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Do Model Minorities Drink Wine or Beer? The Representation of Race, Elitism and American Identity*

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Introduction

In August 2008, NPR and ABC political analyst Cokie Roberts criticized then-Democratic Presidential Candidate, Barack Obama, for choosing to vacation in Hawai'i, the state of his birth and where his late-grandmother and other relatives lived. Roberts argued that Obama should have chosen to vacation in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, stating, "I know Hawaii is a state, but it has the look of him going off to some sort of foreign, exotic place."¹ The implication, as *New York Times* editorial

* A version of this article appears in *The Obama Effect: Multidisciplinary Renderings of the 2008 Presidential Election Campaign*, eds. Heather Harris, Kimberly Moffitt and Catherine Squires. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).

¹) Media Matters for America, "Cokie Roberts on Obama's Vacation: 'I know His Grandmother Lives in Hawaii and I Know Hawaii Is a State,' but It Looks 'Foreign, Exotic,'" (Washington, DC: Media Matters for America, August 10, 2008), accessed August 10, 2008, <http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/200808100001>; Media Matters for America, "Roberts

writer Lawrence Downes noted, was that “Hawaii is elitist while South Carolina is not, and that Mr. Obama was foolishly squandering votes by walking on the wrong beach in the wrong state.”²⁾ Indeed, Roberts’s comments suggest that Hawai‘i, a state that is predominantly Asian, Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian in history, culture and population, is dissonant with mainstream America and that a trip to Hawai‘i would be a mistake for the first minority Democratic Presidential nominee. I find this episode interesting for its inter-articulation of elitism, exoticism, race and the meaning of American identity. Throughout the campaign and even into his presidency, Obama faced charges of elitism³⁾ and questions about his citizenship. Pundits and political opponents alike questioned his ability to connect with everyday Americans. Obama was called the choice of “wine drinkers,” a vernacular description for educated and affluent voters that is used in opposition to “beer drinkers,” working-class, less educated and less

Again Criticizes Obama for ‘Exotic’ Trip Home to Hawaii,” (Washington, DC: Media Matters for America, August 11, 2008), accessed August 11, 2008, <http://mediamatters.org/research/200808110177>

- 2) Lawrence Downes, “A Few Words about Hawaii, U.S.A.,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 2008, accessed August 13, 2008, <http://theboard.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/a-few-words-about-hawaii-usa>.
- 3) Media Matters for America, “Matthews: Does Obama ‘Connect Connect with Regular People’ or Just African-Americans and College Grads?,” (Washington, DC: Media Matters for America, April 2, 2008), accessed April 2, 2008, <http://mediamatters.org/research/200804020001>; Media Matters for America, “Hardball? Matthews Asked McCain: ‘[W]e’ve Had Enough Softball, Senator. ...Is Barack Obama an Elitist?’, (Washington, DC: Media Matters for America, April 15, 2008), accessed April 15, 2008, <http://mediamatters.org/research/200804150008>; Media Matters for America, “Dijon Derangement Syndrome: Conservative Media Attack Obama for Burger Order,” (Washington, DC: Media Matters for America, May 7, 2009), accessed May 7, 2009, <http://mediamatters.org/research/200905070031>.

affluent voters,⁴⁾ The claims that Obama was elitist and foreign locate Obama's identity on familiar ground for the meaning of Asian America and the racialization of Asian bodies. Obama's biography, which includes relatives of Asian descent and is plotted through predominantly Asian locales such as Hawai'i and Indonesia and Ivy League schools such as Columbia and Harvard, resonates with the elitist and exotic stereotypes that haunt the meaning of Asian bodies in America: the myth of the model minority and forever foreign. Far from being benign stereotypes, the racialization of Asian bodies as model minorities and aliens holds power over Asian lives, particularly in how the meaning of Asian bodies has been used as a foil for American identity rather than a demarcation for a common set of inherent traits. One can point to the critical work of Lisa Lowe (1996), David Palumbo-Liu (1999), Robert Lee (1999) or Michael Omi (1994) to demonstrate how the meaning of Asian America has been a powerful organizing principle to arrange the economic, ideological, domestic and foreign affairs of the nation-state. Lowe contends that the meaning of American citizenship

has been defined over [and] against the Asian *immigrant*, legally, economically, and culturally. These definitions have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and populations to be integrated into the national political sphere and as the contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins.⁵⁾

