

## **Chapter One: DISIDENTIFICATIONS OF A GEISHA**

*“As the class would meditate in consternation about the confines of their identity due to ‘the Man,’ I daydreamed about actually having some of ‘the Man’s kind’ enrolled in the class who could listen and share in this discussion.”*

*- Kristina Wong in the “Manifesto” of Big Bad Chinese Mama*

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The Big Bad Chinese Mama website was born out of Kristina Wong’s frustrations with academia, feminism, and stereotypes of Asian women. The former two frustrations led her to develop new strategies to combat the latter. These strategies follow what José Esteban Muñoz has defined as disidentification. In this chapter, I will discuss disidentification as it applies to Wong’s website as well as the work of solo performer Karen Finley. I will also address the specificities of the Internet medium as it relates to the efficacy of the project in comparison to Wong’s goals.

### **BIG BAD CHINESE MAMA: THE INTERCEPTION**

When visiting <[www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com)>, you are greeted by pictures of Kristina Wong in a blue satin qipao (or cheongsam – a traditional Chinese dress), white-powdered face, blood red lips, and a slick black bob. In one photo, she has two heads, another shows her with five eyes, and another with a graffiti-style goatee, sideburns, and an eyebrow drawn in thick black ink.



Wong on the homepage of Big Bad Chinese Mama. Photos courtesy of Kristina Wong/<[www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com)>.

You are welcomed in a chopstick font just above the claim that the site is “The #1 mock mail order bride/Asian porn spoof site in the world!” As you scroll down the homepage, a Hello Kitty-style cartoon is transformed into “Bitchy Kat” with angry eyebrows and an open mouth declaring, “I am ready for ya asswipe!” A counter at the bottom of the page calculates how many your visit brings the total number of “perverts to visit the site” just below the warning, “Enter at your own risk!”

After clicking on “Bitchy Kat,” a photo of Wong splaying a mouthful of chewed Cheetos splashes across the screen with the heading, “Were you expecting Madame Nhu?”



Wong as she appears on the BBCM site. Photo courtesy of Kristina Wong/<[www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com)>.

Below the photo is typed: “Sorry guys, did I ruin the mood for ya?” A brief introduction follows about the purpose of the site: to intercept those seeking colonialist, racist, and sexist imagery of and relationships with Asian women (Big Bad Chinese Mama). It is clearly stated that this site will not provide for these desires. “They [the brides in the ‘Harem of Angst’] will show you just how demure Asian women REALLY are” (emphasis in the original, Big Bad Chinese Mama).

Along the left side of the screen is a line of links to the site’s “FUQs,” or “Frequently Un-asked Questions,” the “Harem of Angst,” “Memoirs of an Anti-Geisha,” “Pranks,” “Order Your Bride,” “Manifesto,” “Reviews,” “Links,” and the infamous “Guestbook.” The “Harem of Angst” includes pictures of Wong, her friends, and others who have submitted

photos for inclusion in poses, clothing, and expressions which are opposite of the delicate and demure “lotus blossom” stereotype of Asian<sup>1</sup> women. “Memoirs of an Anti-Geisha” is a collection of images and prose in which Wong demonstrates how she personally does not fit what she is supposed to be as an Asian woman.<sup>2</sup> “Pranks” is a series of MP3s in which Wong’s friends called sex shops and massage parlors, while “Order Your Bride” allows you to purchase Big Bad Chinese Mama (BBCM) merchandise. “Manifesto” has two subtitles: “Resistance as Living: Giving Revolution a Sense of Humor” and “Why I Tricked Thousands of Nasty Porn Seeking Guys to Come to my Fake Mail Order Bride Site, Only to Get a Fist in Their Face.” This section details the reasons why she created the site. Mainly, Wong was reacting against the lack of safe spaces on the Internet for Asian women, the hypocrisy and ineffectiveness of academia, and the seriousness of feminism and activism. “Reviews” is a collection of some of the press which Wong and the site have received, and “Links” provides access to allied sites and efforts. Last, but certainly not least, is the “Guestbook,” which, during the first year, received thousands of entries per month. This part of the website brought BBCM much of its fame.

The site is linked to searches for Asian female pornography as well as searches for Asian and/or feminist activism. BBCM’s metatags include everything from “ass-kicking anti-geishas” to “mail-order,” “Orientals,” “cock,” “suck,” “lesbians,” and even “teen on teen.” Wong also advertised her site in chat rooms of porn-swapping clubs, social

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Asian” as including anyone identifying as Asian, whether that identification be partial, whole, or in tandem with one or more other racialized identities.

<sup>2</sup> Wong intentionally juxtaposes her Chinese background with the setting of Memoirs of a Geisha in Japan. “I am an anti-geisha. I am not Japanese, I am Chinese. There is a difference between the two, you know” (Big Bad Chinese Mama). She recognizes (and is attempting to reject) the conflation of these Asian identities.

networking sites for white men seeking Asian women, the adult classified section of New Times L.A., and around Los Angeles with stickers which she printed out herself. The audience for the site and the posters on the guestbook were and are intentionally diverse.

### **GOING WHERE (VIRTUALLY) NO GEISHA HAS GONE BEFORE**

When the Internet was first developed, it was heralded as the possibility of a utopian space where race, gender, sex, class, size, age, ability, etc. were not legible, and so would not affect its users. Potentially, the Internet was a space where our lived experiences of power and oppression could be escaped; unfortunately, these systems of power and oppression in real life (RL) are carried with us into virtual life (VL). We consciously and unconsciously communicate information about our identities as we consciously and unconsciously gather information about others' identities.

The information communicated and gathered shapes how we interact with others. In turn, these choices can provide valuable information about RL conditions. As editors Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman wrote in the Introduction to Race in Cyberspace,

Cyberspace is in many ways a semiblack slate upon which users write. Technological artifacts provide us with particular starting points, but within that framework – a blank webpage, an empty chatroom, an unformed public policy – individuals are responsible for how they work with the empty space. The interactive environments of cyberspace are particularly notable for the extent to which a virtual identity is constructed within them. To have a virtual presence means deliberately constructing an identity for yourself, whether it is choosing an e-mail name, putting together a webpage, designing a graphical avatar, or creating a nickname for a chat room or virtual world. Within such a constructivist environment, the construction of identity becomes even more important [. . .] because the self that exists in cyberspace is the result of purposeful choices, it is

possible to trace those decisions back, from the avatar (or virtual projection) to the person who first chose to represent herself in a particular way (Kolko 5-6).

If we conceive of the Internet as a “semiblack slate,” as it certainly was for Wong when she built the BBCM site from scratch, it follows that we would read her expressions and identity as deliberately constructed. The theory of Internet representations as discussed above may seem more characteristic of those using the Internet for social networking, gaming, and communication. However, it is Wong’s recognition of the constructed nature of identities on the Internet which led her to consciously create a counter narrative with the medium, though visitors do not always make the distinction. As Wong wrote, “The big bad chinese mama is a character, she is not an accurate picture of who I, Kristina, am. The big bad chinese mama is the over-the-top militant side of Kristina” (Kristina Sheryl Wong). Many people did (and perhaps still do) not make a distinction between Wong and her BBCM character.

The main concept of Judith Butler’s “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” is that performance renders social laws explicit. I believe that race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class are “done” in the same way that Butler proposes that gender is “done”: through a repeated “series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (274). Representation is a system which is constantly maintained and (incrementally) altered, and so, VL representations have real importance for RL. Therefore, the performative actions of Kristina Wong online and those on the BBCM comment boards may be read as the literal rendering of social laws. Butler also posits that formerly naturalized – and therefore invisible – social laws are exposed and seen as constructed through their performance

(279). On BBCM, the exaggerated and opposite representations (i.e. the “anti-geishas”) accentuate this revelation.

Because VL allows anonymity and exploration not afforded in RL, less censors and filters are utilized in this mode of communication. VL behavior can then be interpreted as a more accurate representation of the creator and societal norms than RL behavior. Christina Elizabeth Sharpe discusses this trend in her piece, “Racialized Fantasies on the Internet”: “‘Virtual society’ and ‘virtual citizens’ on the Web often reproduce the very inclusions and exclusions of our in-person social encounters and alienations . . . In cyberspace, we find both the limits and the expansions of our imaginations” (1093). We are free, to a certain extent, to explore, but that freedom is still grounded in RL. One may transgress one’s lived racialized identity, ethnicity, sex, class, gender, size, age, ability, and/or sexuality; however, the identity/character is still created and controlled by a person who exists within RL. Sharpe continues, “It is not simply that we can be more ‘honest’ about race issues on the Internet because we are not accountable but that the personas we create (even if they begin as ‘us’) start to take on lives of their own in relation to those whom they encounter” (1094). The important relationship mentioned here is that the person/actor and the identity/character which they have created will be affected by the other identities/characters encountered.

Another effect of interactions on the Internet is fragmentation and fixation. As limited information about others is available through VL, they become fixed as the fragments which we can procure (age, sex, size, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc.). Instead of interacting with others as complex beings, their identity is comprised solely of

their performed and perceived characteristics. Whole people and identities are divided into parts which are then fixed into place. Sharpe summarizes that, “Perhaps what the Internet and questions of virtual reality make clear are some of the impasses in the ways we theorize about race [. . .] we continue to seek to regulate bodies and thoughts on the Net in the same ways we do in RL” (1092). Echoing Butler’s discussion about RL, performative acts on the Internet may be read as the rendering of our social laws; in the case of racialized identity, limiting categorization is common. Wong indulges in fragmentation online and performs through the BBCM what Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman describe as “the multiple and dispersed self in cyberspace – a fluid subject that traversed the wires of electronic communication venues and embodies, through its virtual disembodiment, postmodern subjectivity” (5). Wong knows how her racialized identity manifests online (i.e. as the “geisha” or “lotus blossom” stereotype), and she deliberately constructs an alternate narrative.

## **IDENTIFICATION VARIATION**

Wong’s BBCM project is one of disidentification. In his book, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, José Esteban Muñoz defines disidentification as “a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse. Disidentification negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power” (19). Through BBCM, Wong has utilized the current discourse surrounding Asian women and makes that into a site of resistance. In talking about the main case study in his book, the African American drag queen Vaginal Creme Davis, Muñoz writes that “[Davis] transforms

the raw material of identification . . . while simultaneously positioning himself within and outside the image of the movie star. For Baldwin [the enactor of Davis persona], disidentification is more than simply an interpretive turn or psychic maneuver; it is, most crucially, a survival strategy” (Muñoz 18). Wong is working both within and outside of the hypersexual construction of Asian women<sup>3</sup> as she uses the framework of a mail order bride website and resignifies it as a place of resistance.

### **\*DIS-ING ACADEMIA\***

This website was Wong’s fulfillment of a required final project for an Asian American Studies class that she took in the spring of 2000 at the University of California, Los Angeles. However, she was not seeking to merely fulfill the requirements, but to have an impact beyond the classroom. Wong wrote of the project:

Basically, I got bored and was becoming numb to the issues. In that last year of college, I accessed my learnings: I realized that it is a lot easier to discuss oppression with the oppressed rather than the oppressor. I learned how to write thesis papers in one night that would only be read by myself and the teaching assistant. I realized that taking an ‘activist’s’ stance in many of my classes was hypocritical, as I was too much of a prankster to be the poster girl for human rights and dignity (not that I didn’t care). I also realized that I had no clue how to use a computer. I was going to graduate with a ton of knowledge under my belt, but had shared none of it outside of the classroom. With an upcoming proposal for my senior project due, I refused to write another half-assed paper that would be read by only two eyes and tossed afterwards. I wanted to utilize an accessible medium for audiences inside and out of the Asian American community (Big Bad Chinese Mama).

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<sup>3</sup> For more research about this trend, see Celine Parreñas Shimizu’s The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene.

Wong's creation of the website was a disidentification with academia. She had not found productive outlets for the critical gaze she had developed in Asian American and Women's studies courses. While initially liberating and illuminating, practicing resistant methodologies on a daily basis was both mentally and physically straining. In fact, Wong had a nervous breakdown and developed an ulcer (Big Bad Chinese Mama). She then made a decision to put this consciousness to good use, because, as she stated in an interview, "I realized, 'My anger is more oppressive than my oppression'" (Lin). She harnessed her frustration, and, with humor, made her message accessible. Wong also enacted political praxis gleaned from her academic studies in non-academic ways. Though a fulfillment of a course requirement, Wong deliberately chose not to follow the beaten path to a term paper, which would be one of a hundred espousing similar ideologies to the same Teaching Assistant. Instead, Wong turned to popular culture, and decided to create her own counter narrative within a sea of monolithic racialized stereotypes. Even the feel of the site is decidedly non-academic. In the anthology AsianAmerica.Net, Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu wrote in "Good Politics, Great Porn: Untangling Race, Sex, and Technology in Asian American Cultural Productions" that "*BigBadChineseMama* is 'webgrrlism' at its finest, a blend of amusing journal entries, memoirs, pranks, combined with frequent spurts of poststructuralist deconstruction. It is self consciously anti-slick: hastily scanned images, unedited prose, and low-tech coding give it the do-it-yourself feel common to most 'zines'" (297). Though based on the theories and engagement which she gained in Asian American Studies and Women's Studies courses, the end product does not resemble much else found within academia.

Wong's decision to make a fake mail order bride website instead of a paper is a political decision in and of itself: As Audre Lorde wrote, "*The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 108, emphasis in the original). Writing a paper would have been the academically respectable thing to do, but it would not have reached a fraction of the people which BBCM reached. The Internet medium also allowed Wong to attract her desired audience and control how they viewed her. In addition, she created a space for interaction.

Within academia, Wong was also disidentifying with feminism. She took Women's Studies courses while an undergraduate at UCLA and subscribed to feminist ideologies, but did not identify with the label "feminist." Her concept of the term was that of the second wavers burning their bras in protest or academic feminists preaching from a position of privilege in the university. Her own sense of humor and trickster nature did not fit into these types of feminism. "I wanted to bridge the gap between serious feminism and pop feminism<sup>4</sup> in order to make the idea of feminism less scary. As it turns out, [www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com) was the bridge" ("Pranks" 296). Her politics and activist goals were enacted through satire, thereby delivering a message while being humorous. Wong has since broadened her concept of feminism and now embraces the term. "[I]n challenging what I thought was wrong with feminism, I was actually doing feminism" ("Pranks" 307). I will go into Wong's relationship with feminism in greater depth in the next chapter.

