in a way that is not necessarily gendered at all. However, the feminization of consumption or “shopping” as a mode of digital self-expression is certainly well established in our culture. Images of Asian men as “gaysia” reinforce the notion of Asian men as support staff, uninspired by new ideas and defined by consumption rather than production.

Unsurprisingly, the Asian American popular press was quick to decry the imputation of queerness to Asian American men and to speak in favor of rehabilitating the image to make it more masculine. Rather than picking up on the class bias at work here, one that is part of the “model minority” myth that images all Asians as wealthy and wired consumers, Patrick Mango, executive director of Asian Pacific Islanders for Human Rights (APIHR), a support and advocacy group for the API LGBT community, complained that “as usual, from the mainstream community... there is the assumption that all Asian men are effeminate.” In addition, “The Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA) also sent a letter to Details calling for an apology. While we can’t figure out exactly what the feature is trying to say—Asian men are gay? Asian men look gay? Asian men would be better off gay?—there’s no disguising the fact that it combines leering sexual innuendo and a litany of the most tired clichés about both Asian and gay culture with no goal other than to ridicule both groups.”

This neologistic pairing of gay and Asian to form a new hybrid term—“gaysia”—references an older visual culture of racialization by invoking the visual culture of anthropology. The photograph and its accompanying captions uncannily mimic the structure of the “Chink or Jap?” photographs that ran in Life magazine during World War II that I discussed in chapter 2. Just as the Life photographs featured textual annotations that explained the significance of each physiognomic feature with a quasi-scientific precision, anatomizing identity in purely visual terms, so “Asian or Gay?” has arrows that interpret each “feature” on the fly. However, the dichotomy that it presents works at cross-purposes with the former; while “Chink or Jap?” argues for the visibility and interpretability of race to the trained eye, “Asian or Gay?” attempts to erase the differences and emphasize the similarities. Of course, the particular type of scientism invoked by this visual arrangement of photographic portrait or mug shot with interpretive textual annotation is quantitative anthropological measurement methods such as biometrics. And indeed, while biometrics has fallen out of favor in recent years (as evidenced by the moribund state and imminent closure of Le Musée de l’Homme in Paris, the former exhibitor of the preserved genitalia of Saartje Baartman, otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus), the discipline has reappeared as part of the technoscientific inscription of race on the visible body, as in the case of iris scanning, fingerprinting, and the use of facial recognition technology.
for U.S. visitors who travel via plane, and the recent call for biometric identification papers for air travel by the International Civil Aviation Organization. As noted in chapter 3, this open letter to the ICAO singles out facial recognition technology as problematic because it may be used to “reveal racial or ethnic origin.” The “Gay or Asian” image deploys the visual culture of racialization to create its own brand of facial-recognition technology, one that positions its subject not only in relation to border and immigration status but also in relation to class and sexuality. Alexander Galloway writes that new networked biometric technologies—“The science of measuring the human body and deriving digital signatures from it”—are worrisome not only because of their possible infringements on privacy, but also because they have “redefined what counts as proof of the true identity of material life forms. Authenticity (identity) is once again inside the body-object, yet it appears now in sequences, samples, and scans.”52 The “true identity” of the queer or raced male subject, its outing via the visual culture of biometrics, may not overtly participate in the “digital signature” described by Galloway, but the reaction to the image that appeared on petitiononline.com literally produced digital signatures by material bodies, actual people who logged on and wrote comments. These bodies, however, lack the authenticity or presence guaranteed by biometrics and thus evade the dataveilant gaze; it is impossible to tell what race or gender sexuality they are, a point to which I will return.

When we analyze the online response to “Gay or Asian?” we can trace the ways in which the protesting of racial and gender stereotypes, new media, technology, and Asian Americans constellate. The signatures that petitioners leave are anarchic, unorganized, and astounding diverse. Like the discussion boards on allook.com, these often very short and truncated postings create a processual, problematized vision of Asian American identity on precisely the kind of electronic medium that one might expect would preclude it. On March 30 there were 14,589 signatures on Daniel Lee’s “Asians against Ignorance” petition at petitiononline.com pushing for a boycott of Details magazine, and on April 27 it had 32,964 signatures.53 Considering that the site’s petition is quite straightforward about protesting the racism behind the “Asian or Gay?” article, the responses are themselves interestingly all over the map. However, this is itself a statement as to the multivalent uses to which the Asian American community, at least as constituted by this board in the moment of signing the petition, wishes to put this discursive space.

Figure 5.2. “Asians against Ignorance” from petitiononline.com.