4) Media Matters for America, "Chicago Tribune Repeated Obama-arugula Falsehood, Used Anecdotes to Cast Obama as 'Wine-track,'" (Washington, DC: Media Matters for America, September 24, 2007), accessed September 24, 2007, <http://mediamatters.org/research/200709240012>; Gail Collins, "Pinochle Politics," *New York Times*, April 10, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/10/opinion/10collins.html>

5) Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham:

Lee argues that images in print, music and film have depicted Asians in America, “immigrant and native-born, [as]...a race of aliens.”⁶⁾ As Michale Omi and Taeku Lee state, “Asian Americans are collectively regarded as the symbolic ‘alien’ and remain ‘perpetual foreigners’ despite the very long and continued presence of Asians in America.”⁷⁾ Palumbo-Liu writes that the notion of Asian Americans as the “model minority” has distinguished Asians as “viable objects for admiration [which is]...of course a specific mode of containment.”⁸⁾ The model minority myth effaces the heterogeneity of Asian people and the linking of achievement to a homogenous concept of race establishes a regulative ideal for discerning cultural authenticity and the “innate” character of Asian communities. The model minority myth has been “deployed to contain and divert civil rights policymaking, to neutralize activism, and to promote a laissez-faire domestic urban policy.”⁹⁾ That is, the association of Asians as the model minority equates Asian-ness with apathy by suggesting that ideal minorities and immigrants assimilate without cultural and political commotion. Consequently, Asian American concerns can be neglected in political discourse and the community can be used to disavow the experience, specificity and voice of other ethnic and racial minorities. In *Asian*

Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

6) Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), xi.

7) Michael Omi and Taeku Lee, “Barack Like Me: Our First Asian American President” in *Obama Reflections: From Election Day to Presidency: Social Justice Thought Leaders Speak Out* (Ohio State University: Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, October 2009), 45.

8) David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

9) *Ibid.*, 172.

American Politics, political scientists Andrew Aoki and Okiyoshi Takeda note that the politics of recognition and representation have become part of the Asian American political agenda. They contend that “control over one’s identity is an important prerequisite for political inclusion and opportunity. Stereotypes have deep roots…[and] the struggle to eliminate them is an important part of Asian American battle for equality and acceptance.”¹⁰⁾ During the 2008 presidential election, the anemic representation of Asian Americans in political and cultural discourse prompted Democratic members of Congress to write letters to Jonathan Klein, President of CNN,¹¹⁾ and Phil Griffin, Executive-in-Charge at MSNBC,¹²⁾ criticizing each network’s poor coverage of Asian American and Pacific Islander voters and issues in relation to other constituencies. The letters also affirmed the importance of Asian and Pacific Islander American participation in the political process and the media’s responsibility in “recognizing or ignoring these voices.”¹³⁾

Scholars, critics and supporters in the Asian American community highlighted Obama’s “Asian Americanness” as a unique point of connection. In a reprise of African American author and poet, Toni Morrison’s claim that Bill Clinton was “the first black president,”¹⁴⁾ Asian popular

¹⁰⁾ Andrew L. Aoki and Okiyoshi Takeda, *Asian American Politics* (Malden: Polity Press, 2008), 154.

¹¹⁾ The Democratic Party, “Members of Congress Write to Jonathan Klein, CNN President,” (Washington, DC: The Democratic Party, February 15, 2008), accessed February 15, 2008, http://www.democrats.org/a/2008/02/members_of_cong_1.php.

¹²⁾ The Democratic Party, “Members of Congress Write to Phil Griffin, Executive-in-Charge, MSNBC,” (Washington, DC: The Democratic Party, February 15, 2008), accessed February 15, 2008, http://www.democrats.org/a/2008/02/members_of_cong_2.php.

