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RACIAL NATURALIZATION, ADVERTISING, AND MODEL CONSUMERS FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

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IN WHAT WAYS DOES CORPORATE AMERICA allow us to reconsider processes of Asian American racialization in the new millennium? In this article I offer a contemporary twist on central ways of theorizing Asian American racialization. Whereas influential conceptions such as Claire Jean Kim's "racial triangulation" or Mia Tuan's "forever foreigner or honorary whites" still have much analytical purchase, new modes of racialization do not necessarily reproduce the conception that Asian Americans are granted model minority status because they are perennial outsiders who do not pose a threat to the nation.¹ In sectors of corporate America, especially the advertising industry, Asian Americans are faced with a distinctly different option: inclusion. Due to widespread corporate insistence on making more meaningful strides toward representing racial and ethnic diversity confirmed by the 2010 census and other metrics, Asian American advertising agencies, alongside those that target African Americans, Latinos, and other minority groups, are finding ways to make Asian Americans more visible. By depicting Asian Americans through carefully crafted cultural and linguistic strategies, they work to establish a distinctive place for Asian Americans as a natural part of the American racial landscape. To mark this shift from outsider model minority or forever foreigner to a coveted segment of the multicultural market, I use the term "racial naturalization." Racial naturalization addresses the ways in which

contemporary advertisements depict Asian Americans as model citizens with distinct cultural and linguistic traditions but also reframes them as an integral part of the corporate tableau of multicultural advertising that would be incomplete without them.²

A loose comparison between my use of naturalization and that of the state, especially the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, is useful here. We may consider the initial post 1965 positioning of Asian Americans as model but existing outside the body politic, their limbo defined by the state as visa holders, resident aliens, or permanent residents. The process of becoming naturalized by the state, in which oaths of citizenship are usually accompanied by a partial or full withdrawal from one's former nation-state, is not unlike the racial naturalization that occurs in advertising. Rather than appearing as marginal background players or comedic foils, I present ethnographic evidence in which Asian Americans are becoming a naturalized part of corporate brand identities. Indeed, being the target of advertising for such major brands as McDonald's, Citibank, Nissan, and myriad others is to be granted a level of legitimacy and belonging akin to citizenship. Yet, like naturalization, something has to be surrendered, in part or full, to occupy the role of citizen. What gets included and what gets erased creates the basis for new racializations of Asian Americans.

Through the analogy of naturalization, I wish to draw attention to the capitalist processes of legitimization that make Asian Americans belong in multicultural advertising today, and the ways in which Asian American ad executives are part of the machinery that contributes to mass-mediated representations. I emphasize the contemporaneity of this concept in light of the productive intersection of two ideologies in the new millennium: the stronghold of a "postracial" ideology in sectors of corporate America and neoliberal ideologies that valorize not only entrepreneurship but also the power of consumption to shape identities, including those premised on race and ethnicity.³ Presenting ethnographic data collected in Asian American ad agencies in New York, I link two distinct but overlapping processes of Asian American racial naturalization: how ad executives creatively render one ethnic group—South Asian Americans—as consumers in "character sketches" for a campaign pitch, and how they construct a shared Asian American identity through everyday conversations and ethnic

humor to perform for their corporate clients. The ways in which Asian American ad executives create naturalized representations of race, and how they perform naturalized racial identities themselves, are illustrative on several levels. I consider how Asian American ad executives occupy a paradoxical role, in that they thrive from the seemingly level playing field that the postracial moment has engendered in corporate America, but nonetheless need to underscore continually the importance of differentiating *Asian American* from the general market to objectify it in advertising and in corporate interactions. To put it bluntly, in order to make money, executives have to define, manipulate, and emphasize the significance of race. Taking control of representation, then, means potentially transforming racist imagery of Asian Americans produced in different eras since the late nineteenth century, and resignifying Asian Americans as legitimately belonging to the U.S. racial order. The racial naturalization of the model minority into a model consumer is dependent on just these types of creative renderings, both in the imagined audiences that ad executives aim to reach as well as among themselves as Asian Americans.

MANAGING DIVERSITY IN AMERICAN ADVERTISING

Enterprising minorities in advertising and marketing have, since the 1970s, made the case to corporations that targeting large post-1965 minority groups—especially Asian Americans and Latinos—directly through specialized or “niche” advertising is the most effective way to reach them as consumers. Creating specialized advertising that incorporates linguistic and cultural markers that will appeal to these growing and lucrative minority markets is the work of niche advertising. Agencies that cater exclusively to the Asian American market emerged in the mid-1980s and are concentrated in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. These ten or so major firms offer a range of services that include producing advertisements for print, television, and the Internet, buying space in ethnic media, and conducting direct marketing, community-level events, public relations, and reconnaissance on emerging ethnic markets. Corporations that produce goods and services such as automobiles, telecommunications, liquor, insurance, banking, casinos, and fast food have been especially invested in targeting Asian American consumers.

Advertising executives admit that *Asian American* obscures more than it illuminates, and that the grouping of immigrants from different countries in East, Southeast, and South Asia, as well as the Pacific Islands, offers little common ground in terms of language, culture, religion, and ethnicity. It is, nonetheless, a category that the U.S. Census Bureau, politicians, and educational institutions have put into practice, and the business world has followed suit. Asian American advertising must manage a unique set of challenges in which internally varied ethnic groups are represented as coherent and unified, and all these groups are united under the racial category of *Asian American*.⁴ Despite the challenges of effectively subsuming these differences into a unified *Asian American* category, executives still see the value in this construction. In a similar manner, Arlene Davila has illustrated how national, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic differences are downplayed in the creation of “Latino” as an advertising category, and that despite the myriad differences subsumed under “Latino,” this grouping nonetheless seems to work in ethnic marketing.⁵ An analogous process is not quite possible for *Asian American*, as the range of nations and languages is simply too wide. In my observations, ad executives use demographic and marketing data to generate cultural, linguistic, and lifestyle attributes to the five most profitable Asian ethnic groups—Americans of Chinese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, and Vietnamese descent.⁶ Rather than create a single ad for Asian American audiences, executives and their clients usually agree that making several versions of an ad, each “in-culture” (containing cultural markers of a particular ethnic group) and “in-language” (in an Asian language), is most effective.⁷ This requires executives to be fluent and literate in Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, or Hindi, which often means they are first-generation immigrants, but some are members of the second generation or “1.5 generation.”⁸ Among themselves, as well as in their work, they strive to construct a unified, if not uniform, *Asian American*.

