

---

# East Main Street

## *Asian American Popular Culture*

EDITED BY

*Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren*

FOREWORD BY

*Robert G. Lee*



*New York University Press*

NEW YORK AND LONDON

## **“Alllooksame”? Mediating Asian American Visual Cultures of Race on the Web**

*Lisa Nakamura*

Asian Americans use the Internet more than any other ethnic group in America, including whites.<sup>1</sup> According to data gathered in a 2001 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Report, “fully 75% of English-speaking Asian-Americans have used the Internet. Numbering well over 5 million, these Asian-American Internet users are also the Net’s most active users. By comparison, 58% of white adults, 43% of African-Americans, and 50% of English-speaking Hispanics are online” (Spooner 2001). This little-known digital divide between Asian Americans and all other American ethnic groups with regard to Internet use calls into question prior notions of the Internet as a mainly white phenomenon.

Asian American websites, list serves, and on-line forums are the products of an invisible but influential group of American racial minorities: the formulation of the Asian American as the effaced and docile “model minority” both on- and off-line is here replaced by the Asian American as *poweruser*, or part of a digital majority. I am here suggesting that the term *poweruser* be repurposed from its older meaning, that is, as a technologically savvy consumer and knowledgeable user of personal computers and other consumer electronics. This figuration of a “wired” consumer both hopped up on the drug of hypercapitalism, and endowed with the cultural capital to know his way around cyberspace, implies that social power lies in the ability to purchase and take advantage of the network’s advanced features. The reason I wish to recast Asian Americans as powerusers of cyberspace is twofold: first, to do so acknowledges their presence as an on-line force. Indeed, numerous joke lists that circulate via e-mail attest to

this self-identification of Asian Americans as avid users of the Internet. For example, one of these, entitled "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" (Nakamura 2002: 133).

Second and most important, 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 producer, as well as distinctions which serve to rigidify notions of what Asian American "authenticity" consists of. Sites such as Giant Robot's online discussion forum and magazine ([www.giantrobot.com](http://www.giantrobot.com)) and Mimi Nyugen's blog ([www.worsethanqueer.com](http://www.worsethanqueer.com)) work to question the ways in which Asian Americans are falsely represented as "models" of any kind, and do so in ways which put progressive politics, gender, and youth culture into dialogue with considerations of race and ethnicity.

The website that I will discuss in this essay, [allooksame.com](http://allooksame.com), actively works to destabilize notions of Asian identity and nationality in compelling ways that are rendered particularly personal by the user's participation in the site. The site requires the user to guess whether the photographs of Asian faces they are shown are Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, and then calculates the users' score to see if they can accurately tell the difference. Before I begin a close reading of the site, however, I wish to discuss how [allooksame.com](http://allooksame.com) is exemplary of a current movement in Asian American critical theory away from essentialist notions of Asian American identity toward a greater recognition of both hybridity and an imperative to "appreciate fully intra-Asian American difference" (Chuh 2003: 13).

In her recent book *Imagine Otherwise*, Chuh constructs a persuasive argument for the "impossibility of understanding 'Asian American' as an unproblematic designation, as a stable term of reference and politics that transcends context" (145). She posits that Asian American studies might have more critical purchase if it were to become a "subjectless" discipline, that is to say, one not defined by the identity or cultural authenticity of objects of study, but rather by its method and critical concerns. If the term "Asian American" is too fraught with internal incoherence to prove useful, and in fact might be doing more harm than good in its insistence

on eliding differences between Asian Americans, Chuh is correct in claiming that Asian American studies should find other ways to perform its critique.

The critical study of Asian American new media provides a key opportunity for intervention into a still developing media practice. Even more important, it centers upon the possibility for hybrid and de-essentialized Asian identities that address key contemporary narratives about power, difference, perception, and the visual. Indeed, the distinctive culture of Asian America on-line creates a new representational landscape for issues of identity because it offers what static media lack: interactivity.<sup>2</sup> Interactive media like the web can question identity while building discursive community in ways that other static media cannot.