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<sup>4</sup> Wong has expressed her definition of "pop feminism" as that which is embodied and commodified by groups like Destiny's Child.

As disidentification includes identifying, or retaining, elements of the original, it is important to note the influences which Wong reproduced in and through BBCM. In their book Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America, editors Mimi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu state in their Introduction the importance of popular culture as an object of study in Asian American Studies. “For decades, Asian American scholars have turned their attention to American popular culture in order to examine, and often condemn, its mobilization and amplification of stereotypes” (6). Popular culture is representative of political issues and directly affects individuals and the cultural imaginary. BBCM seeks to disrupt identified Asian stereotypes through a popular culture medium.

Another identification from within academia was Mimi Nguyen’s Exoticize This website (<[www.exoticizemyfist.com](http://www.exoticizemyfist.com)>, currently unavailable due to reconstruction) and Worse Than Queer (<[www.worsethanqueer.com](http://www.worsethanqueer.com)>) were progenitors and inspirations for Wong’s BBCM. Tu also wrote about Nguyen’s work in “Good Politics, Great Porn: Untangling Race, Sex, and Technology in Asian American Cultural Productions”: “Others less directly involved with the [porn] industry have sought different goals, attempting not to claim control over the mode of production, but to interfere with the process of consumption. Mimi Nguyen was among the first” (269). Exoticize This catalogued Asian American feminist work and resources. Its creation, like BBCM’s, was also in partial response to the lack of safe spaces for Asian women on the Internet. Those searching for porn with Asian females were also occasionally directed to her site. Nguyen had not copied “adult” website’s metatags as Wong did, so the effect was unintentional. Nguyen’s other Internet project, Worse Than Queer, is self-described as “critical theory for handy everyday

use.” It catalogues Nguyen’s writings on popular culture, feminism, punk rock, Asian American identities, representation, and more.

Another important way in which Wong was disidentifying with academia is through the exchange of ideas which BBCM facilitated with the “Guestbook.” This function within the site further reinforces Wong’s disidentification, as “It [disidentification] understands that counterdiscourses, like discourse, can always fluctuate for different ideological ends and a politicized agent must have the ability to adapt and shift as quickly as power does within discourse” (Muñoz 19). Wong did not shy away from responding to criticisms as well as support, keeping the discourse flowing in response to others’ ideas. In the specific case of BBCM, online comments are viewable by all visitors. No registration is required to post on the forums. There is a line for a name to be entered, but it is often used as a title for the comment. Anonymity is not only possible, but the norm in the guestbook. Some individuals use and sustain avatars on the comments, adding another layer onto the creation of identity. Wong did answer many posts, but she did so as her BBCM character. Hence, the candor was much more aggressive and informal than Wong is in RL. Visitors may freely contribute to the website, and so, the content changes and shifts with its audience.

One of the main reasons why the BBCM site caused so much controversy is because it is interventional, and therefore reached an “unconverted” audience. The site was a place where the oppressor and oppressed met: “The site was intended to shock and provoke the boundaries of being ‘politically correct’ and force people to respond the way pie charts, statistics and graphs wouldn’t. I purposely link my sites to nasty clubs and [chat rooms] to draw this traffic. I also link my site to Asian American activist sites” (“Pranks” 304).

Academic ventures are rarely able to achieve this mixture; though usually encouraged in theory, the reality does not reflect this aim.

Wong was able to create a space where oppressors, the oppressed, and/or activists are thrown together with the means (and ample inspiration) for discussion. As Wong has often lamented, racialized studies<sup>5</sup> courses are typically populated by those who have been oppressed by racialization. So, discussions are often about the effects of actions of those who are not present on those who are present. “As the class would meditate in consternation about the confines of their identity due to ‘the Man,’ I daydreamed about actually having some of ‘the Man's kind’ enrolled in the class who could listen and share in this discussion” ([Big Bad Chinese Mama](#)). Through clever web linking, Wong now had “the Man” in a “classroom” of her own design. Many comments in the guestbook were blatantly racist and hateful, and many did not engage in the space openly and critically. Wong purposefully left these comments for public viewing and did not edit them. Her intention was to demonstrate the existence of discrimination and the need for activism to others (Eng 65).

The site also falls into the category of Culture Jamming insofar as it disrupts the commodification and consumption sanctioned by power and privilege with a sense of humor and joy in the act of disruption. BBCM’s concern with and use of iconography further removes it from typical academic endeavors. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu continues in

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “racialized studies” to indicate those programs studying the ongoing processes and constructed nature of race.

“Good Politics, Great Porn: Untangling Race, Sex, and Technology in Asian American Cultural Productions” to posit that:

[BBCM] obstructs the passive consumption of porn by ‘intruding on the intruder’ and injecting ‘noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver.’ This, as Mark Dery defines it, is the work of a culture jammer, the ‘part artistic terrorist, part vernacular critic,’ who is ‘ever mindful of the fun to be had in the joyful demolition of oppressive ideologies.’ As such, Wong belongs among a long list of pranksters, hackers, and saboteurs who, if only for a moment, have managed to derail the smooth flow of media (273).

The focus of Culture Jamming is popular culture, not academia. Its tactics are interventional, guerilla-style, and above all seeks to disrupt business-as-usual. It identifies the systems of power and oppression which shape our daily lives and throws a rock in the gears to disrupt production and control. I will further discuss Wong’s work as it relates to Culture Jamming in the last chapter.

### **\*DIS-ING AND COUNTER-ING STEREOTYPES\***

In his book Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America, James S. Moy writes about the racialized stereotypes of Chinese individuals that have historically pervaded American theatre. Women are typically sexualized and men are made effeminate; these characterizations of both Chinese people and Chinese cultures have justified the mindset of domination, slavery, and colonization (56). What Wong found on the Internet was the same as what Moy saw in American theatre: Chinese people presented to white American audiences (i.e. oppressors or colonizers) as ready and willing for consumption. As Wong wrote on the BBCM site:

You have really shown us that you care because now our religious icons (like Buddha and Hindu [deities]), our languages (only character languages because [Romanized] languages like Vietnamese aren't as cool and foreign looking), and other cultural sacred symbols are exploited in your tattoos, t-shirt logos, and fashion [accessories]. It's so good to be a trend!

With this quote, Wong criticizes the commodification of Asian cultures often accompanied with the belief that the owning of an "Asian" item correlated with better knowledge of and respect for Asian cultures. When signifiers of Asian cultures are both for sale and in demand, it follows that Asian bodies are commodified as well.

When performing searches on the Internet, Wong was unable to find alternatives to Asian women invoked as mail-order brides and/or in pornography ("Pranks" 300). As previously stated, she created this site in response to the lack of safe spaces on the Internet for Asian women and her own disillusionment with academia and feminism. After experiencing the negative physical and mental effects of practicing a critical gaze without a constructive outlet, Wong sought to put this consciousness to productive use. The project creates a safe place for Asian women while simultaneously creating an unsafe space for those seeking to commodify and consume them. Those with the goal of consuming racialized stereotypes are interrupted and told that their actions are colonialist, racist, and sexist, making this site unsafe for those individuals and actions.

There are two main tropes which Wong addresses with the site. I will first discuss that of the "geisha." Wong wrote of what she had found of Asian women on the Internet:

In a real mail order bride website, Asian culture is played up as much as possible so that the women are as marketable as possible. Traditional cultural dress like Kimonos are sexualized and eroticized to make the women look exotic, mysterious, and delicate. This only commodifies Asian culture rather than provide any meaningful or truthful interpretations of the cultural symbols ("Pranks" 256).

Wong mimics these tactics by wearing an identifiably “Asian” outfit in the series of pictures on the home page of the site, but resignifies these qualities by putting two heads on one body, or significantly altering the “attractiveness” of herself as the “traditional Asian”-looking mail order bride. In this way, she disrupts the consumption of her body and shifts the way in which these cultural signifiers are read.

In the Daisy Lin Shapiro’s documentary Yours Truly, Miss Chinatown, Wong stated that this particular series was playing on the notion of Asian women as “exotic.” Wong does not consider herself “exotic,” and so, she portrayed what she would qualify as “exotic.” Subversive invocations of stereotypes are difficult, as noted by Josephine Lee in her book Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the American Stage: “one must highlight or foreground the anxiety inherent in the performance of the stereotype by overperforming its already exaggerated qualities, pushing violence into hyperbolic slapstick, or forcing its repetition until it becomes monotonous” (96). As shown below, Wong has overperformed the stereotype of the “exotic” Asian women to the point where it has lost its viability.



More images of Wong from the BBCM homepage. Photos courtesy of Kristina Wong/<[www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com)>.

In the image on the left, Wong is pictured with her hand placed modestly over her mouth. This invokes the “lotus blossom” imagery of Asian women covering their mouths to hide laughter or a smile. However, she has altered a photograph of herself so that she is holding her head at her chest. The image on the right, Wong is still in “geisha” drag, but this time the image is altered to have two heads on one body. This invokes the Siamese Twin trope, as well as notions of interchangeability and similarity among Asian people. Both images simultaneously follow stereotypes of Asian women and disrupt their consumption with their extreme alterations. They also hyperbolically stretch the fetishism of “exoticness” past the point of acceptability.

Wong’s addressing of the “lotus blossom” trope is more accurately described as counteridentification, or a strict opposition (Muñoz 11). Wong begins our trip through her site as the “Madame” of sorts, pictured above. These pictures are followed by the this text:

“I have gathered lovely ‘Oriental Creatures’ from all over the world, who are just as sweet and pretty as me. They will show you just how demure Asian women REALLY are . . . So, go ahead. Let us deconstruct your colonialist patriarchal gaze.” These promises are followed by pictures like the following in the “Harem of Angst”:



The person in the first picture is writing “porn sucks” on the wall. Photos courtesy of Kristina Wong / <[www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com)>.

After the viewer is brought to the site, they are teased with the possibility of “demure lotus blossoms,” but are then faced with a very different reality. The Asian female bodies on the site counteridentify with the “lotus blossom” stereotype, as they are obnoxious, strong, indecent, etc.

BBCM has similar goals and uses similar tactics as the character Song in David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*: to target the white, Western male seeking a sexually available and submissive Asian woman. When Song first meets Gallimard (the “target”), she openly criticizes him for his colonialist desires with, “It’s one of your favorite fantasies, isn’t it?”

The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man” (1281). This closely parallels Wong’s BBCM greeting visitors with, “What the fuck? Are you so preoccupied with your patriarchal colonialist longings of global conquest and cultural commodification that you think those kind of mythical people (i.e. Suzy Wong) exist?” Wong also directly references one of the most recent perpetrators of the racialized stereotype Hwang is seeking to disrupt<sup>6</sup>: “Arthur Golden [author of Memoirs of a Geisha] better step the fuck back because there is no way I am going to let him speak for me. I don’t care how long ‘Mr. Bestseller’ lived in Japan or how well he knows the language.” As Dorrine Kondo explores in About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater, Hwang’s play questions notions of stable identity, links the construction of gender to the construction of race, and questions ahistorical reproductions (47).

Though *M. Butterfly* seeks to disrupt and challenge some of the same assumptions as BBCM, it only reaches those who come to the theatre to see a production, rent the movie, or read the script. Wong’s website reaches those who would never think of attending the theatre, much less a notoriously subversive and anti-colonialist production. Actually, Wong’s website reaches modern-day Gallimards on the Internet. So, as Song enticed Gallimard with her “traditional and exotic Asian ways,” Wong entices those seeking the same performativity to her website.

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<sup>6</sup> Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* focuses on disrupting a particular metanarrative of an Asian female sexuality in which a stereotypical “lotus blossom” Asian female falls in love with a white Western male. The two have a relationship after which the male leaves the Asian female for a white Western female, which causes the Asian female to commit suicide. This metanarrative can be traced back through the musical *Miss Saigon* by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, the opera *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, the short story “Madame Butterfly” by John Luther Long, and the novel Madame Chrysanthème by Pierre Loti.

The site, as a whole, does not simply identify with the mail order bride racialized stereotype, nor does it simply counteridentify with the more “Americanized” Asian women pictured above and so often invoked in opposition.<sup>7</sup> Wong successfully creates her own imagery to disrupt the sexualization and fetishization of the mail order bride, the “geisha,” and Asian women as generally submissive and demure. The “Harem of Angst” counteridentifies with stereotypes of Asian women just as the title of the site does. As Wong wrote: “‘Big,’ ‘bad,’ and ‘mama’ are also words used to describe women in black porn sites. Asian porn sites emphasize the smallness, shyness, and coyness of women; by using dramatically different adjectives, I intended to subvert a dominant trend” (“Pranks” 301). Finally, the picture of Wong with an open mouth full of Cheetos is a disidentification with the typical “money shot” of pornographic images and film, as she described in Yours Truly, Miss Chinatown. Instead of a seemingly aroused woman’s mouth filled with a penis or semen, Wong’s face is contorted and displaying her partially chewed junk food.

### **KAREN FINLEY’S *THE CONSTANT STATE OF DESIRE***

Performance artist Karen Finley is known for her incisive, abrasive and shocking tactics. As Theodore Shank wrote of her work in Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre: “[Her] solo performances offer a broad critique of society in the United States, of its homophobia, degradation of women, suppressed desires, and commercialism,

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<sup>7</sup> In “‘Speaking a Language That We Both Understand’: Reconciling Feminism and Cultural Nationalism in Asian American Theatre,” Josephine Lee discusses this common dichotomization which “links what is ‘Asian’ with traditional and oppressive patriarchy and what is ‘American’ with feminist liberation” (147).

which sets standards of appearance and behavior for women based on the desires of men [. . .] her aim is political, but she insists that it is not negative” (202). Audience members usually leave the space feeling implicated and complicit in multiple systems of power and oppression, though it is not Finley’s intention to leave them feeling helpless.