The work of Asian American and Latino niche advertising signals a departure from general market treatments of race. In an advertising industry under mounting pressure from clients to include a more balanced rendering of the 100 million minorities counted in the 2010 census (about one-third of the U.S. population), the push for greater diversity is urgent. Some executives I spoke with in general market agencies sug-

gested that Latino and Asian American agencies are irrelevant in a time when general market advertising already addresses diversity. Other general market executives who regarded niche agencies as providing a valuable service nonetheless prided themselves on their efforts to promote diversity through the inclusion of people of color in their ads. This can take the form of nonwhite actors and models who are less easy to categorize according to existing racial and ethnic categories, what general market ad executives referred to as “ethnic ambiguity.”⁹ Asian American and Latino niche executives critique this ambiguity in order to distinguish and promote the work they do. As Davila has illustrated with Latino advertising and as I discuss elsewhere with Asian American advertising, pitching and compelling clients to commission in-language and in-culture advertising enables them to introduce language and culture in precise ways that the general market is simply not positioned to do.¹⁰ Their rationale for doing so is one of survival: in order to sustain the business of Asian American advertising, executives must continually impress upon clients the value of having brand identities tailored to particular Asian American ethnic groups. They use census and market research data to make the claim that Asian Americans have a very high per capita income and are willing spenders.¹¹ As numerous executives explained to me, the Asian American market is small in terms of numbers (a mere 5 percent of the overall U.S. population), but their purchasing power is too large to ignore. Despite this, in the current era of economic uncertainty in which advertising budgets in general have been drastically reduced compared to the years of frenzied growth leading to the 2008 recession, executives have had to tout the desirability of this group to clients more compellingly.

To survive as a niche industry, Asian American ad executives face the challenge of making explicit the subject of race in corporate environments where such differences are rarely openly discussed. Yet, they must do so in an era when claims to the declining significance of race—a “postracial” era, as some have termed it—seem to hold considerable weight in corporate America despite compelling evidence of continued racism and widening inequality between and within racial groups.¹² Racial naturalization offers a way for advertising executives to utilize contemporary ideologies that facilitate racially marked cultural production without overtly challenging the postracial. In niche advertising, neoliberal ide-

ologies that valorize self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship have found a productive union with racialized imagery that reinforces the power of Asian Americans as consumers while also conveying the nonthreatening nature of their citizenship.¹³ Neoliberal ideologies further emphasize the role of consumption in identity formation, and marketing data suggest that Asian Americans are excellent consumers and therefore worthwhile to target through specialized messaging. Asian American executives have the ideal base on which to further these neoliberal visions of race: the model minority stereotype. Introduced in 1966 by the *New York Times* and *US News & World Report*, these early media characterizations portray Asian Americans as self-sufficient, good citizens at a time when the state was looking to cut social services overall.¹⁴ The model minority Asian American was lauded as a productive member of American society, while other minority populations, especially African Americans, were unfavorably regarded for the reliance of some on state welfare.¹⁵ In her analysis of this “racial triangulation” among blacks, whites, and Asian Americans, Claire Jean Kim astutely notes that the last is racialized as model as well as foreign and that it is their foreignness that lends credibility to their model status. In other words, their purported superiority to other minorities is made possible as well as mitigated by their continual placement as “outside” the body politic. In a different vein, Mia Tuan has termed this dynamic “forever foreigner,” and both these notions of outsider difference are integral to how these ad executives construct Asian American. What I am arguing here is somewhat different: Asian American ad executives are actually not complicit in reproducing attributes of foreignness in their ads, or in their presentation of self. Rather, they present a “naturalized” version of the foreigner, one who embodies attributes of diversity but is ready to consume like an American.

Racial naturalization allows ad executives to do the discursive work of managing difference in ways that come across as safe, relatable, and even fun. In the character sketches I will turn to shortly, as well as the interactions among ad executives themselves, differences of religion, language, and nation are made easily comprehensible and potentially likeable. In the same vein, the discursive work that Asian American ad executives of different ethnicities and immigrant generations do enables them to embody *Asian American* effectively in an industry that has only the vaguest idea

of who is to be included in this grouping and how they might be reached as consumers. As I illustrate, ad executives are careful to construct their characterizations, as well as their corporate identities, using what they believe to be hallmark characteristics of America. Indeed, iconic aspects of American identity are absolutely critical in their advertising work and do the work of situating Asian Americans in multicultural advertising while also enabling them to socialize and network with their largely white American corporate clients. Thus, in their character sketches as well as in their interactions with one another, they attempt to create distance from signs of foreignness and opt instead for familiar, relatable tropes through which to represent being Asian American. Personifying Asian ethnicities in ads and performing Asian American identities enable these executives to remake Asian Americans as friendly, naturalized citizens ready to successfully participate in a racialized capitalism.

With these points in mind, I turn to examples that are drawn from fourteen months of ethnographic and sociolinguistic fieldwork conducted in Asian American ad agencies in New York City and Los Angeles between 2008 and 2012.¹⁶ The examples are part of a multiyear, multisited research project that includes fieldwork with Asian American advertising agencies in New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco; general market agencies; and various industry events. I observed the day-to-day work of “ad executives,” those who work at these agencies; how “creatives,” primarily copywriters and art designers, imagine their audiences and generate concepts, images, and text for ads; as well as how they negotiate their choices with “clients,” the corporate entities that commission these communications.¹⁷ From September to December 2009, I conducted research at a seventy-five-person New York City agency I call “Asian Ads,” and I draw extensively from meetings and conversations I observed there as well as elsewhere.¹⁸ Conversant and literate in Hindi, I best understood communications made for this audience but closely followed all accounts I was permitted to observe, as all materials were translated to English for client approval.

PERSONIFYING ASIAN AMERICAN ETHNICITIES IN CREATIVE WORK

To appeal to Asian populations in the United States, executives project cultural and linguistic values through characters who will resonate with

corporate clients as well as with intended consumers. Ethnographic studies of advertising have illustrated the localized ways in which this industry does not simply reflect existing values but actively creates and formulates them.¹⁹ Understanding regional ideologies, values, and norms specific to a target audience is paramount to effectively constructing consumers and markets.²⁰ The key for these executives, then, is to identify and leverage those aspects of Asian American subjectivity that suit the brand identities of their clients. Since Asian Americans will also be reached by general market ads, clients expect ethnic advertising to contain overt markers of heritage cultures and languages. Ed, account supervisor at a major Asian American ad agency, emphasized that more than providing linguistic translation, clients look to his company for a nuanced understanding of the cultural context. But because clients are also anxious that these ads be “different enough” from general market campaigns that they have already made, they look for obvious symbols of Asian cultures. Executives must accordingly find a middle ground among the representational strategies they develop from their own cultural and linguistic knowledge, the meanings valued by their audiences, and the expectations of clients who hire them. Elsewhere I investigate how executives reconcile the differences between their values and those of their corporate clients, and how each articulates different and potentially conflicting versions of Asian ethnicity.²¹ Here I delve deeper into the process of making recognizable types from nameless, faceless data and statistics.