Likewise, there is a great deal that the study of Asian American critical theory has to offer scholars of new media studies and cyberspace studies. First, failing to examine Asian American on-line culture results in a misreading of the Internet's demographics and representational landscape. Asian Americans are powerusers in both senses of the word, as the Pew Internet and American Life study shows. More important, however, the study of Asian American on-line practices throws a much-needed wrench in the overly simplistic rhetoric of the digital divide. As the 2001 anthology *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life* (Nelson et al.) shows, people of color have long been instrumental in the innovative use and creation of high technologies in a multitude of ways, and their erasure from the digital discourse tends to perpetuate very real power imbalances in the world. And just as important, this figuration of cyberspace as default white tends to demonize people of color as unsophisticated, uneducated, and stuck in a pretechnological past.

In addition, digital divide rhetoric tends to look only at the color of cyberspace's users. In order to formulate a critical practice that takes into account the nuances of participation on-line in terms of identity, power, and race, it is vital to know as well the specific conditions under which new media are produced, consumed, circulated, and exchanged. Interactivity goes both ways as well; websites create users who can interact with them, just as texts create readers. Alllookslike.com's challenging use of interactivity produces a poweruser who is forced to question and eventually discard some essential notions of what it means to be Asian.

There is a tendency in new media criticism to valorize ethnic identity websites that have an overtly progressive political stance as being more culturally "authentic" than others.<sup>3</sup> I chose to examine alllookslike.com

because it is a space produced by an Asian designer for an Asian and Asian American audience which debates national and ethnic identities rather than simply affirming them. In addition, *alllooks same.com* is a comedic site, and thus part of a dramatically underexamined genre which gets next to no critical attention even from net critics.

Dyske Suematsu's *alllooks same.com* is a weird, weird site. Interacting with it produces a mixture of guilt, fascination, and a lingering feeling of discomfort. In short, it is uncanny. The initial screen features the familiar iconography of a scantron exam form with its ranks of numbered oval blanks, along with a "welcome" narrative that reads:

Chinese. Japanese. Korean. What's the difference? Some say it's easy to see. Others think it's difficult—maybe even impossible. Who can really tell? That's what we want to find out. For this first test, we'll show you a series of 18 pictures of CJKs. Select which country you think each is from. When you're finished we'll tell you your score and how you stacked up to others. Future tests will include landscapes, names, architecture, and more. And if you're wondering whether or not to take offense, remember: *alllooks same* is not a statement. It's a question.

After the user completes a short registration form she is routed to the "test," which consists of digital photographs of young men and women. The form requires the user to click on one of three boxes in order to move ahead in the site: one must guess whether the person in the photograph is Chinese, Japanese, or Korean. After the user has done this for all eighteen images, the site calculates the score; the average score is seven. Users are given the corrected version of their test so they can guess which ones they got "wrong," and are told that they are "OK" if they get a score higher than average.

Suematsu writes that he designed the site "ultimately as a joke" and that he "didn't mean this site to be some sort of political arena." Despite this, as he writes in an essay to the user, "some people felt that this site would promote racism, or that the site itself is racist. Others felt quite the opposite. I was very surprised to receive many emails with encouraging words from Chinese, Korean, and Japanese people. In some ways, I was expecting to upset many of these people." The wide range of responses to the site demonstrates the ways in which this particular kind of interactivity, one which puts the user in the position of a racial profiler of sorts, functions as

a nexus for Asians and Asian Americans to actively consider race as an act of seeing. Most important, the low scores that most users get confirm that seeing is *not* believing—the “truth” about race is not a visual truth, yet one which is persistently envisioned that way. This website is an apparatus which deconstructs the visual culture of race. The confusion this entails—users seem to be radically divided as to what the site signifies—provides a unique intervention into the ways in which the visual participates in taxonomies of race.

The most challenging aspect of this, and one which is specifically enabled by this site’s interactivity, is that the user is forced to confront her inadequacy in the face of visual “evidence” of race. The low scores that most users get seem to surprise them: in the extremely extensive discussion area of the site where users post their comments, many note that before using the site, they thought they could tell the difference, but their low scores convinced them otherwise.<sup>4</sup> On September 12, 2002, “Annette” posted this particularly thoughtful set of questions to the discussion board:

What does Japanese mean? Does it mean ethnic Koreans, who speak Japanese and no Korean, who are third generation Japanese born? Or is it my friend who is half Japaneese, half Korean who grew up in Puerto Rico?? Well maybe it is the children of a Japaneese and his Korean Bride.

