

Finally, this book and my world would be unthinkable without my family. My parents, Nguyễn Thị Thọ-Da and Phạm Minh Tân, provided strength, patience, and distraction for a writing process they did not always understand but always supported. My brother Son and sister-in-law Jina (who has never felt like an in-law); my sister Hai (who has always been more than a sister) and brother-in-law Robin; and Brian, most of all, have lived with and through the many twists and turns of the job market and writing process. Their laughter, constancy, and willingness to listen while I moan about it all are the reasons I finished writing this book. Also their promises of good Vietnamese food, sushi, and cake—those helped, too.

This book is dedicated to Anam, who entered this world breathless and has been giving me breath ever since.

Introduction.

Asian Personal Style Superbloggers and the Material Conditions and Contexts of Asian Fashion Work

On October 24, 2010, Susanna Lau—a London-born Hong Konger who is better known online by her childhood nickname, Susie Bubble (because she was always in her own little world)—posted a series of photographs of herself wearing lilac-and-pink-striped, 1930s-era cocktail pajamas (see figures I.1 and I.2). Shortly after the post went up, the owner of the small vintage clothing store in London where she purchased the pajamas was inundated with inquiries about the outfit. The owner recalls: “My phone was ringing off the hook. People called me from all over the country and beyond asking me for those pyjamas!”¹ As well as benefiting retailers, Lau’s taste for out-of-the-box styles of dress (such as vintage pajamas as daywear) has also launched the careers of little-known independent designers. The *New York Times* reported, “Her finds have snared the attention of chains like Topshop; last year the company snapped up Angie Johnson, the [Canadian] designer of I Heart Norwegian Wood, one of Ms. Lau’s discoveries, to create a line for its stores.”² Rumi Neely, a mixed-race Japanese American, wields the same kind of sales-boosting power. Sales surge any time fashion companies like Forever 21 and Myer (an Australian department store) feature her in their advertising campaigns. Chris Wirasinha, cofounder of pop culture web channel *pedestrian.tv*, rightly observes, “If Rumi likes your brand, it’s probably worth more than a *Harper’s Bazaar* or a *Vogue* mention.”³



1.1 and 1.2 Susanna Lau in vintage cocktail pajamas, *Style Bubble*, October 24, 2010.

Other bloggers like the Korean American Aimee Song and the Taiwanese American Tina Craig (who coauthors the blog *Bag Snob* with fellow Taiwanese American Kelly Cook) have an impact on sales simply by wearing their favorite clothes. Song has boasted that clothes she photographs herself wearing and posts to the photo-sharing site Instagram, where she has more than a million followers, usually sell out that day.⁴ Although Craig's blog focuses on handbags, a Twitter photograph of her wearing DL1961 premium denim jeans not only caused a spike in sales for the company, it also launched a capsule collection called DL1961xBagsnob (in which a pair of jeans retails for \$168–\$225).⁵ The Vietnamese American blogger Wendy Nguyen's "Promise" bracelet, designed in collaboration with Tacori (for whom she is also the brand ambassador) has become a top-selling item for the American jewelry company. The bracelet with its intertwined silver and yellow gold has also found a receptive audience among A-list celebrities like Jay Z, who purchased it as a Valentine's Day gift for his superstar wife, Beyoncé.⁶

Lau, Neely, Song, Craig, and Nguyen are part of an elite class of personal style bloggers whose tastes—represented primarily by the fashion garments and accessories they buy, wear, style, describe, admire, and broadcast on their personal blogs—carry an inordinate amount of cultural and economic influence. Like all personal style bloggers, they post photos of themselves wearing clothes, often accompanied by text describing the occasion for wearing the outfit, styling tips, or product reviews. They also share details of their personal lives that help contextualize their unique fashion perspectives. Lau has hinted on her blog that her signature eccentric style of combining "clashing" prints, colors, and categories of clothing (for example, sportswear and formal wear, or sleepwear and sportswear) "was initially an act of rebellion against my parents and the 'popular' people at school."⁷ (Throughout her blog, Lau openly, if offhandedly, attributes her feelings of childhood alienation to her racial difference.) Nguyen's adolescence—spent first in poverty as a Vietnamese immigrant, whose parents worked in the garment industry⁸ and later in the California foster care system—provides the tacit or overt backstory for all of her blog posts. Her personal history reframes how we understand her penchant for floaty, diaphanous dresses and other similarly feminine items. Her romantic and generally conservative style has a cheerful, even indomitably optimistic, spirit when viewed in light of her tumultuous past. In one post she acknowledges that her personal style blog helps her to "heal from some of the emotional scars" of her past.⁹

Broadly speaking, personal style blogs represent an individual's taste. Unlike the clothing featured in fashion museums or in retail spaces that is displayed on mannequins or on hangers, the clothes in style blogs are personal. They are worn on a real person's body, and they reflect a practice and convey an idea of self-composure. Clothes on personal style blogs communicate a personal style of dress as well as a style of identity and of life. They constitute what Joanne Entwistle terms "situated bodily practices."¹⁰ Which garments bloggers wear and how they style them articulate a unique relation between the body and the individual's experience of everyday life. This approach to the media representation of clothing distinguishes personal style blogs from other popular genres of fashion blogs.

The street style blog (for example, *The Sartorialist*, *Street Peeper*, and *Jak & Jil*) presents a more panoramic view of fashion. It is concerned with

representing the material, cultural, and aesthetic landscape of a city from a fashion perspective. It is not unusual, then, for most of the people featured in street style blogs to be unnamed and not described with any personalizing details. The primary function of street style blog images is to represent a fashion city, not a fashionable individual. The personal style blog is also distinct from the fashion news aggregate blog (such as *The Cut* and *Business of Fashion*), which focuses more on collecting and sharing links about fashion than on creating new content. These are filter blogs that presurf and presort the Internet for interesting, relevant, and recent news items. The personal style blog, street style blog, and fashion news aggregate blog are the three most common types of fashion blogs, but there are a number of derivative and minor genres including microblogs hosted on Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter that are image-heavy and, more often than not, image-only presentations of personal style; blogs focused on fashion criticism like my own coauthored *Threadbared*; and blogs that combine elements of various genres of fashion, food, cooking, and lifestyle blogs. All fashion blog genres contain blogs that are independently owned, corporate owned, or some combination of the two.

The personal style blogs I'm concerned with in this book have a distinct set of common features. First, they are all privately owned and operated (though as they have become more successful, many have acquired noncontrolling corporate support). Second, they are run by Asian bloggers based mostly in the United States, although some of them are in the English-speaking Asian diaspora in England and the Philippines. And third, they constitute a highly select group of superblogs. By this, I mean that they are among the most elite blogs according to a variety of metrics, including online traffic; number of reader comments; number of subscribers or followers; the quantity and quality of fashion industry invitations, collaborations, and media attention that they attract; and their high name recognition. The blogs that are the focus of this book make up a very small and incredibly select group of personal style blogs that have the lion's share of influence and attention with respect to both the online public and the fashion industry.¹¹ How did this group of Asian superbogs rise to such prominence in the early twenty-first century? How did the fashion tastes of more or less ordinary Asian consumers come to have such significance in the new economies of mainstream Western fashion media and consumer markets? And how do Asian superboggers' digital practices work to rearticulate race and gender

as aesthetic strategies of value rather than locations of social difference? In other words, how are their personal style blogging practices (such as self-fashioning, posing, and writing) modes of taste work that turn their styles of gendered racial embodiment into cultural, social, and economic capital? These questions frame my investigation of Asian superbogs.

To begin, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by taste. I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's famous statement that "the idea of personal taste is an illusion."¹² What he meant is that our personal tastes are shaped by and reflect our social position and social context. Bourdieu argues that the expression of taste, materialized through our manners, comportment, speech, styles of dress, and other consumer choices, is a practice of self-classification: "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier."¹³ Our tastes locate us in a particular social context that is itself structured by a system of sensibilities, dispositions, and values (what Bourdieu terms "habitus"). Thus, an analysis of the tastes of Asian superboggers is an analysis of the social reality that creates the conditions for their taste as well as the cultural economic context that gives value to it. It asks both what is Asian taste in the context of early twenty-first-century fashion, and why do fashion consumers and the fashion industry have such a taste for it?

Above I described personal style blogs as representations of individual taste. But with respect to superbogs, the blogger's personal style and taste are not simply represented. As I have already indicated, elite Asian bloggers' tastes do a great deal of work. Their taste practices are value-producing activities that generate a significant though highly uneven amount of cultural, social, and sometimes financial capital for the blogger and for various entities in the fashion industry. As the fashion blog phenomenon has spread to the mainstream, fashion companies have become increasingly savvy about monetizing superboggers' free taste labors (which involve creating media publicity, building consumers' interest and trust, and fashion modeling). Sometimes their savviness verges on the ethically dubious, as was the case when the luxury handbag company Fendi borrowed the "BryanBoy pose" (the signature pose of Filipino queer superblogger Bryan Grey Yambao) in its international ad campaign without crediting or compensating him. (I discuss this event in greater detail in chapter 4.)

In addition to producing economic value, Asian superboggers' tastes produce economic relations between bloggers and readers and between bloggers and industry insiders. Although bloggers blog for free and readers

read blogs for free, and although bloggers and readers have more or less equal social standing as ordinary fashion consumers, a superblogger is able to economicize readers' activities by turning their consumption of the blog and their admiration and emulation of the superblogger's taste into cultural, social, and financial capital—for example, when readers click on affiliate links embedded in a blog post.¹⁴

To examine Asian superblogger's online taste activities as value-producing work is to place them in the longer historical context of Asian fashion work. In doing so, I want to extend the notion and history of Asian fashion work into the digital realm. This will serve to draw out the evolving roles that race, gender, and class play in structuring work opportunities and constraints for Asian fashion workers at a time when nonmaterial commodities (such as blogs and taste) have become so central to the fashion industry's accumulation of capital.

One of These Is Much Like the Other

The Asian fashion worker—the designation likely brings to mind images of sewing machine operators; of an exploited and informal female workforce; and of a largely contingent Asian diasporic labor market concentrated in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the United States that has been the global backbone of fashion manufacturing for the past sixty years. The work practices and conditions of this Asian fashion worker—the garment worker—are characterized by the brutal physicality of long hours, hot and poorly ventilated buildings, bent backs, tired bodies, and nimble fingers.

Since the late 2000s, the Asian fashion superblogger has emerged as a new kind of Asian fashion worker. The bloggers' online activities generate indirect and direct value for themselves and various entities connected to the fashion industry. In contrast to the earlier proletariat notion of the Asian fashion worker, the superblogger is considered to be part of a new Asian creative class. Instead of being seen as unskilled and oppressed, superblogger are described in terms that emphasize their imagination, ingenuity, and vision. For example, when *The Business of Fashion*, a highly respected fashion news aggregate blog, kicked off its popular column "The Business of Blogging," the first three profile stories featured Asian superblogger: first, Susanna Lau; second, Tommy Ton, a Vietnamese Canadian street style blogger and photographer; and finally, the Taiwanese American

handbag bloggers Tina Craig and Kelly Cook. The stories focused on the bloggers' artistic vision as the driving force of their productions. In Ton's profile, the writer admired the blogger's "well-trained fashion eye" and his aesthetic sense for capturing "the little details" in his "landscape-style images," "a towering Louboutin stiletto here, a pop of colour there."¹⁵ In Lau's profile, the writer quotes Lau as saying that her product is "my eye, my point of view, a certain taste, a certain way of documenting and presenting fashion."¹⁶ Ton's taste for the little aesthetic details and Lau's taste for "documenting and presenting fashion" are understood in these media profiles to be work practices, highly skilled ones that are neither widely possessed nor easily learned. The high level of Ton's and Lau's taste work is what separates the wheat from the chaff, the everyday hobbyist blogger from the superblogger.

Implicit in these descriptions is a conceptual framework that separates head labors from hand labors, creative work from physical work. Accounts of Asian superblogger's taste work as creative work, as intellectually and artistically innovative practices, are partial and misleading. They elide the ways in which taste work is physical, instrumental, and socially and culturally conditioned. Yet as narrow and inadequate as these interpretations of Asian superblogger's taste work are, in some ways they are also refreshing and even possibly oppositional takes on Asian labor.

The Asian creative worker is a relatively new mainstream idea. Long-held Western stereotypes of Asian workers perceived them as unimaginative; docile; and predisposed to perform rote and repetitive, if demanding, work. In recent years, a spate of media and scholarly attention has focused on the Asian creative class, particularly fashion bloggers, YouTube video makers, maverick chefs, fashion designers, and software start-up founders. The literature on the Asian creative class coalesces around several themes: the mobility of second- and third-generation Asians away from traditional Asian occupations and definitions of success; a celebration of Asians' newfound individualism and freedom from—and, in many cases, rebellions against—so-called Eastern models of collectivist subjectivity; and the end of racial stereotypes as we know them (for example, new images of cool Asians are thought to supplant stereotypes of Asians as nerds). The underlying message in all these discussions is that for these Asians, race no longer poses social, economic, cultural, or personal obstacles. In effect, creativity and entrepreneurship are perceived as social ladders that lead

younger Asians out of blue- and pink-collar labor sectors. These sectors—which cross transnational boundaries and include domestic services, apparel manufacturing, and electronics assembly—have often been the only labor markets available to rural, immigrant, poor, and undocumented Asians.

Represented as personalities, productive Asian hipsters from the YouTube beauty guru Michelle Phan to the pot-smoking, accidental multi-millionaire graffiti artist David Choe are imagined to embody a different relation to capitalism: one based not on gendered racial stereotypes but on individual talent. Asian creatives supposedly signal an entirely new vector of Asian labor history that is rooted in free expression rather than exploitation. Countless mainstream media articles and blog posts assert that the rising prominence of Asian creatives represents a definitive shift away from previous racial labor identities and markets. One such article written by Richard Florida, best known for his assertion that creativity is the new engine of capitalist production and urban renewal, begins this way: “Many in the West think of the Asian Pacific as the world’s factory.”¹⁷ The rest of the article is dedicated to smashing that perception. For Florida, the Asian factory worker is an embodiment of an earlier formation of Asian labor that has now been superseded. Florida and other writers and scholars contrast the earlier Asian factory worker with the creative entrepreneur. Whereas Asian factory labor is closely monitored and controlled, Asian creative labor is free and self-managed. Whereas Asian factory labor is exploitative and alienating, Asian creative labor is expressive and personal.

The category of the creative class embodies an implicit ideological assumption about the democratic and even liberatory properties of creative work. Framed by ideas of individualism, agency, meritocracy, postracism, and liberal multiculturalism, creative work and success in the so-called new economy is understood as fueled by individual drive and intellectual capacity rather than capital, credentials, and other institutionally conferred privileges. Following this logic, a person’s race, ethnicity, gender, and class do not hinder access to success in creative economies. They may even be assets. Re-presented through taste work practices (self-fashioning, sartorial styling, posing, and so on) race, ethnicity, and gender can be rearticulated as aesthetic positions or fashion statements that add to and enhance the value of one’s identity as a personal style blogger in the new digital fashion media economy.¹⁸

Asian web stars stand out as success stories in the digital realms of creative economies. In mainstream media outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Huffington Post* as well as popular arts and culture blogs like *Hyperallergic*, much has been written about Asian creatives’ talent, charisma, capacity to build social networks, and unique but universally appealing personal brand.¹⁹ The common implication is that the new economy of informational or networked capitalism is far more egalitarian than the old economy of industrial capitalism that still persists in more formalized labor sectors like the manufacturing and film and television industries. Under informational capitalism, the increase and diffusion of productive forces, particularly as a result of new user-driven media technologies and knowledges, have purportedly democratized economic processes. Old barriers to success like race, ethnicity, class, gender, and lack of capital can be overcome with a certain measure of stick-to-itiveness and social media savvy. A *Huffington Post* story points out that “discrimination, stereotypes and exclusion are the norm for Asians, both on television and the silver screen” but “social media . . . amplifies otherwise unheard-from populations and creates an equal playing field for ethnic minorities. In this realm . . . Asian Americans (and cats) dominate.”²⁰ Asian web stars—personal style superblogger being some of the most highly visible among them—seem to be evidence of the new and more equitable race and labor relations under informational capitalism.

My book pushes against the assumptions of upward postracial mobility that structure popular understandings of the new Asian digital creative class. Rather than seeing personal style blogging as an altogether new and postracial job category, I situate it within the longer historical trajectory of gendered racial fashion work. Focusing on Asian personal style bloggers’ practices and conditions of taste work, I highlight the historical continuities and discontinuities in the social and economic processes shaping new modes of Asian fashion labor. My aim is to demonstrate that the roles race, gender, and class play in structuring work opportunities and constraints under informational capitalism are evolving, not diminishing.

Throughout this book, I examine Asian personal style superblogger as workers rather than digital artisans, high-tech bohemians, or even immaterial laborers. These latter categories of labor—occupations involved in Florida’s lauded gentrification processes—do not adequately capture the structural similarities that both cut across and link the class relations

between new and earlier forms of fashion work that I am concerned with in this book.

Personal style bloggers as a group trouble distinctions between immaterial and physical labor, and between innovative and instrumental labor. Whereas digital artisans and high-tech bohemians are explicitly marked as middle-class categories, personal style bloggers are not so easily characterized. Some come from middle-class backgrounds, but others do not (as is reflected in the style-on-a-budget blogs that feature clothes purchased from fast fashion and big-box retailers). For most bloggers, blogging constitutes a second-shift job, with all the gendered implications that term entails. All bloggers blog for free, and the most successful of them blog for more than eight or ten hours each day (again, this is often in addition to the hours they work at their “day job”).

Furthermore, though they are digital or immaterial laborers, they are also embodied ones. They generate visual, textual, and aesthetic information that is located and stored in disembodied and distributed networks of algorithmic functions, personal computers, and data centers. Yet these digital, immaterial, or cognitive laborers are not laborers without bodies. Personal style bloggers’ work practices involve the physical labors of posing; self-adornment; and shuttling between their homes, photo sites, and retail sites.

Asian personal style bloggers are especially difficult to categorize in terms of conventional labor classifications. Asian superblogger are immaterial or informational laborers, yet their gendered racial bodies are of particular importance to their work in this historical period of global fashion capitalism. Their participation in the blogosphere as well as their incorporation into the dominant Western fashion industry are conditioned to a great extent by the cultural economic value of their Asian bodies in this moment that many regard as the Asian decade, which began around 2008. (Diane von Furstenberg and others, including the *Financial Times*, are convinced that the Asian decade is really the start of the Asian century.²¹) As I will explain below, the rise of Asian fashion superblogger has occurred at a time when the fashion industry and its various taste makers have a taste for Asian tastes.

This book is inarguably indebted to the many insights that digital and immaterial labor studies provide into the new organizations and meanings of work in informational economies. However, too many critical conceptualizations of immaterial labor are limited because they ignore race as a

variable in the quality and conditions of informational or knowledge work. Terms like *electronic sweatshops* and *digital plantations* are frequently used to describe the exploitative conditions of immaterial or informational labor. But sweatshops and plantations do not simply name difficult workplaces. They designate a racially gendered system of labor organization in which owners, managers, and manufacturers dehumanize specific groups of people to extract surplus value. Race and gender shape work opportunities and constraints in physical as well as digital arenas, and scholars who ignore this risk treating Others’ experiences as no more than colorful metaphors. Indeed, the historical specificity of these terms is emptied out when the sweated labor in question is that of, say, English-language Wikipedia editors (who are overwhelmingly white and male²²) or when *netslaves* refers to the volunteer AOL community leaders and chat hosts who in 1999 sued the Internet giant for back wages.

The insights that scholars like Lisa Nakamura, Minoo Moallem, Nishant Shah, and Kalindi Vora have provided into the uneven flows and inequitable distributions of technical capital (whether skills, resources, wages, knowledge, or time) represent some of the most interesting and important work on race, gender, digital labor, and economies today.²³ Collectively, their research draws critical attention to the historical links connecting material bodies and relations with digital technologies, practices, and economies. But their discussions of Chinese gold farmers in *World of Warcraft*, iPhone girls, electronic assembly plant workers, call center operators, carpet weavers, and puppeteers focus on proletarianized—or at least nonelite—classes of workers. The structural marginalization these workers experience in digital economies is reflective of and compounded by the racialized and gendered materiality of their bodies.