The visual and linguistic signifiers executives choose are ones they believe will appeal both to their intended audiences as well as to their clients. Particularities of class, religion, gender, and lifestyle are here, like in advertising elsewhere, made to seem naturally occurring but are actually hewn from a set of carefully vetted observations and social details. One strategy executives use to connect a client’s brand with immigrant populations about which they may have little firsthand knowledge is to transform data about an ethnic group into “sketches” of ideal character types. This is helpful because clients who wish to reach Asian American audiences generally have a fairly limited understanding of different ethnic groups, and executives believe that these sketches can effectively illustrate to clients how the cultural and linguistic features unique to an ethnic group make them especially good consumers. Such visuals enable executives to

communicate the look and feel of everyday ethnic life to corporate clients in ways that are compatible with their brand identity, but also strive to naturalize them so as to no longer be marked as foreign. The series of character sketches I now discuss were originally pitch materials for a money transfer company that eventually led to a successful campaign.²²

Creating Asian American Consumers

Depicting ethnicity through these cultural, linguistic, religious, and national details offers largely non-Asian American corporate clients graspable figures through which to imagine Asian Americans as consumers of their product. This campaign, intended to target the “Asian Indian” or South Asian American population, suggests that money transfer services will appeal across class differences. Socioeconomic variance is embodied in three different prototypical male characters (Figures 1.1–3.3).

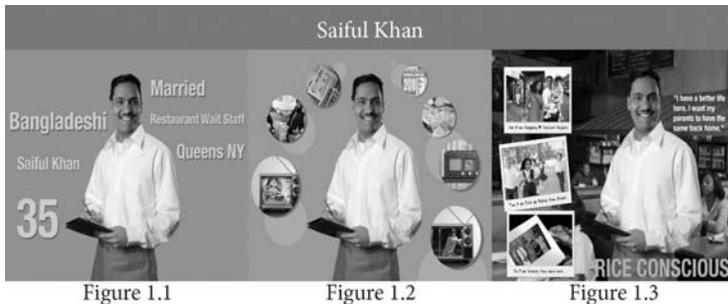


Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.3

In the first set of images (Figures 1.1–1.3) we see a “blue-collar” individual fictitiously named “Saiful Khan.” The gentleman here is a thirty-five-year-old Bangladeshi Muslim restaurant worker residing in Queens, New York, which has been an ethnic enclave for South Asian immigrants since the late 1960s. In-language newspapers and radio shows, Bollywood films, cricket, and value shopping at ethnic stores are all activities that typify Saiful as a consumer. These details culminate in Figure 1.3, where Saiful is given a voice and inset pictures show him shopping, picking his child up from school, and longing for his extended family. His thoughts, as he articulates them, are simple: “I have a better life here. I want my parents to have the same back home.” These references coalesce into a pleasant, recognizable person through an assemblage of socioeconomic, religious, and cultural characteristics. As a working-class man, Saiful can still be a

good citizen by holding a job and spending money on his wife, family, and relatives in South Asia. Religious markers of Islam are portrayed positively as merely a part of his balanced lifestyle, and all these together make him a safe and ideal consumer.

The sketches produced by Asian Ads bring to life the sophisticated attributes and complex heterogeneity contained in this diasporic community. The signs and narratives present South Asian Americans as modern, cosmopolitan citizens who have managed to thrive in the current era of economic instability.

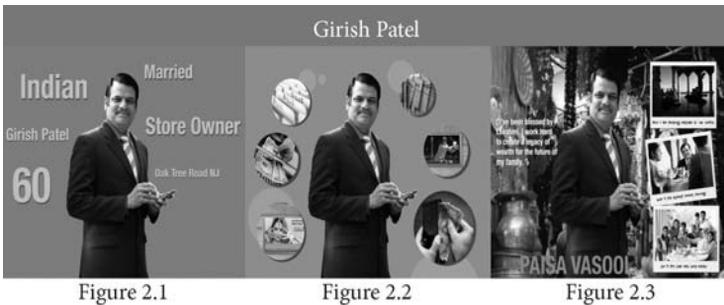


Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Figure 2.3

This is especially evident in the next character sketch (Figures 2.1–2.3) of “white-collar” businessman Girish Patel, an Indian store owner in the South Asian ethnic enclave of Edison, New Jersey. Compared to Saiful, whose simple blue-collar life is encapsulated by the phrase “price conscious,” Girish epitomizes a successful, established, middle-class immigrant. Morning *darshan* (prayer) at the temple, business dinners, and Sunday afternoon *chai* (tea) with a large extended family suggest that his impetus to transfer money is less out of necessity in India and more out of largess resulting from his success in America. *Paisa vasool*, or getting your money’s worth (in Hindi), is Girish’s tag line. He attests to his middle-class status by saying, “I’ve been blessed by Lakshmi [the Hindu goddess of wealth]. I work hard to create a legacy of wealth for the future of my family.”

By illustrating aspects of South Asian ethnicity in personable ways, Saiful and Girish give life and purpose to statistics about purchasing power and per capita income. Offering a simple way to introduce specific ethnic differences to the unfamiliar, Saiful is a friendly, typical blue-collar worker, and Girish exemplifies an ideal businessman. The third character is yet another likable individual.



Figure 3.1

Figure 3.2

Figure 3.3

The prospect of selling a money transfer service to the approachable twenty-eight-year-old IT whiz Vardharajan Iyer (Figures 3.1–3.3) is made even more compelling through images and words that make him appear to have abundant personality and a full social calendar. “Value seeker” Vardharajan (or V. Iyer, as proper South Indian nomenclature would have it) goes to the gym before work, “chills” with friends, and dutifully remembers *Amma* and *Appa* (mother and father) nightly. He reassures us of his potential to be open-minded while not forgetting his culture: “I have a natural curiosity about the world. New ideas and progress fascinate me and bring a balance to old values ingrained in me by tradition.” Like Saiful and Girish, V. Iyer is a good consumer who is deeply rooted to his family in India and will dutifully wire money back to the homeland. For all three, distinctly South Asian preoccupations such as Bollywood and cricket are combined with more cross-cultural symbols, such as money and smartphones. Being a waiter, a businessman, or an IT guy still means spending time with friends, valuing family, and, above all, consuming diligently.

Each of the three characters presents an appealing neoliberal subject and an exemplary consumer to target. Saiful Khan is a “good Muslim,” to use Mahmood Mamdani’s phrase, in that he is a hardworking family man who has held on to those values that make him an appealing citizen and consumer.²³ Although Saiful Khan is Muslim, the few visible signs of this are presented in a safe and apolitical way. His wife is pictured without a *hijab*, and he is not shown praying or engaging in any overtly religious activity. This is the norm, as most executives avoid religiosity of any type, but especially Islam, outside of wedding or festival contexts; this is in keeping with broader societal processes that racialize Muslims differently than Asian immigrants of other religions.²⁴ Girish Patel, like other Gu-

jarati businessmen who share his surname, is a successful capitalist who still cares about the welfare of his community. V. Iyer is an archetypal IT worker who furthers America's technological dominance while cultivating a balanced Silicon Valley lifestyle. All three are model consumers, in that they thrive without state assistance, add value to their communities, and spend money on those they care about.