¹³⁾ *Ibid.*

culture scholar Jeff Yang mused that “the tropes that surround and define Obama can just as easily be read as those of another community entirely[;]...[c]ould it be that our true first black president might also be our first Asian American president?”¹⁵⁾ Ethnic studies scholar Michael Omi and political scientist Taeku Lee argued that Obama was the first Asian American President in how his “life experiences have been fundamentally shaped in close association with Asians and Asian Americans.”¹⁶⁾ The mistaken belief that Obama was too elite and foreign to appeal to mainstream America “sound[ed] a lot like the conflicted, ambiguous, and unsettled racial position of Asian Americans.”¹⁷⁾ The intersection between Obama and Asian America offers a useful point of departure for exploring representation, elitism and race in America. Most people will agree that Barack Obama reshaped the contours of the American political map and challenged conventional thinking about race. The claim that the first minority presidential candidate was far too elite and exotic to be American helps put a focus on the under-representation and misrepresentation of Asians in American political and cultural discourse. As such, in what ways did “model minority” Presidential candidate Barack Obama affect the cultural politics of communities beyond black and white? What forms of support did Obama engender among America’s “model minority”?

14) Toni Morrison, “Comment,” *New Yorker*, October 5, 1998, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1998/10/05/1998_10_05_031_TNY_LIBRY_00016504.

15) Jeff Yang, “Could Obama Be the First Asian American President?” SFGate, July 30, 2008, accessed July 30, 2008, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2008/07/30/apop.DTL>.

16) Omi and Lee, 2009, 44.

17) *Ibid.*, 45.

To explore this critical intersection of elitism, race and politics, I will examine selected *YouTube* videos created by Obama's Asian American grassroots supporters during the campaign. I contend that Obama's candidacy motivated his grassroots Asian American supporters to engage the representation of race in their campaigning for Obama and this aim reveals the emergence of campaign strategies that reflect a set of objectives beyond rallying around the candidate. Asian American supporters treated cultural representation and political engagement as a synonymous practice in their repositioning of Asian-ness in the American political and cultural imaginary. I explore this critical intersection of race, culture and politics by examining YouTube videos. For these supporters, YouTube was an opportune way to support Obama and empower Asian American representation. As Henry Jenkins writes about the new media landscape in *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide*: "[a]s average citizens acquire the ability to meaningfully impact the flow of ideas, these new forms of participatory culture change how we see ourselves...and how we see our society."¹⁸ With YouTube, grassroots Asian American supporters of Obama realized that they could advance support for Obama while simultaneously critiquing Asian American stereotypes. To this end, I focus on three forms of Asian American YouTube engagement: videos that challenged existing representations of Asian-ness; videos that re-purposed existing Obama campaign literature to recognize a diverse Asian electorate; and videos with imagery that associated Asian Americans with political agency.

¹⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 279.

Asian-ness as Polycultural Agency: “La Bamba Obama”

Posted on February 18, 2008, *La Bamba Obama*¹⁹⁾ is a 2:47 minute video that features a middle-aged Asian male performing a musical parody of Ritchie Valens’s iconic song, *La Bamba*. The man exchanges the lyrics of the original song with Spanish words of support for Obama. Though not self-evident, the producer and performer of the video is Bill Ong Hing, a noted professor of law and Asian American Studies at the University of California, Davis. *La Bamba Obama* is emblematic of YouTube’s “do-it-yourself” (D.I.Y.) apparatus. That is, the “*mise-en-scène*” or background-props, actors/acting, costuming and lighting-of the video is simple: an Asian man wears a “Barack and Roll” t-shirt with an Obama button and sings in Spanish while playing his guitar. There is an “Obama 08” sign hanging in the background. The lighting and sound are basic, using, it appears, natural lighting and sound without any special effects. The cinematography is equally basic. The main character is framed in a medium shot, there is no camera movement and much of the *mise-en-scène* is in focus. In terms of editing, the video is a long take, that is, a continuous scene without cuts. While straightforward, the choice of a long take stands out in how it allows the viewer to make connections between the elements of representation at work in the video. French film theorist Andre Bazin suggests that the long take, when employed in conjunction with deep focus (where the entirety of a frame remains in focus), allows the viewer to let his/her attention wander the space of the scene. As the action unfolds, the