Signator 32,906, “Chow Yun Fat,” posted simply: “My tiger crane style will defeat your dragon kungfu.” This statement, which seems like a non sequitur considering that the petition he is signing has to do with media racism in Details, repeats and invokes popular media images of Orientals to parody and manipulate them. While this is the very offense that the Ondade Max Buddha swimsuits (and the response from Details magazine) commit, in the sense that they reproduce stereotyped images of Asian Americans from popular media, this is repetition with a difference. The choice of signature also has meaning, for Chow Yun Fat is a legitimate media star, one of the few to have name recognition and (limited) box office clout in the United States. Here the anonymous signer invokes both older and contemporary Asian martial arts films, a genre that is one of the few media spaces available to Asian men that does not feminize them.

While the majority of signatures decry the racism and ignorance inherent in the “Gay or Asian?” story and pledge to stop buying Details, several did use the site against the grain, as in the case of signator 33,959, who wrote: “Of course not ALL asians dress that way, and neither do all gays. But it’s a _style_ magazine and the article is pointing out the striking similarities between popular gay style and popular asian style. now get over it.” This
injunction to "get over it" is, ironically, exactly the message coming from both Victoria's Secret and Ondade Mar, neither of which agreed that the images were offensive or offered to alter their practices. In this case, the signatory used the space of the online petition to protest the protest.

Other signatories used the site to practice reverse racism, as in the case of signatory 32,925, P. S. Ryu, who states boldly: "Asians have higher IQ." In addition, a variety of configurations of racism and homophobia coexisted in several posts, which due to the limited space available for free response on the site, are almost aphoristic in tone. These haiku-like postings of a few lines or less necessarily imply more than they state; like so many of the bits of microcontent generated by the Web 2.0 technologies like blogs and social networking sites, they are incomplete, poorly articulated or even inarticulate-seeming, evocative rather than denotive. Signatory 33,958, "ExT," writes that "the gays should be offended by this comparison," and signatory 32,868, who gives no name, writes simply, "FU_CK_THEIR_AS_S." His use of typography and underscores indicates that he realizes that a filter might catch these R-rated words and edit his post. Signatory 32,867, Lee Enrile, writes, "What kind of honky ass name is 'Whitney' anyway. Sounds like he's the one whose gayer than hell." (Whitney McNally, the author of "Asian or Gay?" is in fact a woman.) In these instances, the petition revealed the homophobia of the Asian communities, failing to produce the "gaysian" subject posited by Details. For all the Internet's touted abilities to produce new forms of subjectivity, in these cases it tended to reinforce old ones.

Why were the Abercrombie and Details online petitions so much more popular and well publicized than the Ondade Mar protest? Coco Fusco writes that "serious discussion of the meaning of our desire to see race in visual representation is impeded by the difficulties we have in distinguishing between racialization as a visual process, and racism as an ethical and political dilemma." In other words, visual representations of race and racism work paradoxically: they are both irresistible spectacles and social problems. Racial difference and racialized bodies are medigenic in ways that appeal to all viewers. And since the nature of digital media is to be transcodable, instantly transmittable, and infinitely reproducible, racial imagery flows in torrents up and down the networks that many people use every day. As Fusco writes, "We like to see race even if we don't consider ourselves racist," and "The act of visualizing and looking at racial difference continues to seduce and enthrall American viewers" (23). It is possible that the Details and Abercrombie petitions were so much more popular than the Ondade Mar petition because they depicted Asian people rather than religious iconography of Buddha and thus were more "racial" and medigenic. They satisfied the desire to consume race visually that is possessed by all people, even and perhaps particularly by Asian Americans themselves.

The viral nature of e-mail forwarding often works in this way: Asian Americans may have received mailings urging them to sign the petition, and did so partly because they were eager to see the "Asian or Gay?" article for the same reason that the magazine ran it in the first place—it is funny. And also egregious. And as Fusco writes, its irresistibility is part of the complex of investments in the proliferation of racialized imagery, not only in spite of multiculturalism, but indeed as an integral part of it. The desire to share the horror and fascination of what seems like unambivalent homophobia and racism in a mass-market publication mingles with the need for confirmation of its badness and an impulse to indulge in the pleasures of shared indignation. And since the Web is so extremely good at transmitting visual images via links in e-mail, and the petition itself includes a copy of the image, the petition space serves as a perfect venue for transmitting the image to many more people, and certainly more Asian Americans, than might have ever seen it in the first place. (The link from the petition to the image was broken as of July 15, 2004, but there are several blogs that have it up that one can find through Google, demonstrating that the Asian American blogosphere is an extremely effective vector for keeping the image alive and moving throughout cyberspace.)