The Asian superblogger I focus on here are a racially gendered labor force with an inordinate amount of status, influence, and cultural power. This class of style bloggers represents not simply the 1 percent but something closer to the 0.01 percent of bloggers who have more than the lion’s share of online traffic, readers, informal and formal support from fashion industry insiders, corporate sponsorships, and personal resources. Their high visibility in an economy in which attention is currency is what has made them ready examples of the postracism of the digital era.

However, I insist in this book that Asian personal style blogger is not a postracial or postpolitical labor identity but instead a historically situated,

racially gendered and class-based formation. As with Asian labor in garment manufacturing industries, the labor of Asian personal style superblogger is shaped by larger geopolitical, economic, technological, and cultural structures. Asian superblogger's work is nonmaterial, but it is not removed from the material reality and constraints of fashion economies, social relations, and work opportunities that include the inequalities of race, class, size, and gender presentation that have always structured fashion work. The blogosphere is just as racially stratified as earlier fashion labor markets, though it exhibits a somewhat different pattern and logic of stratification.

The difference has to do with the emergence of key luxury fashion markets in Asia, the new meanings and significance of Asianness in the Asian decade, the relative privilege of Asian fashion blog workers in relation to garment workers, and the aesthetic and personal nature of bloggers' taste work compared to the impersonal work of apparel manufacturing. What's more, elite bloggers have technological, cultural, and economic resources that industrial fashion workers simply do not. Indeed, the very work and success of Asian superblogger rests on the promoting and buying of commodities that Asian garment workers (and electronics assembly workers) produce under highly exploitative conditions. Asian superblogger, garment workers, and electronics assembly workers are linked together in a strange circuit of production in which one group's free, highly visible, and rewarding labor (because it offers outlets for self-expression, creativity, and social connection, as well as the possibility of lucrative side work) depends on another group's free or severely underpaid, invisible, and largely alienating labor. Put differently, the emergence of this new form of Asian fashion labor (personal style superblogging) is constitutive of and constituted by the continuation of an older form of Asian fashion labor (garment work). Yet both are positioned—hierarchically—in fashion's productive system as a racially gendered supply of unwaged or underwaged labor.

While I focus on the ways in which the structural position of these two groups of Asian fashion workers overlap, I do not want to lose sight of a fundamental reality: there are vast differences between industrial and immaterial fashion work and the conditions that shape each worker group's experiences and activities. In some ways, their differences are so great that a comparison might seem implausible. Substandard work conditions, declining wages in leading apparel-exporting countries, and the physical

degradation of workers' bodies (including verbal, physical, and sexual abuse by factory managers) are structural realities for apparel manufacturing workers. Bloggers do not experience these, even in the worst circumstances.

Despite these important differences, *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet* argues that Asian personal style superblogger are connected to Asian garment workers—though not in the same way that other Asian fashion workers are. In *The Beautiful Generation*, Thuy Linh Tu observes that Asian American designers acknowledge and create relationships to garment workers that, for some, are based on familial histories intimately connecting the designers to the garment or apparel manufacturing industry. Whether familial or chosen, Tu explains, the kinship relations between Asian American designers and Asian suppliers and sewers who become so-called aunties and uncles challenge the fashion industry's "logic of distance" (in Tu's formulation). These relationships, for her, "acknowledge proximity, contact, and affiliation between domains imagined as distinct."²⁴ Asian superblogger do not identify with or demonstrate any apparent sympathy for the hundreds of thousands of Asian industrial fashion workers around the globe who produce the material and technological products on which blog labor relies. Not only do superblogger not acknowledge cultural, familial, or other intimate connections with the people who make the clothes featured on their blogs, but—as I discuss in chapter 5—they sometimes use the digital resources and digital work practices available to them to maintain a divide between head and hand, or innovative and instrumental, labors. Yet a structural examination of Asian fashion work and the productive systems and modes of fashion capital accumulation it sustains and that sustain it reveals that these two groups of Asian fashion workers have similar material and social positions in fashion's productive economy.

This book traces how the work practices and working conditions of Asian superblogger and Asian garment workers—specifically with respect to their gendered and racialized implications—link them in spite of their differences. Thinking about these two groups together reveals fascinating insights into the fashion industry's changing and enduring divisions of labor, opportunity, recognition, and rewards as it is shifting from a manufacturing-based economy to one based on information or communication. Inarguably, the material conditions and social relations of power that defined fashion labor under late twentieth-century capitalism are

different from those defining fashion labor under early twenty-first-century informational capitalism (more on this below). This book shows, however, that there are historical continuities in the racial and gendered dimensions of patterns of employment opportunity, wage gaps, and labor systems, suggesting that conditions of fashion production in the digital age have much in common with those in earlier stages of global industrialization.

Economies of Asian Industrial and Informational Fashion Work

Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet demonstrates the complementarity of fashion's informational and industrial labor systems without conflating the two. To begin with, both systems have low start-up costs, require little to no prior training or experience, pay workers less than a living wage for physically taxing full-time jobs, prevent unionization through decentralization, discourage workers' collective identification through individualizing tasks and reward systems, and in general exploit workers. Additionally, Asian women and girls have played a significant role in both the early twenty-first-century and late twentieth-century fashion industries—suggesting a shared racial and gendered organization of fashion labor across two very different modes of work.

The entry and participation of Asian garment workers and superbloggers in both fashion production systems are results of broader shifts in global capitalism. In the 1970s, the fashion industry was transformed by the same neoliberal ideologies and policies that had begun to transform various U.S. economic and cultural sectors. Neoliberalism's inexorable march through the 1970s and 1980s cast unions as bureaucratic impediments to workplace efficiency and promoted unobstructed corporate expansion as an intrinsic right under free market capitalism. Neoliberal policies spurred the rapid growth of transnational corporations and increased global production of export goods by some of the poorest countries and people in the world. It was in this late twentieth-century period that Asians, mostly Southeast and South Asian women and girls and immigrant Asians in the United States, first entered the fashion labor force in large numbers.

The second phase of fashion's economic restructuring—which I argue is not entirely divorced from the first phase—began in the early 2000s. This twenty-first-century phase is marked by a confluence of several technologi-

cal, social, and economic changes: the mass distribution of personal digital technologies, the rise in the use of social media, and the 2008 financial crash and recession in Europe and the United States that caused the fashion industry to turn its attention to Asian consumers as a new luxury market. English-speaking Asian fashion bloggers rose to prominence in the midst of this recession, enabled by these new technological, political, and economic transformations.

In 2008, at the dawn of the Asian decade, Asian personal style bloggers embodied fashion's new ideal consumer, and they unwittingly became informational intermediaries. Their blogs provide consumers, retailers, and designers with an easily accessible storehouse of up-to-the-minute information about style trends and consumer values. A few words and photographs posted to high-ranking Asian personal style blogs like Lau's Style Bubble or Neely's Fashion Toast have enhanced the cool cred of established brands while training a high-powered social media spotlight on emerging designers and little-known fashion retailers. As representative consumers of a newly significant luxury market, these bloggers' observations are of particular interest to fashion companies that are working hard to capture Asian consumers' attention and disposable income. The growing numbers of Asian models on fashion runways and in magazines—a related phenomenon in the Asian decade—can also be attributed to the new significance of Asian markets to the Western fashion industry. As Ivan Bart, the senior vice president and managing director of IMG Models Worldwide, explains, “it comes down to getting consumers to come to your brand. You have to have faces that reflect the consumer.”²⁵ Asian superbloggers have faces that reflect the new ideal fashion consumer and do the work of promoting brands for a great deal less money than commercial fashion models or, more often than not, for free.

Asian feminized labor has been integral to the fashion industry's global expansion and development throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. What is popularly described as an historical novelty—the Asian moment (beginning in the mid-2000s)—has a precedent in the early years of neoliberal globalization in the 1970s and 1980s. In both cases, the production of fashion commodities, one material (clothing) and the other nonmaterial (information, taste, and blogs), relies on racially gendered Asian bodies seen as particularly suited for fashion labor and the specific needs of global Western fashion capitalism. The industrial

manufacture of mass-produced and mass-distributed clothing requires cheap, docile, and plentiful labor that Asian and immigrant Asian women and girls are imagined to embody and to be naturally suited to provide.

Today, English-speaking Asian superb bloggers are also well positioned to provide important contributions to Western fashion's expansion into and capture of emerging and dynamic Asian markets. As I suggested above, the bloggers are racially matched with the Asian consumers whom Western fashion companies have set their sights on. At the same time, because the bloggers are English speakers, they are familiarly and knowably Western. They are just racially exotic enough to have a wide market appeal—to Asian as well as to non-Asian English-speaking consumers and retailers—yet not so foreign that their racial difference disrupts the postracial fantasy of late capitalism. Asian superb bloggers' language privilege lends economic value to their racially marked bodies. Their English fluency maintains their highly marketable balance between exotic and familiar.

Finally and just as importantly, Asian superb bloggers possess a sizable personal market share of the so-called attention economy as well as the capacity to accumulate more currency because they have a strong online presence, a highly engaged and loyal audience base, and a proven and significant record for promoting Western fashion brands (again, often for free). With the institutionalization of social commerce in which social media technologies and practices play key roles in shaping consumer behaviors and decisions, the Western fashion industry is increasingly (probably more than it would care to admit) relying on the unwaged labor of bloggers for its continuation and development.

It is important to underscore that personal style blog labor is always free labor—voluntarily given and unpaid. More than an economic issue, this is an issue of identity. Super bloggers' construction of their labor subjectivities as artists rests on the idea that they blog for passion, not for money. In a *New York Times* article about her, Lau describes her blogging in terms of an obsession that has "no financial motivation."²⁶ Similarly, while blogging provides Song opportunities for additional capital streams, she frequently points out that her main source of income is her interior design job. This job serves as Song's proof that her blog is a "genuine expression of her style."²⁷

Super bloggers—an infinitesimally tiny fraction of all bloggers—have managed to create a livelihood from side jobs such as brand collabora-

tions, affiliate links, direct ad sales, and freelancing that can be quite lucrative. Top-tier bloggers make as much as \$250,000 annually (possibly more, depending on the number and types of design collaborations, paid appearances, and advertising partnerships they amass). But these are indirect earning methods that are separate from, though related to, the actual production of blogs. The actual blogging labor of superb bloggers—like all bloggers—is unwaged work. In this way, superb bloggers are no different from other Internet users who provide the free labor that keeps the Internet running. Now an \$8 trillion²⁸ enterprise,²⁹ the Internet is built and sustained by a massive network of horizontal yet hierarchical users (as Tiziana Terranova points out) who voluntarily provide labor in the form of content creation, information sharing, communicating, buying, selling, and so on.³⁰

In this era of social commerce, the various and, again, voluntary online activities of fashion media and market consumers now provide much of the advertising and promotion that fashion retailers and designers depend on to sell their clothes. According to a 2013 report by the Internet search engine company Technorati, bloggers are particularly influential. Thirty-one percent of fashion consumers say blogs influence their purchases.³¹ A four-year survey conducted by the media company BlogHer (which focuses on women bloggers and blog readers, a significant number of whom participate in the fashion blogosphere) found that for the majority of female readers (53 percent), recommendations from bloggers have more weight than celebrity endorsements.³² What this influence translates to in numbers is staggering. A top-tier blog like Craig and Cook's BagSnob can drive as much as \$175 million in annual sales to retailers.³³ While retailers profit enormously, even the highest paid bloggers earn negligible fees. As with garment workers, Asian superb bloggers' relationship to the broader fashion industry is characterized by sharply asymmetrical distributions of labor and earnings.

Perhaps the strongest link between Asian personal style superb bloggers and Asian garment workers is the historically fraught position they share as the embodied evidence of and alibi for the racially gendered processes of transnational fashion capitalism. The two groups of Asian workers entered Western fashion's production systems in related but distinct historical moments when economic articulations of Asians represented them as Western capitalist success stories (as model minority labor) and, paradoxically, as economic competitors threatening the dominant racial order of Western capitalism (as cheap Asian labor).

Understood within a taste model of race relations, the contradictory status of Asian workers and of meanings of Asian labor in these two different fashion production systems is not surprising. Taste is flexible and fleeting—none more so than fashion taste. One person's taste is likely to be another person's distaste, but one's taste can also become one's distaste as a result of changing personal and popular tastes. One particular form of distaste is the aftertaste. These are tastes that might at first be pleasing but, after lingering too long in the mouth, throat, or public sphere (for example, through media overexposure) become unpalatable.

Historically, we have seen the increased visibility of racial Others in positions of political power, economic employment, or academic arenas turn racial admiration into racial resentment. The popular reception of model minorities provides a useful example of the slide from racial taste to racial aftertaste. In the 1960s, the U.S. paper of record, the *New York Times*, praised "Japanese American style" work ethic and academic achievements.³⁴ In 2007, an article published in the same newspaper expressed concerns that the overrepresentation of Asians at top-ranked universities like the University of California at Berkeley were turning these American institutions into "Little Asias."³⁵ More than four decades after embracing the Asian model minority and with the seeming rise in the number of model minorities at American institutions, the "Little Asias" article reflects the limits of racial tolerance when racial taste becomes racial aftertaste. The 2007 Times article described Asians as "the demographic of the moment," suggesting that Asians had overstayed their moment and left racial traces that were apparently neither assimilable nor repressible, and certainly not fully controllable. One such racial trace mentioned in the article is Mandarin, a language described as now "part of the soundtrack at this iconic university," heard "all the time, in plazas, cafeterias, classrooms, study halls, dorms and fast-food outlets."³⁶

Racial aftertastes describe aversions to racial alterities, the features, aspects, and bodies of racial otherness that are not easily consumable either because their racial flavor is perceived as too strong or because their racial traces linger so long that they exceed the terms and limits of racial palatability. Aftertastes mark the limits of racial tolerance; they are not manifestations of blatant racial hatred. Aftertastes are taste judgments derived from perceptions that racial boundaries of social and economic power and privilege are being threatened by a figure or feature of racial alterity seen

not just as out of place, but as not keeping its place because it is encroaching on places where it does not belong (like iconic American universities or job markets that belong to so-called real Americans). Racial aftertastes are the bringing to the surface of racial anxieties and apprehensions that exceed the limits of racial tolerance. Taste and aftertaste, like racial tolerance and intolerance, are contradictory yet complementary. Part of the same structure of racial power and domination, they are systemically co-operating and co-constituted.

Economic articulations of Asian fashion workers as both solutions for and problems of the Western fashion industry's productive needs are also contradictory and complementary. And if, as Bourdieu argues, taste is reflective not so much of personal preference but of "the logic of the space of [taste] production,"³⁷ then an examination of the taste for Asian fashion workers and its aftertaste has important implications for our understanding of the contradictory yet complementary racial logics of transnational capitalism in the late twentieth century and informational capitalism in the early twenty-first century.

While Asian personal style superblogger are generally associated with the new Asian creative class—a labor category that supposedly distinguishes them from previous racialized categories of Asian model minority labor like the efficient and passive garment worker or electronics assembly worker—the superblogger can be understood as a model minority labor force for the digital era. The model minority thesis emerged in the 1960s as a racial discourse that constructs an image of Asians in the United States and elsewhere as hardworking, self-driven, and self-sufficient people who maximize available opportunities for social and economic advancement (at school or in the workplace), all without fuss or friction. In the civil rights era, it functioned as a liberal alibi that countered the growing criticisms of structural racial inequalities raised most forcefully and publicly by African Americans and Latinos. Images of the Asian model minority in television news, entertainment media, and popular newspapers and magazines like the *New York Times*³⁸ and *U.S. News and World Report*³⁹ repeatedly deployed the Asian model minority stereotype as a way to obscure the racialized realities of systemically uneven distributions of political, economic, and social power, opportunities, and resources.

In the 1980s, advocates of neoliberal policies and discourses framed the transnationalization of production that shifted Western manufacturing

work offshore and underground as the triumph of free-market democracy. The largely Asian and Latina workforce in the United States and abroad that fill the jobs created by the global expansion of Western apparel manufacturing constitute a model minority labor force. The workers are perceived as ideally suited to fulfill the demands of Western fashion capital for dramatically reduced labor costs, quick turnaround of a high volume of garments, and maximized profits. Richard Pierce is the former owner of a garment factory in Saipan, a U.S. territory in the South Pacific that in the 1980s and 1990s produced clothes for U.S. brands like Gap, Nordstrom, Liz Claiborne, JC Penney, Abercrombie and Fitch, Polo, Gymboree, and Sears, to name a few. Pierce boasts of the predominantly Chinese and Filipina labor force his factory had: "I remember one of the biggest manufacturers here when he visited our company. . . . He came into the factory and the first thing he did was, he kind of just listened and you can tell by the hum of the machinery there whether it's a productive place. He just got this smile on his face because our workers were actually, I think, better than his. It's a busy place."⁴⁰

While Asian and Latina garment workers have been vocal about the brutal working conditions and criminal labor practices necessary to sustain the high level of productivity that labor contractors, designers, retailers, and consumers have come to expect, they are regularly held up as living proof that the promise of free-market democracy (in which a free, competitive market will positively influence individual and national economic and social development) has been realized. Pierce maintains that the apparel manufacturing industry's system of contract, contingent, and outsourced labor is "to the benefit of here [Saipan's economy] and particularly, I think more than anything, to the benefit of the ladies that are here in our business that come from other places."⁴¹ Pierce's perspective is a common neoliberal stance that fails to acknowledge the ways neoliberal economic policies are directly responsible for widening the gap between the rich and the poor in the United States⁴² as well as deepening the international division of labor between the Global North and the Global South (and all of that division's racialized and gendered relations of production).⁴³ A 1999 lawsuit filed by more than 30,000 garment workers in Saipan (the majority of whom were from China and the Philippines) clearly contradicts Pierce's claim. The lawsuit cited labor and human rights violations—including emotional abuse, dangerous working conditions, nonpayment, and debt

peonage—that essentially held workers hostage in garment factories, keeping them from their children and other family members.

Uncritical celebrations about the benefits of neoliberal restructuring for (Asian) workers in other countries occurred at the same time that (white) workers in the United States in the 1980s were experiencing severe economic decline as a consequence of "the combined effects of deindustrialization, economic restructuring, and the oppressive materialism of a market society where things have more value than people."⁴⁴ The model minority worker discourse added more fuel to the flames of anti-Asian sentiment, which has a long history in the United States. In the 1980s and 1990s, a pervasive belief that Asians represented a foreign economic enemy to white American workers led to heightened anti-Asian violence, including the murder of Vincent Chin in Detroit, Michigan. (One of his attackers was heard saying, "It's because of you little motherfuckers that we're out of work!"⁴⁵) Asian garment workers in the 1980s and 1990s were put in the contradictory position of embodying both a gendered model minority labor force and a racialized and foreign economic enemy.

The fraught position of Asian garment workers—as the racially gendered embodiment of the problem of and the solution for transnational fashion capitalism, as the alibi confirming and the evidence undermining the promise of free-market democracy, and as the model minority labor force and foreign economic competition—mirrors that of the new Asian fashion worker. Asian superblogger such as Yambao, Lau, Song, and Neely are regularly held up as proof that the digital democratization of fashion production systems is real. The indirect earnings of Yambao, Song, and Lau are routinely the focus of news stories about fashion's digital democratization. To be sure, they provide compelling evidence for claims that social media are lowering participation barriers and allowing more people to enter the previously insular fashion industry. The fact that ordinary Asian Internet users have become superblogger (earning six figures annually) in a historically white cultural economic field—seemingly through their own hard work and determination—is the kind of rags-to-riches trajectory that is essential to the model minority discourse. Asian superblogger are not simply among the top earning personal style bloggers; in 2013, Yambao and Song were the two highest grossing superblogger in the world.⁴⁶ Yambao made headlines when he admitted in the early days of personal style blogging that "he makes more than \$100,000 per

year,”⁴⁷ mostly from advertising and guest appearances.⁴⁸ Aimee Song, the highest-paid blogger in the world, commanded fees as high as \$50,000 for a single brand collaboration a couple of years ago.⁴⁹ While there are no published data, her current fees are likely higher now since her popularity has increased in recent years.