Finley often uses the convention of nudity combined with the application of food and other items to her body in order to alter the ways in which the female body is controlled and consumed. As noted by audience members, the consumption of her female body is disrupted when she demystifies and defiles it (Rapp). Finley’s artistic identity has, for some, reduced her to this convention as “the chocolate-smearing woman.”<sup>8</sup> The following picture was taken by Donna Ann McAdams during a performance of *The Constant State of Desire* at P.S. 122 in 1987:

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<sup>8</sup> Finley was dubbed “the chocolate-smearing woman” by Jesse Helms during his arguments against funding “obscene” works by the infamous “NEA 4” (Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller). During the piece in question, Finley smeared her body with chocolate, which was meant to symbolize feces and the way in which women are treated in her society (Rapp). Finley appropriated her nickname in her 1998 show, *Return of the Chocolate-Smeared Woman*.



Karen Finley during a performance of *The Constant State of Desire*.

In this piece, Finley undresses and takes colored eggs from a display of Easter baskets and stuffed animals on the stage. She puts the unboiled eggs in a bag and smashes the contents, then uses the stuffed animals to smear the raw eggs on her torso. She finishes her decoration with glitter and confetti (Finley 60-61). At the point of the photograph above, Finley is throwing a mixture of candy, glitter, and confetti at the audience. Jon Erickson writes of the piece that “[the] obsession that Finley articulates is indeed a constant state of desire, a socially imposed value that infects all other relations – the desire for absolute control and mastery which in turn promotes abuse at every level, sees other humans as a

means for satisfying one's insatiable appetites, eventually turns inward to devour the family itself and ends in suicide" (231).

Similar to Wong, Finley appears to almost fulfill societal desires and expectations of her body before jarringly disrupting this consumptive gaze. Just as Finley smears raw eggs on her naked body, Wong's "geisha" portraits give her two heads or five eyes. Erickson continues that "She [Finley] begins by placing her body in ways both matter-of-fact and seductive, and subverts this approach through monologues that for most audiences can only be a turn-off" (231). This disruption is intended to obliterate these sexual fantasies.

It may seem antithetical to perform nude (or in "geisha" drag) in order to disrupt sexual consumption. As Prommaggione argues, "Finley's performing body is not an object – she employs particular techniques to turn back the objectifying gaze of the audience" (287). There is another layer in this interaction – or, rather, a layer missing. As Shank describes, "[Finley] makes herself vulnerable by revealing herself - her body without the cover of eroticism, as well as her fantasies and experiences that others would keep secret, and she expresses openly her fears, anchors, and desires in a language that is uncensored" (Shank 209). Though Wong uses more humor than Finley, she still reveals her worldview and goals through her work. Wong displays her and others' bodies without the cover of racialized eroticism. For both artists, their transgressions are punished by some audience members; the website's "Guestbook" has been mentioned, and Finley has had people scream, "Whore!" at her in performances.

Also like Wong, Finley was frustrated with the inefficacy of typical methods she learned during her training and education. As Lenora Champagne wrote of her work,

“Finley performed in nightclubs, circumventing the art gallery circuit. She wanted to ‘put emotion into performance, like expressionism into painting’ and to make work ‘that people could understand, that would have references to the world rather than to the history of art’” (57). Both artists are also working from what Finley describes as “an emotional commitment to something which I feel very urgently about and that needs to be changed now” (qtd. in Champagne 57). This urgent need encourages both to find more effective and accessible forms of expression.

Jon Erickson concludes his conversation on appropriation in “Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley” that “In order to make something that belongs to others your own, you must transgress, that is, trespass, across those boundaries separating what is yours from what is theirs. I make it mine, so the effectiveness that your meaning gives to it is devalued. This doubleness is at the core of both parody and travesty: the ridicule of ‘authority’” (226). Wong and Finley reclaim their bodies by devaluing dominant narratives of them; this is also the strategy behind disidentification.

## **SURVEYING THE DAMAGE**

Wong’s creation, though now well-known after eight years and no longer unique, remains relevant because of its interventional methods and the questions it raises about how we define feminism, activism, and academia. It reaches more than those who choose to be exposed to its politics and provides a forum for discussion, thereby fostering the exchange of ideas in a way that too few plays and term papers are able to accomplish. Wong created

a mechanism to disrupt the act of colonization and fetishization within the medium which typically perpetuates these processes. The accessibility of the site is greater than that of a live performance due to many factors. In comparison to allied projects, such as *M. Butterfly*, which played on Broadway, Internet access is much more commonly available. Most public libraries offer this access with a (usually free) member card. Also, the use of parody in BBCM is legible and recognizable, whereas *M. Butterfly* has multiple layers of representation which has, for some, hindered their comprehension. Finally, a webpage is accessible at any time, for any length of time, and by (almost) any number of visitors, unlike a live performance.

Demonstrating the possibility of something other than the “geisha” or “lotus blossom” is certainly an important endeavor. The use of humor, parody, and lack of treatises leaves BBCM relatively open for interpretation. “The site doesn’t throw out abstract intellectual essays claiming to ‘get to the essence’ or ‘truth’ of what an Asian woman is really like . . . In making it’s point the site is more effective than any laid out argument or essay because it shows first hand multiple contradictions to the stereotypes it’s trying to shatter” (Bowles-Martinez). A term paper about the harm and constructed nature of racialized stereotypes would not have had the same effect on the reader as imagery of actual people existing outside of these stereotypes. The medium and delivery reaches a much broader audience than formal critiques within academia and affects them visually and viscerally, as well as intellectually.

There are some problematic implications of the site. First is the way in which the comment board functioned. Discussions online are rarely as critically engaged and

productive as one might hope. For those intercepted in their search for pornography of Asian females, their consumption has been halted. It is impossible to truly measure the performative effect of this website on all of the aforementioned individuals, but judging by the posts, a good number either maintained or became more adamant about their colonialist, racist, and sexist ideologies. On the other hand, many left encouraging messages for Wong on the “Guestbook.” This polarization is common in Internet discussions: an issue or representation is posted with which commenters either agree or disagree. Also, those feeling most strongly (in agreement or disagreement) are the ones most likely to post a message. Hence, the discourse rarely exceeds this basic interaction.

As mentioned, the message board alone became infamous, as many white supremacists, misogynists, and homophobes took the opportunity to berate Wong for interrupting their lives. Just as the Internet medium allowed Wong to express herself in a controlled and specific manner, those posting had the same freedom and control. As Sherry Turkle posited in “Looking Beyond Cyberspace: Beyond Grounded Sociology,” the fragmentation and anonymity of the Internet allows for experimentation and an overflow of passion that is not normally permitted in real life (643). Hence, many of the postings on the guestbook were extremely hateful, racist, and sexist. Dismissals of Wong and BBCM included claims that it was the work of frustrated lesbians, “feminazis,” and loud mouths whom no one wishes to listen were common.

This may seem antithetical to her desire to create a safe space. Leaving the particularly hateful messages on the board could leave readers feeling less safe online.

Wong has spoken about this dilemma: “[there’s] a little more anger than necessary [on the

‘Guestbook’ comments], and you leave going, ‘Whoa, this is funny, but I feel totally attacked,’” Wong conceded of BBCM. “Or, ‘This is funny, but I feel misrepresented’” (Eng 66). However, her intention is to not create another unsafe space where Asian women are only desired when fitting the “geisha” or “lotus blossom” stereotype. A more accurate term may be an uncomfortable space, where questioning is encouraged. Wong continues, “I want to leave people with that raw nerve. Our ancestors worked too hard to get here for us to sit here and be comfy.” The site seems to be an uncomfortable space for many, but that discomfort has fueled critical and personal engagement for many regarding the efficacy of Wong’s methods, the usage of stereotypes, and more. As the space encourages engagement, it can be said to have a different effect on Asian visitors than visiting an Asian porn site or mail-order bride site would.

Next, Wong also incurred criticism from those within Asian communities. The burden of representation, or the added significance and scrutiny placed on a representation because of scarcity, meant that people came to the site seeking more than she could have ever offered. As Wong puts it, “although the site’s URL is [www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com), too many visitors confuse it as [www.all-asian-people-conveniently-defined-in-one-website.com](http://www.all-asian-people-conveniently-defined-in-one-website.com)” (“Big Bad Prank” 282). When representation of a certain community is rare, the few existing representations are expected to both include all experiences of those in the community and please all of those in the community – two equally impossible tasks. The burden of representation was laid on Wong’s back by other communities as well. “People [. . .] send hate mail about how I am ‘unqualified’ to be feminist, Asian American or activist based on whatever they think a feminist, activist, or ‘good’ Asian American is supposed to

be” (Kristina Sheryl Wong). The burden of representation is made heavier by the confluence of the “model minority” stereotype, which categorizes Asians as the “best” (or the most assimilated and well-behaved) “minority” group. Not only is Wong expected to represent all Asians, but she has to do so in a way that fulfills the role of Asians as the model for all “minorities.” Appropriately, it is just these concepts of feminism, activism, Asian American-ness she is trying to explore with her work.

All of this is further complicated by the sense of humor and parody which pervades the site. “Wong’s layers of meaning are buried beneath angry humor that hits so forcefully that one’s initial reaction, positive or negative, can preclude wanting or needing to look more deeply” (Eng 69). It is easy to imagine how many viewers either “get the joke” and agree, or are offended and turned off by the in-your-face style of the site. Though Wong wishes a dialogue to take place on the site, the tactics and her BBCM persona make it appear that the creator has a singular, unwavering viewpoint. Dissenters will have no effect, nor will they be respected, and allies have no need to add to an already clear message. As stated, Wong varies greatly from her BBCM persona. As this is not communicated on the site, the persona is read as an accurate representation of her.

Finally, through the questioning of the constructed nature of the “lotus blossom” and “geisha” stereotypes, another stereotype was constructed. In an interview, Lynda Lin asked Kristina, “Do you think that your subversive technique of trying to break down the stereotype of Asian women as shrinking violets has actually created another stereotype of angry Asian girls?” This question is closely linked to the aforementioned burden of representation. Wong answered, “Yeah, probably. But I don’t see myself as angry, and I

don't really see it as my responsibility to dismantle every kind of stereotype there is out there or to micromanage the politics that people leave with after being exposed to me and my work." Wong's goal to disprove the racialized stereotypes led to a proliferation of the opposite – a counteridentification – which, in turn, could be seen to strengthen both stereotypes and create a binary within which Asian and Asian American women are placed: "lotus blossom" on one end, and "angry Asian girl" (examples from the BBCM site are below) on the other.



Pictures from the "Frequently Un-Asked Questions" section of the BBCM website.  
Photos courtesy of Kristina Wong/<[www.bigbadchinesemama.com](http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com)>.

"My goal was only to satirize the blatant racism perpetuated by Orientalism and to spoof anger itself" ("Big Bad Prank" 280). The trouble with this kind of humor, though, is that you cannot control whether audiences are laughing with you or at you. The parody may

not read as such, and so, may create another stereotype or reinforce that which is desired to be disrupted.<sup>9</sup>

Though Kristina Wong now laments the way that many have used this initial project to define her and her work, it did open many doors for the artist by putting her “on the map” (Kristina Sheryl Wong). Many professors began to use the website in classes, affording Wong the opportunity to lecture and even perform. The irony here, of course, is that Wong created the site out of frustration with academia, feminism, and activism – the very same groups who now herald her as a pioneer and hire her for workshops, keynotes, residencies, and performances. So, through her efforts to challenge what academia, feminism, and activism can be, she has succeeded in broadening their definitions and scope.

This project embodies many of the qualities that Wong has taken with her throughout the rest of her career: humor, decolonization techniques, feminism, resignification/disidentification, and perhaps most importantly, interventional tactics. The way that BBCM intervenes and disrupts colonialist and sexist behavior is just as important as that with which it intervenes. Wong reached exactly the audience that she wished to change, which is rarely the case in activist efforts. The resulting interest and touring in academic and activist circles has broadened both the site’s and her exposure. “For me, this project is successful because I am bringing a voice that is uniquely mine to so many people”

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<sup>9</sup> Dave Chappelle, an African American actor, stand up comedian, screenwriter, and producer, faced a similar dilemma with his show, “Chappelle’s Show,” in which he commonly embodied racialized stereotypes. Chappelle stopped doing the show because of high stress levels and a strong ethical dilemma. He believed that certain audience members were laughing *at* him, not *with* him, and that some of the sketches were “socially irresponsible.” Though Chappelle’s intention was to subvert racialized stereotypes through parody and satire, he felt that the performative effect was achieving the opposite – and, in fact, that this was the network’s (Comedy Central) goal, in order that they might increase revenue (“Dave Chappelle”).

(Big Bad Chinese Mama). This site remains an initial articulation of her methodologies and the work which she continues today.

## **Chapter Two: PUTTING THE WONG BACK IN FEMINISM**

*“Too bad the rest of the world couldn’t understand the kind of feminism I was embracing without taking a women’s studies class.”*

*- Kristina Wong in “Pranks and Fake Porn”*

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Feminism has changed significantly since the Second Wave, but popular misconceptions about the Second Wave movement and its members still abound. As such, the word “feminism” has been argued to have lost its efficacy. In this chapter, I will delineate between what I feel are the two main current trends in feminism and explore how Kristina Wong fits into these definitions. I will use her piece *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* as a main example and relate these to Denise Uyehara’s *Hello (Sex) Kitty: Mad Asian Bitch on Wheels*.

### **WHAT’S WONG WITH FEMINISM?**

Kristina Wong is commonly identified as a Third Wave feminist, typically on the basis of her creation of BBCM. Her writings have appeared in several anthologies on feminism, including “The Earliest Trials of the Novice Postfeminist Pornographer” in *We Don’t Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists* (2006), “Pranks and Fake Porn: Doing Feminism My Way” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2003), and “A Big Bad Prank: Broadening the Definition of Asian American Feminist Activism” in *YELL-oh Girls! Emerging Voices Explore Culture, Identity, and Growing Up Asian American* (2001). However, according to Wong, even

while touring the country and visiting Women's Studies and Asian American Studies classes, she was reluctant to take on the label of "feminist." Published in 2003, her piece "Pranks and Fake Porn: Doing Feminism My Way" details her experience:

Why was I afraid of the word 'feminism'? I had spent four years at college avoiding the word to identify my leftist politics [. . .] The way I saw it, you couldn't just casually call yourself a feminist [. . .] A feminist was someone who lacked humor [. . .] I would have to develop a supersensitivity to anything that might be somewhat offensive, policing society for every ounce of injustice (294-295).