What does Korean mean? Is is people from south western Korea who descended from Chinese in those areas whose names are not Kim and Lee but Chang and Moon??? Or does it mean Koreans who are 1/2 Chinese or Japanese? Nah . . . maybe Korean means the child of a Fillipina (or Chinese or Indonesian for that matter) mail order bride (passing as Korean) and her Korean husband. Then again, they could be those in Uzbekistan forcefully moved there by the Russians 50 years ago, or those in eastern China. What about the Mongolians or Manchurians who came across the border to North Korea . . . Korean??

And just what does Chineese mean? Those Koreans born of Chinese Decent? Or those who have been in Peenang Malasia for over 100 years, who have mixed with the Indians or Malays at some point?? Or does it mean one of the hundreds of recent Chineese labourers to S. Korea.

WHAT IS MY POINT YOU ASK? Well . . . None of these groups are “pure” (ie no mixture or outside influence), nor are they homogeneous. Even among the Koreans who are considered the most homogeneous most inbred in Asia, there has been some mixture . . . that’s why it may be difficult to tell . . . but then . . . Is it infact important to tell?????? The world is

changing. I for one can't wait for the day when there are so many new groups and categories on the census that they will have to drop the race/ethnicity category.<sup>5</sup>

In the face of empirical evidence of the failure of vision as a means of identifying race, "Annette" redirects the conversation in such a way that the categories themselves are deconstructed. Her comment that race and ethnicity will eventually become uncategorizable, and thus unavailable to empirical analysis, takes the site to its logical conclusion.

Alllooksame.com is a very popular website with Asian Americans.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the site's success, in March 2002 Suematsu was invited to address the Asian American Students Association at Harvard University on the topic of "Asian American community." In his speech, which he reprints on alllooksame.com, he claims to have no interest at all in producing an "Asian American community," asserts that he is not a member of any such thing because he was born in Japan, and goes on to question the importance or relevance of Asian American studies as a discipline and Asian Americanness as a meaningful identity based on anything other than shared racial oppression, the existence of which he professes to doubt. It seems that the default whiteness of web content is so pervasive that these Harvard students were inclined to think that any visual representations at all of Asian Americans on-line constituted an act of community building. But by calling into question what "Asian" is, at least in visual terms, Suematsu is interrogating the basis upon which racial taxonomies like "Asian" are built, and in so doing is producing a community of a different kind. In this, he is "imagining" Asianness "otherwise," to use Chuh's formulation: that is to say, he is envisioning it within his website as a test that can't be passed, or as a set of visual conventions and markers that are less about racial revelation than they are about questioning the status of the "Asian" subject.

By uniting Asian users in the act of deconstructing and questioning their own visual notions of race, alllooksame.com produces a community based on a shared act of interactive self-reflexivity. By discovering that Asian identity is in the "eye of the beholder," as the site asserts, race is detached from biological bodies and reassigned to the realm of the cultural, political, and geographical. Even more to the point, the act of severing the visual as a way of knowing from racial identity addresses a sore point within the Asian American community: that is, racism *between* Asians.<sup>7</sup> In

her chapter "Indonesia on the Mind: Diaspora, the Internet, and the Struggle for Hybridity," media theorist Ien Ang explains the ways in which "the dominant discourse of the passions of diasporic identity are being globalized in a dramatic fashion by cyberspace" (2001: 54), and her studies of Huaren (diasporic Indo-Chinese) websites reveals the extent to which they contribute to intra-Asian prejudice. Ang found that "the immediacy of the Internet promoted a readiness to buy into highly emotive evocations of victimization which worked to disregard the historical complexity and specificity of the situation within Indonesia, in favour of a reductionist discourse of pan-ethnic solidarity cemented by an abstract, dehistoricized, and absolutist sense of 'Chineseness'" (69). The site served as a vector for appeals to an "authentic" and essentialized Chinese identity. In this sense, it promoted "ethnic absolutist identity politics" (69). In contrast, *alllookslike.com* is a site where racial essentialism can be critiqued in an active, participatory way with its own built-in apparatus: the test.

*Alllookslike* remediates several cultural institutions allied with race construction in order to comment upon race as a mistaken notion, one that is more easily gotten wrong than right. The site's iconography invokes the scantron exam, a distinctive feature of Western higher education's obsession with the empirical, as well as the pictorial convention of the mugshot and the lineup, both connected visually with the judicial and legal system. This confluence of the academy and the police in this site gestures toward the participation of both within the system that maintains racial codes. The site also shows that racial codes come from the user as well as the interface or content of the site itself. The site exposes the participation of the user in this construction; it shows how individual acts of viewing and "typing" or clicking create race just as surely as do large institutions such as schools, medical establishments, and the law. Of course, individual acts are inflected by these institutions; when this is acknowledged they come less to seem like personal "choices" and more like part of a complex or dynamic by which race occurs and is instantiated in everyday acts of seeing.