But as with the earlier formation of the model minority fashion worker, the Asian superblogger is largely a discursive construction that conceals deep-seated asymmetries of race, color, class, and body size in the blogosphere and in the global fashion industry more broadly. Asian superbloggers are a highly visible and high-achieving group, but they are also only a tiny minority of superbloggers—which is why the same few Asian superbloggers are named over and over in the fashion media. The personal style superbloggerosphere, as a whole, is overwhelmingly white. At the same time, Asian superbloggers’ body sizes and skin tones complement rather than challenge dominant standards of beauty. In fact, personal style blogs and other related social media platforms and practices have not so much democratized the fashion industry as they have enabled limited forms of diversification that do not upset the racialized hierarchies of fashion bodies, tastes, and economies that have historically structured the Western fashion industry.

Discursive constructions of Asian superbloggers as the embodied evidence of digital democratization also ignore the uneven social relations built into the commercial Internet, where a handful of corporations control the technical means of communication, creative expression, and sociability that millions use but will never own. While new user-driven technologies of communication and information have certainly lowered participation barriers in fashion’s productive and consumer economies, they have not eliminated disparities in the quality of participation in and through the blogosphere. Henry Jenkins, Craig Watkins, and others have argued that the corporatization and mass distribution of cheaper Internet technologies and telecommunications infrastructure have narrowed the digital divide between the technological haves and have-nots.⁵⁰ These authors caution, however, that there is a growing participation gap in which certain online users and activities that serve and sustain corporate interests are privileged over others. The participation gap is unmistakable in the personal style blogosphere.

Creating a fashion blog is free and relatively easy, thanks to new online publishing services. Yet the corporate-run search engines’ operating logic means that only the most popular sites are likely to show up in web searches. The advent of expensive search engine optimization services means that the top search result positions are for sale to sites with large bankrolls. The same websites and blogs routinely appear in the top three to five results of web searches; all other sites, as Jodi Dean puts it, are “drowned in the massive flow [of commercialized data].”⁵¹ When I ran a search using the term *fashion blog*, the first page of Google results included only corporate and monetized blogs maintained by *Elle* magazine, *New York* magazine, the *Sartorialist*, and *Fashion Toast* (Neely’s blog, which is now hosted, but not owned, by the media giant *Fairchild Fashion Media*). I received nearly identical results using the Bing and Yahoo search engines. Blogs owned and run by individual personal style bloggers were nowhere near the top of the search rankings. This confirms Dean’s observations that digital democracy is little more than a “neoliberal fantasy”: “Rather than a rhizomatic structure where any one point is as likely to be reached as any other, what we have on the web are situations of massive inequality, massive differentials of scales where some nodes get tons of hits and the vast majority get almost none.”⁵²

In the personal style blogosphere, fashion’s traditional social hierarchies are not leveling out, nor are they becoming more democratic. Instead, these hierarchies have evolved in ways that allow them to expand into this popular digital arena. Far from being a postracial meritocracy, the personal style blogosphere is organized by highly uneven distributions of power and privilege that are not determined by blog quality. The online traffic of some African American fashion blogs (both personal style blogs and street style blogs) outrank or are comparable to white and Asian English-language U.S. fashion blogs, yet many of the African American blogs with the most traffic, like *The Fashion Bomb*, do not show up in top search results and do not receive nearly the same levels of national and global attention as do white and English-language Asian superblogs. With the notable exceptions of *Street Etiquette*, a style blog coproduced by Joshua Kissi and Travis Gumbs; Tamu McPherson’s street style blog *All the Pretty Birds*;⁵³ and Kathryn Finney’s cheap chic blog, *The Budget Fashionista*, African American-run blogs occupy the same marginal status in

the blogosphere as African American fashion models (and Black fashion models more broadly) do on the runway.⁵⁴

Bloggers that are not located in global media empires also have an extremely difficult time gaining the attention of the hegemonic Western fashion industry. Han Huohuo, for example, is a blogging sensation in China. His account on the strictly policed Chinese microblogging platform Weibo draws more than a million followers, yet he hardly registers in the mainstream consciousness of the Western fashion public. Because he lives in China and is subject to its state-run and heavily censored media system, Han lacks access to popular blog host sites like Blogger and WordPress; blog-measuring sites like Technorati; and social media platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, and Twitter. Further, Weibo is not readily accessible to audiences outside of mainland China, although modified versions of it exist in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Han and other Chinese bloggers are further disadvantaged by China's relatively low ranking on the Global Creativity Index that measures national levels of financial investment and research, among other technological infrastructural commitments. In 2011, China ranked thirty-seventh, about on a par with Latvia and Bulgaria.⁵⁵ In effect, these technological conditions structure the flows of information and communication that shape bloggers' work experiences, opportunities, and earning potential (in terms of social, cultural, informational, and financial capital). As a result, the social divisions of labor and the social stratifications that exist outside of the Internet are embedded in and supported by the operating logic of search engines and the development logic of telecommunications networks and services.

Even superbloggers who have the advantages of public, industry, and technological attention (such as a top rank in search engine results) participate in the blogosphere under highly asymmetrical and exploitative conditions. Superbloggers who generate hundreds of thousands of clicks on and in their blogs and microblogs (Twitter, Instagram, and so on) may or may not monetize their popularity, but they do create an extraordinary amount of capital for social media sites that these companies depend on for revenue. Popular platforms draw interest and funding from venture capital firms as well as major advertisers—both of which are willing to pay top-ranked Internet companies a lot of money for access to their users' information and attention. The importance of Asian superbloggers to Google

has not escaped the company's notice. When the Web behemoth wanted to understand how new media are consumed and used, it turned to a small handful of experts, among them Lau, Yambao, Ton, and Ethan Nguyen.⁵⁶

For every superblogger who can command public and corporate attention, there are thousands more (across all racial groups) who will never find a general audience, much less a livelihood. Asian superbloggers have won the "glittering prizes" in what Andrew Ross calls the "jackpot economy," but as with all jackpots, there are many more players than there are winners.⁵⁷ As I demonstrate throughout this book, the glittering prizes of substantial online traffic, corporate collaborations, sponsorships, affiliations, and paid freelance writing and speaking opportunities can distract us from noticing that the game is rigged against bloggers, even those who have achieved considerable success. The dominant fashion industry rigs the game in a way that recalls Marx's notion of worker alienation: as Mark Andrejevic puts it, workers' labors are turned back on them.⁵⁸ Ironically, the more successful bloggers are, the better positioned they are for increased self- and corporate exploitation.

Asian superbloggers have acquired a substantial number of privileges within the fashion industry. Yet these privileges come at a cost. The corporate Internet, as Andrejevic has argued, is structured to accelerate and channel users' behaviors for commercial profit. Online publishing services encourage bloggers to make their sites visible to search engines; use tags and categories (a classification system that groups similar blog posts together and makes them searchable); post often; respond to readers' comments; link to other blogs; and even pay for web traffic using services like StumbleUpon, which forwards web content to users. These activities can help increase and sustain high levels of blog traffic—a key goal for superbloggers—but they also demand more and more free labor from the bloggers in the form of more blog posts as well as more Tweets, Instagram photographs, and other social media content. These diverse but converging social media platforms provide additional channels for online traffic to the blog and different possibilities for brand collaborations. In February 2014, for example, Song—whose Instagram account attracts more than four million weekly hits and has more than a million followers—took over the Instagram account for the online fashion retailer Revolve Clothing. These are temporary guest worker arrangements that are in addition

to the personal style blogging that bloggers do for their own social media channels.

Rather than hiring a full-time, permanent employee (who earns a regular salary and benefits), retailers, brands, and designers turn to high-profile superblogger as short-term contract workers to fill a variety of jobs including social media managers, models, and spokespeople. Asian superblogger, as I suggested above, have a structural advantage in fashion's casual labor markets. Not only does their strong online presence provide the all-important personal customer touch points that familiarize consumers with fashion brands, but their racially marked bodies also link them to the kinds of consumers that brands are particularly targeting. In other words, their racial advantage makes them more vulnerable to the exploitative features of casual labor.

In the section that follows, I briefly revisit the history of Asian garment workers. While *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet* focuses on the contemporary forms and practices of Asian fashion work seen in personal style blogging, the history of an earlier mode of Asian fashion work is crucial. Presenting this history even briefly provides an important contextual backdrop for examining the historical continuities, global forces, and racially gendered frameworks that structure the taste work of Asian superblogger today.

To be sure, Asian garment workers' fashion tastes play no role in their production of fashion products. Asian garment workers' bodies—the sites at which taste is perceived, performed, and socially constructed—are fragmented and ultimately alienated from the productive processes of apparel manufacturing. Apparel manufacturing industries exert enormous amounts of control over and abuse of garment workers' bodies (even their bodily functions are controlled by routine denials of bathroom breaks). The near total devaluation of their bodies reduces hundreds of thousands of Asian women and child workers to little more than their labor power. Yet the history of Asian fashion work in apparel manufacturing sectors is worth reviewing in an investigation of Asian personal style superblogging for what it can reveal about changing and enduring racialized hierarchies that structure the political economic and social terrain on which even some of the most elite levels of Asian fashion work take place.

A Critical Review of Asian Fashion Labor

Since the 1970s, Asian women and girls have made major contributions to the global expansion and development of the U.S. fashion industry—now a dominant cultural, economic, and aesthetic power in global fashion. The Asian and Asian American history of the U.S. garment industry is a long and complex story that has been the subject of numerous academic and popular texts. The Asian fashion worker and the garment industry are critical topics in and across development studies; globalization studies; urban studies; feminist labor studies; immigration studies; sociological, political economic, and cultural studies of fashion; and comparative ethnic studies. The Asian garment worker holds a central position in the critical imaginary of Asian American studies and disciplines that intersect and overlap with the field. When Amerasia conducted an inventory of Asian American and Asian diaspora studies publications, the journal's editors found that research "related to the labor issues [surrounding] contemporary garment workers [got] the most attention."⁵⁹ The Asian garment worker also appears in Asian American studies scholarship that is not specifically about labor and economy. For example, literary, media, and cultural studies texts like Darrell Hamamoto's *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* and Laura Hyun Yi Kang's *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* invoke the Asian garment worker as a figure representing global capitalism's transformations. Throughout Asian American and Asian diaspora studies, the Asian garment worker embodies globalization's cultural, social, and economic effects.

Western academic literature, films, news reports, and documentaries about garment workers in general regularly focus on the Asian female fashion worker. In a scholarly essay on digital labor's political significance, David Hesmondhalgh pits the feminized Asian factory worker against (positive) free digital creative labor: "Are we really meant to see people who sit at their computers modifying code or typing out responses to TV shows as 'exploited' in the same way as those who endure appalling conditions and pay in Indonesian sweatshops?"⁶⁰ The gendered racialization of garment workers in these sites accurately reflects contemporary workforce demographics in which Asian women are now a majority (though they have not always been). Such gendered racialization is also present in assumptions about Asian women's natural facility for gendered manual labor—for

example, stereotypes about their nimble fingers. In reducing Asian women to their racial and gendered bodies, the fashion industry has made them both vital and vulnerable to fashion's material conditions and productive economy.

Despite their now ubiquitous presence, Asians have not always participated in the U.S. garment industry. From 1870 to 1965, Asian workers made up a very small minority of the multiracial and multiethnic apparel manufacturing workforce. Beginning in 1882, Asian exclusion laws—which included special bars against Asian women and Asian workers—kept Asians from establishing a foothold in this growing industry. Before the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act reversed these anti-Asian immigration policies, the U.S. garment industry was powered first by Italian and Eastern European Jewish immigrant labor and, following World War I, by African American and Puerto Rican labor.⁶¹

During World War II, Italian and Jewish workers and members of other white ethnic groups left the industry for better-paying jobs related to the war effort, and African Americans who had left the South as part of the Second Great Migration and Puerto Ricans who were emigrating in increasingly large numbers to New York City filled most of the garment industry jobs.⁶² Though African American and Puerto Rican workers formed the majority of the workforce, they rarely occupied management positions, which members of white ethnic groups held until the 1970s. And though the fashion industry turned to Southeast Asia for cheap labor as early as the 1950s (when postwar prosperity increased the demand for clothing and other personal goods), it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that Asian women became a visible presence in the garment industry.

In the mid-1960s, several key events facilitated Asian women's entry into the garment industry: the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, affirmative action policies, and the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Encouraged by recent civil rights victories, African Americans left the garment industry for better employment opportunities, creating a labor shortage that Asians soon alleviated. Chinese, Korean, and Southeast Asian immigrants who were just arriving in the United States after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act took jobs in the garment industry, primarily in Los Angeles and New York City. According to a 1969 Columbia University survey, 23 percent of New York's Chinatown residents were working in the apparel industry at that time.⁶³ Chinese factory owners in New

York's Lower East Side and Chinatown tended to hire Chinese American workers. Korean factory owners who opened shops in midtown Manhattan hired mostly Mexican and Ecuadoran workers.⁶⁴ The ethnic hiring networks and work environments of Chinese-owned garment factories provided Chinese workers with some flexibility in their work time. Margaret M. Chin notes that Chinese factory owners offered courtesies to members of their ethnic group, such as permitting workers to run errands in the middle of the workday or bring their children to work on school holidays. Chinese workers, however, complained that Chinese factory owners often took advantage of them. They worked more hours at piecework rates, earning less money than Latino workers at Korean garment factories who received hourly salaries.

Trade and capital liberalization throughout the 1980s and 1990s shrunk an already faltering U.S. garment industry. When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect in 1994, its impact on the weak U.S. garment industry was almost immediate. In the first year after the U.S. Congress ratified NAFTA (alongside the Canadian Parliament and the Mexican Senate), Los Angeles lost tens of thousands of jobs, while wages plummeted in the jobs that remained.⁶⁵ The 1995 creation of the World Trade Organization, which was designed to expand labor and consumer markets, was another blow to the U.S. garment industry. Between 1997 and 2007, the New York City garment industry lost 650,000 apparel jobs⁶⁶—and it had already lost an average of 2.8 percent of its jobs every year between 1970 and 1987.⁶⁷ Most of these jobs moved to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Mexico, or Central America, where fashion companies found the lower wage, work, and environmental standards easier on their bottom lines. In the 1990s and early 2000s, workers in Asia and Latin America were paid an average of about \$7,200 per year.⁶⁸ In 2005, when the Multi-Fibre Arrangement that had been governing world trade in textiles and garments since 1974 ended, U.S. imports from China of cotton trousers increased by 1,500 percent and imports of cotton shirts increased by 1,350 percent.⁶⁹ As Asia became a world supplier of apparel (with the United States its biggest consumer), the United States lost more textile jobs as well as jobs in ancillary services such as cutting, laundering, and finishing operations.⁷⁰

The apparel manufacturing jobs that remained in the United States after trade liberalization relied, by and large, on the sweated labor of women of color and nonwhite immigrants. A 1998 U.S. Department of Labor study

of seventy Southern California garment factories found that 61 percent violated provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act: owners violated the minimum wage law; failed to pay overtime; did not pay some workers for work; and denied workers standard benefits like sick pay, health insurance, disability protection, and worker grievance systems. Social Security and vacation pay were nonexistent in these factories. Based on this report, Edna Bonacich and Richard Appelbaum estimate that the Los Angeles garment industry was accruing about \$72.6 million in unpaid wages per year.⁷¹ In addition to wage violations, the investigators found that hazardous work conditions were prevalent in most of the factories: blocked and locked exits, nonfunctioning doors and windows, dangerous electrical wiring, and uncapped gas lines. They also found malfunctioning toilets, some of them in the same room where workers worked, ate, and slept.

Bonacich and Appelbaum estimate that the actual percentage of garment factories operating under sweatshop conditions was likely much greater than 61 percent. For example, the Department of Labor survey did not include unregistered and underground firms that accounted for 25–33 percent of the Los Angeles garment industry.⁷² Also uncounted were the makeshift garment factory outposts hidden in the homes of workers. While industrial home work was outlawed in the 1940s because officials found it too hard to monitor wage and work violations (especially involving child labor), home work not only persists today, it is a standard practice in the garment industry.

Ironically, personal style blogging has revived home fashion work not only as an acceptable but also as a lauded mode of fashion labor. The story of Yambao's beginning his blog in 2004 from his parents' home in Manila (at the age of seventeen or twenty-four⁷³) has become more than a personal blog origin story. Frequently invoked in the "how to make it as a fashion blogger" media stories that have become their own genre, the image and idea of this Asian superblogger working from home (voluntarily) underscore Yambao's initiative and passion and the extraordinariness of his rise to superblogger status, as well as functioning as a racially loaded moral tale about the value and practice of the Third World Asian work ethic. As a popular racial mythology, Yambao's story plays an important role in the construction of Asian superblogger as the new model minority of the digital economy.

The myth of the Asian work ethic (to which Yambao contributes to some extent in the construction of his identity as a fame-taxed fashion celebrity) places extra burdens on superblogger whose high level of productivity, in turn, creates greater demands for more and faster production. This is something that both Yambao and Lau have directly addressed on their blogs. In one blog post, Yambao admits that he "sometimes feel[s] like packing up and calling it a day because of the horrible, unreasonable demands by [blog] audiences."⁷⁴ In another entry, he posts screenshots of his various e-mail and Facebook in-boxes, some showing more than 600 new messages.⁷⁵ By his own account, the "horrible, unreasonable demands" of his readers include: "Why are you so slow updating? How dare you not update in days? Why have you changed the way you blog? Why haven't you replied to my emails? Why don't you want to follow me on twitter? Why aren't you replying to my tweets? Why won't you accept my facebook request? Why is your content so different now than what it was three years ago? Why do you have ads? Why do you have lots of ads? Why can't you post more pictures? Why can't you post better pictures?"⁷⁶

Yambao's description of the ever increasing and seemingly relentless expectation for productivity reminds me of the experiences of garment workers interviewed in Tia Lessin's documentary *Behind the Labels*: "Today he [the factory manager] would say that the quota was sixty pieces. Tomorrow he would increase the quota to sixty-five pieces. You reach sixty-five and the next day, he would say seventy. . . . They always yelled at us: 'Why can't you reach 2,000?' The supervisor punched our table and shout[ed] at us . . . 'You work so slow!' His insults were more than you can bear."⁷⁷ Meeting their quotas, the women explain, often require working inhumane hours: "We worked forty hours straight. Two days without eating, sleeping, without changing anything, without toothbrushing. But most of the time, I work like twenty hours, twenty-two hours, twenty-six hours." Long work hours exacerbated the likelihood of accidents such as workplace fires and industrial needles puncturing fingers. Most days, first aid supplies and medicine were padlocked in a cabinet. Locks were removed and air conditioners turned on only in preparation for scheduled investigations by employees of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Asian fashion workers in the information economy do not have to contend with domineering bosses and a hostile work environment. For

superbloggers, the pressure for productivity is both internalized as well as distributed across blog readers. Yet in the examples above we see that Asian superbloggers who do different kinds of fashion work under different operating conditions share with garment workers racialized demands for productivity.

To clarify, I am not arguing that the expectation for constant and high productivity is unique to Asian superbloggers or garment workers. As Jonathan Crary argues, this expectation is a condition of our times, made more widespread by the advent and use of digital communications and the idea that “productive operations . . . do not stop” in our 24/7 world.⁷⁸ Crary means both technological and human productivity. What I am pointing to in the shared experiences of these two distinct groups of Asian fashion workers is that the racialization of their labor power—the idea that Asian fashion workers have a predisposition to hard work and high levels of work demand—is both a source of advantage and of mistreatment in their respective fashion labor markets. They occupy a common fraught position as a model minority labor supply believed to be oriented to hard work, yet racial assumptions about their natural facility for hard and difficult work put them in a position where they must bear the burden of demands (often discourteously made) for unreasonable amounts of work.