The concept of feminism which Wong had encountered in academia did not fit with who she was or who she wished to be. As discussed in the previous chapter, she did not feel that the activism happening in academia was effective or relevant, and the ideal was not possible for her to achieve. It is the questioning of feminism, however, which puts her in the category of the Third Wave, as Wong herself has defined it and stated.

U.S. feminism is typically categorized as "waves," a metaphor that groups feminist activism into movements. The First Wave refers to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts for women's suffrage; activism during the 1960s through the late 1980s aimed at extending equal rights "on paper" to real life and equal opportunity constitutes the Second Wave; and the Third Wave, which is less easily defined, includes feminist activity since the early 1980s. This metaphor, however, is sometimes argued to have lost its efficacy. As Lisa Jervis, founding editor and publisher of the magazine *Bitch: A Feminist Response to Popular Culture*, argues in *We Don't Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists*:

We've reached the end of the wave terminology's usefulness. What was at first a handy-dandy way to refer to feminism's history, present, and future potential

with a single metaphor has become shorthand that invites intellectual laziness, an escape hatch from the hard work of distinguishing between core beliefs and a cultural moment [. . .] The metaphor wraps up differences in age, ideology, tactics, and style, and pretends that distinguishing among these factors is unimportant (14).

Hence the title of the collection, “we don’t need another wave.” The phrase is not meant to imply that feminism is dead, or that all feminist work has already been done. Rather, it stresses the artificiality of and harm done by the divisions between the waves of feminism, and stresses the contiguity of feminist ideology.

One of the most damaging effects of the misnomer of “waves” is the characterization of Third Wave feminists as harbingers of either salvation or damnation. As Jervis continues, “Even the more nuanced discussions of Third Wavers tend to cast them [. . .] as sex-obsessed young things [sic] with a penchant for lip gloss and a disregard for recent history, or sophisticated identity politicians who have moved past the dated concerns of their predecessors” (Jervis 14). Neither concept gives proper credit to both feminism’s predecessors and its recent innovators. Just as Second Wave feminism moved the push for equality from the legal realm to the social realm, Third Wave feminism has used the tenets of the earlier waves to critique their work and effects. This polarization also reflects a tension within U.S. culture about the current relevance and/or the necessity of feminism.

Jervis goes on to delineate more of the stereotypical binaries which have been constructed about Second and Third Wave feminism:

Older women drained their movement of sexuality; younger women are uncritically sexualized. Older women won’t recognize the importance of pop culture; younger women are obsessed with media representation. Older women have too narrow a definition of what makes a feminist issue; younger women are scattered and don’t know what’s important. Stodgy vs. frivolous. Won’t share

power vs. spoiled and ignorant [. . .] It's become the master narrative of feminism's progression (or regression, as some see it) (15).

A number of important issues are raised in this list. One is the recent trend to reclaim sexuality and femininity – a definite shift from the anti-commodification politics of the Second Wave. Reclamation is characterized as an unimportant (and actually regressive) political act. Another dismissed (or “frivolous”) area of focus is popular culture. The proliferation and increased accessibility of media has drastically changed the ways in which we receive and process information. However, as much of this media is considered “entertainment,” it is often ignored as an important contributor to our world views. One more issue is the “scattered” nature of younger feminists’ activism. There is a harmful fear that the feminist label sentences its bearer to continual and paralyzing responsibility to all who are oppressed. If you are not a militant and tireless feminist, you cannot bear the badge. Hence, the identity is not one with which women commonly identify, though they typically believe in equal rights. Finally, the concept of recent generations as spoiled is not unique to those identified as feminists; many rights movements view younger generations as ungrateful for their work. It is ironic that the group which agitated for equal rights on the basis that certain rights are inalienable would criticize those who have matured in a world closer to that ideal for taking equality for granted. Notably, Jervis’ list is meant to reflect how Second Wavers and Third Wavers are portrayed, not necessarily how they actually interact. However, there must be some basis for the creation and acceptance of these arguments.

There are also strong debates about whether to refer to the most recent period of time as “Third Wave feminism” or “postfeminism.” There are separate political connotations and ideological bases for each, though they are occasionally used interchangeably. It is my belief that the terms are not interchangeable, and so, I will delineate the two terms.

### **\*POSTFEMINISM\***

Obviously, “Third Wave” conveniently conforms to the structure already created in the narrative of feminist history. However, as Jervis argued, these divisions are not necessarily accurate or helpful. “Postfeminism” was coined in the October 17, 1982 New York Times Magazine article “Voices from the Postfeminist Generation” by Susan Bolotin. At the time, it was used to describe the current state as after the time of Second Wave feminist activism. The implication is that all of feminism’s work has been done, and no one is a feminist any longer. As Janelle Reinelt wrote in “Navigating Postfeminism: Writing Out of the Box:” “There is something performatively defeatist about using the designation of ‘postfeminist’ – defeatist in that it seems to give up on the project of feminism, and performative in that it actively constructs the present based on a sense of feminism as post or over” (17). Though the Second Wave accomplished much in terms of equal rights and access, few today would concede that everything sexist about society was “fixed” during the 1960s and 1970s and that we now live in a state of equality and bliss. Though access to many spaces has been gained for some women, the spaces remain configured for (normative) male participation, and do not provide for needs such as child care.

Concurrently, there is a movement to reclaim sexuality as a signifier of power and liberation. The restrictions which the Second Wave placed on female heterosexuality as a reaction to commodification and consumption are characterized as oppressive, and so, “true” freedom is achieved through the casting off of these rules. Unfortunately, this is rarely accompanied by a theoretical engagement about the possible reification of sexism.

Elaine Aston writes about this trend in her article “‘Bad Girls’ and ‘Sick Boys’: New Women Playwrights and the Future of Feminism” in the anthology Feminist Futures?

Theatre, Performance, Theory:

More worrying still, however, has been the reclamation of the feminine through the 1990s explosion of girl culture and power: the idea that girls can readily access power through a sexualized feminine. Dubbed by some as the ‘feminism’ of the 1990s, ‘girl power’ is more accurately to be understood as an individualistic style of self-promotion: one which encourages girls to believe that self-confidence and sexually aggressive behavior is a means to empowerment: a means of getting on and getting what you want (73).

Hence, what I am defining as “postfeminism” reclaims that which the Second Wave denounced as oppressive and purports this reclamation as liberation. Similarly, Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey write in “Second Thoughts on the Second Wave” that “postfeminism demarcates an emerging culture and ideology which simultaneously incorporates, revises and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues raised by Second Wave feminism” (77). Postfeminism shares more linguistic similarities with “antifeminism” than it does with what I will define as Third Wave feminism. Antifeminism connotes a turning away from feminism and adopts the opposite of what feminism purported.

In an interview for Tooth and Nail, Kristina Wong was asked, “[D]oes feminism exist in 21st century [A]merica? [I]s this a fair question?” Wong replied,

[M]ost definitely. And it is a construction of popular culture so it has its built in flaws. Notions of “Girl Power,” “You Go Girl” and “Chicks Rule” have been neat sloganistic and marketable approaches to rewording a word synonymous with hairy armpits and ugly angry white women. I think the word “feminism” still carries a lot of baggage that young women of color shy away from. I work with high school kids and they freak out at that word. I think some of these new slogans have built in “unempowerment”-- like “girl power”-- if I said “Woman power” then it’s not cool sounding, because it sounds all serious feminist and stuff. “Girl power” is cuter as a slogan because it conjures images of someone small doing something big-- but not something big doing something big. But at least it is a step at empowerment. Unfortunately for feminism to educate others out of the classroom in a women’s studies course, to the rest of the world, it needs to be packaged in pop culture. Example: So Destiny’s Child is the muse of Women’s Rights by showing that independence and emotional strength is best achieved by dressing in undies and dancing all sexy? It’s a step at least. But why can’t we be ugly and independent? (“I Got My”).

Like the typical Third Waver, Wong is “obsessed with popular culture.” This time, this obsession extends to analyze the commodification and commercialization of feminism.

Indeed, the Spice Girls, a British pop band of five scantily-clad women, was marketed on “girl power.” This is also present in the marketing of Hello Kitty merchandise, which was/is popular with adult women. Hello Kitty’s hyper-cute persona and lack of a mouth has drawn significant criticism and further complicates its popularity with adult women.

The infantilization which Wong notes is a common trend which serves to disempower those advocating for an end to their oppression. Like postfeminism, infantilization – and “girl power” – reverse the work done by and the ideals sought after by the Second Wave. It is important to note, though, that Wong sees some potential and improvement with the mainstream acceptance of postfeminism. She does see the restrictions placed on femininity by feminism as unnecessary; however, her last question, “Why can’t we be ugly and independent?” suggests a desire for a deeper engagement with reclamation.

Another trend contributing to postfeminist ideologies is the divorcing of current oppression from past oppression, which is more widely accepted as sexism. To put this assumption in a different context, it would be like positing that racial inequalities for African Americans no longer exist, as literal slavery, which is accepted as a racist institution, is no longer practiced. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, editors of Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, note how this worldview isolates instances of oppression: “[M]any of us view injustice as something that happened in the past; if injustice does occur in the present, we assume it is an aberration, not a widespread or systemic problem” (7). Hence, an incident involving sexism is only symptomatic of the individuals involved, not the society which produced them and in which the sexist behavior took place. As concrete, cause-and-effect evidence can never be produced of how one action is a direct indication of larger trends and ideologies, the purporter of this claim can be perpetually dismissed.

Deborah L. Siegel writes in “Reading Between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a ‘Postfeminist’ Moment” about a common reason (among the writings of Naomi Wolfe, Camille Paglia, Rene Denfeld, and Katie Roiphe) why the term “feminist” is rejected: “‘We feminists’ has come to mean, unilaterally and unequivocally, ‘we victims’” (63). So, the term has come to signify disempowerment. This dismissal has some serious implications, however, as it justifies a return to some of the problematic practices of the Second Wave. As Carolyn Sorisio writes in “A Tale of Two Feminisms: Power and Victimization in Contemporary Feminist Debate,” this is problematic because “it allows white bourgeois women to inaccurately absorb others’ experiences into their own, to force a rhetoric of

'sisterhood' or a category of 'woman' that may not adequately describe different women's experiences (142). This oversimplified equation of "feminist" with "victim" is neither critically engaged nor cognizant of the varying lived experiences of women. It also denies the validity of victim-ness in any form, thereby encouraging silence and furthering oppression.

### **\*THIRD WAVE FEMINISM\***

Rebecca Walker, the daughter of feminist activist and author Alice Walker, published an article in a 1992 issue of *Ms Magazine* entitled, "Becoming the Third Wave." It is here where the phrase was coined, and where she famously stated, "I am not a post-feminist feminist. I am the Third Wave." It is this spirit of feminism which Kristina Wong's work follows. Third Wave activism and scholarship is characterized by intersectionality, an exploration of the specificity of personal experience, and an inclusive and interlocking concept of oppression. Quite contrary to the connotation of the term "postfeminism," the Third Wave purports that there is much left to be done. It also connotes a similarity with the previous two waves of feminism as opposed to an end or reversal of them.

The Third Wave does not completely reject the work or ideals of the Second Wave. Instead, it seeks to improve upon and broaden them. It uses the lessons learned from the Second Wave to critique the Second Wave and the world at large. This has included recognition of the homogeneity of the Second Wave.

In the 1970s and 1980s, U.S. women of color and lesbians, responding to their marginalization by the mainstream white, middle-class women's movement,

extended the insights of second wave feminism by theorizing about their experiences. They called for a recognition that identity is intersectional – in other words, that gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are interlocking and that oppression is not experienced simply along one axis. These women, who labeled themselves U.S. third wave feminists, questioned the tendency within the second wave to reduce the category of ‘woman’ to its essence. In their writings, U.S. third wave feminists moved the concepts of difference and diversity to the foreground, reminding us that even if sisterhood is global, not all women’s lives and experiences are identical (Dicker 9).

The way in which a white woman experiences sexism is different than the way in which an Indigenous North American woman experiences sexism, and this must be recognized.

These experiences would also vary depending on the location of their experiences (i.e. a big city on the coast, a reservation, a rural area in the Midwest), the socio-economic status of these women, their sexualities, their gender expression, their abilities, their ages, their size, and more. The Second Wave, in its efforts to focus on sexism, effaced all other modes of discrimination. The Third Wave seeks to explore the intersections of identities, the specificity of personal experience, and interlocking oppressions.

Third Wave feminism, in contrast to postfeminism, has gotten the reputation of being too rigid of an identity for any one person to truly inhabit. As the Third Wave extends the definition of oppression, everything one does has a larger, political significance – the personal is *always and already* political. The task to make politically informed decisions hundreds of times per day is daunting – and anything less than perfection seems like complete failure. As Rebecca Walker writes in the Introduction of To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism: “For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal

histories” (xxxiii). Kristina Wong dealt with this paralyzing concern as an undergraduate student at UCLA. She found an initial liberation in her Women’s Studies classes, but that freedom was short-lived.

The women’s studies classroom gave me a place where I could redirect my anger and self-hatred – at government, at my culture or lack thereof, at the mass media, and especially the white men and their big oppressive dicks. These were amazing revelations, but instead of feeling empowered, I felt completely helpless [. . .] I realized that my anger was only hurting me and was doing nothing to change the world around me (“Pranks and Fake Porn” 297).

The creation of the Big Bad Chinese Mama website was an important step for Wong, as it was an effort to reconcile those parts of her which were “inappropriate” for feminism. BBCM transitioned Wong from oppression rooted in the impossible ideals of feminism and the inefficacy of academia to open and interactive activism. The foundation for this transition was laid in the classroom of Mimi Nguyen.

The solution to this dilemma came to me through my work with Mimi Nguyen, a Ph.D. candidate in gender studies at UC Berkeley who showed me how to make academia relevant in day-to-day events [. . .] Her writing demolished my stereotype of academics as dry, intimidating readers of ancient books [. . .] With her sassy writing style, Nguyen was able to awaken my interest in academia (“Pranks and Fake Porn” 300).