The reinforcement of the successful Asian American in these pitch materials, like others that Asian Ads produces, offers a racially naturalized Asian American. No longer a newcomer bound for ethnic enclaves, these socially well-adjusted and financially self-sufficient individuals find ways of linking their ethnic heritage to productive American lives, blue-collar or white-collar. Such naturalization is not without its erasures, as a narrative so seamless cannot be forwarded without erasures and ellipses. Asian American executives attempt to expand and diversify an ethnic group through sketches like these while also remaking them in narrower ways that elide the possibility of outlier identities. For example, working-class Asian Americans who may not be succeeding economically or socially or who otherwise do not seem like model consumers certainly do not have a place in this racial refashioning process. Moreover, men are the central consumers and women are in the background as wives, parents, or friends. The economic power of women, especially to wire money, seems to be relatively negligible. Complexities are reduced even in the case of language. For instance, South Asian American ethnicity is represented through the Hindi language, as evidenced in the Hindi newspapers and the Hindi phrase *paisa vasool* in conjunction to Girish Patel, who, with a markedly Gujarati surname, would perhaps be speaking Gujarati instead. Using the national language of India, rather than Bengali, Tamil, or another language, further narrows this characterization.

These character sketches provide evidence of racial naturalization in ways that transform the outsider Asian American into the dependable, loyal, and modern consumer so valued in this tumultuous economic era. They not only define the ethnic group "South Asian American," but also begin to populate *Asian American*.²⁵ Using different South Asian ethnicities—Bangladeshi Muslim wage laborer, Gujarati Patel businessman, and South Indian Tamilian computer engineer—accomplishes an ethnic construction that is more complex than stereotypes of these individuals circu-

lated in mainstream media.²⁶ By showing these individuals in familial and ethnic enclaves alongside everyday American spaces such as offices, gyms, and supermarkets, they also ease these individuals gently into American society while still preserving their distinctive ethnic features. I now turn to how ad executives undertake a process of negotiation and translation among themselves in ways similar to how they do so in their work.

MAKING ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITIES IN CORPORATE AMERICA

In the wake of multiculturalism, the advertising industry, like much of corporate America, has been slow to change. This is not to say that ethnic difference is altogether unwelcome; indeed, measured displays of identity characteristic of multiculturalism allow individuals to maintain a balance between corporate workplaces and their personal lives.²⁷ Even when workplace diversity is championed, however, expressions of ethnicity and language that depart from mainstream white culture stand out. Particularly at a time when general market agencies consider themselves diverse collectives that can speak to cultural differences in the general American population, highlighting a distinct Asian American identity is especially marked. Yet, embracing *Asian American* as a natural identity rather than a disambiguated census category is a notable shift that Asian American ad executives have learned to perform. Such an identity is important because clients routinely address executives as *Asian American* in their interactions. In a neoliberal America where expertise about culture and language is valued, corporate clients look to Asian American executives to define and perform this category in their interpersonal interactions as well as in their work. I have documented numerous multiparty conference calls in which clients refer to and address executives as “the Asian neighborhood,” “the Asian team,” or “our Asian American friends.” Especially in these interactions, they are being required to present themselves as a unified collective despite myriad cultural, national, and linguistic differences.²⁸ Because this category brings together individuals from a wide range of Asian nations who may have little in common with one another, they must find a sense of ownership in this racial category while still displaying expertise about individual ethnic groups.²⁹

Racial Naturalization in Workplace Interaction

In order to convince clients that they identify with and embody *Asian American*, executives must make category meaningful among themselves in ways compatible with corporate America. Their efforts to relate to *Asian American* are in some regards similar to those in Asian American professional organizations, university departments, and programs of study. Yen Le Espiritu's influential formulation "Asian American panethnicity" documents this coalition building among college students, faculty, and citizens.³⁰ Politicians and activists have embraced a similar strategic essentialism to create strength in numbers for elections and social movements. A key difference between these executives and others who strive for group identity and collective representation, however, is that the former are not necessarily concerned about inclusion and solidarity; rather, their main objective is to make *Asian American* viable in the field of multicultural advertising and marketing, and make the ethnic groups it encompasses meaningful within capitalist agendas.

Inasmuch as executives would like *Asian American* to be easy to define among themselves, it can prove to be quite abstract. For instance, in their everyday work, the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic specificities for which they are experts are far more important. Language differences are a concern even within ethnic groups such as South Asian Americans, who may speak one of fifteen major languages, or Chinese Americans with strong ties to either Mandarin or Cantonese. Likewise, generational differences can also pose challenges to creating group cohesion. First-generation Asian Americans in this industry are usually from major metropolitan cities in Asia that have undergone dramatic globalization, such as Beijing, Seoul, and Mumbai. Working in advertising and marketing in Asia makes them ideally suited to joining Asian American advertising firms in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. They may be hired for their linguistic proficiency and ethnonational knowledge, but may be less familiar with the identity category of *Asian American*. Indeed, many of the executives I interviewed indicated a much more complex understanding of the societies from which they immigrated and admitted that they were still becoming conversant in U.S. racial groupings and cultural trends. Those

born and raised in the United States bring a different set of associations to the work of creating Asian American consumers. Second-generation Asian Americans may have more exposure to panethnic formations of race but less current understandings of contemporary Asian cultures and usages of language. Interactions between these two constituencies, as well as the small minority of people who do not identify as Asian American, reveal a complex range of knowledge and subject positions.

Executives of different ethnic and generational backgrounds make explicit efforts to find common ground among themselves. Through their day-to-day interactions, they not only construct an Asian American identity for the broader advertising world, but also reinforce the viability of *Asian American* by inhabiting it. What they choose to emphasize, what they omit, and how they negotiate these differences speak to how they imbue this racial category with meaning in their advertising world. Humor has been shown to be an especially effective tool to enact different types of resistance and accommodation within minority groups and create more empowered identities. Unlike the more damaging work that ethnic and racial humor can do in advertisements themselves,³¹ humor has been shown to enable members of a group from different backgrounds and orientations to find common ground. For instance, in black stand-up comedy, in-group notions of race and ethnicity, and, related to this, authenticity and meaning, are created differently from in mainstream contexts, in ways that allow for collective deliberation and meaning making.³² Among immigrants, ethnic humor has been used to show differences in immigration patterns, ability to assimilate, and language acquisition.³³ Formulaic jokes that are recognizable and familiar to participants can offer a linguistic resource to ease social tensions, as can the introduction of ethnically specific social references into everyday conversation. In these and other situations, interlocutors participate by playing along or rejecting attempts at humor and accordingly influence the efficacy of such joking in creating a shared identity.³⁴ For ad executives, interactional spaces of humor provide a medium in which to create naturalized racial identities. By objectifying and making light of stereotypes linked to particular ethnic groups or performing ethnicity in new ways, they are able to remake an Asian American identity that is suitable for corporate interaction.