Racial and gendered stereotypes about Asian model minority workers have structurally advantaged them in hiring decisions while historically disadvantaging African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and (to a lesser extent) Dominicans seeking jobs in the garment industry, who suffer from corresponding stereotypes about laziness and a quickness to complain. Typically, Asian garment workers are darker skinned due to their working-class, rural background, and/or Indigenous ancestry, and they have little education. Stereotypes about this socially disenfranchised group of workers’ racially gendered docility and willingness to accept substandard work conditions have resulted in a new international division of labor in which the largest portion of the world’s apparel manufacturing is done in Asia. Currently, the four largest exporters of clothing to the United States—which provide a whopping 97.7 percent of the clothing Americans purchase⁷⁹—are all countries in Asia: China, Viet Nam, Indonesia, and Bangladesh (in that order).⁸⁰

The advantage that Asians have in the garment industry is a cruel irony in light of the oppressive work conditions and workplace arrangements that they endure on a daily basis. In 1995, seventy Thai immigrants were held

in a Southern California apartment complex in El Monte that served as a covert garment factory. They were forced to work seventeen-hour days for \$1.60 per hour (the 1995 California minimum wage was \$4.25 per hour). The Thai-Chinese owners of the makeshift factory also charged workers a hundred dollars per month for food and housed sixteen workers in one room. By one account, the apartment complex was “ringed with razor wire and fences with spiked bars turned inward as if to prevent escape. The building’s windows had been covered with cardboard, and the interior had been converted into a fiberboard-and-plywood rabbit warren of crowded living areas and sewing work spaces.”⁸¹ While the owners promised workers they would be freed after paying off their transportation debts, Bonacich and Appelbaum point out that their rock-bottom wages and the vastly inflated costs of food and other supplies “virtually assured that they would never get out of debt peonage.”⁸² Garments manufactured in the El Monte factory were sold at Nordstrom, Sears, Target, and Mervyn’s. They also bore the coveted “Made in the USA” label, which was meant to assure consumers that garments were manufactured in compliance with strict employment, wage, and environmental standards.

What the El Monte factory and other sweatshop factories continue to do illegally in the United States, trade liberalization policies allow U.S. companies to accomplish legally overseas. The garment factories in Saipan are a representative example. In the 1990s, Saipan’s \$1 billion per year garment industry was the island’s economic backbone. Most garment workers were women from China and the Philippines. They paid as much as \$3,600 in recruitment fees (borrowed from friends and family) to travel to Saipan. Their base salary at that time was \$6,350 per year. After paying for room and board (approximately \$2,400 per year) and paying off their recruitment fee debts, workers might earn a net salary of \$350 in their first year.⁸³

Saipan garment workers believed that U.S. employment and wage laws protected them, since Saipan is a U.S. territory and they were making clothes for U.S. companies such as Gap, J. Crew, and Walmart. When workers arrived, however, they discovered that U.S. territories were exempt from U.S. immigration laws, import duties, and federal minimum wage laws. In fact, Congress passed the minimum wage exemption in the early days of 1970s neoliberalism to attract businesses to Saipan and similar locales.

Saipan is an exemplary sign of neoliberalism in Aihwa Ong’s sense of the term. Ong understands neoliberalism as a global system of exception

in which political and economic liminality is a standard feature of life.⁸⁴ Saipan's guest worker economic structure and legislative shell game produce a neoliberal exception by deterritorializing labor and thereby stripping migrant workers of rights they might have under U.S. law or the laws of their origin countries. In so doing, the Saipan garment industry and the U.S. fashion industry operate within a context of exception with respect to wage and employment laws. This state of exception allowed them to disregard U.S. manufacturing standards while still assuring consumers that their clothes were "made in the USA."

In fact, the "Made in the USA" label has long been a cover for severe corporate abuses. Throughout the 1990s, Saipan garment workers' essentially free and round-the-clock labor enabled the all-American fashion company J. Crew to expand into international markets and the Gap Corporation to become the second-largest-selling apparel brand in the world.⁸⁵ While these brands bear the "Made in the USA" label because they were made in a U.S. territory, the label conceals workplace abuses and hazardous workplace environments that are the reality of Asian garment workers' lives. In Lessin's film, a Filipina woman describes her first impressions of a Saipan factory and living barracks: "As we were driving towards the barracks, I was really surprised. I'm asking, 'Is this United States territory?' It's like a rural area in the Philippines. . . . The barracks is [sic] squalid, unsanitary, rat-infested and cockroach-infested. We have ten bunk beds, so twenty people stayed in that place." Another woman notes the unsafe noise levels that workers were subjected to in their rooms: "Next door to my barracks is a sewing workshop. It sounds like a machine gun firing away. Next to my bed is a window with an exhaust fan that sounds like an airplane. I couldn't sleep well for three months. . . . It's not a place suitable for living."⁸⁶

The "Made in the USA" label functions as the kind of spectacle that George Lipsitz identifies as a key feature in "the new patriotism" of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States. He points out that the "nationalistic rhetoric and patriotic display" is odd in an "era of economic and political internationalization."⁸⁷ Yet the new patriotism emerged when it did because it served to provide a feeling and discourse that deflected "attention and anger away from capital" and the racial and gendered configurations and consequences of massive unemployment, wage stagnation, and homelessness that so many Americans experienced at this time, as a result of deindustrialization and deregulation policies. "Made in the USA"

labels obscure the economic realities wrought by neoliberal policies and the racially gendered labor that constitutes the production of fashion commodities bearing the labels. The very policies that move garment work offshore to exceptional sites like Saipan, where Asian female workers are specifically recruited through contractors who promise attractive salaries and work environments, are also the policies that make it possible to devalue this labor force and make it invisible.

Globalization has been disastrous for garment workers in the Global South as well as in the Global North. By all accounts, the number of sweatshops in the United States has increased in the years since the birth of NAFTA and the World Trade Organization. In garment industries abroad, there has been a steady decline in wages, while corporate greed climbs unchecked. A 2013 study prepared by the Worker Rights Consortium found that "garment workers still typically earn only a fraction of what constitutes a living wage—just as they did more than 10 years ago."⁸⁸ Living wages are salaries that afford workers minimum necessities such as adequate nutrition and decent housing. Most garment workers earn about one-third of a living wage. In places like Bangladesh and Cambodia, where wages are lowest, workers make only about one-sixth of a living wage. In nine of the fifteen countries that the 2013 study investigated, real wages had decreased: Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, the Philippines, and Thailand. In the countries where wages increased—China, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Peru, and Viet Nam—the gains were less than 2 percent when adjusted for inflation. As a consequence, the report concludes, "while wage gains for workers in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Haiti were more substantial [than those in other countries], it would take more than 40 years for the prevailing wage rate to equal a living wage even if their recent rates of real wage growth were sustained."⁸⁹ Together, trade liberalization and the interlocking hierarchies of race, color, gender, and class have shaped both the work opportunities and work constraints that characterize Asian fashion work in the apparel manufacturing industry.

Today, it is not trade and labor liberalization but a confluence of several shifts in popular and consumer culture that is shaping the work opportunities and constraints of Asian personal style superbloggers. As I discuss in chapter 1, the global spread of Asian cute culture, the emergence of new fashion markets in Asia as a result of the rapid rise of some

Asian economies, and social media-connected consumers' growing influence on fashion companies' behaviors and strategies have culturally and economically restructured the Western fashion industry around the tastes and Internet activities of Asian fashion consumers. The Asian superblogger who are the focus of this book are structurally advantaged with respect to the broader context in which the business and culture of fashion now operates. They are prime beneficiaries of these shifts and the changing dynamics of race, gender, and labor that are the shifts' effects.

The influence of basically ordinary Asian consumers on fashion advertising, retail, and consumer behavior is both historically unprecedented and historically conditioned. These consumers are the flavor of the Asian decade or Asian century, depending on one's view of global economic forces. Yet their heightened visibility and success have also left a racial aftertaste for fashion industry insiders and media pundits who have tacitly and overtly suggested that they are racial threats to fashion journalism and the standards of taste, decorum, and work ethic that the industry purports to uphold. The fraught positions that Asian superblogger occupy as beneficiaries of racialized preference and targets of racial discrimination, as a racialized labor force in a postracial digital media economy and as signs of the progressive democratizing development of fashion media and markets, as well as symptoms of their decline (for example, lowered barriers to participation mean lowered standards of knowledge and practice), are the focus of chapter 1. First, I argue that their fraught positions signal a continuation of the historically contradictory relation of Asian fashion workers to the fashion industry. Second, I argue that Asian superblogger's fraught positions illustrate the contradictory reality of liberal multicultural and postracial celebrations of diversity and difference (such as the digital democratization of fashion). The paradox that underlies these fraught positions as the subject of popular tastes for racial difference and the object of racial aftertaste demonstrates the implicit conditionality and limits of celebrations of multiculturalism, diversity, and racial tolerance.

After chapter 1 historicizes these blogs and shows their context of global Asian labor and the changing social dynamics of global consumer capitalism, chapters 2 through 5 unpack different elements of the personal style blog and Asian superblogger's negotiations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Asian superblogger are not passive bystanders of the structural forces that condition their participation in contemporary fashion media.

Their blogs are tools for shaping, negotiating, and managing stereotypes of Asian cheapness in the linked terms of taste, work ethic, and morals. How specific blogging practices work to produce and perform Asian superblogger's taste and their fashionable embodiment as a distinct but not radically different racialized tastemaker is the subject of chapters 2 through 5.

Each of these chapters documents, reveals, and carefully analyzes major features of the personal style blog and the specific taste work practices associated with them: the style story, the outfit photo, the blogger pose, and the outfit post, respectively. These are not frivolous formalities of the style blog but rather a complex set of aesthetic, representational, and commercial strategies that reveal the particular ways in which the work of Asian superblogger is raced, gendered, and class-based as well as how the style blog genre, more generally, is at once a cultural form and a commercial product. My critical attention to Asian superblogger's taste work is intended to uncover the shifting and enduring relations of race, gender, class, and labor in one of the most popular spheres of the Internet.

Chapter 2 begins the discussion of Asian superblogger's taste work. I analyze bloggers' style stories—the text that accompanies their outfit photographs—as a complex mode of taste work that involves textual, computational, and identity work in the form of code switching. Drawing on Roland Barthes's theory of "written fashion"⁹⁰ and Bourdieu's formulation of fashion language as a site where the struggle for fashion meanings takes place, I argue that Asian superblogger's style stories are the means by which they articulate themselves as racialized fashionable bodies, as embodiments of legitimate difference.

The code switching in Asian superblogger's style stories is not necessarily about shifting between languages; instead, the shift is in how the bloggers express their Asianness, from a racial difference to a style of racial embodiment. In close analyses of Song's and Yambao's style stories, I argue that the stories function to aestheticize Asianness by recasting racial difference as a style of Asianness that is distinct in terms of taste and, tacitly, class. The bloggers' style stories indicate an important shift in the signification of race in the personal style blogosphere, from the physical and social body to the practices of aesthetic sartorial choice.

Style stories suggest that Asian superblogger wear their race on their sleeves, but as with all things in fashion, how race is worn matters. Chapter 3

focuses on the class-based dimensions of superblogger's taste work practices. Analyzing the aesthetic forms and technocultural structures of outfit photos—the essential feature of personal style blogs—I consider what these photos might tell us about how racialized eliteness is constructed in the personal style blogosphere and what kinds of Asianness are valued when they are attached to eliteness.

Stylistically and formally, all outfit photos look pretty much the same. Some of their most characteristic aesthetic and formal conventions have been credited to Asian superblogger and reproduced *ad infinitum* throughout the blogosphere. Yet hierarchies in the personal style blogosphere—between hobbyist bloggers and superblogger, for example—suggest that outfit photos are almost the same but not quite. Analyzing the formal features of outfit photos produced by the memetic repetition of photographic practices like Lau's mirror shot technique, I argue that there is a difference in the repetition of camera angles and distances. This difference is understated because it is located not on the surface of outfit photos' formal qualities but in the distinction of informational mobilities—of the frequency and extent of the photos' circulation. Outfit photos demonstrate that Asian eliteness in the blogosphere balances distinction with relatability; it is the embodiment of a difference that looks familiar. As with their style stories, Asian superblogger's outfit photos and other taste work practices are ways to construct the bloggers' legitimate difference as racialized taste makers and style leaders.

Chapter 4 focuses on fashion blogger poses, particularly the brand-name poses Lau and Yambao invented—the Susie Bubble pose and the BryanBoy pose. The significant amount of cultural, social, and financial capital these bloggers have accrued through the poses and their memetic repetition suggest that the poses function as job performances that have the power to heighten bloggers' status and role in the blogosphere. I argue that fashion blogger poses in general reflect the changing values and gendered attitudes related to knowledge, expertise, and authority in informational capitalism. However, the brand-name poses bear the marks of the ongoing racial disparities in the blogosphere, even for elite bloggers. As I explain, they were created in response to and are performances of racial ambivalence. As job performances, then, they represent the added racial and gender dimensions of impression management against stereotypes

that workers belonging to minority groups are often pressed to perform in traditional workplaces.

Chapter 5 returns to an early and central premise of this book: that while there are structural similarities that link new and earlier forms of fashion work, Asian superblogger do not necessarily acknowledge these links. In fact, bloggers actively maintain the divide between digital and physical labors. An investigation of the technological and aesthetic conventions of the primary mode of personal style blogging called outfit posting demonstrates that bloggers use the digital technologies and practices available to them to render invisible the spaces and times they move through in doing the work of blogging and self-fashioning (for example, driving to retail sites and trying on clothes). Outfit posts represent personal style blogging as an effortless activity. Their spatial and temporal conventions suggest that bloggers come by their stylishness easily and effortlessly, confirming the idea of the personal style blogosphere as a site of real and natural style.

The construction of blogging as effortless has two contradictory implications that I examine in chapter 5. It has the positive effect of disassociating the concept of Asian fashion work from sweated labor, but it also has the negative effect of deskilling personal style blogging in ways that have historically defined and justified the devaluation of women's work. This produces a doubly negative effect for Asian superblogger. First, it deskills the very significant knowledge and expertise they have with respect to media work, bodily work, and taste work. And second, the racial hierarchies that have historically organized women's work (often performed not just by women but also by Asian men, for example, as laundry workers and domestic workers) especially devalues Asians in ways that raise the racialized specter of cheap Asian workers. In outfit posting, the primary mode of media production for personal style bloggers, the structural intersections of race, gender, and class that shape Asian fashion labor in manufacturing sectors are both disrupted and reinforced by Asian fashion labors in the blogosphere.

Chapter 1.

The Taste and Aftertaste for Asian Superbloggers

The message on the sign American designer Marc Jacobs was photographed holding read: “I love you BryanBoy! I wish you were here. (I did write it!!!).”¹ The photograph, taken by *V* magazine fashion photographer JD Ferguson backstage at Jacobs’s fall–winter 2008–9 fashion show in New York City, is just one of hundreds of tokens of affection that fans have sent to the queer Filipino personal style blogger. Like the others, it exemplifies the public’s taste not only for the blogger’s fashion choices but especially for the blogger himself. What makes this fan message stand out from all the others that Bryan Grey Yambao shares on his blog is that it comes from within the Western fashion industry. The message, created backstage at one of the most important fashion events in the world by one of the most illustrious designers in the world, indicates the reach of the blogger’s mass appeal into the citadel of establishment fashion. In two more incredible acts of fanboying, Jacobs created a \$4,800 army green ostrich leather handbag that he named BB (in honor of the blogger) and styled the white American male model Cole Mohr to look like the spitting image of Yambao in his *Marc by Marc Jacobs* ads (shot by the preeminent photographer Jürgen Teller).² See figures 1.1 and 1.2.

The Marc Jacobs “I love you BryanBoy” photo and the media frenzy it ignited introduced the practice of personal style blogging to the mainstream



1.1 (left) Yambao in the Singapore edition of *Style* magazine, December 2008, 197.

1.2 (right) Mohr in the Marc by Marc Jacobs autumn-winter 2008 ad campaign for both men's and women's lines.



fashion public and changed Yambao from an ordinary personal style blogger to a celebrity personality. Media outlets from the mainstream (such as the *New York Times Magazine*³) to the alternative (*Schönl!*⁴) began referring to him using the new title of superblogger.

Not until about a year later would another blogger—also Asian—garner similar levels of public and industry attention. Audiences watching the fall 2010 fashion shows live and online couldn't help see Susanna Lau (aka Susie Bubble) as a source of inspiration for some of what appeared on the most exclusive runways. The models for luxury brands like Lanvin (at Paris Fashion Week) and Erin Fetherston (at New York Fashion Week) all wore Lau's signature long straight hair with blunt-cut bangs. One blogger enthusiastically observed, "susie bubble [sic] you know you are doing something right when half the runway shows from the big leagues had your hair, I think unconsciously or consciously you got them!"⁵

Not long after the fashion shows ended, ads appeared on the Internet seeming to confirm that Lau's style had become the taste of the Western fashion industry. In one such ad for California-based indie online retailer Moxsie, the featured model bore a striking resemblance to Lau, physically and sartorially. For the fashion news aggregate blog *Racked New York* (owned by Vox Media), the ad was a cultural signpost. One of the blog's headlines declared, "Moxsie's Nod to Blogger Susie Bubble Is the Sign of the Times."⁶ While the ad doesn't mention Lau or her blog, most took the omission as an indication of her prominence. As the blog's article explains, "So maybe the ad doesn't mention Susie's name because it doesn't have to—Moxsie expects shoppers to recognize her look on their own."⁷

The fashion public's and industry's taste for Asian superblogger Yambao; Lau; and the third member of the blogosphere's holy Asian trinity, the mixed-race Japanese American Rumi Neely (the first blogger to appear in a national advertising campaign of a major retailer—*Forever 21*—and the first to appear on a Times Square billboard) coincides with and is strengthened by broader shifts in the context in which Asians' relations to the global economy are understood. This is a time when, as Mimi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Tu write, there is a strong "popular appetite for all goods Asian in both the United States and the West more generally" and Asian Americans are "being courted by the corporate marketplace" as never before.⁷ In the introduction, I discussed a particular focus of this manifestation of the cultural taste for Asian creativity in the critical and public attention to the Asian creative class. The discursive construction of this new labor class as a group that is both racialized yet seemingly unaffected by racial barriers or racial discrimination serves to legitimate claims about the postracial yet liberal multicultural structure of the so-called new economy. It also reflects the constitutive contradiction of Asian superblogger's fraught position in contemporary Western fashion economies. The emergence of the Asian personal style superblogger indicates the Western fashion industry's continued dependence on racialized labor (Asian superblogger are a pivotal workforce in the Asian moment of fashion) as well as the image of the new postracial fashion economy (in which anyone—even a gay Filipino kid—can reach the heights of fashion cultural and economic influence).⁸ While queerness is normative in Western fashion industries, the racial and regional difference Yambao represents as a young Asian man from a Third World country was headline news.

An article from *Agence France-Presse* has the headline “Philippine Blogger Stirs a Fashion Revolution,”⁹ and another from *Gawker* is suggestively titled “Marc Jacobs Wrapped around Finger of This Gay Filipino Blogger.”¹⁰

I begin this chapter by elaborating on the context within which the cultural and economic influence of Asian superblogger emerged. How did Asian superblogger styles and tastes become so significant in the early twenty-first century? What I am concerned with is what Pierre Bourdieu describes as “the logic of the space of [taste] production”¹¹ and the location of Asian superblogger within these logics and spaces of production. In other words, what are the conditions that set the stage for Asian superblogger to become the flavor of the decade (or century)? In the latter half of the chapter, I consider the logic of conditionality and tolerance implicit in the discourses of liberal multiculturalism and postracism that frame the meanings of Asian superblogger’s prominence in the historically white cultural domain of fashion media and imagery. My argument is that the backlash against Asian superblogger can be understood as both the evidence and end of conditional tolerance. In other words, the backlash or the racial aftershave following the multicultural taste for Asian superblogger is a marker of the inherent limits of tolerance as an approach to diversity and difference. This chapter momentarily sets aside questions about the ways Asian superblogger position themselves within taste production spaces. How Asian superblogger position and negotiate their racial and labor identities through their taste work is the focus of the chapters that follow. The purpose of this chapter is to understand the context and extent of Asian superblogger’s rise to some of the most rarefied spheres of Western fashion media and markets.

Asian superblogger’s elite status cannot be understood through racial generalizations about their talent for media production and media relations, their work ethic, or their fashion sensibility. They are beneficiaries of cultural economic shifts that began in the late 1970s and that have accelerated rapidly in the early years of the twenty-first century. As I explain below, the global diffusion of Japanese cute culture, the ascendancy of Asian creative industries and luxury markets that have turned the Western fashion industry’s economic focus toward Asia, and the social media-led expansion of ordinary consumers’ power to drive fashion advertising and marketing have created space for some Asian bloggers to flourish. This does not discount the very significant ways Asian superblogger have built

on and expanded their roles as new tastemakers, but it provides a context for understanding the practices and significance of their taste work.