Nguyen’s websites, as mentioned in the previous chapter, catalogued and centralized Asian feminist resources, thereby setting a precedent of providing a safe space on the Internet for Asian women. Nguyen utilized the technology which was being used to commodify and consume Asian women to empower them. And she did it in a way which melded academia, activism, and irreverent humor. This last ingredient was (and is) very important to Wong. It is in the questioning of feminism and academia, however, that feminism is taking place. As Christine Doza wrote in her piece “Bloodlove” for [Listen Up: Voices from the Next](#)

Feminist Generation, “There’s a system of abuse here. I need to know what part I’m playing in it” (43). It is necessary to recognize both the oppression which is enacted upon us as well as our culpability in enacting oppression upon others, as systems require everyone to participate. Only then can real work for equality take place.

Kristina Wong had to come to terms with the stereotypical perceptions of feminism which she had internalized. Though Wong did not fit into the “hairy armpits and ugly, angry white women” narrative of feminism, she followed the ideologies of feminism.

On one occasion, a student put me on the spot and asked if I thought of myself as a feminist. I explained, “I don’t consider myself so much a feminist as I do an artist who believes that there is political power in the personal voice.” The San Francisco State University professor who was hosting me in her classroom corrected me in front of the class. She explained that that was what feminism is about (“Pranks and Fake Porn” 295).

This was one of many turning points in Wong’s exploration of feminism and activism. She now proudly declares herself a feminist, as she has remade that definition for herself. Wong continues,

Third wave feminism is about embracing individual experience and making personal stories political. First and second wave feminisms sought to empower women as a united front. Although they offered a political voice for women as a whole, they didn’t acknowledge the varying agendas and experiences of individual women. Third wave feminism is a response by women of color and others who felt homogenized by a movement defined by the goals of middle-class, white women (“Pranks and Fake Porn” 295).

Wong also now conceptualizes herself and her work in the multifaceted and complicated history of feminism. By identifying what she wished to continue and what she wished to alter through BBCM, she landed in the middle of the Third Wave.

The Third Wave also seeks to challenge the essentialist and stable identities which the Second Wave accepted and reinforced. Notions of authenticity are replaced by multiplicity and specificity. In Amy Schreifer's "We've Only Just Begun: Translating Third Wave Theory into Third Wave Activism," she writes that: "Third wavers believe that the negotiation and contradiction of our differences is the main concept of modern feminism, requiring us to rethink what our movements and activism look like as well as our meanings of identity and community. This celebration of difference welcomes the influence of feminists of color and queer feminists." Wong, as a rule, practices this tenet of Third Wave feminism as well. "I look at what my work is doing to explore and question words like 'activist,' 'feminist,' 'Asian American'. For me, these are all words that I'm trying to stretch in definition through my work" (Ip).

In "Contests for the Meaning of Third Wave Feminism: Feminism and Popular Consciousness," Ednie Kaeh Garrison writes that

Coming to feminist political consciousness today involves weeding through disjointed, conflicting, and apparently contradictory conversations. This includes contending with the tension between what gets to be establishment feminism in the eyes of the media, subsequent popular consciousness of feminism, and more complex articulations, comprehensions, and practices (often expressed as academic or intellectual and therefore suspect and unrealistic) (194-195).

## ***WONG FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST***

Wong's latest solo performance work is *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*,<sup>10</sup> and is an which explores the alarmingly high rates of depression, mental illness, and suicide among Asian American women. It marks an important shift in Wong's career, as she is now receiving funding which enables her to focus on her performance work. The piece is a 2006 National Performance Network Creation Fund Project and was commissioned by the Asian Arts Initiative and La Peña Cultural Center. Funding for the piece has also been provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, The Ford Foundation, and La Peña's New Works Fund supported by The James Irvine Foundation. It is also a Project of Creative Capital.

Wong's promotional synopsis for the show reads as follows:

Incisive writer and performer Kristina Wong mixes sharp humor and psychology in *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a swear-to-god-not-autobiographical, serio-comic portrayal of the high incidence of anxiety, depression and mental illness among Asian American women. Tangling, spinning, and mixing yarns, she asks: Which came first? The sky-high suicides of Asian American women? The maddening world? And when the heck do we get to climax?

The official poster for the piece is below, along with the original which the title invokes:

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A for a recording of the October 2007 performance of *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* at La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley, California.



Kristina Wong in the poster for her show *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Photo by Diana Toshiko / <toshikophoto.com>.

Jack Nicholson in the original poster for the film "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."



The poster clearly follows in Wong's Culture Jamming tendencies discussed in the last chapter, as she has appropriated established iconography for her own use. It is significant that she does so with humor and that she iconographically takes the place of Jack Nicholson, a revered and hypermasculine actor. In Esther Kim Lee's A History of Asian American Theatre, she identifies the use of humor as a trend among 1990s Asian American theatre artists. "They satirized American culture and laughed at themselves to gain empowerment. Their self-deprecating humor tackled the one stereotype of Asians that had not been addressed: the stereotype of Asians as having no sense of humor" (206). In this poster, Wong has mocked an iconic film and put herself in the position of the "cuckoo" person, thereby mocking both American culture and herself. Wong often achieves this in her other work as well.

The show begins with Wong singing "It's A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," the opening theme of each episode of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," arranging the piles of yarn and unfinished knitting and crocheting, and slipping into her sneakers. She introduces herself and then describes the piece as her "landmark, historic show" ("Wong Flew"). She is careful to stress in the beginning – at the urging of her mother – that the show is not autobiographical. She states in the piece, "I even traced my lineage back three generations into China, and as far as I could tell, there was no mental illness or depression or suicide in the Wong family. In fact, there was no mental illness in China" ("Wong Flew"). Again, we are aware that Wong is mocking the silence and shame surrounding mental illness, as well as the particular silence and shame surrounding mental illness among Chinese and Chinese American individuals. She continues, "So, you're gonna hear me during the show using

words like, ‘I,’ ‘we,’ ‘our.’ This is just my way of personalizing the research I’ve done on other women [who are] outside of the Wong family. It’s like a dramatic device.” Wong is telling us about the distance she has from the subject matter while actually communicating that she has a personal connection with it. She then introduces the “Fiction Game,” where she asks the audience to listen to different scenarios and identify whether or not they are fiction. She begins with a simple claim of a dragon living under her bed and moves on to an elaborate story of a mental breakdown, each time encouraging a response of “Fiction!” from the audience.

Wong then introduces the dramatic arc of fiction on an overhead projector, including exposition, crisis (inciting incident), rising action, climax, denouement, and falling action. She identifies the high rate of depression, mental illness, and suicide among Asian American women as the crisis of this “Dramatic Arc of Fiction.” While writing, she asks: “Why are API [Asian and Pacific Islander] women so depressed and killing themselves? And how is Kristina going to save them all?” (“Wong Flew”). She later broadens the question to encompass additional impossible tasks: “How is Kristina going to portray all the stories of all depressed, mentally ill, suicidal API women in a positive way that does not rely on stereotypes? [. . .] and [. . .] how do I do it and not alienate white people in the audience?” She also adds this to the overhead projector list of tasks for the show. After posing these latter tasks, Wong begins the “Dropped Stitch” section of the show where she attempts to portray all varieties of depressed, mentally ill, and suicidal Asian American women. The given circumstances of characters, including racialized identity, age, and occupation, are projected on a screen. Wong names each one before picking up an

unfinished knitting or crocheting piece from the floor and then improvises a monologue about why that particular woman is depressed. Reasons include the complications of immigration, motherhood, poverty, and body image. The pace of the slides speed up as Wong continually slips between the character's names and her own.

Wong then details her experiences trying to acquire free therapy, as she did not have health insurance. The adventure, spanning many weeks just to get to someone who could determine her eligibility, highlights the inefficacy of mental health care in the United States. Desperate to receive the help that she needs, she becomes increasingly dramatic about her past and current mental state, donning an oversized bra outside of her sweater and smearing lipstick across her face. She approaches her phone interactions with state employees as auditions, dropping her normal speaking voice into a haggard, out of breath moan-speak: "Hi, my name is Kristina Wong and I am here to read for the part of the potential free therapy client" ("Wong Flew"). After finally being assigned a therapist, she spends many more weeks recounting her life story, until her therapist finally decides that a standardized personality test is the next course of action. Wong then projects sample questions from the test and explains the procedure, illuminating how arbitrary and inefficient the test is – as is the therapy available to those without health insurance.

More desperate than ever, Wong turns once again to the "Dramatic Arc of Fiction," only to find that she is still at the crisis. So, she begins looking on the Internet for Asian women who have successfully gotten past a crisis. It ends up that all Wong can find are perfect Asian women who have never encountered a crisis (e.g. newscaster Connie Chung), or women who have endured many crises and are now working in porn (e.g. Annabel

Chong). The Madonna/whore – or “lotus blossom”/”geisha” – binary trope is once again identified, and Wong decides that all who do not fit the perfect, virginal, stereotype or the sexually promiscuous stereotype are depressed, mentally ill, and suicidal. She also realizes that the crisis of this work of fiction can only result in suicide, and then questions her desire to move beyond the crisis at all.

After becoming disillusioned with the “Dramatic Arc of Fiction,” Wong decides to create the “Second Chance Land of Crazyville” with the audience members, and dubs herself the mayor. She dons a military hat, a long vest made of United States Postal Service materials, and glasses so that she will look “authoritative.”



Kristina Wong as the mayor of “Second Chance Land of Crazyville” during a performance of *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Photo by Matty Nematollahi.

There are four villages: The Village of the Normals, The Village of the Depressed, The Village of the Bipolars, and The Village of the Schizophrenic-Paranoid-Insane. Each gets their own chant and have to cheer for potential inhabitants, culminating in an orchestra of moans and greetings conducted by Wong. As she “climaxes” with the rising sound, she has an epiphany and begins to tell us the reason why Asian American women are depressed, mentally ill, and suicidal. Wong is interrupted by a voice over the sound system stating that activity time is over and she has to go back to her room. Wong slowly takes off her Mayor costume and removes her sweater to reveal a hospital gown. She sings “It’s Such a Good Feeling,” (another Mr. Rogers classic) softly as she picks up one unfinished knitting piece and walks slowly offstage, leaving the rest behind. The comical *deus ex machina* demonstrates the pervasiveness and evasiveness of mental illness, depression, and suicide. There are no simple solutions for systemic trends. Also, as dealing with this crisis has caused a personal crisis, Wong demonstrates the need for collective action.

For the set, Wong utilized unfinished knitting and crocheting pieces which were donated by people across the United States. An avid knitter herself, Wong knew many appropriate magazines in which to post her request, which included the following: “The unfinished knitting collected represent incomplete intentions, women’s work, ‘spinning a yarn,’ and loneliness. During the show, Kristina uses the knitting pieces to represent ‘[unraveling]’ women” (“Calling All Knitters and Crocheters!”). Typically, the following picture was placed along with the ad:



Kristina Wong in a promotional photograph for *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Photo by Antonia Kao/ <divine-eye.com>.

During the show, Wong discusses her personal experience with depression. She cites many causes, including the expectations and pressures of being a comedian, prankster, Asian American woman, student, and activist and insufficient support from friends and family. During the piece, Wong states, “Among my friends, I’m like, the funny one, you know? And no one wants to be around me if I’m not funny” (“Wong Flew”). It is almost impossible to get the help that one needs when the expectations of one as a person preclude the ability to show weakness or unhappiness. She also notes that there is a distinct lack of

three-dimensional, well-adjusted Asian female role models who have “made it through the arc.” In the piece, Wong refuses to provide a succinct answer to why a large number of Asian American women are depressed, mentally ill, and/or suicidal. She provides a personal narrative, from which principles may be drawn.

The use of metatheatrical devices throughout the piece confuses the audience’s sense of reality; we are not sure whether our disbelief should be suspended. By distancing the audience with dramatic devices, projections, the “Fiction Game,” etc., she actually re-personalizes and closes the distance between her and her character and her and her subject matter. After stating her concern about alienating white people in the audience, Wong says, “I want this to be the kind of show where you can walk out into the street, approach a strange Asian woman, and say, “Konnichiwa! [. . .] I just saw this show by Kristina Wong and now I know everything there is to know about your people and I feel so empathetic to your plight. I’m so sorry for you.” It is understood that Wong does not desire this action from her audience, but the way in which she makes this all-too-familiar trend strange reveals its preposterousness. She is also poking fun at the idea that any easy solution – even a performance piece – will bridge racialized and ethnic boundaries and solve social crises. Finally, in Wong’s purposeful failure at distancing herself from the material, the crisis of mental illness, suicide, and depression is made specific and emotional.

#### **DENISE UYEHARA’S *HELLO (SEX) KITTY: MAD ASIAN BITCH ON WHEELS***

Denise Uyehara is an Asian American writer, performance artist, and playwright. She was also one of the founding members of the performance collective Sacred Naked

Nature Girls. Her show *Hello (Sex) Kitty: Mad Asian Bitch on Wheels*, her second solo piece, premiered in 1992. The two main characters in the piece are Mad Kabuki Woman and Vegetable Girl, obvious racialized tropes. Esther Kim Lee writes about Uyehara's use of stereotypes in *A History of Asian American Theatre*. Lee discusses Uyehara's parodic embodiment of racialized stereotypes in order to expose them (173). As seen in the first chapter and will be explored in the next, Wong often utilizes this tactic in order to disrupt the processes of racialization. Below is a promotional photo for the piece:



Denise Uyehara with a gun to the head of a Hello Kitty doll.  
Photo by Chuck Stallard.

Uyehara uses her characters' love for a Hello Kitty doll throughout the piece. At the end, she leaves with the doll and sings "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes," a song from Disney's "Sleeping Beauty." This end is similar to the framing of *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's*

*Nest*, which uses songs from the “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” children’s television show. Both Wong and Uyehara are mentioned in the book *Hello Kitty: The Remarkable Story of Sanrio and the Billion Dollar Feline Phenomenon*, a book written by two businessmen. Wong is in the book because of her use of Hello Kitty iconography in her BBCM website. The artists are included in the chapter titled, “Defiling Hello Kitty” and surround the patronizing heading, “Angry Asian Girls.” Ken Belson and Brian Bremner, the authors, write that “[like] Uyehara, Wong wants to take a wrecking ball to stereotypical images omnipresent in Western mass media” (146). They argue that one reason for anti-Hello Kitty sentiment is that the cartoon cat represents a “‘cute’ value system” (145). Hello Kitty is emblematic of a “lotus blossom,” quiet (as she has no mouth), feminine, petite, and eternally cute.