Creating Identities through Collegial Interaction

Ad Asia events intended to build collegiality and educate about specific ethnic traditions and festivals nonetheless create opportunities for humorous exchange. For instance, in a celebration for Diwali, a South Asian Hindu festival of light signaling the new year, the two South Asian Americans at Asian Ads hosted a celebration for their colleagues with snacks, music, and votive candles that spelled out the agency name. Colleagues enjoyed the food asked informative questions about the holiday that they had seen featured in ads, but they also found opportunity for humor. For instance, Chris, a second-generation Vietnamese American, eyed the candles as he entered the conference room and shouted “voodoo ceremony!” Along with several around him, he burst out laughing. His perfunctory apology was met with banter and further joking. Through his unlikely description of the event underway, Chris was able to distance himself and colleagues from the more foreign connotations of Diwali. This iteration of Diwali, easily collapsible with a religious practice from a completely different region of the world, kept the celebration low-key and easy to manage in an office context. As nothing specific was required of attendees, this event, like other intraoffice interactions, provided spaces in which executives departed from the more formal interactional style required with clients. Instead, they negotiated alternative social meanings for Asian ethnicities and explored what it means to be Asian American.

Example 1 is an excerpt from an audio recording of an internal account meeting for a money transfer company. Here, the account team is planning a promotional event aimed at the Chinese American community that will accompany the print ad they have just completed. In it, Angela, a first-generation Chinese American woman, is the most senior member of the team, followed by An Rong and Sheng Li, who are both first-generation Taiwanese American men. Kew, a first-generation Chinese American woman, is the account supervisor, and Jun Yi, a first-generation Chinese American man, is a creative.

Example 1: “The Picture of the Winner Will Be Posted”

1. Sheng Li: There will be five hundred \$88 winners.
2. Kew: Fine.
3. Angela: Like a lottery winner, maybe the picture of the winner will

4. be posted.
5. Sheng Li: Well, you know some Chinese, it's like, "**Hi! You** got the
6. money! Okay, **you** treat!" {loud laughter}
7. Jun Yi: "You got the money!"
8. An Rong: It's like, "You treat! You treat! You treat for . . . uh"—
9. Angela: "I know him! He's **undocumented!**" {loud laughter}
10. Sheng Li: "But you **owe me** money!" {loud laughter}
11. An Rong: "You have the money to send back home but you don't
12. have the money to **pay me!**"

What begins as a serious conversation about a product promotion quickly moves into a series of comedic turns through the performance of different voices. Once Sheng Li uses "It's like" (line 5) to indicate speech that could occur, others in the meeting chime in and offer their own comical impersonations of contest participants and community members. Despite their first-generation status, they are able to distance themselves from this conduct by joking about it. Characteristics that would index foreignness—being undocumented (line 9), immigrant circuits of money lending and debt (line 10), and social obligations that transcend those necessitated by mainstream white society (lines 5–6), are all objects of ridicule. Through such humor, they are able to create a racially naturalized identity against these attributes, one that is devoid of such foreignness but nonetheless retains relevant markers of Chinese culture.

The process of creating group-specific, internal meanings of ethnicity shown in example 1 also occurs with the broader category of *Asian American*. Example 2 is an excerpt from an account team meeting for a fast-food campaign. Asian Ads was asked to design a singing contest aimed at 1.5-generation Asian Americans from different Asian ethnic groups, including Filipino Americans and Korean Americans. Roughly imagined in the style of vocal competitions such as *American Idol*, the account team had many details to iron out, including a contest title and possible prizes. In addition to speakers featured in previous excerpts, participants in this excerpt also include Amado, a first-generation Filipino American, and Chris, the 1.5-generation Vietnamese American from the Diwali interaction I discussed earlier.

Example 2: “Asia Does America”

1. Angela: We could offer a scholarship.
2. An Rong: That would look good.
3. Chris: Asian people are rich; they don’t need money! {laughter}
4. Amado: Maybe we could offer scholarship money for musical instru-
5. ments. A lot of Asian kids take musical lessons, and parents
6. could use this to push their kids to go! {laughter}
7. Angela: How about an air ticket?
8. Several people {in unison}: No! {laughter}
9. Amado: What, are we going to get someone a ticket back home?
10. Chris: Yeah, a one-way ticket back to China! {laughter}
11. Sheng Li: What are we calling this thing?
12. Angela: [Fast-food company] recognizes Asian Talent?
13. Sheng Li: [Fast-food company] Asian American Talent Achieve-
14. ment Program?
15. Amado: How about Asia Loves Rice? {laughter}
16. Chris: How about “Asia Does America?” {loud laughter, Angela
17. grimaces}

This raucous discussion of what is and is not “Asian” serves to define what *Asian American* means to executives of different ethnic backgrounds. Again, the identification of those attributes that mark Asian Americans as outsiders are parodied as things *not* to include: a love of rice (line 15), pushy Asian parents who stand out against a white mainstream (lines 5–6), and a one-way ticket back to a homeland, with no plans for return (line 9). Racial naturalization is here most fully accomplished with humor based on American popular culture, as in Chris’s suggestive title “Asia Does America” (line 16)—a play on the pornographic cult classic film *Debbie Does Dallas*. Being an Asian American apart from these stereotypical references allows them to present themselves in ironic, edgy ways that display their insider knowledge about American culture and its points of derision about Asian Americans, thus indexing their belonging as Americans.

These are but two instances of how ethnic humor plays a role in racial naturalization. Whether for a particular ethnic group or the broader Asian American category, these performances come from the experiences and subjectivities of executives themselves. Identities may also be fostered in

more explicit ways, particularly when directives from supervisors push executives to regard themselves differently. In example 3, Yang, first-generation owner and CEO of Asian Ads, has strolled in on an internal meeting called “Brand Power,” a strategy session intended to boost productivity. At 6:30 p.m. on a sunny May evening, the meeting is well into its third hour and creative, production, and media people are slumped in their seats, apparently ready for the meeting to end. Missing or ignoring this cue, Yang paces around the room as he offers the following directives about building unity and cohesion.

Example 3: “We’re All Asian American!”

1. Yang: We will work closely with you. I’m going to give you one more
2. idea, keep it in your mind. Don’t stick to your ethnicity or
3. your category, because you limit yourself. Because it is small.
4. Small, smaller market, small, smaller category, small, smaller
5. response. Let’s all think about it. We’re all Asian American!
6. Each one can understand Filipino. We can understand South
7. Asian Indian. Right? Here’s a question: Can we do South Asian
8. Indian? {2-second pause}. Of course we can! You know about
9. South Asian Indian? **Who is South Asian here?**
10. {Paul and Chris raise their hands}.
11. I like your energy, you have some spirit! Good.

Cohesion-building strategies such as Yang’s allow Asian American ad executives to expand the bounds of individual expertise and build a more powerful collective. To do so, however, they must be willing to look beyond their own ethnicity and inhabit expert subject positions of ethnicities about which they may know little. Noteworthy here is Yang’s escalation of the stakes when he does not initially receive his desired response. With no South Asian Americans in the room aside from this anthropologist to raise their hand, Yang demands that others overcome their limitations and inhabit this category (lines 7–9). Second-generation Vietnamese American Chris and 1.5-generation Chinese American Paul answer the call, to the stifled amusement of their colleagues. In this unusual instance of racial naturalization, executives are asked to perform identities in which interethnic differences—the very basis on which many are hired—are less

important than belief in a functioning collective. Much like ideologies of the postracial, in which ethnic differences are tolerated only insofar as they do not disrupt or challenge hegemonic formations of racial neutrality, answering Yang's call for unity was the correct performance that also worked well to end what had become a very long meeting.