The Globalization of Cute Culture and Cute Work

Asian and Asian-like commodities have been produced and consumed transnationally for centuries. Chinese porcelains and tea sets and innumerable chinoiserie objects have been circulating globally since the seventeenth century as symbols and practices of “patrician Orientalism.”¹² In the context of Western fashion, Asia-inspired clothing styles and design motifs have been recurring themes. Some notable examples include Paul Poiret’s 1911 *jupes sultane* (harem pants), Jean Paul Gaultier’s 1999 kimono bikini ensembles, and Prada’s 2013 coats embroidered with origami flowers.¹³

What is distinct about the contemporary global market of Asian commodities and consumers is that it is driven by the aesthetic practices and productions of Asians themselves, rather than non-Asians. The most widely recognized Asian commodities today are those of Japanese cute culture, and none is more recognizable than that cute cat with the marshmallow-y head named Hello Kitty. For Christine Yano, Hello Kitty is “the global icon of cute”¹⁴ because it invites multiple modes of relating to it. Hello Kitty is a site of nostalgia, generational bridging (between mothers and daughters, for example), irony, sexual fetish (as an ideal feminine figure because it is “a mute presence that does not look back at you or judge”¹⁵), and a site for reclaiming a postfeminist “girl power” that doesn’t mutually exclude “frilliness and dominance.”¹⁶ All of these consumer relations are built into and expressed through the Hello Kitty global empire of products that target multinational and multiracial markets for girls, women, men, and so-called adult girls (adult women who identify with girl culture). Among the 15,000 or so Hello Kitty products are plush toys, board and video games, furry slippers, plastic fly swatters, sanitary napkins, body fat monitors, exhaust pipes, lawnmowers, men’s underwear, and a Boeing 777 jet plane operated by a Taipei-based EVA Airways crew. Product sales alone net the Sanrio Corporation \$2.86 billion annually.¹⁷

The economic power of Asian cute culture can also be seen in Pikachu, the small, chubby, yellow bunny-like Pokémon¹⁸ character with small, black, shoe-button eyes and rosy pink cheeks. Pikachu is the fastest-selling game in the Pokémon franchise, which holds the record for the second-most-

popular game franchise (in terms of sales) in the world. Mario, another Nintendo creation, holds the number one spot.¹⁹ In the broader popular culture beyond video games, Pikachu is also an economic powerhouse. In Time's list of "The Best People of 1999" (ranked, in part, by each contender's earnings that year), the magazine listed Pikachu second, following Ricky Martin but beating J. K. Rowling and Prince William.²⁰

As should be clear by now, cute culture crosses continents and oceans. Its transnational spread—what Yano describes as "pink globalization"²¹—means that it represents an Asian global market rather than a niche one. One of the largest markets for Japanese cute culture is the United States. When *Pokémon: The First Movie* opened in the United States in November 1999, observers noted that "it played on over 3,000 screens (in contrast to 2,000 in Japan) and was the week's top-ranked movie, grossing close to first week sales for *Star Wars, Episode I* (and surpassing those of *Lion King*)."²²

The global economic impact of cute culture is only one dimension of its significance. For academic and popular observers, the global phenomenon of Japanese (as well as Korean and Taiwanese) cute culture indicates that the global hegemony of the Western ideal of masculine cool is giving way to a new and differently racialized and gendered ideal of Asian feminine cuteness. As one *Newsweek* article gushes, "Western-style cool is out. Everything Japanese is in—and oh, so 'cute'!"²³

Scholars argue—rightly, I believe—that the phenomenon of Asian cute culture is both a reflection and an extension of the rising "soft power" of Asian markets in the global economy. Rather than the "hard power" of military or other coercive forces, cute culture represents Asia's "soft power" of economic co-optation through feminized personal and entertainment consumer goods and feminine shopping activities.²⁴ Consumers turn to Asian cute cultural products not because they are forced to but because these commodities fulfill consumers' personal desire for the cute, the sweet, the feminine, and the soft.²⁵ Cute culture's mass appeal has to do with its promotion of warmth and intimacy in an increasingly cold and technologically intensive world. In Yano's words, it "can be seen as part of a more generalized nostalgic reaction to a highly technologized, depersonalized world. Thus, 'cute'—Japanese or otherwise—can represent a turn to emotion and even sentimentality."²⁶ This echoes Larissa Hjorth's observation that Asian Pacific consumers' cute customization of mobile devices with *kawaii* wallpaper, toy attachments, phone covers, and so on "is about per-

sonalising impersonal technologies, and rendering 'cold' dehumanised new technologies friendly, human or 'warm.'"²⁷

Studies of cute culture have not taken notice of the fashion blogosphere. This is a surprising oversight, since that blogosphere's visual, textual, sartorial, and body language is steeped in the aesthetic logic, goals, and judgments of cute. Cuteness is apparent in bloggers' linguistic and kinesthetic practices. These include the extensive use of nonstandard words (for example, "logo-a-go-go"; "bargainous printastic sweater"; and Yambao's signature sign-off, "baboosh"—an onomatopoeic word describing the sound that blowing a wet kiss makes); spelling (such as "gonna" and "kewl"); "backchannel sounds" (like "ah," "hmmm," "ugh," and "grr"); and emotional icons including emoticons, graphic symbols, and the linguistic shorthand for hugs and kisses ("xo"). The photographic poses that personal style bloggers perform are also cute. In front of the camera—one that is always either controlled or directed by the blogger—they construct a visual rhetoric of cuteness in the ways they position their heads, bodies, and faces. Their poses suggest youthfulness, modesty, informality, and guilelessness. Some of the most common blogger poses are the pigeon-toed stance; the "elsewhere gaze," which avoids eye contact with the camera lens and viewer; and the "sugar bowl," pose in which the blogger places two hands on the front of his or her hips, making the body appear smaller and thus younger.

In addition to, and perhaps more important than, the physical configurations of the body, personal style bloggers' poses can be understood within the context of cute culture because they exhibit what Gabriella Lukács identifies as a central feature of cuteness, "semantic flexibility."²⁸ Lukács's critical insight about the semantic flexibility of cuteness provides an important key to understanding the racial and gender dimensions of the production of cute, or cute work. Lukács's analysis focuses on the Net Idol phenomenon in Japan in the 1990s and 2000s. Net Idols are young Japanese women who produce their own websites that feature personal photos and narratives characterized by cute aesthetics and practices. "Net Idols offer diverse styles of care and cater to different types of needs" by creating online personas (sometimes even fictitious biographies) and digital images that are tailored to the expectations and requests of predominantly male audiences.²⁹ Lukács's informants stress that they are not sex workers, underscoring this point with examples of times they have taken

individual viewers to task for requests that they felt were too sexually suggestive or provocative.

For Lukács, the essential cuteness of Net Idols' activities is not located in the visual aesthetics of their practices and productions but in the quality of their work ethic. Drawing on the more nuanced meaning of cute (*kawaii*) in its original Japanese context, Lukács states: "I challenge the assumption that cute connotes a particular physical appearance of behavior that can be described using a stable set of signifiers. Instead, I stress that semantic flexibility is a central feature of the notion of cute." The word *kawaii* is not limited to describing babies; small animals; and small, soft, fuzzy things. Quoting Koga Reiko, Lukács contends that "*kawaii* is a magical word because it can designate almost anything that is round, weak, bright, small, smooth, warm, or soft."³⁰ Thus, Lukács concludes, "cute is a signifier that accommodates."

Net Idols are engaged in productions of cuteness because they embody an accommodating and highly gendered service-oriented worker who is "approachable, gentle, soft, and even submissive."³¹ What's more, Net Idols provide these services of care work for little to no money. While cyberentertainment companies have exploited opportunities to capitalize on the Net Idols phenomenon by skimming profits from Net Idols' entrepreneurial ventures (such as paid fan events, CDs, DVDs, postcards, T-shirts, and so on that are sold on their websites), sales of these items are rarely enough to provide Net Idols with a livelihood. Still, Net Idols cite intangible rewards such as self-exploration, self-realization, and fun as motivating factors for their production of cuteness. Some of the Japanese women that Lukács spoke to said that the tedium of their paid office jobs became so unbearable that they quit to pursue their Net Idols activities on a full-time basis. As Lukács puts it, "unpaid work in the digital media economy is for some Net Idols the only possibility for finding self-fulfilling work."³²

Through her analysis of the Net Idols phenomenon, Lukács illuminates some of the ways that the gendered dynamics of cute culture are reshaping the new economy. She locates in cute culture "an emerging form of rationality (the foundational logic of neoliberal governmentality) within which individuals accept and even celebrate the end of job security as a marker of a shift from the postwar order of 'working to find pleasure' to the neoliberal imperative to 'find pleasure in work.'"³³ The Net Idols phenomenon is, in Lukács's formulation, producing and reproducing a gendered labor

supply that embraces the conditions and forms of economic precariousness that is endemic to digital media economies.

The numerous ways in which personal style blogging overlaps with Net Idols activities is uncanny to me. Both are highly gendered forms of labor in which processes of capital accumulation converge with and rely on processes of social reproduction. The payoff for the vast majority of personal style bloggers, like Net Idols, is negligible at best. The time and energy they devote to fashioning their bodies and images, building social networks, communicating with their audiences, and being attentive to the audiences' needs generate almost entirely only immaterial rewards for workers. With the institutionalization of these activities, however, companies have found a way to squeeze out profits from what is mostly free labor. Website hosting companies, branding and marketing companies, and the various retailers that sell the cute clothes and accessories that are key components in the production of cute have capitalized on these Internet users' self-expressive practices. Strikingly, even some of the cute poses that Net Idols perform in front of their webcams are similar to bloggers' poses. While there are no hard-and-fast rules for Net Idols poses—or for blogger poses, for that matter—the performance and production of cuteness through these bodily practices suggest that cuteness is an unspoken rule in both work environments.

While I have never come across any evidence that Net Idols have directly inspired Asian superblogger, I see the influence of cute culture in the gendered work rationale that Lukács so helpfully identifies. For me, though, work modes of accommodation (toward taking on multiple and varied tasks, meeting an audience's needs and expectations, and learning and improving on skills as needed) are not just gendered expectations but also particularly racialized ones. Asian women, more than other groups of women, have been racially stereotyped as more (and happily) inclined to accommodate, serve, and care for others for little other reason than that they want to.

The phenomena of Japanese Net Idols and Asian superblogger indicate that cute culture—and the digital technologies and cultural practices now so integral to its production and circulation—has extended and strengthened the link between Asian women and labors of accommodation. The especially high visibility of both groups of Asian cute workers suggests that this link is not coincidental but structural, resulting from systems of knowledge and power that racially gender Asian women as especially suited for and

good at accommodation work. The global popularity of Asian cute culture has whet the Western consumer's appetite, cultivating the taste for Asian cuteness that Asian superblogger embody to a tee. Asian superblogger—for all their differences in ethnicities, dress styles, and shopping habits (some preferring to mix "high" and "low" fashion, others sticking to luxury brands)—are all conventionally cute. Their bodies and faces generally reflect rather than challenge Western standards of beauty (including thinness, youthfulness, and cuteness) that the fashion industry rigorously promotes. While Asian superblogger are all attractive and incredibly successful, they are not immune from feelings of racial ambivalence. Lau's sartorial and posing style, as I have briefly mentioned above and will discuss in greater detail throughout this book, stems from her racial ambivalence about her face and especially her eyes. Yambao has expressed the desire for racially implicated plastic surgery: "I really need to get a fuckin nose job and chin implant soon."³⁴

In the Asian moment of fashion, these superblogger's Asian (but not too Asian) subjectivities have important value to Western fashion companies. This may be why they have found their most receptive audiences in the West, particularly in the United States and Canada.³⁵ Yambao has noted in his blog that the consumer and retail publics in the Philippines don't even know he exists.³⁶ This is an exaggeration, but his statement suggests the importance of Euro-American tastes for the production and circulation of Asian cute culture.

The racially gendered logic of cute work—the notion that Asians exemplify feminine qualities of service and are sweetly willing and happy to work hard for others for little or no pay—structurally advantages Asian superblogger. Outside of cute culture's sphere of influence, the same racially gendered stereotype has benefited Asian garment workers. Though garment workers are not engaged in cute productions (of language, behavior, body, or affect), the link between Asian women and accommodation work connects garment workers to cute workers. As I discussed in the introduction, Asian garment workers are advantaged in hiring decisions because they are perceived to embody the accommodating worker in all its racially gendered dimensions. The rise of cute culture has facilitated the continuation and expansion of this racially gendered logic of labor into digital realms, to the "benefit" of Asian superblogger. I use quotes because, as I have tried to make clear, the structurally advantageous position

that Asian fashion workers occupy also puts them in the position of being more vulnerable to self- and corporate exploitation.

While there is significant overlap between the cute productions of Net Idols and the work of Asian superblogger, there is an important difference between the gendered meanings of their unwaged yet corporatized labors. According to Lukács, Net Idols' unwaged work has gendered associations of weakness and submissiveness (qualities that Net Idols perform on their websites as part of their accommodative aesthetic and approach to their work). The unwaged work of personal style bloggers articulates a different but still gendered racial meaning—in this case, about passion, not weakness. For bloggers, even superblogger, not earning a blogging income and not caring about this fact serves as a badge of authenticity. Bloggers stress on their blogs and in interviews that they produce their blogs not for money or fame but for the genuine love of fashion, of connecting with other fashion enthusiasts, and of creative expression. Yambao, the superblogger whose indirect earnings were the first to be made public (and sensationalized), insists in an interview that "for me money is really not the issue, it's about getting material and getting my content." He notes, too, that he'd even be willing to forgo his fees: "If it's something or somebody that I support, then of course I'm not going to charge."³⁷ Whether or not his statements are sincere is irrelevant. The salient issue is his expression of a cute work rationale that emphasizes a willingness to be flexible and accommodating—taking on a variety of different jobs that were once the highly specialized work domains of writers, photographers, trend forecasters, and fashion models—even if it means working for free. (Despite repeated claims about his artistic passion, Yambao and other Asian superblogger have borne the brunt of critics' accusations about bloggers' fame mongering. As I discuss below in this chapter, the aftertaste of Asian superblogger is also racialized.)

Fashion's Asian Moment

In addition to cute culture, the taste for Asian superblogger has been conditioned by the ascendancy of Asian economies and markets that has convinced many observers that the future of the global economy is in Asia. The Asian decade (or century) in the fashion context has seen the meteoric rise of Asian fashion workers across multiple creative labor sectors,

including fashion designers, models, and editors. What's more, Asian consumers across countries and class groups (because not all luxury consumers have luxury-level salaries³⁸) constitute a vast, geographically dispersed, and growing market that is supporting the multibillion-dollar global Western fashion industry.

Asian fashion designers are perhaps the most distinguished contributors to this Asian moment. Asian American designers in the United States—including Vera Wang, Anna Sui, and Jason Wu (the designer of Michelle Obama's first and second inaugural gowns), Phillip Lim, Alexander Wang, Peter Som, Derek Lam, and Humberto Leon and Carol Lim, are recognized and largely respected as global fashion powerhouses. Wang's presence in Europe was recently strengthened by his appointment as creative director of the Paris fashion house Balenciaga; similarly, Leon and Lim took the reins of the Paris-based luxury goods and clothing company Kenzo. Asian brands based in Asia, notably Couronne (Korea) and Woo (China), are also becoming popular in European fashion markets. Likewise, designers from China, India, Malaysia, and Singapore such as Jenny Ji, Lu Xiaoyu, Lili Lee, Stella Lam, Zheng Xiaodan, Zhang Yuhao, Masaba Gupta, Tanvi Kedia, Farah Khan, and Feng Zhu have all captured global attention in recent years. Much of the attention Chinese designers are receiving around the world is due to the support and visibility of China's first lady, Peng Liyuan. Peng regularly turns to Chinese designers rather than European or American ones when she needs an outfit for a public event. These fashion choices, like those of the U.S. first lady, Michelle Obama, are widely observed and have a considerable impact on retail sales.³⁹

Asia's design boom is the result of a deliberate economic strategy put in place by state officials and international investors. As Thuy Linh Tu explains in *The Beautiful Generation*, state and business actors responded to "free market heightened anxieties" in the 1990s: "As nervous leaders began strategizing about how to contend with the open market, they repeatedly stressed the need to 'move up the value chain.'"⁴⁰ Because designing and branding are value chain pinnacles, "Asian government leaders increasingly saw access to this sector as the key to gaining long-term advantage, meaning long-term profit."⁴¹ Rather than compete with apparel-manufacturing countries like Viet Nam and Bangladesh, where labor costs are much lower, countries like China, India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka began developing

their creative sectors by opening new design schools and developing partnerships with U.S. and European design schools. Global fashion events like Design by Shanghai at London Fashion Week in 2013 are the outcomes of these efforts.

The rising prominence of Asian fashion producers globally is matched by the growing market power of Asian consumers in the global fashion economy. Since about 2008, Asian fashion consumers in key cities have moved from the periphery to the center of public fashion discourse. Today, considerations of Asian consumers shape decisions across the global fashion commodity chain. As I have written elsewhere,⁴² the confluence of debt crises, record unemployment levels, and diminished consumer confidence felt in the United States, Europe, and Japan, as well as the massive economic growth in parts of Asia, has enabled cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Manila, Mumbai, and Hong Kong to emerge as new luxury markets.⁴³ In fact, China is on track to become the second-largest luxury market by 2017. Western designers are doing whatever they can to court these highly valuable consumers, including designing exclusive lines sold only in Asia.⁴⁴ These Asia-only collections are, in the words of the *Los Angeles Times*, "infus[ed] . . . with Asian sensibilities in look, feel, and size."⁴⁵ Economic growth is quite a bit slower in Southeast Asia than in East and South Asia, but Thailand is also attracting interest from fashion companies as a site for luxury stores. In 2012, the number of such stores in Thailand grew 17.6 percent, outpacing the global average of 8 percent.⁴⁶

Western fashion companies are not just designing for and opening stores in key Asian markets. They are also launching their initial public offerings in Asia-based stock exchanges. Prada, Salvatore Ferragamo, Jimmy Choo, and Coach all pursued initial public offerings in Hong Kong. With a 2011 combined market capitalization of nearly \$17 trillion, the Hong Kong Stock Exchange is Asia's second-largest stock market (just behind the Tokyo Stock Exchange) and the sixth-largest stock market in the world.⁴⁷ As the *Financial Times*, *Forbes*, and the *Atlantic's Wire* have all reported, fashion companies look to the Hong Kong Stock Exchange to be closer to their new consumer base.⁴⁸

As well as seeking the home-field advantage in Asian stock markets, luxury fashion companies are attempting to court Asian consumers through advertising. Western brands are buying up ad pages in the Asian editions

of U.S. and European fashion magazines like *Vogue* (*Vogue China* was launched in 2005 and *Vogue Thailand* in 2013) as well as in special Asia-themed issues like *V* magazine's summer 2011 issue. The Asian moment in fashion has also seen an increase in the hiring of Asian models for both print media and runway shows—though the increase is not as significant as it is generally perceived to be. Still, a small handful of Asian models like China's Du Juan, Shu Pei Qin (Maybelline's spokesmodel), and Liu Wen (Estée Lauder's first Asian face); South Korea's Hyoni Kang, So Young Kang, and Lee Hyun; Japan's Tao Okamoto; and Canada's Geoffrey Gao have risen to supermodel status in recent years.⁴⁹ As fashion news journalists and fashion modeling agents have noted, the rise of Asian models follows the rise of Asian luxury markets.⁵⁰

The interest in having faces that reflect Asian consumers in fashion ads does not always lead to the hiring of Asian models. The highest echelons of the fashion modeling industries remain glaringly white even in fashion's Asian moment.⁵¹ In major fashion spreads such as those in the American (September 2011) and Japanese *Vogue* (October 2011), as well as fashion films like *Paris-Shanghai: A Fantasy* (a short film accompanying the Chanel 2009 prefall runway show), white models Karlie Kloss, Crystal Renn, Freja Beha, and Baptiste Giabiconi achieve the Asian look through yellowface makeup techniques.⁵² Not surprisingly, all of these fashion events were directed by white editors and designers (respectively, Tonne Goodman, Anna dello Russo, and Karl Lagerfeld).