A dominant theme of the signatories' responses involves decrying the existence of such "ignorance" and racism in this supposedly enlightened post-multicultural culture. The surprise and outrage at this evidence of failed antiracism seem to be invoked by a sense of violated temporality—if we are "beyond racism," if history has put it to rest, surprise would be the appropriate response. This sense of temporality, of being in a "new age" that turns out to our dismay not to be so new after all, is echoed by the discourse of Internet utopianism, which also claims to be a harbinger of a new period of history, one in which important things have changed. Cybercultural studies have made claims that technology has changed the nature of the body, that databasing, gene mapping, prosthetics, and various forms of biotechnology have created a cyberbody. Biometrics is a space where racial identity, technology, and surveillance converge. The new visibility of the body as a digital signature creates apprehension because it seems first of all to be profoundly antihumanist but offers benefits in terms of our desire to visualize race. The
Internet offers enhanced opportunities not only to view race, in all its scandalous deliciousness, but also to put our own bodies into play as digital signatures.

Perhaps as a result of the petition’s being anonymous, a significant number of signatories felt compelled to identify their race, but almost always only if they were non-Asian. Signator 34,024, “Brian,” writes, “I’m not even Asian and I think this is stupid”; and signator 34,023, “Todd Keithly,” writes, “I’m white and think this is out of line.” This addresses some of the compelling questions regarding online activism posed by Martha McCaughey and Michael Ayers in the introduction to their collection Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice. They claim that “the Internet allows us to interact with others without our voices, faces, and bodies. In the absence of meat bodies (also known as wetware among Netizens), the traversing of spatial and temporal boundaries raises questions about what presence, essence, or soul we think we are on the Net (Slater). The Internet thus raises new questions about social change and how it works. For instance, where is the body on which that traditional activism has relied?”

Their concern with the free-flowing “traversing of spatial and temporal boundaries” appears to be misplaced when read in the light of online petition responses like the ones I list here, for these petitioners are all too aware of their racialized bodies when responding to Asian American media protests. Concerns that the racialized body or “meat” might itself be the basis for effective activism cause these writers to question whether social change can occur without “putting your body on the line,” as they dramatically put it. Protests, particularly civil rights ones, have often depended on the ability to successfully visualize activism, especially when the particular offense in question is itself visual in nature, as in the case of racism in advertising and media. In addition to seeking visibility as a cause in and of itself (some protests are less concerned with accomplishing actual specific goals than with “getting themselves out there” and being correctly counted by the media), civil rights protests in particular have capitalized on producing visual evidence of racial diversity in their support base. It is thus that the presence of whites in Martin Luther King’s civil rights protests and the presence of men at pro-choice rallies attest to the ideas, as well as that a cause benefits from visible diversity. The presence of whiteness validates racial justice protests as “universal” rather than as particular and invests them with legitimacy. However, as Mark Oolub points out, there is a tendency in civil rights dramas such as Mississippi Burning to make white people the main characters in these conflicts in such a way that belies historical accuracy; this may be perceived as the only way to draw in white audiences. Indeed, this is partially borne out by the structure of these posts, in which declarations of whiteness precede and even eclipse critiques of “Asian or Gay?” thus making whiteness itself, and specifically the invisible but digitally asserted whiteness of the signator, the “main character” in the protest.

How do online petitions function differently from television, film, and other media in this way? Should we talk about them as media, or as political protests? Of course, we need to do both, and visual culture is the way into resolving this dilemma and debate. Political protests that feature diverse physical bodies visualize the issue at hand, such as civil or reproductive rights, as social problems at large, rather than as minoritarian concerns. This is no doubt a worthy goal. However, online petitions lack this feature; it is impossible to poll for diversity on the Internet because there are no visible bodies attached to signatures. Hence the self-identification of some signators as white serves as an attempt to bring this feature back into the space of online protests. These signators seem to realize that their claiming whiteness in the moment of signing the petition reinserts their bodies into the discourse in such a way as to make the petition more powerful, just as the presence of their white, heteronormative (very little discourse on the poll concerned itself with gay or straight identity) bodies might “count” more in the context of a physical march or demonstration. This shows an impressive amount of media savvy but raises some vexing questions regarding the position of the raced body as a media product to be protested and as a vehicle of protest itself.

The default identity assumed in these petition spaces is Asian American-ness, not whiteness. In what ways has the use of information technology intertwined itself as another aspect of identity within the complex of identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class? How might forms of racism other than “retail racism” be challenged using what is at base an industrial media form with its own infrastructural constraints, interface and platform specificities, and flows of labor and capital? Wired magazine’s February 2004 cover features an image of a South Asian woman in a veil with mendhi on her hands, which spell out the characters of a programming language. The cover story is titled “The New Face of the Silicon Age: Tech Jobs Are Fleeing to India Faster than Ever,” and in tiny letters next to the dateline we see the words “help wanted.”