19) billysoohoo, “La Bamba Obama,” YouTube, accessed February 18, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTtd5n03-FY>.

meaning of the scene becomes open to interpretation as the viewer must make his/her own sense of the on-screen action and the meaning of the sequence. Bazin states that a long take “affects the relationships of the minds of the spectators to the image, and in consequence it influences the interpretation of the spectacle...it implies, consequently, both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress.”²⁰) In *La Bamba Obama*, the long take and relative deep focus of the video prompts viewers to contemplate the representations within and consider how the video is not a simple online spectacle. First, *La Bamba Obama* reveals that Hing’s commitment to Obama is serious. While the video may feel light-hearted because of its novelty, Hing’s performance is sustained, suggesting that the main purpose of the video is not to entertain per se, but to express his support for Obama. In other words, Hing wants his performance and Asian-ness associated with political agency. Second, Hing’s video expresses a polycultural attitude towards Asian cultural identity. By “polycultural,” I refer to the argument of cultural theorist Vijay Prashad (2001) that identity can be understood as a composition of congruent cultural, political and ideological lineages. Rather than see identities develop in isolation of each other, a polycultural perspective looks for family resemblances between cultural identities and instances of collaboration. According to this definition, *La Bamba Obama* is a polycultural work. Hing sings, in Spanish, one of the few popular songs of American rock and roll that is not sung in English.

²⁰) Andre Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6th Ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 49.

By making these choices, Hing suggests that Asian American identity is congruent with Latino American identity. Hing inter-articulates his Asian-ness with Latino-ness to offer a moment of collaboration and civic engagement. The fact that his video was posted to the apparatus of YouTube means that *La Bamba Obama* will be viewed, circulated and discussed. In this sense, the video is simultaneously a rallying point for Obama and an alternative point of discussion for the meaning of Asian-ness and Americanness.

Asian-ness as Political Agency and Cultural Representation: *Captioned Media for Obama*

*Captioned for Obama*²¹⁾ is a YouTube channel created by *Captioned Media for Obama*, a grassroots group of Obama supporters and organizers. The channel features Obama campaign videos that have been captioned in English, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese and Spanish. The videos were produced by *Captioned Media for Obama* to help the Obama campaign reach voters whose first language was not English as well as those voters who are hearing impaired. Instead of creating new videos, *Captioned Media for Obama* re-purposed existing campaign new media content to address specific constituencies and provide more campaign resources for use by other grassroots supporters. The group ripped key campaign videos like biographies, major speeches, interviews and debates to translate and caption. The translations and captioning attempted to address the heterogeneity of Asian

²¹⁾ captionedforobama, YouTube, accessed March 31, 2008,
<http://www.youtube.com/user/captionedforobama>.

languages spoken in America while remaining faithful to the original text. The campaign's Obama introduction video, which features Obama's defining speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, was captioned in Chinese,²²⁾ Vietnamese²³⁾ and Korean.²⁴⁾ The Obama biography video featuring Michelle Obama was also captioned in Chinese,²⁵⁾ Korean²⁶⁾ and Vietnamese.²⁷⁾ The campaign biography video featuring Obama's younger sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, was captioned in Chinese²⁸⁾ and Vietnamese.²⁹⁾ While the videos were available from *Captioned Media for Obama*, both the video's translator and *Captioned Media for Obama* went un-credited; subtitles were the only element added to the videos. As such, the captioned material could spread as if it came directly from the campaign. By anonymously captioning videos in multiple Asian languages, *Captioned Media for Obama* crafted the image that Obama recognized and valued a culturally heterogeneous portrait of Asian America. Consider that the grassroots Asian American supporters of John McCain did not

22) captionedforobama, "Barack Obama intro in traditional Chinese," YouTube, accessed April 2, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jE-AFTmHL4I>.