While some attempts to attract Asian consumers have been wildly misguided, the industrywide interest in the Asian consumer fashion market has generated new opportunities for some of the most highly visible Asian consumers as brand ambassadors. Asian superblogger like Neely, Lau, and Aimee Song have fronted national advertising campaigns for American brands like *Forever 21*, *Gap*, and *Michael Kors*, respectively (Neely was the first ever personal style blogger to do so). Highlighting the authenticity of products by using a real person rather than a fashion model has become a popular strategy in the age of social commerce. The influence of social commerce is the third factor and last point I will discuss that played a role in the rise of the Asian personal style superblogger.

Personal Style Bloggers Are Real People, Too

The first known use of the term *social commerce* was in 2005, when Yahoo launched its online store.⁵³ But the practices of social commerce—the employment of social networking technologies and their capacities (such as online posting, linking, sharing, following, and commenting) as tools for buying and selling products online and offline—began at least a decade earlier. In 1995, *Amazon.com* was the first company to let customers post reviews of products on its site. With the launch of the social networking site *MySpace* in 2003 and the online review site *Yelp* in 2004, peer-to-peer product promotions became an everyday aspect of the consumer experience.

Product and service endorsements by so-called real people rather than actors, star athletes, or other celebrities are of course not new. People have long exchanged product referrals with friends, neighbors, and family members. In the earliest days of radio and television, product endorsements by the randomly chosen average man, woman, or housewife were a regular part of the mediascape, and for good reason. The use of real people in advertising is an effective marketing and branding strategy. It lends credibility to the endorsement and a sense of authenticity to the brand. It suggests that the company prioritizes the consumer's point of view.

Social media have amplified the reach and engagement of real-person advertising, also called reality advertising. Rather than wait for a reality ad to air on the radio or television, consumers with access to social media are able to seek out, create, and share product reviews to audiences that can circulate across time zones and continents. Today, reality advertising takes many forms, including blog posts, tweets, *Yelp* reviews, Facebook status updates, and print and television ads. More often than not, these ads are broadcast or shared across media systems. If a company is lucky, the ad will go viral, traveling a great distance from its target market to reach new consumers.

The fashion industry was slow to embrace social media. With their peer-to-peer communications and its tolerance, if not outright welcoming, of the amateur opinion, social media and commerce are structurally opposed to the fashion industry's top-down, hierarchical, and highly guarded organization of taste and value. But by 2009, social commerce had become the predominant business model for designers, retailers,

and editors, who were all openly endorsing the social media values of connection, collaboration, and public engagement. When an Ann Taylor Loft customer placed a comment on the retailer's Facebook page complaining that its new silk cargo pants "look great, if you're 5'10" and a stick like the model," the company's manager of digital programs responded the following day by posting Facebook photographs of Loft employees (who ranged in size from 2 to 12, and in height from 5'3" to 5'10") modeling the pants. The company's responsiveness to regular customers and its use of "real women" to model the pants made headline news in a wide range of media outlets from the social media news site Mashable⁵⁴ to the business news site Forbes⁵⁵ and the Huffington Post.⁵⁶ Consumers rewarded the company's attentiveness with praise in social media (effectively, consumer-initiated viral marketing) and with increased sales. In the second quarter of 2010, following the Facebook photos, the company saw a 16 percent rise in same-store sales and a 55 percent increase in its e-commerce sales.⁵⁷

The discourse of real women signals a shift but not a complete overhaul in the aspirational values of the fashion industry. While fashion companies and magazines still draw on aspirational fantasies, brand approachability or relatability has emerged as a key concern in the industry. There is a strong sense in fashion commercial markets of the importance of relatability in building and strengthening customer relations. Such relatability is established in various ways from the use of amateur models to the ease with which users navigate a company's website to the pleasantness and speed of a company's social media responsiveness. Brand approachability and corporate relatability have as much to do with meeting current commercial standards for customer service as with demonstrating the company's cultural relevance in the social media age. The importance of projecting an image of cultural relevance cannot be underestimated for companies competing in an industry that imagines itself as "a bellwether for modernity and a mirror of its (future) time."⁵⁸ Cultural relevance is the lifeblood of fashion companies.

Today, real women are not only a feature of fashion advertising and marketing strategies, but they have also become a main fashion event. As one journalist observed, the "real woman" is . . . greeted with much fanfare and acclaim and frenzied discussion."⁵⁹ But as critics have rightly argued, for all the attention that the fashion industry is devoting to real women, its

discursive and embodied construction remains discouragingly narrow.⁶⁰ The real women in fashion media are generally not represented by, for example, disabled women, obese women, or women whose gender presentation is nonnormative. Nonetheless, the discourse of real women circulates widely in the fashion industry. National ad campaigns like the 2010 Jones New York "Empowering Your Confidence" campaign (which featured ordinary career women in their favorite Jones New York outfits) and fashion shows by Donna Karan, Betsey Johnson, Alberta Ferretti, Rick Owens, and many others that replace fashion models with nonmodels keep the discourse of real women alive in fashion media and consumer culture.

Personal style bloggers benefit from and contribute to the reality culture of social commerce. Indeed, personal style bloggers are a key real people constituency. Every day, they post tens of thousands of real person ads that can be shared, searched, and shopped (when they are linked to retail sites). Their blog posts demonstrate in intimate detail how products fit into and enhance the everyday lives of real people. This is what advertisers call brand storytelling, and bloggers provide these stories every day for free. In the age of social commerce, when peer-to-peer consumer communications and consumer-generated connections with brands are the driving forces of consumer behaviors, personal style blogs are an important sphere of social commercial activity. Whereas peer customer reviews and endorsements are just one of a multitude of activities that take place in other social media sites, these are the primary activities in the personal style blogosphere.

But unlike conventional reality ads or other forms of reality media—such as reality television—that are created for a general audience, personal style blogs are addressed to an imagined and bounded audience. Studies of self-presentation in social media have found that social media users do not write into a digital abyss but to an imagined or, as danah boyd describes it, "cognitively constructed" audience.⁶¹ Alice Marwick and danah boyd explain in their study of Twitter users that "in the absence of certain knowledge about audience, participants take cues from the social media environment to imagine the community."⁶² For bloggers, these cues include readers' comments, online traffic sources (the ways in which readers come to the blog, such as via Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook), keywords in searches (the search terms readers use to find the blog), and the relative

popularity of blog posts or blog subjects. From this information, bloggers derive some sense of their audience and construct their presentations of self, identity, and taste with this imagined audience in mind.

Likewise, audiences take cues from personal style bloggers that help them feel like they know the blogger, discerning the blogger's favorite fashion trends, designers, pet peeves, phrases, and events in his or her personal life from blog posts, About Me webpages, comments, and external interviews. The blogger's construction of the self is a social and interactive practice that is constituted alongside audience practices of reading, responding, and—often—not responding. The idea that having nothing nice to say should deter readers from commenting on the blog is implicit in the posted warnings against trolling behavior (online harassment) that are common fixtures on many blogs. The construction of the imagined blog community relies on a mostly unspoken social contract that Internet trolls will keep themselves or be kept by others at bay.

In addition to the presence of an imagined audience in the coproduction of personal style blogs, another key difference between these blogs and reality ads is their subject matter. Blogs emphasize the person, while ads focus on the products promoted in blogs. To be more accurate, the main product in personal style blogs is the person producing the blog. The bought products function as materials—matters of taste—that aid in the online production of the self. They are material representations of the blogger's taste that create and communicate the blogger's character, level of fashion knowledge, and identity. All the blog posts together create an image of the blogger's taste, style, and character—all the qualities that make the blogger unique, identifiable, and appealing. This is what bloggers call their personal brand. Recall that Lau identifies "my eye, my point of view, a certain taste, a certain way of documenting and presenting fashion" as her product. In her words, "that's what I'm selling."⁶³ Thus, the many formal and casual product endorsements that constitute blog content are not just visual texts (as ads are) but also social and cultural practices of taste work. All the activities of personal style blogging—from creating visual, textual, and design content to posing in front of a camera and responding to readers' comments—are modes of taste work. These activities generate value, though how much value and for whom, as I've already discussed, is highly variable and socially conditioned.

If personal style bloggers are a key real people constituency, then Asian superblogger are a privileged (and minority) group among this constituency. They have "faces that reflect the [Asian] consumer" whom fashion companies are actively pursuing.⁶⁴ At the same time, their Asian faces are made less foreign by their English-language names and fluency. To put this another way, their Asian difference—which is not too different—is within the acceptable limits of racial tolerance. In the next section, I explain where and how the limits of racial tolerance are set. For now, what is important is that in this historical conjunction of the Asian moment in fashion and the age of social commerce, the exotic but not too exotic Asianness of Asian superblogger provides just the balance between brand distinction and brand approachability that fashion companies now want to establish. What's more, the massive, transnational audiences that Asian superblogger have built over the years make them very appealing to fashion companies that want to increase their exposure to mass markets.

The aim of this chapter so far has been to describe the wider context that conditions the cultural and commercial taste for Asian superblogger. The particular confluence of Asian cute culture, the Asian moment in fashion, and the reality effect of social commerce on the fashion industry and media has rearticulated the economic meanings of Asianness, gendered Asian labor, and Asian fashion consumers in ways that have structurally advantaged some Asian personal style bloggers. But the new economic meanings of Asianness are nevertheless racialized. That is, the success of Asian superblogger is not a sign that race no longer matters in fashion media economies. Just the opposite. The phenomenon of Asian superblogger demonstrates clearly that race, particularly gendered ideas of Asianness, continues to matter a great deal in fashion economies—but in different, though historically linked, ways.

The taste for Asian superblogger has not done away with the historical distaste for Asianness. As we know from Bourdieu and have seen in many examples of scholarly books and articles analyzing fashion, food, and visual cultures through the critical lens of ethnic studies,⁶⁵ the fields of taste production and consumption are constituted in and by racial, gender, and class relations of power in which the meanings of taste—and, connected to them, the meanings of style, fashion, and beauty—and the right to determine these meanings are struggled over. Thus, the souring taste for

Asian superblogger (what I'm calling racial aftertaste) is part and parcel of the Asian superblogger phenomenon. "In matters of taste, more than anywhere else," Bourdieu writes, "all determination is negation . . . disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others."⁶⁶ He goes on to describe the negative reaction to the tastes of others as "aesthetic intolerance." I take Bourdieu's formulation of "aesthetic intolerance" or "the visceral intolerance . . . of the tastes of others" to include racial aftertastes, the souring of public tastes toward what was once a curious novelty and that now threatens to become a permanent feature of the new fashion and fashion media economy. Pushing at the limits of racial tolerance for otherness, racial aftertastes exemplify the aesthetic intolerance that, in Bourdieu's words, "amounts to rejecting others as unnatural."⁶⁷

The unnaturalness of Asian superbloggersthe racial incongruity of the idea that the fashion tastes of Asians not only matter but are playing important roles in shaping the wider space of taste production and consumption—has been hinted at and stated outright throughout the Asian moment in fashion. An investigation of racial aftertastes with respect to Asian superblogger is important for what it can tell us about the changing and enduring racialized hierarchies of fashion and digital labor markets.

After the Taste, There Is the Aftertaste

The headline blasts in that ironically tabloid, insidery tone that has become a hallmark of mainstream feminist digital media in the post-Jezebel.com era: "We All Know Fashion Bloggers Have No Integrity, Right?"⁶⁸ Immediately below the headline is a photograph of two Asian superblogger (Lau and Yambao), dressed in a riot of vivid colors and prints and standing backstage at a fashion show (figure 1.3). This is the sole image in a three-page web article published in the corporate-owned and -operated website, Gloss.com, in 2012. The choice of the photograph and its placement directly following the headline imply an affirmative answer to the question. The visual emphasis on the bloggers' eccentric dress (due in part to the way the photograph is harshly lit from the front) hints that they may have other outre tendencies like going where they don't belong (such as the front rows of fashion shows) and ignoring journalistic standards (for example, selling one's opinion for freebies)—the two main points the article makes.

We All Know Fashion Bloggers Have No Integrity, Right?

2 years ago by Ashley Cardiff 9 Comments Share a Tip



— WEAR DOLCE & GABBANA. DRINK DIET COKE

During fashion month, when every fashion site with a photo department publishes slideshow after slideshow of "street style" in and around the tents you pretty quickly note the recurring

1.3 Partial screenshot of the Gloss.com article of March 12, 2012.

The tone and substance of the article is like many other antiblogger missives that began springing up in the early 2010s. Unlike the more positive news stories about bloggers and the democratization of fashion culture and industries in the mid-2000s (which nonetheless treated bloggers as mostly pet curiosities), later stories are noticeably more circumspect about the blogger phenomenon. Consider the following article published on the website *Fashionista.com*, part of a larger network of websites run by *Breaking Media Corporation*. Its headline is nearly identical to the *Gloss.com* piece: "Can You Trust the Editorial Integrity of Personal Style Blogs? A Closer Look at How Bloggers Make Money." And like the former article, its opening shot is directed at Asian superblogger. The article begins

by saying that blogs, “once the provenance of earnest fashion fans on the fringes of the industry, . . . have evolved into legitimate media sources and, more importantly, big moneymakers. Just look at today’s . . . ‘hot fashion bloggers’ like Bryan Boy and Susie Bubble [Yambao and Lau],” and it later notes that “as blogs make the transition from personal style diaries to profit-turning businesses, some readers have begun to feel that original and unbiased content . . . has taken a hit.”⁶⁹ Who these skeptical readers are remains unclear in the article. Many of those quoted are anonymous, including a blogger who admits that blogging has become “a slightly vicious cycle of bribery.” Other bloggers who are quoted and identified insist that all their endorsements are from the heart. Yambao and Lau are not quoted. Nor is Neely, though the article takes a gratuitous jab at her as well, quoting a *Women’s Wear Daily*’s comment that she “has never had a job that’s lasted more than a month.”

Of the many antiblogger invectives that have circulated, the one that the renowned fashion journalist Suzy Menkes wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* in 2013 is perhaps the most damning. In “The Circus of Fashion,” Menkes slams bloggers for bringing into being a world governed by “the survival of the gaudiest.” As with so many other denunciations of bloggers, in this case the critic’s finger wags in the general direction of all bloggers but points to Asian superblogger as specific examples. For Menkes, one of the gaudiest leaders of the fashion circus is Yambao. In a broad description of bloggers that includes lines like “gagging for . . . attention”; “peacocks . . . [who] pose and preen, in their multipatterned dresses, spidery legs balanced on club-sandwich platform shoes”; and “the cattle market of showoff people,” she suggests that her readers “think of the über-stylish Filipino blogger Bryanboy, whose real name is Bryan Grey Yambao.” Another superblogger who Menkes mentions by name is Lau. In the same sentence in which she describes Lau as “the sharp Susie Bubble,” Menkes admonishes her as a representative of all bloggers who have made “judging fashion . . . all about me: Look at me wearing the dress! Look at these shoes I have found! Look at me loving this outfit in 15 different images!”⁷⁰

Nowhere in Menkes’s description of bloggers’ digital self-regarding and self-promotion is an acknowledgment that these activities are endemic to social media culture, as well as built into the architecture of social media platforms in the form of profile pictures, “about me” webpages, status update features, and so on. Menkes’s concern is not about digital narcissism

writ large. Her problem is that the gatekeeping mechanisms meant to separate, to use her analogy, the monochromatic “group of dedicated pros—dressed head to toe in black” from the “multipatterned” poseurs seem to be failing.⁷¹

Her aversion for bloggers is not restricted to their sartorial style but extends to their ostensible willingness to accept “trophy gifts and paid-for trips”—or “bribes,” in Menkes’s estimation: “Adhering to the time-honored journalistic rule that reporters don’t take gifts (read: bribes), I am stunned at the open way bloggers announce which designer has given them what.”⁷² At best, this is an exaggerated statement of protest; at worst, it is an insincere one. Fashion editors and journalists have never made a secret of the fact that they receive gifts daily in the form of free samples, gratis services, and guest passes to big-ticket events. Yet Menkes blames bloggers for this practice and makes an example of Yambao: “When [Marc Jacobs] named a bag after Bryanboy in 2008, he made the blogger’s name, and turned on an apparently unending shower of designer gifts, which are warmly welcomed at bryanboy.com.⁷³

It’s worth mentioning that Asian superblogger were made to represent the fashion blogger phenomenon even in earlier news stories, in which they were mostly perceived as a cultural novelty rather than a nuisance. When the mainstream media first took notice of bloggers, it was the bodies and physical presence of Asian superblogger that the media gave much of their attention to. Screenshots of some of the earliest news articles about bloggers illustrate the centrality of Asian superblogger in media representations of fashion bloggers.

Some blog readers have defended Asian superblogger by rejecting their critics as nothing more than wrenches in the wheels of progress. In a comment posted to *Style Bubble* on February 20, 2013, one of Lau’s readers calls them “not-to-be-modernised PR companies” and “veteran journos . . . who can’t bare [sic] the thought of modernization.” In a position piece for *Vogue* a year later, Lau is equally dismissive, describing the criticism of bloggers as “the noise of a few grumbling industry insiders.”⁷⁴ But it would be a mistake to see attacks on bloggers that target Asian superblogger as just the arbitrary or subjective acts of a few intransigent relics. To do so would be to ignore the fact that they are part of a long history of racializing Asian labor. I argue that these attacks are not isolated ones against a new and distinct labor identity, but instead evidence of the persistence and mutability

Have laptop, will travel: bloggers arrive on fashion's front row

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Blogger Bryanboy backstage at the Camille parade at Australian Fashion Week.
Photo: Edwina Pickles

Rachel Wells
May 4, 2008
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1.4 Yambao backstage at Australian Fashion Week in Rachel Wells, "Have Laptop, Will Travel," *the Age*, May 4, 2008.

of racial hierarchies as a structuring force in fashion labor markets and in digital media economies more generally. Furthermore, they express for me not the failure of the liberal viewpoint but the logical conclusion of liberal approaches to tolerance, difference, and diversity. As I demonstrate below, the distaste for Asian superb bloggers—what I'm calling racial aftertaste—is not a reversal of the popular opinion about and interest in Asian superb bloggers but is instead structurally continuous with them. Racial aftertastes always follow from the taste for racial difference.

The popularity and success of Asian superb bloggers are conditioned by broader cultural, economic, and technological factors, but they are sus-

Bloggers Take Over the Front Row



1.5 Lau, Neely, and Yambao in Joyann King, "Bloggers Take Over the Front Row," *InStyle*, September 10, 2009.

Today I'm wearing...

Style blogger Susie Lau is headed for fashion's front row



Eva Wiseman

The Observer, Saturday 7 February 2009



Style blogger Susie Lau Photograph: Suki Dhanda

Every day, 10,000 people read what 25-year-old Susie Lau thinks about clothes. Every day, Susie Lau logs on to her blog, *Style Bubble* (stylebubble.typepad.com), photographs her outfit, raves about a new designer and inspires her international fanbase - they post their excited

1.6 Lau in Eva Wiseman, "Today I'm wearing . . .," *Guardian*, February 7, 2009.

tained by the discourse and value of social progress. As I argued above, media stories about superb bloggers often focus on Asians as evidence of the progressive development of the industry. In the words of Robin Givhan (the only fashion journalist to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize), they show that "fashion has evolved from an autocratic business dominated by omniscient designers into a democratic one."⁷⁵ These media stories textually and visually represent Asian superb bloggers' achievements and successes as technologically enabled by digital media. They frame the phenomenon of Asian superb bloggers as an effect of digital democratization. The under-

THE YEAR IN STYLE
Bloggers Crash Fashion's Front Row

Dennis Van de Ven

TRUE The bloggers Bryan Boy, third from left, and Tommy Ton, right, in Milan. More Photos >

By ERIC WILSON
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1.7 Yambao and streetstyle blogger Tommy Ton are the only bloggers shown in the photograph sitting with elite fashion editors—including Menkes; Michael Roberts (*Vanity Fair*); and Sally Singer, Anna Wintour, and Hamish Bowles (*Vogue*)—at Milan Fashion Week in Eric Wilson, "Bloggers Crash Fashion's Front Row," *New York Times*, December 24, 2009.

standing is that technologies have lowered the barriers to participation, helping make the various spheres of fashion (from fashion journalism and fashion modeling to fashion consumerism) more racially inclusive and diverse. Asian superb bloggers are supposedly the embodied evidence of a more racially tolerant and more democratic industry.