The salient question here and in much visual representation of labor, consumption, technology, and race is precisely the one stressed in the “gaysian” tagline: who is to receive and who is to give? Who is “technological” in a threatening, protesting, queer way, and who is technological in a
useful, helpful, and comfortably offshore way? As Robert Lee notes, Asian American women outnumber Asian American men, which may account for why the “face” of offshore labor is a female one. In addition, the use of the veil works to obscure the individuality of the face and to underscore its exoticism. This Wired cover images Asians as technological down to their skin, which is inscribed by strings of code and the language of machines. Instead of protesting “retail racism” using online protests, these particular Asian bodies are depicted as part of the abstract infrastructure of the Internet itself: to cite the replicant Rachael in the film Blade Runner, they aren’t in the business, they are the business. The mendhi typography on the Indian woman’s hands spells out a computer programming language, as if to stress the ways that South Asian women are naturally digital. This techno-Orientalist imagery can be seen as well in the final installment of The Matrix trilogy, Matrix Revolutions, in which software programs are embodied in a South Indian family, Rama-Kandra, his wife Kamala, and their daughter Sati. They implore Neo for their freedom, since as bonded labor they are bound to serve the Architect’s purposes. The notion of Asians as technological, and intimately acquainted with, or even, in the case of The Matrix, intrinsic to informational technologies as products rather than users, creators of value rather than consumers, valences the ongoing racial formation of Asians in America.57

While the “gaysian” formulation of consuming Asian masculinity re-inforces the notion of Asians as defined by retail culture, in some cases the Internet has enabled young people of color to critically intervene in particular aspects of the culture industry, such as fashion, another commodified expressive culture with its own set of politics and investments in youth culture. In April 2002, Abercrombie and Fitch, a popular mall retailer that markets its casual clothing to the high school and college set, produced a series of kitschy graphic T-shirts that depicted images of Asians with “slanty eyes [and] rice paddy straw hats” along with slogans such as “you love long time” and “Two Wongs Can Make It White.” The latter slogan was paired with a satiric cartoon image of two Asian laundryworkers. The Internet response to these T-shirts was immediate. An e-mail campaign was organized both informally and formally through two Web sites. The first was initiated for the sole purpose of organizing the protest and is at http://www.boycott-af.com. The other can be found at http://www.petitiononline.com/BCAF/petition.html. Both provide an area where a user can sign a petition on the Web, as well as a link to Abercrombie and Fitch’s e-mail address and a link that enables one to “send petition to a friend.” Ultimately this Internet
organizing resulted in several rallies in front of Abercrombie and Fitch bricks-and-mortar stores. The Organization of Chinese Americans attributes this to "angry complaints, phone calls, and e-mail campaigns [that] spread like wildfire among APA students, community members, and leaders nationwide." The Web petition gathered over 6,500 signatures, and it is impossible to track how many Asian Americans used private e-mail to circulate this information. The T-shirts were withdrawn shortly afterward, and Abercrombie and Fitch delivered an apology to the Asian American community. Here the Internet's ability to spread information "like wildfire" provided a politicized space that allowed Asian Americans, a minority that struggles against popular images of themselves as prostitutes and laundrymen, to intervene in the commercial culture industry. Though the e-mail campaign against Abercrombie's racist T-shirts is encouraging, it should be noted that it still constructs users of color in relation to online commerce, as "angry customers." The language of boycott is still that of the dissatisfied consumer, who uses his or her clout to influence retailers' policies. In effect, this is just more of the same; business as usual poured to the Internet is only likely to reduplicate existing power relations in terms of race and racism. Rigorous scholarship into the distinctions between Internet users as consuming audiences and producers of online discourse is crucial if we are to guard against the further reduction of people of color to markets.

Thus it is crucial that future demographic studies of the Internet and race explore production as well. How many people of color are putting up Web sites, posting their music, images, and videos, managing and contributing to Listservs, or adding content to other textual sites? The Pew category "Using email" conflates passive e-mail activities such as reading and deleting spam and "tribally marketed" hypercapitalistic advertising with more active ones like writing or even forwarding politically oriented messages on racial identity issues such as Abercrombie's "Two Wongs Can Make It White" T-shirts, sending pictures of the grandkids to relatives, or distributing a family newsletter. This is why future studies of Internet usage in America must ask questions regarding people of color as producers of Internet content, not just consumers. Tracking the extent to which racial minorities are availing themselves of the Net's interactivity will tell us how much and in what ways they are adding to the discourse. Michelle Wright notes the significant increase in numbers of Internet users of color approvingly; she is encouraged by studies that report that Latinos and African Americans are the number one and number two slots of "fastest growing groups of Internet users." She also quite rightly emphasizes the impor-

tance of moving beyond models of minorities as passive media audiences: "We need to engage with the Internet beyond Web surfing and checking e-mail." It is imperative that we devise rigorous methodologies to help us understand what constitutes meaningful participation online, participation that opens and broadens the kinds of discourse that can be articulated there. It is not enough merely to be "there": the image of the online "lurker" invokes the passivity and ghostliness of those who watch from the sidelines of online life.