23) captionedforobama, "Barack Obama intro in Vietnamese," YouTube, accessed April 2, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-BWNzGGQ4D8>.

24) captionedforobama, "Barack Obama intro in Korean," YouTube, accessed April 3, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LF4s_5eNq5Q.

25) captionedforobama, "Michelle Obama introduction-with Chinese subtitles," YouTube, accessed April 2, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9L7oBLOyGFA>.

26) captionedforobama, "Michelle Obama with Korean subtitles," YouTube, accessed April 3, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RqaOQNwvPH0>.

27) captionedforobama, "Michelle Obama in Vietnamese," YouTube, accessed April 3, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10wsMjRUTx4>.

28) captionedforobama, "Maya Ng-Soetoro in Chinese. Barack Obama's half sister," YouTube, accessed April 5, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1wiyrwBE_Y.

29) captionedforobama, "Maya Ng-Soetoro in Vietnamese. Barack Obama's half sister," YouTube, accessed April 5, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElJ6-ZNN3xk>.

produce as many captioned YouTube videos as *Captioned Media for Obama*. The McCain Asian American grassroots group, *Asian Pacific Americans for Change (APA4McCain)*,³⁰⁾ created a YouTube channel two days before the general election and offered nine videos of which two were official McCain campaign videos captioned in Vietnamese³¹⁾ and Chinese³²⁾ respectively. At the same point in the election, *Captioned Media for Obama* offered eighty-seven captioned videos. The combined effect of *Captioned Media for Obama's* work was to associate Asian-ness with political importance and agency; their videos supported Obama's candidacy and in the process of doing so, the re-purposed imagery offered an alternative representation and valuation of Asian-ness in America.

Asian-ness as Political Agency and Cultural Representation: *United for Obama*

*United for Obama*³³⁾ is a coalition of Obama grassroots supporters from across the country. Many of the group's members include Asian American filmmakers like Eric Byler (*Charlotte Sometimes*, 2003; *Americanese*, 2006), Annabel Park (*9500 Liberty*, 2009), Warren Fu (music video director and animator) and Mora Stephens (*Conventioneers*,

³⁰⁾ Asian Pacific Americans for Change, YouTube, accessed November 2, 2008, <http://www>

³¹⁾ APA4McCain, "Spread the Wealth - Vietnamese version," YouTube, accessed November 2, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tdLcg6eLJE>.

³²⁾ APA4McCain, "I am Joe - SUBTITLED," YouTube, accessed November 2, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlnNf3IpaOY>.

³³⁾ UnitedForObama, YouTube, accessed January 16, 2008, <http://www.YouTube.com/user/UnitedForObama>.

2005), among others. These filmmakers formed *United for Obama* to use their skills and networks to “amplify Obama’s message on YouTube and offer visible, tangible evidence that this movement [to support Obama] is real and spreading.”³⁴⁾ As Asian American filmmakers, however, their experience in the entertainment industry provided an additional purpose to their work; they are part of an industry where the meaning of Asian America is contested cultural terrain. That is, Asian identity is defined in and against the normative representations and narrative and aesthetic form of American cinema. Film theorist Peter Feng aptly describes this tension for Asian American film and filmmakers as an attitude of “ambivalent dis-identification.” For Feng, ambivalent dis-identification is to be “engaged in a project of signifying on cinematic convention, using cinema to critique cinema, using a mode of communication to convey messages that subvert that mode”³⁵⁾ as a way to fill gaps in American history. Asian American cultural production often highlights the exclusion and misrepresentation of Asian America in the medium of its production. Many of the thirty-one videos by *United for Obama* embodied this practice. Through aesthetic and narrative choices, the group’s YouTube videos expressed support for Obama while associating Asian-ness with political agency and cultural presence. A particular set of videos stands out: the videos of an Asian American actor discussing why the Asian American community supports Obama and how Obama has motivated Asian Americans to be active in politics in spite of the cultural baggage to be otherwise.