Perhaps the most salient example of an institution which regulates racial visual codes and taxonomies has yet gone unmentioned, and that is anthropology. This field's long association with racial typing is referenced in Robert Lee's  *Orientals* in his chapter on "The Cold War Origins of the Model Minority Myth." In it, he writes that after Pearl Harbor, "for the first time, being able to tell one Asian group apart from another seemed important to white Americans. Two weeks after the Japanese attack on

Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the War, *Life* magazine ran a two-page pictorial entitled 'How to Tell Japs from Chinese'” (1999: 147). The article provided pictures of representative Japanese and Chinese faces along with commentary that interpreted the visual images in terms of their difference from each other. Some of these markers are described as follows: Chinese are described as having a “parchment yellow complexion, more frequent epicanthic fold, higher bridge, never has rosy cheeks, lighter facial bones, longer narrower face and scant beard,” while the Japanese face “betrays aboriginal antecedents, has an earthy yellow complexion, less frequent epicanthic fold, flatter nose, sometimes rosy cheeks, heavy beard, broader shorter face and massive cheek and jawbone” (147). In so doing, “*Life* reassured its audience that cultural difference could also be identified visually” (148), in short, that the “truth” about race, particularly with regard to “Orientals,” lies within the systematic and scientific study of the face.<sup>8</sup> This visual culture of racial typing endorsed by anthropological method and convention persisted in the presentation of the images themselves: for “to lend an air of precision, scientific objectivity, and authority to the photos and the accompanying text, *Life*’s editors festooned the pictures with handwritten captions and arrows simulating anthropological field notes” (148).

Alllooksame remediates this older anthropological discourse of phenotypic categorization.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the site’s net effect of destabilizing notions of Asian identity based on visual essentialism works to expose the user to her own participation in creating these categories. However, the key difference between this site and the *Life* images lies in its audience and its intention. While the *Life* images are designed to educate a white audience that had never considered or cared about the visual differences between Chinese and Japanese people, the alllooksame.com ones are at least as much for Asian and Asian American users who care very much about the differences, and may need a reverse kind of education. That is to say, while whites could not tell the difference and did not care, many Asian Americans believe that they can. A young Asian American woman in Nam’s collection *Yell-Oh Girls!* asserts that, “contrary to what *haole* America thinks, we don’t all look alike, and we can tell a Japanese from a Chinese from a Korean from a Filipina from an Indian” (2001: 173). Thus, the site achieves both an Asian American identity as a cultural formation and the kind of “subjectless” identity advocated by Chuh, for it is “Asian/American” interactive new media content produced by and for Asian Americans, yet time it questions that identity by fostering debate and conflict

around questions of race and ethnicity. Ultimately, as Suetmatsu writes, “alllooks same is not a statement. It’s a question.” New media such as the Internet enables this question to remain an open one in ways that older non-interactive media, both textual and visual, do not.

As net critic Geert Lovink writes in *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture*, “over the last few decades media theory has drawn heavily from literary criticism. Perhaps it is time to reverse the intellectual exchange” (2002: 32). Lovink’s call for a “radical upgrade of literary criticism” acknowledges that there are aspects of visual culture on-line that cannot be adequately thought through using literary models. As previously noted, media are multifarious, and multimedia are perhaps even more so. If we shift our focus away from the discourse of *literary* postcolonial theory, we can better perceive the possibilities that the *visual* culture of the Internet can have for challenging notions of racial and cultural essence and identity. There is no doubt that images can be just as complicated with the colonial project as words; they are no more innocent than novels, advertisements, manifestos, or medical taxonomies of racial difference. And in fact, the most interesting new work on race and postcoloniality in recent years has been in the field of visual culture. Sander Gilman, Anne McClintock, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Ella Shohat have all produced fascinating work on the ways in which the visual cultures of empire produce racial hegemonies.<sup>10</sup> However, websites such as Dyske Suematsu’s all-looks same.com effectively employ interactivity and the spectacle of race on-line in ways that offer distinctive forms of resistance to racial and visual categories. The type of self-critiquing interactivity it offers challenges vision itself as a way of understanding race, culture, and the body on- and off-line.