Yet implicit in the celebrations of tolerance and egalitarianism are narrow and rigid standards for what differences and behaviors are deserving of tolerance and who is entitled to equality (and how much). To be

tolerated, Rey Chow incisively observes, "is to be granted a radical . . . kind of recognition . . . based on clear-cut, hierarchical boundaries."⁷⁶ What she means is that the subject granted tolerance is necessarily positioned as inferior, as someone in need of and determined to be reasonably deserving of tolerance (from a superior who is in the position to offer tolerance and acceptance). Using the example of the ethnic subject, Chow explains that the liberal framework of tolerance depends on—even as it overtly disavows—boundaries separating us and them, the cosmopolitan West (distinguished by its liberal tolerance) and the rest (all the backward places that are ethnically marked by their cultures of intolerance).

In liberal frameworks of tolerance (and all the names they go by, such as multiculturalism, postracialism, and diversity), the boundary between us and them is built into the discursive and ideological structure by its implicit assignment of who is the agent of tolerance and who is subject to tolerance. The contradiction in liberal approaches to difference is that they depend on clear and durable hierarchies of difference. Tolerance is contingent on the fulfillment of conditions of acceptability that legitimize or normativize difference. Liberal approaches to difference and diversity are conditionally bound. What lies on the other side of the field of tolerance's conditions is intolerance. In this way, intolerance is systemically coconstituted with tolerance in liberal frameworks. Difference provides the occasion for both tolerance and intolerance.

To relate this more specifically to the taste for and aftertaste of Asian superblogger, I turn to Bourdieu's concept of legitimate difference. In his essay, "Haute Couture and Haute Culture,"⁷⁷ he describes fashion trends as "legitimate differences" that operate through a central and contradictory logic, much like that identified by Chow as operating in relation to tolerance. Because legitimate differences are conditionally bound by determinations of what is legitimate and what is illegitimate, the threat of becoming an illegitimate difference is a constitutive feature of being a legitimate difference. That is, legitimate and illegitimate differences are two ends of the same spectrum of difference.

Bourdieu's legitimate difference exemplifies for me the fraught position Asian superblogger occupy in the fashion industry and helps explain how the popular taste or preference for them necessarily leads to the souring of tastes for them. The Asian superblogger I have been discussing embody a legitimate difference. They are exotic but not too exotic. They are

different but legitimately and legibly so, because they are English-speakers; are cute (in appearance and work practice); and blog, live, shop, and fashion themselves in and through Western sites of culture and communication. They embody difference but one that is knowable, familiar, and thus legitimate.

As the public and media buzz about Asian superblogger illustrates, legitimate differences are highly lauded in the fashion industry. Indeed, they are crucial to the continuance of the industry. "The struggle for the monopoly of distinction, that is, the monopolistic power to impose the latest legitimate difference, the latest fashion," Bourdieu explains, is "the motor of the field."⁷⁸ Fashion trends challenge previous ones, but not to the detriment of the fashion system because they adhere to and remain within the parameters of legitimacy that leave the system of fashion trend cycles intact. In this way, fashion trends are distinct from fashion transgressions. Rather than a destructive force (though some may see and experience them that way), they are actually a productive force. The constant emergence of new trends and the decline of old ones are essential to the continued cultural and economic operations of the fashion industry. But its continuation depends on limited degrees of change and a narrow range of difference that disrupts without damaging. Legitimate fashion trends remain within the field of acceptability; they keep their place.

Racializing processes of differentiation are not only spatially articulated (for example, through residential segregation) but also temporally constructed. As we know from Chow and others (notably, Johannes Fabian, with his crucial theory about anthropological constructions of otherness through "the denial of coevalness"⁷⁹), tolerable differences conform to spatial and temporal designations of acceptable behavior, social relations, and—as I discuss below—labor and consumer practices. Tolerable or legitimate differences are temporally distinct from universalized norms, which are privileged as spatially and temporally transcendent. To put this another way, the legitimacy of universal norms is not subject to conditionality and so is not in need of tolerance. Their legitimacy goes without saying.

The rise of Asian superblogger is timely insofar as the phenomenon is temporally correlated with wider cultural, economic, and technological shifts. Understood in this way, a crude interpretation of Asian superblogger is that they are trendy. And just as trends are fundamentally ephemeral and temporary, so too are superblogger, who are bound to spatial and

temporal conditions. Paradoxically, while trends are fleeting, the idea of fashion trends is a structural fixture of the fashion industry. In fact, the only thing constant about fashion trends is that there is always a next one, so the emergence of a fashion trend is also the beginning of its decline. We can say that a fashion trend is a legitimate difference—is institutionally recognizable—when another one takes its place, when it is shown to be a fleeting part of a succession of trends.

Like all good trends, predictions of Asian superblogger's demise inevitably followed celebrations of their rise to prominence. Media stories about superblogger describe them as the latest new thing while also anticipating (explicitly or implicitly) their eventual metamorphosis into the old thing. Examples include "Is Fashion Blogging Dead?," "Why The Era Of Personal Style Blogs Must Come To An End," and "The Golden Era of 'Fashion Blogging' Is Over."⁸⁰ These stories, as former New York writer Amy Odell makes clear, are about Asian superblogger whether they are specifically named or not: "When the industry talks about fashion bloggers, they're referring to . . . the likes of Susie Bubble, Bryan Boy, Fashion Toast [Neely]."⁸¹ This is quoted from an article whose headline reads, "Finding the Next Bryanboy." If trends are characterized by their inevitable succession, then this is perhaps the clearest evidence of Asian superblogger's trendiness.

The spatial and temporal conditionality of Asian superblogger as a legitimate difference helps explain the backlash against them. The extraordinary span of their achievements and the length of time they have spent in the fashion media spotlight (due in part to their own efforts in controlling and directing the spotlight) has exceeded, according to insiders like Menkes, the spatial and temporal bounds of acceptability. Lingering too long and too far outside the parameters of acceptable taste, they have left an aftertaste. Attacks on bloggers indicate a souring of popular feeling toward superblogger. Implied is a determination that the time and place for the trend has passed. Asian superblogger, while once novel and interesting, have overstayed their welcome.

The aftertaste left by Asian superblogger's continued presence in the fashion media and public consciousness can be traced to a longer history of racial aftertastes regarding Asian labor. Attacks on bloggers like that of Menkes express disgust for bloggers' tastes for loud, attention-getting clothes ("multipatterned dresses"), for fashion as an attention-getting device rather than an art for its own sake, and for freebies and the media

spotlight. In short, these attacks are taste judgments about the cheapness of bloggers' taste, style, and work practices. Menkes's characterization of bloggers as a group governed by "the survival of the gaudiest" is highly suggestive of the judgment of cheapness. In what follows, I investigate the gendered and racial dimensions of cheapness that the discourse of ethics that frames attacks on bloggers (using such terms as "integrity" and "time-honored journalistic rule") simultaneously implies and obfuscates. Tracing the gendered and racial dimensions of taste judgments that condemn bloggers and their cheapness will clarify the historical continuities of race and gender hierarchies that link nondigital and digital economic and labor markets.

Cheap Talk about Asian Labor

Previous studies have shown that in the term Asian labor, the word Asian functions as both a racial and a class qualifier.⁸² Historically, Asian labor (or Oriental labor or Asiatic labor) has been synonymous with degraded, cheap labor. This class-based racial identity has been reinforced and naturalized through economic, legal, and social exclusions that confine Asian workers to the lowest-paying and most precarious labor market sectors. In the nineteenth century, Indian workers on sugar plantations in Trinidad, Jamaica, British Guiana, and Mauritius; Chinese and South Asian coolies in the Caribbean and Louisiana; and Chinese miners in California all embodied cheap labor in the imaginaries of industrial and state employers. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Filipino migrant agricultural laborers in the U.S. Pacific Northwest; Filipina domestic workers around the world; Chinese and Korean garment workers in the United States; and Chinese, Bangladeshi, Thai, Vietnamese, and Sri Lankan garment workers and electronics manufacturing workers in Asia embody cheap labor both in the global economy and the global imaginary. In 2014, Ethiopian workers at a Chinese shoe factory located outside Addis Ababa have also become the embodiment of cheap Asian labor. As Chinese factory owners are moving their operations to Ethiopia, where wages are staggeringly low (garment workers in Addis Ababa make 10 percent of what Chinese workers do), scholarly, corporate, and media representations have described them as the Chinese of Africa. A Bloomberg article reports "Ethiopia Becomes China's China in Global Search for Cheap Labor," a title that probably

draws on a quote in the article by a professor of international development, who characterizes Ethiopia's future in the global economy in this way: "It could become the China of Africa."⁸³

So-called Chinese gold farmers exemplify the digitalization of cheap Asian labor. Chinese gold farmers are online gamers who may or may not be Chinese or Asian but are, as Lisa Nakamura has explained, racialized online as Chinese.⁸⁴ They are typically from the Third World and are paid by First World gamers to do the tedious tasks necessary to build a high-level character, including playing the game when the First World gamer is sleeping. Here we see not only the transmigration of stereotypes of cheap Asian labor into digital realms but also the Asianization of cheap labor, even in cases where the laborers themselves are not Asian. The Asianization of cheap labor exemplifies Chow's concept of the "ethnicization of labor," in which dividing labor into hierarchical categories (cheap labor, low-level labor, domestic labor, and so on) has an ethnicizing effect that marks certain workers as socially inferior.⁸⁵ We see this in the digital economy with Chinese gold farmers as well as in the material economy with Ethiopian shoe factory workers. The designation of Chinese marks both groups as cheap laborers at the same time that their perceived cheapness racializes these workers, who may not actually be Asian, as Asian labor.

The variety of nationalities, ethnicities, and jobs that have been designated as cheap Asian labor indicates that it is not simply a labor identity designation but instead a product of economic racialization. The term is a racial expression of and a justification for social and economic divisions of labor. While the racial and economic articulation of cheap labor has not been exclusively applied to Asians, it has been a feature of Asian racialization for centuries. The current race to the bottom triggered by free trade and globalization has only reinforced the Asianization of cheap labor. Today, it is not just China but also Viet Nam, Indonesia, and Bangladesh (the four largest exporters of clothing in the world) that are the world's factories.

Strikingly, though, Asia is no longer identified just with cheap labor. It is becoming a crucial market for luxury goods as well. A 2013 report released by the Economist Intelligence Unit, the market analyst firm that publishes the Economist, predicts that Asia will account for 50–60 percent of luxury revenue worldwide within ten years.⁸⁶ The growing middle class and wealthy elite in China, Japan, India, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia are

expected to drive more than half of the luxury goods economy worldwide. Jon Copestake, chief retail and consumer goods analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit, concludes that "with Europe stagnating and North America subdued, the focus is firmly on Asia's potential."⁸⁷

Today, the racial and economic designation of Asian labor as cheap exists alongside the ascendancy of Asians into the higher rungs of fashion labor markets such as fashion design, fashion modeling, and fashion blogging. (Although designers, models, and bloggers do not necessarily earn high incomes, their status in the creative sectors is higher than that of Asian fashion laborers in manufacturing sectors.) Does the ascendancy of some Asians in the creative sectors of fashion's labor markets mean that the economic articulation of Asianness as cheap labor is shifting? Yes and no.

The discursive and visual construction of cheapness in attacks on bloggers suggests, on one hand, that cheap continues to be the economic description of Asian difference and, on the other hand, that the racialization of cheapness operates differently in creative labor segments. In one register of meaning, cheap indicates low value and worth. Cheap Asian labor is devalued as inferior, unskilled, and expendable labor (as in the contexts of the garment and electronics assembly industries). The designation of cheap Asian labor justifies the rock-bottom wages paid to these workers.

The devaluation of Asian labor as cheap also has specifically gendered meanings. Just as to feel cheap is to feel used and powerless, to be classified as cheap Asian labor is to be perceived as powerless, subordinate, and docile. In the stereotype of the docile Asian worker, femininity is presented as an inferior as well as an intrinsic quality of Asian workers. At the same time, as we saw in the racial hiring patterns in apparel manufacturing industries throughout the latter half of the twentieth century (discussed in the introduction), the feminization of cheap Asian labor structures Asian workers' relative valorization in relation to Black labor, even cheap Black labor, which is racialized as difficult and demanding.

The U.S. Page Act of 1875 institutionalized a moral valence of the term cheap Asian labor by legally categorizing Asian women as likely prostitutes. The act imposed a blanket prohibition on the immigration of all Asian women ("any subject of China, Japan, or any Oriental country"⁸⁸) on the presumption that they were immigrating for the purposes of prostitution. The popular perception of Asian women as the embodiment of cheap labor

and cheap morality has not gone away, as the countless representations and widespread circulation of Asian prostitute stereotypes attest.⁸⁹

The moral dimensions of cheap Asian labor are also found in its third register of meaning, in which cheap signifies fakeness or fraudulence. A cheap win is not a real win, but one that is attained by some unprincipled or unscrupulous means. Asian labor has similarly denoted a cheapness of work ethic, of cutting corners and evading rules. Thus, the expression cheap Asian labor not only refers to the low wages Asian laborers historically have been paid, but it also implies that Asian laborers are immoral and deviant as well as dishonest and untrustworthy. Bret Harte's much-cited 1870 poem "Plain Language from Truthful James,"⁹⁰ about the Chinese immigrant card shark Ah Sin, reflects this perception. Harte does not specify Ah Sin's occupation, but the character stands in for Chinese laborers in California at the time. In the poem, Ah Sin's cheating is discovered, and he is brutally punished. But before his white card-playing counterparts Bill Nye and Truthful James beat him up, Nye wails, "we are ruined by Chinese cheap labor." The poem's conflation of cheap and cheat illuminates the historically negative ethical valence of cheap Asian labor.

As the earlier examples of antiblogger discourse demonstrate, it is the third register of meaning (with shades of the second meaning) that dominates articulations of cheap Asian labor in the Asian moment in fashion. Critics of personal style bloggers accuse them of unethical practices designed to extract free gifts and free publicity. There are vague insinuations of their whoring for attention and for fashion labels. These kinds of condemnations are meant to discredit personal style blogging, in general, as fake journalism and inauthentic expressions of taste and identity. But by focusing their fire on Asian superbloggers, critics racialize cheapness in ways that are historically specific and historically continuous.

As the Ah Sin literary example suggests, the charge that Asian superbloggers do not come by their skills, talents, and successes honestly is not unique in the history of Asian labor, particularly Asian immigrant labor. We see the same racialization of cheap Asian labor in the context of laundry, railroad, agricultural, and mining work in the United States in the nineteenth century. Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino workers who were willing to work for less pay and longer hours, and in harsh conditions, were accused by their Euro-American counterparts, politicians, and the mainstream media of taking unfair advantages in their respective labor

markets. These advantages were also unfairly acquired, according to mainstream perceptions, since they were understood as the results of racial cunning and prowess.⁹¹

More than a century later, Asian fashion workers from superbloggers to star designers are subject to the same kinds of accusations. When the Asian American fashion designer Alexander Wang was named creative director of Balenciaga in 2012, industry pundits and lay observers suggested (and sometimes overtly stated) that his appointment had nothing to do with talent and business acumen and everything to do with his Chinese-ness.⁹² (Wang, who was born in California, identifies himself as Taiwanese American.) Lurid speculations about Wang's exploiting and deriving benefits from Chinese connections underlie and sometimes appear explicitly in media stories about Wang's new job. One widely circulating article had this headline: "New Evidence That Alexander Wang's Chinese Connections May Have Helped Land Him Balenciaga."⁹³ Not surprisingly, the article presented no evidence of these supposed connections.

In the age of social commerce, when consumer activities are also value-producing activities, it is worth noting that the economic racialization of Asian labor extends to Asian consumers as well. As I have written elsewhere, Chinese fashion consumers—a catchall term for Asian fashion consumers—have been simultaneously hailed as the saviors of the global luxury economy and derided as gaudy, tacky consumers with cheap tastes.⁹⁴ Valentine Fillol-Cordier's comments in a Style Council discussion published in *Bon* in 2011 illustrate what has become a commonplace criticism of Asian fashion consumers. Discussing Chinese consumers, the stylist sniffs: "You can't pretend to have lots of taste if you're simply buying all that shit and spending tons of money."⁹⁵ Such judgments of Asian fashion consumers (with their "pretend" tastes) reveal social anxieties about the possible threat that Asian consumers' rising market power poses to fashion's established racial order. I suggest that attacks on bloggers that target Asian superbloggers betray the same kinds of racial anxieties about what the enduring presence and power of these new fashion leaders might mean for the historically white fashion industry and culture.

The persistent associations of cheapness with Asianness even in a context in which Asians are ascending fashion status ladders illustrates my point here that the word cheap is not only an economic designation but also a racially charged one. In addition, it illustrates the general point of this

book, that the presence of Asian superblogger in the top tiers of fashion's new informational economy marks the continuation—not the diminution of—racial hierarchization as a structuring force in fashion's processes of capital accumulation. Indeed, the history of fashion capitalism has always been a history of racial capitalism.

Cedric Robinson's magisterial work in *Black Marxism* demonstrates the ways in which racializing processes of differentiation have been integral, not incidental, to the historical development of capitalism. Tellingly, some of the earliest systems of what Robinson calls "racial capitalism" can be found in the histories of textile and clothing manufacture.⁹⁶ In the early sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, Flemish cloth workers and, later, Huguenot handloom weavers in London made up the large and expendable reserve supply of immigrant labor that fueled these early industries. While there has been little research on the racialization of early modern European working classes—a critique that both Robinson⁹⁷ and Immanuel Wallerstein⁹⁸ make—there is evidence that Flemish workers were specifically targeted by these industries due to popular perceptions that they were capable as well as controllable. John Aubrey, a mid-seventeenth-century antiquary and amateur local historian in Wilts County in the southwest of England, jokingly compared Flemish cloth workers to the sheep they sheared for wool: "If our nation in times past was the most famous for the greatest quantity of wool in ye world, this county had the most sheep of any other." To maintain their economic advantage, "successive English rulers, even for centuries, did all that lay in their power to encourage Flemish and other foreign cloth workers to settle in this country."⁹⁹

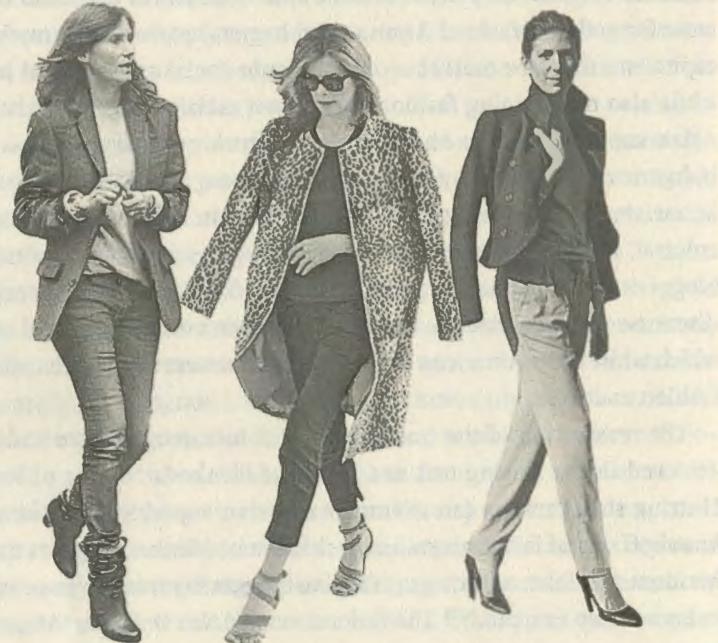
Today, the racializing processes of differentiation on which late Euro-American capitalism is based are structured, paradoxically, by the cultural logics of postracism and multiculturalism. Describing this era of "neoliberal multicultural capitalism," Jodi Melamed explains that in current articulations of race with capitalism, "racism constantly appears as disappearing according to conventional race categories, even as it takes on new forms that can signify as nonracial or even antiracist."¹⁰⁰ This is borne out in the competing conceptualization of Asian superblogger as, on the one hand, representative of a highly valued and entirely new formation of creative Asian worker and, on the other hand, a historically consistent class of cheap Asian workers.