Uyehara is tied to Third Wave feminism, as intersectionality is inherent in her world view and her work. In “Notes on *Hello (Sex) Kitty*,” she writes about a Korean American audience member’s reaction to her show. “[He] noticed that ‘the only thing Asian’ in my show was about the tea ceremony [. . .] He wanted to know, ‘Where is the Asian-ness?’ Well, isn’t domestic violence an Asian issue? Isn’t being bisexual an Asian issue?” (379). Uyehara does not see her identity as a woman separate from her identity as bisexual or Asian. In fact, the two inform and shape one another. This is echoed in the script: “The community says, there is no violence in our house. / So what’s it going to be? [Are] you a feminist or a person of color? / But what if I’m a woman?” (399). Similar to Wong, Uyehara is enacting a politics of Consciousness Raising about issues which she believes are not discussed within the Asian community. This intersectional world view also

affects how Uyehara conceptualizes her identity. Lee continues in her analysis of Uyehara's work that Uyehara practices a "borderless identity," meaning that she exists within a historical trajectory. Her identity is not a fixed and closed space in time, but is collectively created and constituted (Esther Kim Lee 171, 175). Certainly, Uyehara fosters *and over either/or*, as Alice Walker encourages (xxxv).

Performance art is particularly suited to multiplicity. This is a central tenet of Meiling Cheng's *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art*. She writes: "[the] artist/self relinquishes certain control over the performative action in exchange for incarnated engagements with the viewer/other [. . .] performance art actually supplies a constitutive instance of multicentricity, because the artist's authorship or centrality has become conceptually dispersed and shared among many" (xxv-xxvi). As the artist intentionally disregards those conventions which serve to remove the audience from the meaning making process, the creators of the piece encompass all those present. The center which the original artist holds is presented to the many, and therefore, becomes something entirely different for each member. Meaning and centers have multiplied in this process of expression – hence, becoming multicentric.

Uyehara is also engrossed in the Third Wave focus on the personal narrative. As she continues in her "Notes on Hello (Sex) Kitty": "I say, write what comes from your heart, not what the public dictates [. . .] I need to create from my own vision" (379). She does not allow pressure from one facet of her identity to control her content, as this would not be truly reflective of her experience. Esther Kim Lee notes a trend in Asian American solo performance toward personal narratives in her survey. "Often written, directed, and

produced by performers themselves, Asian American solo performances have brought a heightened sense of truth” (156). This truth is also sought in Third Wave feminism, and so, these communities share this goal and tactic. RoseLee Goldberg argues that this trend is common among the performance art community in her survey Performance Art: From Futurism to Present, as does Meiling Cheng (153-154). Cheng describes the trend as multicentric performance art: “Despite their diversity, multicentric self performances consistently resort to this triple legacy from *Loneliness* [an early piece by Guillermo Gómez-Peña], employing the artist/author as the performer, the artist's autobiography as the primary text, and the artist's interface with a live audience as the performance context” (182). These trends in performance art coincide with methodologies and concepts in Third Wave feminism, the work of Denise Uyehara, and the work of Kristina Wong.

### **HOW IS KRISTINA WONG GOING TO SAVE THEM ALL?**

The task which Wong takes on during *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is to save all Asian women from suicide, mental illness, and depression. Humor must be integral to Wong's concept of effective activism. When performing *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Wong asks all Asian artists in the audience to clap so that they may be recognized by the rest of the audience. After this, Wong then singles out one such member of the audience and states, “I have been working on this topic of mental illness for about a year now, so I just ask that you stay off my topic. I found it first. White people have a really hard time telling us apart. If we start doing shows on similar things . . . Just stay away from my grants” (“Wong Flew”). With tongue planted firmly in cheek, Wong makes the audience aware of how

artists – specifically artists of color – are labeled and pigeon-holed. The reality of making a living doing activist art is expressed, and territorialism and division among activists and artists is parodied.

Another important tenet of Wong's methodology follows in the Second Wave tradition of consciousness raising (CR), which was codified and commonly practiced during the late 1960s in the United States. During the Second Wave, CR groups were used to distribute information about sexism, birth control, and more. In the groups, women shared personal stories which helped to demonstrate the universality of sex-based oppression, thereby uniting those present in the cause. Similarly, the Third Wave indulges in the idiosyncrasies and uniqueness of women's stories to demonstrate the interconnectedness of oppressions. Though CR groups are not as formally prevalent in Third Wave, the methodology remains – though without the goal of uniting in a collective, universal, and problematic “we.” This is because – as Rory Dickerson and Alison Piepmeier posit in Catching a Wave – “the third wave operates from the assumption that identity is multifaceted and layered” (10). In *Wong flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Wong utilizes her personal experiences of depression to explore the larger issue of the high rates of depression, mental illness, and suicide among Asian American women. Her specific story knitted with the stories of other Asian women demonstrate the interconnectedness of oppression. Her expression has a CR effect on audiences, though the audience is more heterogenous than Second Wave CR groups. “When Wong first began performing the piece at colleges, members from audiences would share their own experiences with her. Many of these experiences dealt with traumatic subjects such as molestation and divorce.

Wong now requests that members of campus psychological services be present at shows.” So, the CR effect, though desired, could be dangerous when bringing up potentially painful and traumatic memories and experiences. The specific subject matter of the show further problematizes their invocation. As Wong is not a trained mental health professional, the aftermath of her show was more than she could ethically handle. However, she has remedied that situation so that the CR still takes place in a safe environment.

Mimi Nguyen writes that “We have to conceive of our feminist politics as embodied and personal, but also strategically responsible and critically, importantly public. After all, at some point in both love and politics, a girl has to take a few risks.” In *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Wong has made the personal public in order to foster critical engagement with an important issue. She has taken risks – even against the advice of her mother – on the basis of her feminist politics and love for her fellow humans. For this issue in particular, silence has been the problem and is, in fact, taking lives. So, being public is the central shift which can take place and is literally a matter of life and death.

In *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Kristina Wong reclaims knitting and crocheting, two stereotypically “feminine” activities which are often disparaged as such. This reclamation of a solitary, feminine activity mirrors the blurring of public and private in the Second Wave and the “kitchen table” politics tradition of Cherríe Moraga’s 1983 collection *This Bridge Called My Back*. Wong seeks to disrupt commodification and oppression in a different way – not through denouncing all things “feminine,” but through unapologetic (and sometimes irreverent) resignification. She and other Third Wave feminists seek a feminism “that allow[s] women to retain their culture, to have pride in their traditions and

to still vocalize the gender issues of their community” (Darraj 301). Feminism, in its most recent “wave,” has gained both breadth and height as it has built upon its predecessors and combined with allied activist movements. Alice Walker encourages feminists to “[accept] contradiction and ambiguity, [to use] *and* much more than we use *either/or*” (xxxv).

Kristina Wong is one of many helping to push these waves in new directions as she creates work dealing with intersectionality, explorations of the specificity of personal experience, and an inclusive definition of oppression.

### **Chapter Three: CULTURE JAMMING IN CHINATOWN**

*“I want to leave people with that raw nerve.”*

*- Kristina Wong in “The Princess and the Prankster”*

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Kristina Wong’s political motivations and tactics, specifically with her guerilla character Fannie Wong: Former Miss Chinatown Second Runner Up, closely follow the Culture Jamming tradition, disrupting racialized stereotypes instead of advertising. In this chapter, I will explore the practices of Culture Jamming with a focus on the use of interventional détournments. I will then relate this to Tseng Kwong Chi’s *East Meets West* series, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s character, *El Mexterminator*.

#### **CRASHING THE PARTY: FANNIE WONG, FORMER MISS CHINATOWN SECOND RUNNER UP**

One of Wong’s best-known guerilla theatre characters is that of Fannie Wong, also known as Former Miss Chinatown, Second Runner Up.<sup>11</sup> For her costume, Wong wears a slim satin qipao (or cheongsam), elbow-length white gloves, and a Miss Chinatown sash along with a cheap tiara and horn-rimmed glasses. Her props include a cigar and a bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey. Fannie displays none of the fetishized characteristics of Asian women (i.e. demure, polite, etc.). In Josephine Lee’s Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage, she discusses “the objectification of Asian women

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<sup>11</sup> “Fannie Wong, Miss Chinatown Second Runner Up” is also the title of one of Wong’s solo shows. However, for the purposes of this section, I am focusing solely on her use of this persona in improvisations while showing up uninvited to official Miss Chinatown events.

through [. . .] stereotypes of evil seductresses, ‘dragon ladies,’ geishas, or frail lotus blossoms” (11). Quite contrary to these latter two categories, Fannie Wong is brass, crass, and intent on building and enjoying her celebrity status. The following image is from Wong’s promotional materials available on her website.



Kristina Wong, as the character Fannie Wong, Miss Chinatown Second Runner Up, pictured here having a true celebrity moment in her bathroom. Photo by C. Pete Lee.

As Wong states in the documentary Yours Truly, Miss Chinatown, Fannie does not look like an actual Miss Chinatown. She remembers the pressure while growing up to be like a Miss Chinatown – “a perfect blend of East and West,” beautiful, articulate, intelligent, proper, demure, etc., and characterizes Fannie as “who [she] would have been had [she] ever run for the Miss Chinatown pageant.” From the picture above, it is clear that Wong

has no interest in fulfilling the racialized archetype of Miss Chinatown. Her pimples do not fit the fetishized clear and silky Asian skin, her smoking and drinking (of such specifically masculine items like a cigar and hard liquor) do not fit the allowed behaviors for a “good” Asian woman, and her middle finger certainly does not fit the ambassador role which Miss Chinatown is expected to fulfill.

As Fannie, Wong crashes official Miss Chinatown events or hosts nights at the theatre, “[taking] advantage of all the ‘perks’ of being a self-made community celebrity-- shaking hands, taking pictures, and signing autographs” (Kristina Sheryl Wong).

Wong/Fannie is often forcibly removed by security at Miss Chinatown events, but not before causing some trouble and occasionally getting her picture taken with actual Miss Chinatowns, as pictured below.



Kristina Wong, as the character Fannie Wong, Miss Chinatown Second Runner Up, pictured here at an official Miss Chinatown event with actual Miss Chinatowns. Video stills from video by Steve Wong.

Wong also posed as the character for a postcard series by visual artist Steven Wong, as seen below.



Kristina Wong as featured on a postcard series by artist Steven Wong.

This postcard demonstrates another level of notoriety and infamy for Fannie, but also comments upon notions of authenticity. By placing Wong/Fannie in front of a building in Chinatown which has identifiably Chinese architecture, her parody of inherent, racialized beauty ideals casts doubt upon the authenticity of the building and the area in general. Her enthusiastic failure to fit the standards of Chinatown and Asian American-ness destabilizes the need to comply; her intentional performance reveals all other racialized performances to also be constructed, intentional acts.

## HOW DOES ONE “JAM” CULTURE?

In Mark Dery’s survey of Culture Jamming, he states that the term was first used by the college band “Negativland” to describe their efforts of media sabotage (“Culture Jamming”). Generally, the practice is thought to include “parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages,” as journalist Naomi Klein wrote in her seminal text No Logo (280). The impetus for the act is the proliferation of advertisements and the monolithic status of media and expression. As Klein continues, “Streets are public spaces, adbusters argue, and since most residents can’t afford to counter corporate messages by purchasing their own ads, they should have the right to talk back to images they never asked to see” (280). Definitions of performance art are similarly based on broad trends and/or characteristics and a fairly universal discontent with the current state of the world and of theatre. The Situationists, a group of activist artist/writer/thinkers active in Europe during the 1960s, fit into a similar progeny. Kalle Lasn, the founder of Adbusters Magazine<sup>12</sup> and the author of Culture Jam, traces this history:

The punks, like the hippies, yippies, beats, anarchists, Dadaists, surrealists, automatistes, fluxists, and any number of other disaffected visionaries, represented an age-old spirit of spontaneous defiance toward the established order. But it was the Situationists who first applied that spirit of anarchy to modern media culture. They were the first to understand how the media spectacle slowly corrodes the human psyche. They were, in a sense, the first postmodern revolutionaries (100).

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<sup>12</sup> Kalle Lasn and Adbusters Magazine have been criticized for their tactics. One issue is the heavy-handed morality of the “subvertisements,” which some characterize as harmfully patronizing. Another concern is Lasn’s appropriation of the movement and the branding of it with the magazine, their products, etc., thereby violating the tenets of the movement.

Kristina Wong's work – specifically Fannie Wong – follows many of the main tenets of the Situationists, and hence, those of Culture Jamming.<sup>13</sup> “Culture jamming is, at root, just a metaphor for stopping the flow of spectacle long enough to adjust your set. Stopping the flow relies on the element of surprise” (Lasn 107). Hence, effective Culture Jamming must happen within the realm of that which it seeks to disrupt – on television, on a billboard, on corporations' websites, at stores, or in Fannie's case, at official Miss Chinatown events. It is an ideological – and often physical – intervention.

One noteworthy Culture Jamming group which directly implements the “theatre of everyday life” is Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping. The following are images from two of their protest events. The first took place in Times Square in New York, and the second if from an anti-Wal-Mart demonstration. They can be found on the group's website at <<http://www.revbilly.com/index.php>>.

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<sup>13</sup> Situationist theory has been adapted by many Culture Jammers and bears some significant differences from its progenitor, just as Situationist theory bears significant differences from its progenitors (Existentialism, Dadaism, etc.).



Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping preaching in front of the Stop Eviction Gospel Choir.



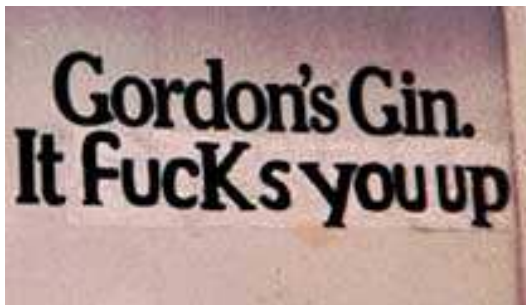
The Reverend preaching in front of members of the Church of Stop Shopping at a protest in front of Wal-Mart.