#### N O T E S

Many thanks to my poweruser sister, Judy Nakamura, and to the editors of this collection, in particular LeiLani Nishime, who made excellent suggestions regarding revisions and was very understanding about deadlines. I also wish to thank my writing group at UW Madison: Victor Bascara, Leslie Bow, Shilpa Davé, Grace Hong, and Michael Peterson, for their generous readings and brilliant comments. Audiences at the 2002 Media and Cultural Studies colloquium series in the Communication Arts Department at Madison, the 2002 Visual Culture Colloquium at Madison, the 2003 Art and Archaeology Graduate Symposium at

Cornell University, and the 2002 American Studies Association conference all contributed valuable comments and support as well. Many thanks to Dyske Sue-matsu for generous permission to reproduce images from his website.

1. A different form of this essay appeared in the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, Issue 2, Fall 2002.

2. This is not to claim that readers cannot "interact" with older media such as literature. However, this interaction is largely invisible and does not change the form of the media object itself. In this, it differs from what happens on interactive websites, in which the user changes the appearance of different screens by her actions via a keyboard or mouse.

3. The Chiapas website at <http://chiapas.indymedia.org/> is a good example of this.

4. On August 24, 2001, "Oaken Din" wrote, "I am a Chinese guy living in the Los Angeles area. I see Chinese ppl all the time. I'll see Koreans and Japanese ppl here and there when I am out and about in the LA area. There are a lot of Vietnamese, Indonesian, Mongolian, etc. that I bump into. When it comes to telling them apart, I seem to get it right for the most part between Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. But I scored miserably on your test. I got a four. That tells me how much I know. I suck and am forever changed. Thnx for the eye opener."

5. Original spelling, grammar, and formatting are reproduced from the original post as faithfully as possible.

6. Suematsu claims that the test has been taken over 200,000 times since August 2001, and most of the people who posted to the "discussion" section self-identified as Asian.

7. In an article entitled "Testing Out My A-Dar," Harry Mok remarks that when he first started the test, he thought "this was going to be easy. No problem, I'm Chinese. I can spot Chinese people a mile away. I have the Asian sixth sense, an A-dar." After remarking that he failed miserably, he includes Suematsu's comment that "A lot of time just to be polite or politically correct, people go to a difficult long way to find out (what ethnicity or race you are)," Suematsu said. "It's almost like a whether-you're-gay-or-straight kind of thing."

8. See Palumbo-Liu's (1999) discussion of the face as a privileged signifier of Asian identity on pages 87–88, in which he writes that the Asian "face is elaborated as the site of racial negotiations and the transformation of racial identity," and that "it is this 'face,' then, not (only) in its phenotypology but (also) in animation, that demarcates essential differences between groups."

9. See the film *Europa Europa* for a comic critique of this theme of phenotypic racial identification in terms of German visual cultures of identity regarding Jews.

10. See Anne McClintock's seminal *Imperial Leather* (1995), Nick Mirzoeff's *Visual Culture Reader* (1998), which has a section entitled "Race and Identity in Colonial and Postcolonial Culture," and Sander Gilman's *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (1985), in particular his chapter on the

Hottentot Venus. It is important to note that though Mirzoeff's collection also has a section entitled "Virtuality: Virtual Bodies and Virtual Spaces," the book lacks any analyses of actual websites or specific examples from the Internet.

#### W O R K S C I T E D

Ang, Ien. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Chuh, Kandice. *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Gilman, Sander. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Howard, Philip E., Lee Rainie, and Steve Jones. "Days and Nights on the Internet: The Impact of a Diffusing Technology." *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 45, Summer 2001 special issue.

Lee, Robert. *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999.

Lovink, Geert. *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture*. Boston: MIT Press, 2002.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. (ed.) *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Mok, Harry. "Testing Out My A-Dar: Trying to Pick Out Who Is What." Online, <http://www.inthefray.com/200203/imagine/same12/same12.html>.

Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Nam, Vickie. *Yell-Oh Girls! Emerging Voices Explore Culture, Identity, and Growing Up Asian American*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

Nelson, Alondra, et al. (eds.) *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*. New York: NYU Press, 2001.

Palumbo-Liu, David. *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Spooner, Tom. "Asian-Americans and the Internet: The Young and the Connected." Pew Internet and American Life Project, December 12, 2001, online, <http://www.pewinternet.org>.