The field of multicultural marketing in which these executives participate requires the ethnic diversity encompassed in *Asian American* to be managed effectively. Despite myriad differences, creating order among these groups, much like Latino and African American executives are pushed to do, is important for pleasing clients. Racial naturalization allows various Asian ethnicities to be housed in *Asian American* in ways that accommodate ethnic and linguistic specificity only to the extent that they are useful to the advertising work at hand. Through daily interaction, a neoliberal, corporatized identity emerges, one that is marked with specificities but does not pose a threat to producing niche advertising.

FROM MODEL PRODUCERS TO MODEL CONSUMERS

The two types of analyses I have offered—how Asian American executives construct racially naturalized consumers and Asian American identities—illustrate how ad executives have positioned themselves *against* the engrained foreignness that has characterized so much of the Asian experience in America. By favoring an explicitly consumption-oriented, aspirational middle-class identity, Asian Americans are transformed from model minorities existing outside the bounds of the nation to naturalized model consumers who compose a vital part of American consumer society. The ways in which they depict consumers who fit well with neoliberal ideologies of consumption, as well as how they construct identities compatible with postracial corporate America, converge to shape Asian American participation in racialized capitalism. Capitalism in America, like elsewhere, is premised on shifting notions of race, gender, and labor that suit the production and consumption conditions of any given era.³⁵ Racialized capitalism builds on earlier ways of difference making while also giving the impression that it is something new. The discursive work ad executives do to make the subjects of their representations, as well as themselves, appear as a naturalized part of American society is integral

to their agenda of selling the potential of the Asian American consumer market to corporate clients.

Within these parameters, the labor of articulating race falls on racialized bodies because the largely white world of general market advertising is not equipped to handle specificity. Ethnic ambiguity in advertisements and multicultural workplaces with little room for actual cultural and linguistic difference suggest that general market advertising still does not quite know how to engage with race as a representational or interpersonal category. Like other realms of society that prefer minorities to represent their own cultures, corporate clients look to Asian American advertising to get the details right. The sketches I analyzed earlier, which may seem basic to those familiar with South Asian Americans, here offer differentiation and specificity to the variance that this category contains. Such detail is intended to aid clients in understanding this group to resonate better with intended audiences, and to potentially not offend consumers in unforeseen ways. Indeed, general market advertising has been widely critiqued for either omitting minorities altogether or presenting them in ways that cater to white audiences, even though minorities themselves may interpret these ads very differently.³⁶ In these ways, executives contribute to racialized capitalism through the cultural and linguistic production they do for white corporate America.

By making race explicit but friendly, Asian American executives prioritize their financial aims of profit and growth at the expense of more heterogeneous depictions of Asian Americans, but nonetheless consider their work beneficial for Asians in America. Consider the perspective of Ed, an account supervisor at a prominent Asian American agency in New York: "I think when corporations invest in certain communities, vis-à-vis advertising, they're helping these communities take root, to grow. Obviously you do have marketing ambitions behind that, but it legitimizes the voice of some of these communities." Likewise, Yang, cofounder and majority owner of Asian Ads, elaborated his professional vision and the challenges to accomplishing it: "I want to do something so I am able to fulfill my thinking about my own culture, how I retain it or how I can gain some respect in general market advertising or get some respect from mainstream media. So we work extremely hard." Acknowledgment and legitimacy, as their views indicate, are difficult to attain in this industry,

and presenting racially naturalized imagery and identities enables executives to find a way into the American advertising industry. In depicting Asian Americans not only as good citizens but also as wealthy consumers, executives project racially naturalized versions of *Asian American* to construct this category in ways that secure their place in the American economy and in this sector of corporate America.

By countering simplistic, reductive, or offensive representations of Asian Americans, the depictions of race and ethnicity executives create in some ways do offer a more complex picture of Asian populations in the United States.³⁷ While their foremost objective is to profit in a competitive advertising world, my interviews with executives and observations of their pitch meetings indicated that they are also interested in creating positive images of Asian Americans. Not only did the topic of negative stereotypes continually come up in internal creative meetings, but it also generated enough interest to spur a panel at the 2011 Asian American Advertising Federation annual conference.³⁸ Executives seek to avoid negative stereotypes that have persisted in mainstream media, including modern versions of the “yellow peril” and “Orientals” depicted on trade cards, a bygone form of advertising.³⁹ Images of prewar Asian Americans as dragon ladies, Fu Manchus, and generally sinister individuals who posed miscegenation threats were also identified as unfavorable.⁴⁰ Executives are concerned that their work also differs from mainstream advertisements that have been critiqued for creating and circulating racist imagery that furthers xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment, especially general market advertising that still features racist representations of Asian Americans.⁴¹ My interviews, observations, and analyses of their creative work indicate that Asian American executives are trying to counter decades of negative representations that mock or vilify Asian speech and appearance. Their countervisions, to use Darrell Hammomoto’s term, feature a much more complex and nuanced attempt to capture socioeconomic and ethnic difference.⁴² The characters they develop and ultimately feature in their ads depict Asian Americans as real people rather than caricatures or buffoonish foils.⁴³ As such, they are offering a new generation of commercial racial representation.

Yet, such creative work is necessarily circumscribed by the broader rubrics of a postracial corporate America with its narrow vision of racial

and ethnic difference. Racial naturalization here produces a uniformly successful portrait of Asian Americans in ways that overshadow the complex socioeconomic diversity of this population. If “Asian Americans have come to embody an ideal neoliberal subject that is constituted in terms of human capital,”⁴⁴ then ad executives’ explicit focus on upward mobility, family values, and good consumerism is done through processes of selectivity that narrow the range of ethnicities, religions, and class positions otherwise embraced in Asian American panethnicity in academia or politics.⁴⁵ Choosing to feature only five ethnic groups based on size and income (Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino, South Asian), selecting representative languages for each (Mandarin or Cantonese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Hindi), and making myriad other representational choices delimit this category in precise ways. Representations of consumers tend to be heteronormative, financially stable, and devoid of outliers.⁴⁶ Through this commercial media production, Asian American executives further their capitalist agenda while they also attempt to refashion *Asian American* and select ethnicities for public consumption. In this sense, Asian America becomes further narrowed through the niche advertising process, as aspects of Asian languages and cultures become naturalized as a part of Asian American ethnicities while others are relegated to realm of the foreignness.

CONCLUSION

Over the past few decades, scholars have tracked activism and organizing at universities, politics, social movements, and other forums to understand how they build coalition and contingency between different ethnic groups included in *Asian American*. What is clear is that the boundaries of this category are not fixed; rather, who is and is not included is continually being revised. For instance, since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, some coalitions of university and public intellectuals, such as the Association for Asian American Studies and the Asian American Writers Workshop in New York City, have expanded *Asian American* to more explicitly include Arab Americans. The move, as I understand it, acknowledges similar processes of racialization that can occur between Arab Americans and, for example, Pakistani Americans, both of whom have

experienced discrimination, detainment, and deportation based on their ethnonational and religious affiliations. While Asian American advertising executives may share political visions with activists and progressive academics of what positive images of Asian Americans should look like, their work may in fact circumscribe these representations to prioritize the needs of clients and capitalist agendas. Racially naturalized Asian American representations and identities leave little room for outlier identities and heterogeneous ways of conceptualizing inclusion and difference.