The Reverend Billy is a character developed to resemble fundamentalist “fire and brimstone” preachers. Bill Talen, who plays the role of the Reverend, began this theatrical intervention to protest Disney for its use of sweatshop labor for its wares. As captured in the documentary CultureJam, he would enter Disney stores with a Mickey Mouse stuffed doll taped to a wooden cross and preach the evils of the company’s unfair labor practices until forced (often by police) to leave. The enemies of the Church of Stop Shopping have since grown to include consumerism, debt, corporatization, Starbucks, gentrification, and more. His interventions have generated a following, now complete with a congregation, the Stop Eviction Gospel Choir, and the Not Buying It Band. The work of the Church of Stop Shopping would be characterized as the preferable methodology for Klein: “At its best, culture jamming homes in on the flip side of those branded emotions, and refocuses them, so that they aren’t replaced with a craving for the next fashion or pop sensation but turn, slowly, on the process of branding itself (288). It is this intentionality of meaning which separates the Culture Jammers from the Situationists and Dadaists, who aimed to act on impulse and without planning.

Another prominent Culture Jamming group is the Billboard Liberation Front (BLF). This first photo is of the BLF, followed by two examples of billboards which the group has “liberated” (i.e. altered) for their “clients” (i.e. the companies whose billboards they alter, in these cases, Gordon’s Gin and Apple). All three are from the group’s website, available at <http://www.billboardliberation.com/>.



A photo of the members of the Board Liberation Front donning disguises typical of their style.



Examples of the Board Liberation Front's Culture Jamming.

The BLF has a strong belief that humor is an essential element to Culture Jamming, as is evident by their disguises and flippant revisions of billboards. As Jack Napier (a pseudonym), Founder and Chair Emeritus of the BLF stated, “They win if you’ve got a stick up your butt” ([CultureJam](#)). The importance of humor, and playfulness in particular, is also legacy of Culture Jamming’s progenitors, Dada and the Situationists. As seriousness is key to the maintenance of a monolithic mass media, humor is a potent weapon. Mark Dery

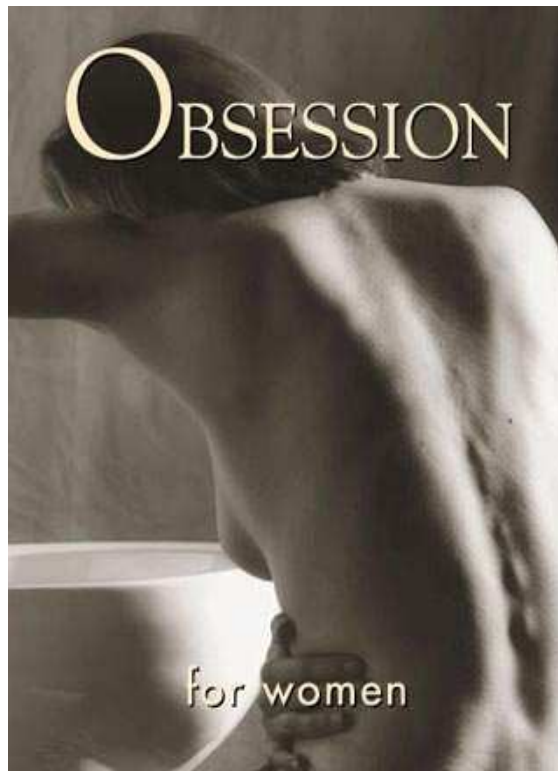
continues in his study that “culture jammers are Groucho Marxists, ever mindful of the fun to be had in the joyful demolition of oppressive ideologies” (“Culture Jamming”). This humor is exercised by Kristina Wong in much of her work, as well as the works of Tseng Kwong Chi and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, as will be addressed later.

The BLF is also dedicated to the activity of reclaiming public space, for as Napier stated in the documentary CultureJam, “There is no free speech anymore. It’s all bought and paid for.” The BLF targets billboards because they believe that billboards are a populist medium and should be considered common property (CultureJam). Therefore, corporations’ use of them is a violation of the rights of the public. Unlike the Church of Stop Shopping, they do not necessarily seek to preach a message about the evils of the products being sold; more important to the BLF than a particular message is to disrupt the seamless flow of corporate advertising.

## **DÉTOURN-ING TO SUBVERT**

The Situationists’ theory of subversion included the creation of “a perspective-jarring turnabout in your everyday life” (Lasn xvii). This was a way to take control of the spectacle, or commercialism, which both groups believe has kidnapped our lives. “Literally a ‘turning around,’ *détournment* involved rerouting spectacular images, environments, ambiances and events to reverse or subvert their meaning, thus reclaiming them” (emphasis in the original, Lasn 103). There are two important elements in a *détournment*: 1) the use of codified, recognizable imagery and 2) noticeably changing this imagery while keeping it connected to its original source. The following are two *détournments* of well-known

advertising campaigns in the United States. They were created by self-proclaimed Culture Jammers at the Adbusters Media Corporation. The first uses the Calvin Klein advertisements for the scent Obsession as its base. The Adbuster version is followed by an original from the advertising campaign.



An Adbusters Media Corporation Culture Jam of Calvin Klein's Obsession advertising campaign.

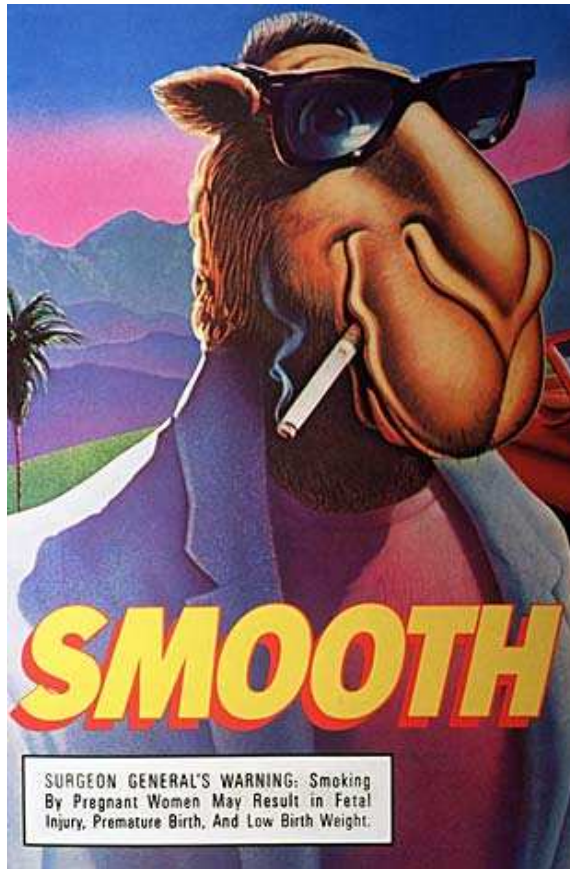


One of the original pieces from the Calvin Klein Obsession advertising campaign.

This next Adbuster “subvertisement” takes on the tobacco company Camel. Again, the Adbuster version is followed by an original from the Camel ad campaign.



An Adbusters Media Corporation Culture Jam of Camel cigarettes’ advertising campaign, including their spokesperson, Joe Camel.



An original from one of Camel cigarettes' advertising campaigns.

Both subvertisements seek to utilize the visual aesthetic of the original ads to communicate an underlying truth about the product being (indirectly or directly) sold. The similarity between these advertisements and Fannie Wong are clear. Wong also used Culture Jamming tactics in her poster for *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, as seen in Chapter 2. She commonly uses this tactic when naming her shows and characters (i.e. Fannie Wong: Miss Chinatown Second Runner Up, *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Mildred Fong: Import Supermodel, Kero Kero Pi: An Experiment in Asian Sisterhood – complete with Sanrio

cartoon Keroppi and “pi” symbol logo, and *Miss Saigon with the Wind*.) The differences are clearer when each is put each next to the iconography which it is meant to mock.

However, as we are saturated with commercial iconography and images of racialized beauty, this comparison is not necessary for the viewer to understand what it being invoked. Our expectation of the image is disrupted when we see how it does not fit our concept of the company, product, or ideal. “A well-produced print ‘subvertisement’ mimics the look and feel of the target ad, prompting the classic double take as viewers realize what they’re seeing is in fact the very opposite of what they expected” (Lasn 131). This tactic, in effect, *détourns* the metanarrative or stereotype, be it beauty or the coolness attained through smoking (Lasn 132). Similarly, Fannie Wong, Miss Chinatown Second Runner Up “uncools” the “authentic” Miss Chinatown by invoking the visual signifiers of Miss Chinatown (i.e. her dress, tiara, gloves, and sash) but is communicating the opposite of that which Miss Chinatown is supposed to embody (i.e. unkemptness, brashness, drunkenness, etc.). The Miss Chinatown pageant is an advertisement factory for the confluence of proper heteronormative gender performance and proper performance of race and ethnicity.<sup>14</sup>

The Situationists attempted to embody a spirit of openness and playfulness in their everyday lives. They wanted to live outside the influence of commercial culture, and did so

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<sup>14</sup> In fact, the pageant was created during a time of heightened anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States to provide a non-threatening counternarrative. For a more information about the history of the Miss Chinatown Pageant, see Judy Tzu-Chun Wu’s “‘Loveliest Daughter of Our Ancient Cathay!’: Representations of Ethnic and Gender Identity in the Miss Chinatown U.S.A. Beauty Pageant.”

through both avoidance<sup>15</sup> and subversive engagement with it. “To the Situationists, you are – everyone is – a creator of situations, a performance artist, and the performance, of course, is your life, lived in your own way” (Lasn 101). The goal was openness and the creative expression of everyday people. It was believed that we had two options: to act genuinely (preferred) or to act as we are told (i.e. how we are conditioned). Situationists said that genuineness had been “kidnapped” by the spectacle of society, and so, the goal was to devalue spectacle in order to attain genuineness (Lasn 101-103).

Importantly, it is believed that ordinary people have the tools for this revolution, as it depends on a perceptual shift (Lasn 109). This can be traced back through Culture Jamming’s predecessors, through the Situationists to the Dadaists. As David Darts wrote in his article, “Visual Culture Jam: Art, Pedagogy, and Creative Resistance”:

Dada artists [. . .] embraced counter-aesthetic imagery and modern techniques like photomontage, which easily facilitated the creation of satirical forms of visual representation and which, because it didn’t require special skills to create, resisted the privileged status of the artist as trained professional (320).

This is emblematic of the Culture Jamming desire for populist control and freedom of speech. Money and political influence should not be prerequisites for expression, just as a lack of conservatory training should not preclude artistic expression. As Naomi Klein observed, Culture Jamming has become increasingly technological, as both the tactics and venues have changed (285). However, two schools of thought have emerged about the use of high-tech (and therefore not commonly accessible) methods in Culture Jamming: one

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<sup>15</sup> One common activity in which the Situationists engaged was the *dérive*, or “drift.” Also a tactic of the Dadaists, it consisted of walking through the streets without a goal, but with an open mind in order to more fully experience life. This fulfilled the goal of entertainment which was not pre-packaged or sold (Lasn 102-103).

encourages the use of graffiti-style interventions (i.e. spray paint, permanent markers, stickers, etc.), and the other argues for the appropriation of the aesthetic of the original. This latter technique does limit the number of possible participants, but has a goal of borrowing visual legitimacy from advertising. As we are submerged in a world of slick, highly constructed imagery, anything less may inherently read as less legitimate (Klein 285).

Fannie Wong is an example of Culture Jamming, and easily fits into the tradition of détournments. If the word “advertisement” is replaced with “stereotype,” Wong, as Fannie, jams the stereotype of Asian women and beauty. Indeed, Miss Chinatown Pageants are an advertisement for appropriate racialization, gender, class, and sexuality. David Darts continues his analysis of Culture Jamming to say that:

In a commercial-dominated world society in which “culture” is often defined simply as a set of objects, images, and artifacts to be purchased and amassed, participating in individual and community-based forms of cultural production and resistance is seen by culture jammers as an essential component of responsible democratic engagement with the ideology of the everyday (322).

Kristina Wong exposes the absurdity of the equation of culture with objects and images by utilizing them “incorrectly.” Though Fannie does exhibit many characteristics of Miss Chinatown, as she is popularly conceptualized, she is intentionally unsuccessful at achieving the status of Miss Chinatown. The equation of the characteristics (objects and image) with culture is broken by this subversive embodiment. Wong, as Fannie, is exercising responsible engagement with stereotypes which are placed on her body and life.

This is an excerpt from the “Culture Jammer’s Manifesto” as published in Culture Jam:

We will take on the  
archetypal mind polluters  
and beat them at their  
own game.

We will uncool their  
billion-dollar brands  
with uncommercials  
on TV, subvertisements  
in magazines and anti-ads  
*right next to theirs* in  
the urban landscape (my emphasis, Lasn 126).

Wong's alteration of the revered and desired Miss Chinatown "uncools" Miss Chinatown's status. It is precisely her situating herself as Fannie right next to the "authentic" Miss Chinatown(s) which adds potency to her "subvertisement." By also parodying celebrity and the ways in which we both worship and give lenience to those who have it, Wong is able to "beat them at their own game." She can pretend to be as famous and loved as the "real" Miss Chinatown, thereby taking the power for herself. By doing so when visually not fulfilling the expectations of Miss Chinatown, Wong reveals the artificiality of the entire exercise. The following images show Fannie Wong with an "authentic" Miss Chinatown.



Kristina Wong, as the character Fannie Wong, Miss Chinatown Second Runner Up, in more pictures with an actual Miss Chinatown. Video stills from video by Steve Wong.