³⁴⁾ UnitedForObama, YouTube, accessed January 16, 2008,
<http://www.YouTube.com/user/UnitedForObama>.

³⁵⁾ Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 14–15.

In *Kelly Hu, Asian Americans for Barack Obama*,³⁶⁾ actress Kelly Hu (*Martial Law*, 1998–2000; *The Scorpion King*, 2002; *Undoing*, 2006; *Americanese*, 2006; *Shanghai Kiss*, 2007) hosts an informal Asian American roundtable discussion about the reasons why the participants supported Obama and wanted to become more involved in the political process. Hu opens the video by explaining why her involvement in the election is tied to increasing Asian American participation. She states, I think the reason why I decided to get so involved this year in supporting a particular candidate, is because I felt that what I did in the last election was just not enough, trying to get Asian Americans to get out and vote, was just not enough... Obama living and growing up in Hawaii has lived amongst Asian people for such a long time, that I think he really understands us.³⁷⁾

Similarly, in *Kal Penn (Harold and Kumar) for Obama*,³⁸⁾ United for Obama member Annabel Park interviews actor Kal Penn (*Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, 2004; *The Namesake*, 2007) at an Obama rally held before the January 15, 2008 Democratic Candidates Debate in Las Vegas, Nevada. Penn begins the video by discussing his feelings toward partisan politics and how he “never campaigned with anyone before”³⁹⁾ meeting Obama. Penn praises Obama’s character and discusses how Obama has solicited feelings of inclusion and support from minority communities. Throughout Penn’s interview, cut-away shots of Asian American supporters engaging in the rally are included

36) UnitedForObama, “Kelly Hu, Asian Americans for Barack Obama,” YouTube, accessed January 16, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW_AXO8wCj0.

37) Ibid.

38) UnitedForObama, “Kal Penn (Harold and Kumar) for Obama,” YouTube, accessed January 16, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJvw1-oZCNM>.

39) Ibid.

in the video. With Penn playing the role of community advocate against a backdrop of political activity featuring Asian Americans in action, the video comes together as a strong display of Asian representation and political engagement. In *Yul Kwon with Asian Americans for Barack Obama*,⁴⁰⁾ Yul Kwon, the winner of *Survivor: Cook Islands* (2006), reports from a San Francisco Obama canvassing station that was organized by Asian Americans. In the video, Kwon wants “to chart what’s going on in the Asian American youth political movement.”⁴¹⁾ Kwon interviews several Asian Americans who discuss how Obama’s narrative and vision resonates with their life and politics. The video explores why Asian American youth may feel excluded from the political process and how Obama makes Asian American supporters feel empowered as cultural and political citizens. At the end of the video, Kwon concludes, “...and we hear some of the same common themes from each one of them (the supporters). They believe that Obama is a unifier. They believe that he has the background, and especially the multiethnic background, to really relate to a lot of different minorities. They believe that he has a message of hope and inspiration that really resonates with people who have historically not been part of the political process and have usually felt disenchanting with the partisan politics of the past. So, for a lot of APAs (Asian Pacific Americans) in this community, it appears that Barack Obama is someone they see as a symbol of hope and someone who can represent their voices within the national debate, and for this country.”⁴²⁾

40) UnitedForObama, “Yul Kwon with Asian Americans for Barack Obama,” YouTube, accessed January 27, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ8-s8jf_pc.

41) Ibid.

42) Ibid.

In *Ken Leung (Rush Hour, X-Men 3) for Barack Obama*,⁴³ actor Ken Leung (*Rush Hour*, 1998; *X-Men: The Last Stand*, 2006; *Shanghai Kiss*, 2007) offers a personal testimony about how Obama compels him to be political in a way that goes against type. Early in the 6:47 minute video, which is composed of long takes and tracking shots, Leung states,

I'm trying to learn how to, how to express myself, politically, and he's moved me

to do that and I think that is the biggest impact he has had on me so far. Where he has activated this part of me that has not really existed before...You know, I was raised with, my parents are part of a generation that never felt that they were in a position to embrace or own the process, you know, they came to America, just tried to do the best they can and stay to themselves.⁴⁴

Leung's testimony captures the general narrative thread that runs throughout the videos: an Asian American popular culture figure discusses the importance of political engagement as a way to support Obama and improve Asian American representation while Asian Americans are background figures participating in political activities.