My analyses of niche advertising development and production offer the next turn in the discussion on where Asian Americans fit on the sliding scale of racialization in America. Racial naturalization, like naturalization in the context of citizenship, involves some kind of formal initiation into the body politic. I have presented a case in which legitimization and belonging are bestowed on Asian American advertising executives in an era in which representing race well is a point of profit, provided it can be accomplished within the discursive parameters of a neoliberal, postracial corporate American environment. As model consumers, rather than just model minorities, Asian Americans need not experience the prevailing foreigner status; it is precisely their value as *Asian American* consumers that makes them ideal participants in a neoliberal world of American consumption. Such a recasting confirms their shift from minority outsiders to multicultural insiders—alongside Latinos and African Americans—in the eyes of corporate America. While this media production does not perpetuate negative Asian American stereotypes, it does further the divide between those addressed by the ads and those not encompassed in these elite depictions but who must nonetheless build lives for themselves as Asian Americans.

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Greenberg, and Jessica Winegar for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article. All errors are my own.

Notes

1. See Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics and Society* 27 (1999): 105–38; and Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
2. Devon Carbado has discussed "racial naturalization" in a legal context by considering how US naturalization laws have de-naturalized and re-racialized groups at particular points in American history. My emphasis is primarily on the cultural and linguistic work that the advertising industry, as part of corporate America, has done to bring Asian Americans (who may already be legal US citizens) into the mainstay of consumer society. What is especially useful here about Carbado's approach is the connection he draws between racism, racial naturalization, and the law and everyday governance—one that signals that similar processes of racism underpin the racial naturalization work of corporate America. My thanks to Dan Hosang for bringing this work to my attention. Devon Carbado, "Racial Naturalization," *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 633–658.
3. For further discussion on capitalism and multiculturalism, see Jodi Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism," *Social Text* 24, no. 4 (2006): 1–24.
4. In this article I focus centrally on the construction of the racial category "Asian American," I have opted to use *italics* to denote the racial category of *Asian American* as an object of racial construction. I also use this shorthand for *Latino* in the same way. I differentiate this from Asian American (no italics) as an adjective that modifies individuals, agencies, and practices linked to Asian heritage.
5. Arlene Davila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
6. Executives use the term "ethnicity" to refer both to ethnic groups and to the broader category of Asian American—a trend that mirrors a corporate world in which "race" is less frequently uttered. In my analysis, I use "ethnicity" to refer to groups (Chinese, South Asian, Korean, etc.) and included in the "racial" category of Asian American. I acknowledge that the relationship between these terms is shifting and at times contradictory, but nonetheless use them to differentiate between how specific ethnonational groups are fashioned in relation to the broader category of *Asian American* and how both are negotiated between executives and their corporate clients.
7. See Shalini Shankar, "Creating Model Consumers: Producing Ethnicity, Race, and Class in Asian American Advertising," *American Ethnologist* 39 (2012): 579–92.

8. The term “1.5 generation” refers to individuals who immigrate during late childhood but come of age in the United States.
9. I address diversity in mainstream advertising in greater detail elsewhere but note it here because it constitutes an important point of contrast to hyper-specific representations that Asian American executives construct in their communications. See Shalini Shankar, “Copywriting Race: Creating Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Asian American Advertising” (n.d.).
10. See Davila, *Latinos, Inc.*; Shankar, “Creating Model Consumers.”
11. A recent Pew Research Center report offers the conflicting claim that while Asian Americans had a household wealth greater than the white household median in 2005, their net worth dropped by 54 percent in 2009. The study attributes the drop to Asian Americans suffering losses in the housing market and the arrival of new immigrants who brought down the overall level of wealth. Excluding immigrants who arrived from 2004 onward, the overall net worth drop is estimated at 31 percent. Rakesh Kochar, Richard Fry, and Paul Taylor, “Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs between Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics,” *Pew Research Center—Pew Social & Demographic Trends*, July 26, 2011.
12. Even prior to the election of president Barack Obama, various right-wing groups, news media outlets, and policies argued for the declining centrality of race in America and openly opposed race-based systems of institutional preference. Most notably, these would be the end of affirmative action and the rise of whiteness as an ideology. See Linda Trinh Võ, “Beyond Color-Blind Universalism: Asians in a ‘Postracial America,’” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 13 (October 2010): 327–42 for the former and George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) for the latter.
13. David Harvey, *Neoliberalism: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
14. Fast-forward to today and this depiction remains largely unchallenged in media and commercial arenas, even though academics, activists, and educators alike have contested its disconnect from the political economies of Asian Americans and other minority communities. For instance, David Palumbo-Liu has interrogated the implications of how this model characterization has become deeply entrenched in public discourse, and how its seemingly positive gloss obscures the prejudice that underpins it. Likewise, Gary Okihiro questions where Asian Americans fit into the racial hierarchy, and whether they are seen as good citizens, enemies of the state, or something in between. Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). Others who have looked at youth in educational settings also take issue with this characterization. See, for instance, Stacey Lee, *Unraveling the “Model Minority” Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1996); and Shalini Shankar, *Desi*

Land: Teen Culture, Class, and Success in Silicon Valley (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

15. This idea, put forth by several scholars, has been eloquently articulated by Vijay Prashad in *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
16. Being a university professor, a South Asian American, and an anthropologist all contributed to my being welcomed into Asian American agencies. Using their professional organization website to contact members proved very successful. At the very least I was granted a lengthy interview and a viewing of their “agency reel,” showcasing their best work; others hosted me for weeks and months, too hospitable to ask when I might leave. As is often the case with those in anthropology who “study up” or observe the worlds of social actors in positions of significant economic and social power, I encountered practices and politics in this capitalist sphere that did not articulate with my own political commitments. I also felt pulled, to an extent, by expectations of the types of writing I would produce and its potential to further the field of Asian American advertising, especially since my own goals were considerably different. For the most part, however, I enjoyed the company of executives and respected them, considered their work smart and progressive in its goal to counter stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans in advertising, and am deeply grateful to them for permitting me access into their exclusive world.
17. Meetings proved to be the richest site in which to observe the creation of meaning and value, and for following interactions between clients and executives. I audio-recorded, logged, and selectively transcribed 140 meetings (over 180 hours) consisting of creative brainstorming and client calls, and also attended forty-five other meetings for which I have field notes. I also audio-recorded and selectively transcribed over one hundred interviews with a variety of advertising executives and industry personnel, and use these data to illustrate the positionality and subjectivity of those in the industry, including their background, experience, views about their work, and how they identify with their language and culture. I observed production activities including casting sessions and commercial shoots, and also spent a total of three months in four different large, multinational general market advertising agencies to better understand contemporary advertising’s use of emerging social media technologies and in-house attempts to address concerns about diversity, culture, and difference. Industry conferences, symposia, award shows, and other events I attended enabled me to better understand the structure and concerns of the advertising industry overall.
18. Unless otherwise noted, the names of individuals, agencies, corporate clients, and brands have been changed to pseudonyms. Names of places have not been changed.
19. William Mazzerella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003); Daniel Miller, *Capitalism: An Ethnographic Approach* (London: Berg, 1997).