There is particular power in the juxtaposition of “jammed” ads with their original sources; likewise, there is added impact when witnessing Fannie Wong with Miss Chinatown, as she makes a mockery of the entire charade. As Josephine Lee wrote in Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage, “[the] unsettling presence of the Other it supposedly represents has the potential to disrupt the stereotype as the partial representation that mocks its own attempts to imitate” (109). Her presence at these events throws the legitimacy of the entire practice into question, which explains her forced removal from them. “One high-profile culture jam arrived in the fall of 1997 when the New York antitobacco lobby purchased hundreds of rooftop taxi ads to hawk “Virginia Scum” and “Cancer Country” brand cigarettes. All over Manhattan, as yellow cabs got stuck in gridlock, the jammed ads jostled with the real ones,” (Klein 285). The antitobacco lobby did not need to purchase *all* rooftop ads, as the inevitable mixture of original and jammed ads would subvert the legitimacy of all original tobacco ads. As Craig Baldwin, veteran Culture Jammer and filmmaker stated, the goal is not simple obliteration or negation, but to change the general consciousness (CultureJam). This requires a complex engagement with the original image or advertisement, one akin to disidentification, which was discussed in the first chapter.

## TSENG KWONG CHI'S *EAST MEETS WEST*

From the years 1979 to 1988, artist Tseng Kwong Chi<sup>16</sup> created pieces of his series *East Meets West*<sup>17</sup>, taking photographs of himself in what he called his “Mao suit”<sup>18</sup> at popular tourist sites. While the series may seem to be simple portraits, they are actually highly constructed events. As Dan Bacalzo proposes in “Portraits of Self and Other: *SlutForArt*”<sup>19</sup> and the Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi,” these portraits are not of Tseng the person. Rather, “they are portraits of a persona created by Tseng as an art object that resonates with the representational history of Asian Americans. This persona is specifically an ‘Other,’ a product of the colonial perception of non-Western peoples as strange and different from their perceptions of themselves” (74). Tseng has commented on his conscious objectification. A clear manifestation of this was the pair of reflective sunglasses which he wore with his costume (Chong 124). Like Kristina Wong’s character Fannie, Tseng uses the racialized identity of his body in concert with charged costume pieces to directly address stereotypes.

One moment of particular interest is when Tseng covered the opening reception of “The Manchu Dragon,” an exhibition of Ch’ing Dynasty costumes at the Metropolitan Museum, for the *SOHO Weekly News*. Tseng wore his “Mao” outfit for the event, and many

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<sup>16</sup> He used the name Joseph Tseng until 1978, when he began using his Chinese name in the customary order with his family name first (Bacalzo 81).

<sup>17</sup> Later incarnations of the series became more focused on natural tourist sites and landscapes and were called the *Expeditionary Series*.

<sup>18</sup> The suit, which Tseng purchased at a thrift store in Montreal, is not actually from the Mao era, but much earlier. It is significant that that detail was not noticed at the time; when on his body, it evoked Mao Tse-Tung.

<sup>19</sup> “Slutforart” was the name on the visitor’s badge which Tseng wore for this series. After he died in 1990 of AIDS related causes, his sister, choreographer Muna Tseng, used this as the title for the second of two pieces she did in his memory.

party attendees wore Asian-esque outfits. As Grady T. Turner wrote of the event in “The Accidental Ambassador:”

As the rich and famous arrived, Tseng invited them to pause for photographs and take part in brief conversations which he recorded. Among those snapped posing with Tseng were Henry Kissinger, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Yves Saint Laurent, who commended Tseng for his fluency in French and asked if he had served in the Chinese embassy in Paris.

Many besides Saint-Laurent assumed Tseng to be an official from China when he was in costume, and Tseng exploited this trend. Like his costume, his creation process for the portraits was also highly theatrical. “The theatrical quality of Tseng’s photographs is underscored by the staging of his photographic shooting as a performance. While on his shoots, Tseng needed to remain in character” (Bacalzo 80). The persona in his photographs had a reality beyond the captured images, which is why they are powerful in the first place. The stereotypes and ideologies which fix Asians as “Other” are both the inspiration for and the context within which they are read. “Tseng used the persona of an anonymous visiting Chinese government functionary to create an oeuvre that explored and exploited Western stereotypes of Asians” (Turner 81). His stereotypical costume further “Othered” his already “Other” body, thereby causing the assumption of Tseng as a Chinese official.

In Karen Shimakawa’s book National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage, she spends a chapter exploring applications of mimetic abjection and abject mimicry. “If Asian Americanness is intelligible only as abject, might some insubordinate ‘playing with mimesis’ offer Asian Americans some way to deauthorize that process of exclusion?” (104). Kristina Wong, Tseng Kwong Chi, and, as will be addressed shortly, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, utilize stereotypes in their work in direct, political, and playful ways. The

intentionality of the invocation is an essential aspect of these artists' work. In Dan Bacalzo's *Portraits of Self and Other: Slutforart and the Photographs of Tseng Kwong Chi,* he observed that "Tseng's photographs seem self-consciously constructed to make the viewer aware of both the artist and the way the artist is representing himself. This critical edge opens up the work to further interrogation of the history of Asian American representation" (77). The audience's knowledge of the artists' intentional use is a way to signal the need for critical engagement.

To demonstrate further how Tseng achieves this, the following is a work from *East Meets West*.



This is one piece from Tseng's series, *East Meets West*.

Compare Tseng's image with an example of the typical tourist snapshot at the Hollywood sign, as seen below:



A tourist capturing his travels with typical site-specific photographs next to monuments. This picture can be found online at <http://www.notesfromhollywood.com/page.cfm?Sectionid=1&typeofsite=storydetail&ID=1268>.

Both Tseng's and the tourist's photographs are obviously staged; however, Tseng's photograph has another level of consciousness. First of all, the assumed photographer of the tourist's portrait is not present in Tseng's, as indicated by the shutter release in his foregrounded hand. Instead of a shared moment between companions, Tseng appears to be simply going through the motions of tourist duties. Next, the focus of the individual being photographed is very different; while the tourist smiles widely at the camera, Tseng's eyes are blocked by his sunglasses and his gaze is neutral and focused somewhere to the side of the camera. We can sense the same strategic "failure" to fulfill the role of tourist which Wong performs as the character Fannie. In the context of the title of the series, the contrast between East and West becomes a theme. As Bacalzo states, "Tseng's presence is at odds with the tourist site," just as Fannie is at odds with the official Miss Chinatown

surroundings (89). The following is Tseng's portrait with the Statue of Liberty, which is considered the most popular and recognizable of his works (Balcazo 74).



This is another piece from Tseng's series, *East Meets West*.

In his analysis of the work, Dan Balcazo emphasizes the lack of scale, making Tseng appear larger than Lady Liberty, Tseng's neutral expression, and the overt placement of the trigger release in the foreground (73). Tseng's piece clearly reflects the aesthetic of a postcard, as was his goal. "He spent a considerable amount of time looking at postcards and browsing through gift shops, finding the angle of vision that appeared to most tourists" (Balcazo 90).

An example of this is seen below:



This is a photograph of an actual Statue of Liberty postcard. It can be found online at <[www.soultones.com/pc\\_newyork.html](http://www.soultones.com/pc_newyork.html)>.

The similarity in viewpoint, contrast, and sky texture is clear. Tseng did not necessarily see this particular postcard and seek to reproduce it, but this does illustrate the tourist gaze which he sought to reproduce in his work.

### **GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA'S *EL MEXTERMINATOR***

Guillermo Gómez-Peña is an internationally renowned and prolific performance artist and writer. One of his first and most resilient performance art personas which he created is *El Mexterminator*, which has appeared in installations, performances, and interactive displays. In his survey of alternative American (United States) theatre, Robert

Shank wrote that “[the] concept of cultural hybrids and ethnographic dioramas are the bases of his most extensive work, *The Mexterminator*, created in collaboration with Roberto Sifuentes. This interactive installation, incorporating video, poetry, and computer art, also plays on the fear of the other -- especially the Mexican immigrant” (247). Gómez-Peña is pictured below as *El Mexterminator*.



Guillermo Gómez-Peña as the character *El Mexterminator*.

In Lisa Wolford’s introduction to Gómez-Peña’s entry in *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century*, she wrote that “[his] performances alternately deploy and destabilize familiar images of the ‘rrrrroomantic Mexican’ as seen

on picture postcards and in tourist brochures” (277). There is a similar “postcard” quality to the Fannie Wong character and Tseng Kwong Chi’s series. All three artists are clearly quoting racialized archetypes in their work.

Like Wong, Gómez-Peña is concerned about the efficacy and applicability of his activism. Shank continues, “*Mexterminator* is part of a long-term project that Gómez-Peña says is ‘to make relentlessly experimental but accessible art; to work in politically and emotionally charged sites, and for diverse audiences; and to collaborate across racial, gender, and sex boundaries as a gesture of citizen-diplomacy’” (250). Their tendency to utilize iconic imagery is therefore both prevalent and understandable. For *El Mexterminator*, Fannie Wong, and Tseng’s *Accidental Ambassador*, the viewer begins with a recognition of the racialized stereotypes of the artists before focusing on the details of their embodiments, which do not follow stereotypical or prescribed avenues. Gómez-Peña also views the challenging of these metanarratives as a patriotic act which fulfills the full spectrum of our rights to the means of reproduction and meaning making. This assumes, as do the Culture Jammers, that these are inalienable rights of the people.

In his book *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back*, Guillermo Gómez-Peña enumerates “The Activist Commandments of the New Millennium.” Commandment number seven reads, “Confront the oppressive and narrow minded tendencies in your own ethnic or gender based communities with valor and generosity” (93). Gómez-Peña seeks to specifically address racialized, intersectional oppressions and stereotypes, as does Kristina Wong. Neither artist perceives homophobia, sexism, or classism as functioning separately from their racialized identity, nor do they only experience these oppressions from those

outside of their racialized group. The “blame” for such stereotypes does not fit solely with the oppressor; for true change to take place, these stereotypes must be addressed at every level of their enforcement.

I would characterize crashing Miss Chinatown events dressed as Fannie and acting like a celebrity an act of both valor and generosity, as Wong provides the opportunity for laughter and enjoyment through her bold activism. In a study of another of Gómez-Peña’s pieces, *Loneliness*, Meiling Cheng wrote that “Gómez-Peña’s tactic [. . .] resembles the personal/political strategy introduced by feminist performance. Effacing the border between the public and private, the artist stages a happening that flagrantly disrupts the routine paths of random viewers” (179). As we saw with BBCM and *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Wong does not make clear distinctions between herself and her art, or between her personal life and her activism. Wong has pursued many avenues in both her public and private lives which follow this trend. For example, Wong recently did not buy any new items for a one-year period, save for essential items. She also drives a car which has been converted to run on vegetable oil, and is planning to be transient for one year in the near future.

Number eight on Gómez-Peña’s “Activist Commandments” reads, “Sit at the table with your true enemies (if you can, of course). Talk to them. Be polite but firm with them - it’s painful, but necessary” (93). As we saw with BBCM, we also see with Fannie Wong. She does not keep her arguments against the ways in which society functions safely within the walls of a theatre or a university; rather, she takes her protest directly to the oppressor. This tactic is more difficult to maintain, but the results are much closer to the intended

effect. As Paolo Friere argues in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, when a power differential is being questioned, those with the power have no reason to participate in acts which seek to change the current patterns (29). The oppressor does not often choose to attend, and so, interventional tactics become necessary.

### **CHANGING THE WORLD, ONE CIGAR AT A TIME**

Fannie Wong takes on Freirean “sub-oppressors” who, in their efforts to access power, reproduce those systems which keep them from accessing power. “This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of ‘adhesion’ to be oppressor” (30). By subverting the Miss Chinatown pageant, Wong disrupts the ways in which Chinese women are fetishized and oppressed by racialized beauty within and by their own communities. These ideals of racialized beauty, however, are not enacted solely by those outside of one’s own racialized identity; in fact, in this case, it is those in the very same community (sub-oppressors) which are enforcing this ideal.

Greil Marcus, an American author, music journalist and cultural critic and who wrote Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century, believes that the right détournment would cause a fundamental revolutionary shift, revealing the emptiness of all the spectacle which surrounds us (Lasn 107). Similar to Naomi Klein, I am skeptical that any single détournment could have this massive effect, given that a main reason why the spectacle is so imbedded in our minds and lives is the high saturation level (296). However, with repeated and varied application, détournments could certainly contribute to this shift

in consciousness. As seen in Josephine Lee's analysis of the plays *Yankee Dawg You Die* and *M. Butterfly*, the use of recognizable imagery – just as other Culture Jammers use advertisements – “rob[s] the stereotype of its power to substitute for the natural being and reveal it as a social construct [by taking] advantage of the stereotype's inability to encompass the body of the Asian Other by overplaying the stereotype and thus revealing its inability to contain the excesses of the actor's body” (98). Though Lee is referring specifically to stereotypes of Asians used on the stage, the same pattern exists with Fannie Wong, the BLF, Reverend Billy, Tseng Kwong Chi, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Whatever the imagery being disrupted, these individuals distort it in such a way that the original's legitimacy is questioned.

Culture Jamming is productive because of the effect it has on both the (en)actor and the audience. The actor in Culture Jamming is making their political beliefs known and attempting to effect change with them. As stated in the first chapter, Wong suffered an ulcer as a result of her festering frustrations with oppression. Putting this consciousness to productive use is and integral part of survival. Also, by constantly practicing resistant readings, the effects of mass media can be lessened. For Carly Statsko, a Canadian Culture Jammer, “the practice of making her own media, adopting the voice of the promoter and hacking into the surface of the ad culture began to weaken advertising's effect on her” (Klein 290). The act of Culture Jamming is an affirmation of agency. The second importance – to the audience – is discussed by Statsko in the documentary CultureJam. “If they see one instance of it, it becomes a possibility.”

Though it may not fulfill the purpose which Greil Marcus hoped it would, the fact that *the possibility* of speaking back, of claiming space, and agency in general has been demonstrated is significant. The audience may not immediately begin drawing on subway ads with their own permanent markers; however, the right to speech has been demonstrated, putting a crack in the foundation of monolithic mass media. As David Darts wishes for art students, Culture Jammers wish for their audiences: “art educators can begin to shift their students towards more active and responsible forms of engagement with the inequities and injustices of the status quo” (325). Fannie Wong, Miss Chinatown Second Runner Up certainly constitutes a disruption in the stereotypical representation of Asian women and embodies an active and responsible engagement. Ideally, this possibility is passed on to each viewer.

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