In terms of aesthetics, members of *United for Obama* have made films with the high production values of Hollywood studio films, yet many of the YouTube works embraced the platform's D.I.Y and *cin ma v rit* documentary style aesthetics. The filmmakers in United for Obama chose "realist" aesthetic techniques that presented the on-screen action as natural grassroots activity as opposed to

43) UnitedForObama, "Ken Leung (Rush Hour, X-Men 3) for Barack Obama," YouTube, accessed February 5, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LCde5gFNDA>.

44) Ibid.

staged action. The videos were composed of long takes and hand-held camera movements to convey the sense that the action was live and unrehearsed. Each video was shot on-location and used the available lighting to capture the reality of the moment. Each video did not diminish the interruptions of ambient sound so that viewers could also feel the moment. This realist aesthetic prompts viewers to see Obama's grassroots Asian supporters and their campaign activities as authentic, organic and earnest; framed in such a manner, Asian bodies are displayed as natural political agents. Moreover, the D.I.Y. style of the videos make a critical distinction between Hollywood cinema, which has misrepresented and under-represented Asian Americans, and a real life representation and experience of Asian America.

Conclusion

This chapter captures just some of the novel forms of political culture that emerged in support of Obama. Asian American creative expressions for Obama demonstrated a new sense of Asian American political and cultural engagement that challenged the predominant configuration of elitism, exoticism and race in the discourse of the model minority. These YouTube expressions offered polycultural stances, re-purposed existing Obama campaign materials to value a diverse Asian American electorate and presented imagery that associated the meaning of Asian America with political agency and cultural presence. Obama and the new media spirit of his campaign became the black-Asian vehicle for treating cultural representation and political engagement as synonymous practices and by doing so, presented a new and

critical sense of Asian America. It may be tempting to see invigorated Asian American political participation as merely an extension of good citizenship—in other words, a continuation of the model minority—but what these grassroots YouTube activities accomplish is a repositioning of elitism and race in the meaning of American identity. Rather than see the tropes of Asian-ness as elite, foreign, exotic and thus, out of touch with American values as Cokie Roberts did, the argument is that Asian-ness is visible, active and central to the American experience. The study of these fresh articulations of political and cultural engagement expressed on behalf of Asian America reveal how new media technologies are enabling the formation of increasingly more complex political practices and resetting the terms of debate on the status of race in America.

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■ 논문 투고일자: 2010. 6. 18

■ 심사(수정)일자: 2010. 9. 27

■ 게재 확정일자: 2010. 10. 11

Abstract

**Do Model Minorities Drink Wine or Beer?
The Representation of Race, Elitism
and American Identity***

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Throughout the 2008 presidential campaign and into his presidency, President Barack Obama faced charges of elitism and questions about his patriotism and citizenship. These claims of elitism and foreignness locate Obama's identity on familiar terrain for the Asian American experience. Obama's biography, which is plotted through predominantly Asian locales such as Hawai'i and Indonesia and Ivy League schools such as Columbia and Harvard, shares the elitist and exotic tropes associated with stereotypes that haunt the meaning of Asian bodies in America: Asian Americans as the model minority or as fundamentally foreign. This chapter explores how Obama's Asian American grassroots supporters used Obama's black-Asian intersection to organize around objectives that went beyond merely rallying around the candidate. Through YouTube, these supporters treated political engagement and cultural representation as a synonymous practice.

Key Words

Barack Obama, Asian America, YouTube, New Media

* A version of this article appears in *The Obama Effect: Multidisciplinary Renderings of the 2008 Presidential Election Campaign*, eds. Heather Harris, Kimberly Moffitt and Catherine Squires. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).