20. Steven Kemper, *Buying and Believing: Sri Lankan Advertising and Consumers in a Transnational World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Timothy Malefyt and Brian Moeran, eds., *Advertising Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2003).
21. Shankar, "Creating Model Consumers."
22. These materials contain men from three different regions of the Indian subcontinent. The first is a Muslim man from the country of Bangladesh and is commonly referred to as "Bangladeshi" (or, alternatively, "Bengali," the language spoken in Bangladesh as well as the Indian state of Bengal). The second is a North Indian Hindu man from the state of Gujarat, referred to as "Gujarati." The third is a South Indian Hindu Tamil speaker, referred to as "Tamilian."
23. Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): 766–75.
24. Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).
25. While I am here unable to present analogous character sketches for other ethnic groups, their construction and use in winning new client accounts and conceptualizing ads draw attention to how ethnic characters together begin to shape the racial category of *Asian American*.
26. Consider, for instance, the growing fleet of South Asian American interns on television medical dramas or characters such as Apu from *The Simpsons*. See Shilpa Davé, "Apu's Brown Voice: Cultural Inflection and South Asian Accents," in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, ed. Shilpa Davé, Leilani Nishime, and Tasha Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 313–36.
27. Pawan Dhir, *Managing Multicultural Lives: Asian American Professionals and the Challenge of Multiple Identities* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).
28. Shankar, "Copywriting Race."
29. Howard Winant's formulation of racial formation is useful to keep in mind because it emphasizes the *process* by which seemingly fixed meanings of race come to seem so: "Although the concept of race appeals to biologically based human characteristics (so-called phenotypes), selection of these particular human features for the purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. There is no biological basis for distinguishing human groups along the lines of 'race.'" Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 317.
30. Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).
31. John Hartigan, "What Are You Laughing At? Assessing the Racial in U.S. Public Discourse," *Transforming Anthropology* 17 (2009): 4–19; Otto Santa Ana,

- “Did You Call in Mexican? The Racial Politics of Jay Leno Immigrant Jokes,” *Language in Society* 38 (2009): 23–45. See also Shalini Shankar, interview on the news program *Chicago Tonight*, May 10, 2012, <http://chicagotonight.wttw.com/2012/05/10/racial-controversy-over-ashton-kutcher-ad>.
32. Lanita Jacobs-Huey, “The Arab Is the New Nigger,” *Transforming Anthropology* 14 (2006): 60–64.
 33. Roderick Labrador, “‘We Can Laugh at Ourselves’: Hawai’i Ethnic Humor, Local Identity, and the Myth of Multiculturalism,” in *Beyond Yellow English*, ed. Angela Reyes and Adrienne Lo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 288–308; Limor Shifman and Elihu Katz, “‘Just Call Me Adonai’: A Case Study of Ethnic Humor and Immigrant Assimilation,” *American Sociological Review* 70 (2005): 843–59.
 34. Mary Bucholtz, Elena Skapoulli, Brendan Barnwell, and Janie Lee Jung-Eun, “Entextualized Humor in the Formation of Scientist Identities among U.S. Undergraduates,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 42 (2011): 177–92.
 35. Marable Manning, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2000); Elana Shever, “Neoliberal Associations: Property, Company, and Family in the Argentine Oil Fields,” *American Ethnologist* 35 (2008): 701–16.
 36. Leo Chavez, *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick, *Immigration and American Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); John Steele, “Reduced to Images: American Indians in Nineteenth-Century Advertising,” in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Jennifer R. Scanlon (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 109–28.
 37. As demonstrated in studies of advertising showing it to be an effective arena for cultural production that challenges dominant social meanings, executives here play an important role in remaking the racial category of Asian American. See, for instance, Adam Lury, “Advertising: Moving beyond the Stereotypes,” in *The Authority of the Consumer*, ed. Russell Keat, Nicholas Abercrombie, and Nigel Whitley (London: Routledge, 1994), 91–101; Brian Moeran, “The Orient Strikes Back: Advertising and Imaging in Japan,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 13 (1996): 77–112.
 38. The Asian American Advertising Federation (3AF) held its annual two-day conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, in May 2011. One of the featured panels was titled “Stereotypes in Asian American Advertising” and featured heads of creative departments as well as a community educator. Most striking about this panel was the focus on the history of Asian immigration to the United States, stereotypical images in mainstream media, and the importance of cultural context in current work. The panelists also spoke about their experiences as first- or second-generation immigrants and how this has affected their work. Overall the panel could easily have been mistaken for an academic one, and the concern for broader media representations was abundantly clear.

39. Yuko Matsukawa, "Representing the Oriental in Nineteenth-Century Trade Cards," in *Re-Collecting Early Asian America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Josephine Lee, Imogene Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 200–217; Lenore Metrick-Chen, "The Chinese in the American Imagination: 19th Century Trade Card Images," *Visual Anthropology Review* 23 (2007): 115–36.
40. Pre–World War II motion pictures also routinely depicted Asian Americans as sinister, untrustworthy, or a threat through potential miscegenation with whites, and included unlikable fictional characters such as the inscrutable "Fu Manchu" and sinister "Dragon Lady." Tina Chen, "Dissecting the 'Devil Doctor': Stereotype and Sensationalism in Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu," in Lee, Lim, and Matsukawa, *Re-Collecting Early Asian America*, 218–37; Robert Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). See also Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams* and Cynthia Liu "When Dragon Ladies Die, Do They Come Back as Butterflies? Re-imagining Anna May Wong." In Hamamoto and Liu, *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).
41. Minjeong Kim and Angie Chung, "Consuming Orientalism: Images of Asian/American Women in Multicultural Advertising," *Qualitative Sociology* 28 (2005): 67–91; Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Brendon Coates, "Minority Models in Advertisements in Magazines Popular with Minorities," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 83 (2006): 596–614; Ki-Young Lee and Sung-Hee Joo, "The Portrayal of Asian Americans in Mainstream Magazine Ads: An Update," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82 (2005): 654–71; Kent Ono and Vincent Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2009).
42. Darrell Hammomoto, *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000). See also Peter Feng, *Screening Asian Americans* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
43. An example of the latter can be seen in recent Metro PCS commercials in which two South Asian American men, Ranjit and Chad, speak in heavily accented English in a call center and generally act ridiculously. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E8-NklZobg>.
44. Helen Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 132.
45. Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*.
46. Arlene Davila argues that "spin" of this kind disengages representations of Latinos from the political economy that underpins them. Arlene Davila, *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).