The tendencies to valorize and devalue Asian superblogger may be contradictory, but they have the same aim. Both sets of expressions (of the taste for and aftertaste of Asian superblogger) preserve the myth of late capitalism that free market economies spur social and material progress while also maintaining fashion's dominant racial order. The existence of Asian superblogger in one of the most cutthroat and racially stratified industries in the world proves that social progress is being made (that is, racism is disappearing) and that the fashion industry is the vanguard cultural, social, and economic force it imagines itself to be. Attacks on bloggers that focus on the personal ethical failings of bloggers retain the discourse of progress while reasserting fashion's dominant racial order, in which white Euro-American experts and consumers are the true arbiters of fashion and style.

The reassertion of the traditional racial hierarchy of taste and style is achieved in the closing text and image of Menkes's "Circus of Fashion." Hinting that Yambao (an exemplar of Asian superblogger) is a cheap knockoff of real fashionistas and fashionistas, Menkes suggests that even his identity is fake, referring to "Filipino blogger Bryanboy, whose real name is Bryan Grey Yambao."¹⁰¹ The fashion-centric *New York Times Magazine* has many readers who are sure to know as much or more about Yambao than Menkes, who has made her disdain for personal style bloggers well known. Given this, her comment about Yambao's name seems unnecessary, except to underscore her main point that he's a fake, a cheap Asian imitation, a knockoff of real fashion workers (like Menkes herself, presumably).¹⁰²

The final image of Menkes's article illustrates what real fashion people look like, according to Menkes and the *New York Times Magazine* editors. The image shows three white European fashion editors: Emmanuelle Alt (*Vogue Paris*), Virginie Mouzat (*French Vanity Fair*), and Ludivine Poi-blanc (*Interview*). Above the image is a caption that reads: "The opposite of look-at-me fashion: leave it to the French to master understated chic" (figure 1.8). Wholly rejecting the general understanding of personal style blogging as real style by real people, Menkes's article reasserts that real fashion is the preserve of white Western media and industry professionals (people with access to teams of stylists and hair and makeup artists). The binary oppositions the article sets up between real and fake fashionability and what is chic and what is cheap are clearly divided along gendered

The opposite of look-at-me fashion: leave it to the French to master understated chic.



1.8 The embodiment of normative chic, from Suzy Menkes, "The Circus of Fashion," *New York Times Magazine*, February 10, 2013.

racial lines. Fakeness and cheapness are Asianized and feminized in the figure of a queer Filipino man and pitted against straight white feminine authenticity.

The cheap, unethical blogger is a nonracial form of racialization that enables "racism to appear as constantly disappearing."¹⁰³ What disappears or is erased by attacks on bloggers are the conventional, more familiar categories of race as well as the histories of economic racialization in which the discursive construction of cheap Asian labor is rooted. But it is the disappearance of old racisms that enables new racisms to appear (under the covers of postracism, multiculturalism, and the seemingly non-racial discourse of ethics).

Cheap, as an economic and racial concept, links personal style bloggers to a longer history of Asian labor in fashion industries and beyond.

At the same time, the particular significations of cheap have shifted to accommodate neoliberal late capitalist rationalities of individualism, self-responsibility, and postracism. It is the shifting meanings of cheap that allow the term to endure as mechanism of economic racialization. The incorporation of Asian superblogger into the top and highly visible tiers of fashion media serves the pluralistic and competitive imperatives of global and multicultural capitalism. They substantiate the inclusionary nature of fashion's business and culture to its global and increasingly Asian consumers and investors. The designation of cheap Asian labor (in all the registers of the term's meaning) ensures, however, that the racial structure of power and privilege is not altered. Thus, the incorporation of Asian superblogger provides the multicultural cover for the upward distribution of resources, opportunities, rewards, and respect. Judgments about cheap Asian labor naturalize this hierarchical system. In this way, the racialization of Asians as cheap labor has not prevented them from participating in the fashion industry's manufacturing or digital media labor markets. To the contrary, racialization has been and continues to be the condition of Asians' economic participation.

Chapter 2.

Style Stories, Written Tastes, and the Work of Self-Composure

Roland Barthes begins his investigation in *The Fashion System* with the observation that fashion in its written form—what he calls “written clothing”—provides the clearest representation of its meaning in a society. Unlike “real clothing” (that is, actual garments), which is “burdened with practical considerations (protection, modesty, adornment),” written clothing’s only function is signification.¹ According to Barthes, if a “magazine describes a certain article of clothing verbally, it does so solely to convey a message whose content is: *Fashion*.² He capitalizes *Fashion* here because he intends it to represent what he calls a “supercode”—a system of words and meanings that “take over” the garment.³ The forcefulness implied in the term “take over” is appropriate. Barthes understands the function of written clothing—of descriptions of fashion—to impose meaning that blocks out other possible interpretations: “every written word has a function of authority insofar as it chooses—by proxy, so to speak—instead of the eye . . . words determine a single certainty.”⁴ He continues: “Fashion text represents as it were the authoritative voice of someone who knows all there is behind the jumbled or incomplete appearance of the visible forms.”⁵

Several years after Barthes published *The Fashion System*, Pierre Bourdieu gave a talk in Arras, France, titled “Haute Couture and Haute Culture,” in which he attributes to fashion descriptions much the same social, cultural, and ideological functions as Barthes does. Analyzing the adjectives most

often associated with fashion designers and products in fashion magazines, Bourdieu argues that these adjectives refer less to the designer or product and more to the “aesthetic position” of the agent or institution doing the describing.⁶ Fashion descriptions, according to Bourdieu, are the means by which “the possessors of legitimacy” reproduce and secure their legitimacy, and by which those who want to attain legitimacy (“the newcomers”) make their way into the field of fashion. By gaining control of the meanings of fashion and the right to define its meanings, newcomers challenge “the possessors of legitimacy,” being careful to “destroy the hierarchy but not the game itself.”⁷ In other words, fashion descriptions are both a site where the struggle over the meanings and limits of class, taste, beauty, and distinction take place and a site circumscribed by the delineation between legitimate difference (what is fashionably distinct) and illegitimate difference (what is distinctly not fashion).

I begin my discussion of the taste work of Asian superblogger with Barthes’s and Bourdieu’s characterizations of the power and politics of fashion language because they provide a critical point of departure for evaluating what is an underexamined and sometimes totally ignored feature of personal style blogs: the personal style story, the text accompanying the photos that describe how bloggers choose a particular outfit, how they style it, and the occasion for wearing it. Recall that when the fashion journalist Suzy Menkes chides Susanna Lau (aka Susie Bubble) for contributing to the circus she believes fashion shows have turned into now that bloggers have come onto the scene, she skewers Lau with this taunt: “Look at me wearing the dress! Look at these shoes I have found! Look at me loving this outfit in 15 different images!”⁸ Menkes is referring to the outfit photos that are the defining feature of personal style blogs. But even a casual reader of Style Bubble, Lau’s blog, will notice that outfit photos make up a minority of the blog; in contrast, the number of words Lau produces for her style stories is legion. As I discuss below, Lau is an exceptionally prolific blogger in terms of the length of her stories, but she is in no way exceptional in the creation and use of them. Personal style stories are a primary component of personal style blogs, though they receive little public or scholarly attention.

The stereotype that personal style bloggers are vain and superficial attention seekers whose fashion sensibility, in Menkes’s words, is nothing more than “look-at-me fashion” maintains the authoritative position of

those in the fashion establishment and the structural organization of the establishment. By ignoring the literary work of these newcomers who are creating fashion language that contributes to the popular meanings of what is fashion and who is fashionable, Menkes and others like her suggest that their power to determine fashion meaning and knowledge is unopposed. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how Asian superblogger writings about their style and tastes challenge—and do not challenge—the dominant fashion system. Thus, part and parcel of my goal will be an investigation of how race, gender, class, and sexuality are constructed in and through these narratives of personal style in ways that maintain and accumulate capital for the blogger. In short, I am concerned with how different Asian superblogger’s literary modes of taste work function as expressions and embodiments of legitimate difference.

Asian superblogger, as I discussed in the previous chapter, embody Bourdieu’s notion of legitimate difference. As Asians in a white-dominated cultural and economic field who are expert English speakers and expert users of popular Western media technologies and practices (including popular fashion language), they are exotic, but not so exotic that they are foreign. It is their legitimate difference—their distinctiveness but not radical difference—that underpins their superblogger-level audiences, blog traffic, commercial partnerships, design collaborations, and mainstream media attention. Asian superblogger’s practices of taste work, I argue, function to negotiate and manage their fraught position as legitimate differences and to maintain their position as racialized others who are recognized in, if not always accepted by, the dominant fashion industry.

The Anatomy of a Personal Style Blog

Personal style blog content consists primarily but not exclusively of what are called outfit posts. Generally, outfit posts have two major components: the personal style story and photos of the blogger’s outfit of the day (or simply outfit photos). Typically, a single outfit post includes one story and several outfit photos. The stories explicitly or obliquely refer to outfit photos in much the same way that Barthes’s “written clothing” refers to “image clothing,”⁹ except that in personal style blogs the conceptual referent is not an article of clothing but a unified style of dress and embodiment. The clothes featured in personal style blogs (in all their structural forms) are

significations of an individual's taste and personal style, not of fashion itself.

Style stories are a key but not necessary element of personal style blogs. Blair Eadie's well-regarded blog *Atlantic-Pacific* (so named because of her U.S. bicoastal life and style) does not include any style stories, yet it is recognizably a personal style blog because it has the essential feature of such blogs: outfit photos. Without outfit photos, the genre's key characteristic and by far most distinguishable feature, there is no personal style blog. When style stories are present, they might be as short as a single sentence or as long as two thousand words. Often, bloggers intersperse outfit photos throughout longer style stories, breaking up the text to make it easier to read online. And just as there is no standard length for a style story, there are no standard numbers of stories and story words that bloggers must produce.

To get a sense of the variability of style stories and outfit posts, consider that in the span of one year, Lau published a total of 237 blog posts, 65 of which were outfit posts (see table 2.1). The remaining 172 blog posts focused on a subject other than herself (such as a fashion collection, designer, retailer, event, or some other fashion news item). In the same year, she generated a total of 49,060 words, giving her an average of 207 words per blog post. In roughly the same year, Aimee Song published 197 blog posts, 191 of which were outfit posts. Her total word count was 23,754, making her average words per blog post 120. Similarly, Bryan Grey Yambao published 90 blog posts of which 52 were outfit posts. With a total of 7,459 words, his average words per blog post was 83. The ratios of outfit posts to not-outfit posts and words per blog post for other Asian superblogger like Wendy Nguyen and Rumi Neely are about the same as Yambao's. These numbers clearly show that Lau is a superblogger both with respect to her status and her productivity. The productivity of other non-Asian superblogger falls somewhere between Song's and Yambao's levels. For example, Jane Aldridge (*Sea of Shoes*) created 125 blog posts, 94 of them being outfit posts. She generated a total of 7,245 words or an average of 58 words per blog post. Leandra Medine (*ManRepeller*¹⁰) is the only other superblogger to come close to Lau's word count, but since Medine's blog is now produced by a team of people, this is not an apt comparison.

Table 2.1. A Year of Style Stories and Outfit Posts

	Style stories	Outfit posts	Total posts	Average word count per post	Total word count
Susanna Lau	172	65	237	207	49,060
Aimee Song	6	191	197	120	23,754
Bryan Grey Yambao	38	52	90	83	7,459
Jane Aldridge	31	94	125	58	7,245

*Survey of Lau's posts taken from June 29, 2013–July 2, 2014; Song from July 2, 2013–June 29, 2014; Yambao from June 18, 2013–June 16, 2014; Aldridge from July 2, 2013–July 3, 2014.

Style stories involve literary modes of taste work. Bloggers write, edit, and revise texts that represent and constitute their identities as fashionable people, fashion consumers, and style authorities. Which garment details, brands, retailers, fashion events, and social relationships they emphasize and how they highlight them creates a literary representation of their taste identity. The linguistic form of written taste bears some relation to written clothing—in fact, bloggers sometimes adopt the popular vocabulary and turns of phrases of fashion magazines as a way of speaking to, by speaking like, the possessors of legitimacy. Song's outfit posts (97 percent of all her blog posts) are peppered with sartorial idioms and proverbs that convey the popular expressions and familiar sentiments of fashion magazines. Song frequently uses phrases like “pop of color” and “my go-to Fall jacket/blouse/studded boots/etc.” and actively promotes the conventional wisdom of fashion magazines that clothes should flatter the body—that is, make it appear slender. Song's style stories simultaneously explain and demonstrate her knowledge of how to choose colors, prints, cuts, and lengths of garments that create the illusion of longer legs, a smaller waist, and curves on her “boyish shape.”¹¹ Through her personal stories, she occupies both inspirational and instrumental roles: those of style muse and style guide. Readers write sometimes hundreds of comments on a single outfit post, remarking on how beautiful Song is and how much they love the way she styled her outfit. Just as often, they thank her for being “an inspiration” or, as was the case with a comment on a July 7, 2014, outfit post,

for teaching them something new about wrap rompers, about a new exotic vacation spot in Morocco, and about how to wear a necklace as a ring ("I'll definitely be adding that to my jewelry box").

Arguably, print fashion magazines also serve the dual role of providing both style inspiration and guidance, but personal style bloggers carry out these functions differently. The production of style stories involves both textual and computational modes of taste work. This may be an obvious point, but it is one worth emphasizing since the tendency to compare fashion blogs and fashion magazines (like comparisons between bloggers and print journalists) elides the crucial difference between them. Unlike the fashion magazines that Barthes and Bourdieu analyze and that some bloggers like Song rhetorically emulate, personal style blogs are not a print medium. They are, in Katherine Hayles's words, "digital born"¹² texts that are not meant to be printed. There are no PDF versions of outfit posts, as online fashion magazines sometimes have, and there are no "print" buttons anywhere on the screen. Of course, it is possible to print out a blog post or a page of blog posts, but a print version of a personal style blog post would be a poor and only partial translation of the digital text. Lost in the translation from digital to print media are hyperlinks, affiliate marketing links (explained in the introduction), GIFs (graphics interchange formats, or animated and looping computer images), video and audio files, and the reader comments feature that allows multidirectional conversations to take place in real and asynchronous time. These are more than a blog's digital features—they constitute bloggers' taste work.

Bloggers' choice of which brands and garments to blog about, which to add hyperlinks and affiliate links to, and which audio and video files to upload are value-producing taste expressions. The most obvious message they convey is the blogger's sartorial and fashion preferences. Dedicated readers of some of the Asian superblogs know that Lau favors and is friendly with independent designers and that Yambao is "obsessed" (as he often puts it) with establishment houses like Balenciaga, Chanel, and Givenchy. And of course his friendship with Marc Jacobs has been well documented on his blog. Neely's style stories typically emphasize her laid-back Californian approach to style, in which she mixes luxury and mass-market labels, as well as her strong fan base in Japan, where she has been featured in numerous ad campaigns and fashion editorials—all of which are described in her style stories. Song also represents herself and her style

as "California girl," which, as she has written a number of times, explains her "obsession with palm prints."¹³

Style stories also indicate the levels of influence and privilege a blogger's taste has. If, as Bourdieu has argued, there is a corresponding relation between taste and status—that group membership is indicated and enacted through taste—then the videos, affiliate links (or the lack thereof), and so on that constitute style stories demonstrate a blogger's relative position in the field of taste production. An uploaded video showing a blogger interviewing a top designer after a major fashion show confers a very different level of influence, status, and access than a video shared from YouTube. Likewise, the quality and quantity of affiliate links in a style story indicates a blogger's level of entrepreneurial savvy and industry support. All of these taste work practices generate cultural, informational, and—in the case of affiliate links—financial capital for bloggers. For example, behind-the-scenes videos at exclusive fashion shows, in designers' studios, or at the headquarters of a fashion house can draw new and repeat readers (as well as traffic) to the blog, thus increasing the blogger's reputation as well as the quality and quantity of his or her opportunities for side work. Uploading videos, creating GIFs, and embedding affiliate links are practices of taste work that require bloggers to do some basic to intermediate code and system administration work. For digital media to operate, computational work is needed. Print versions of personal style blogs suppress some of the key processes, practices, and skills of bloggers' taste work and, with them, bloggers' lines of capital accumulation.

With regard to the experience of the blog reader, a printed web page imposes the structural constraints of print-mediated communications onto a digital media form and practice. Online reading habits, as Internet studies have shown, differ from modes of reading print. Christian Vandendorpe adapts Mark Heyer's descriptions for the three distinct modes of information gathering—grazing, browsing, and hunting¹⁴—to explain methods of "reading on screen."¹⁵ In the grazing mode, readers read continuously through a piece of text. This reading method has been transported from print to digital media and is less commonly practiced online than the other two reading modes. In the browsing mode, readers scan the text, pausing to read only those parts that interest them. In the hunting mode, readers actively search for specific information. They might use the Web browser's search tool or website's search box to find particular words or phrases. Online

reading habits are also shaped by what Vandendorpe calls the “feedback effect” in which “a culture of questioning” encourages and enables Internet readers and writers to interrogate, critique, and challenge each other.

One of the effects of feedback on digital writing is the open-ended process of revision that continues even after a blog post has been published. Sometimes the revision process is highlighted by the blogger through the use of strikethrough lines or addendum notes that indicate changes have been made. A blog’s changing content, particularly in the context of personal style blogs, is suggestive of the liveness of the blogger’s style of dress and of embodiment. It conveys the blogger’s style and life as genuinely lived in the moment. These qualities mark the personal style blogger and blog (the digital double of the blogger) as authentic. Print versions of outfit posts freeze the dynamic and dialogic processes of reading and writing in static form. In so doing, they structurally privilege linear and continuous forms of reading, imposing a method of reading print onto a digital form.

Style stories are a nonlinear and often nonsequential literary form. The noncontinuous succession of outfit posts, as I discuss in chapter 5, is an important structural characteristic that shapes the organizational representation of the personal style blogosphere as a creative labor sector. Outfit posts emphasize the art of self-styling by showing only the finished look. The physical work (traveling, shopping, trying on clothes, and so forth) that underpins the production of outfit posts—and that happens in between each outfit post—is removed from view, giving the impression that self-styling is an effortless activity.

To return to the point about the experience of reading style stories, because each outfit post is not necessarily connected to the one before or the one after it, the posts can be read in any order. Furthermore, the tags of keywords and terms (often brands, retailers, a style of clothing, and so on) that most personal style bloggers use to organize their blog posts give readers options for how to arrange their reading experience. Readers interested only in posts about TopShop garments or skinny jeans can click on those tags to filter out irrelevant posts. Another feature of style stories that gives readers the ability to customize their reading experience is hypertext. Clicking on an affiliate link will take readers immediately to a retail site (usually in a different window, so the blog remains open) where the specific garment can be purchased. Depending on which links readers choose to click on and in which order, each blog reading experience is unique.



Topshop Palm Jacquard A-Line Skirt (dress version [here](#))

Dolce Vita Lace Top (similar [here](#) and [here](#))

7 For All Mankind Denim jacket (love this light one [too!](#))

2.1 Screenshot from “Calamigos Ranch, Malibu,” Song of Style, April 21, 2014.

Song’s style stories include an additional feature that many others’ stories do not. She provides hypertext links not only for the garments spotlighted on her blog but also for alternative versions of these garments. When she does include suggestions for alternatives, they usually appear in a footnotes list at the end of her style story. This list includes source and supplementary source information.

The difference between the featured garments and their alternatives might have to do with cost, brand, and/or design (for example, a dress version of a miniskirt; see figure 2.1). Saving her readers the time, energy, and potential frustration of combing through the Internet for versions of her outfit that better fit their budgets and/or style, Song surfs the Internet for them, giving her implicit imprimatur to these alternative fashion choices. With these links, she acts as style inspiration, search engine, and personal shopper, using her personal tastes as a rubric with which to sort, reduce, and organize the Internet’s ocean of fashion choices for her readers, an audience of sartorially like-minded consumers.

This is a free service Song provides to her readers—and if readers’ comments are any indication, it is a service that readers not only appreciate but also have come to expect. When bloggers don’t note the brand or retailer carrying the garment featured, readers frequently use the comments feature of the blog to ask for this information. It is not uncommon for readers to respond to other readers’ questions, sometimes providing additional

information about the fit, color, or sizing of a garment. These are everyday interactions in the era of social commerce. Personal style blogs are key sites for mediating these one-to-many and many-to-many consumer communications. The interactivity of personal style blogs—communications between bloggers and readers, among bloggers and designers and retailers, between readers, and between different websites (blogs, news websites, online retailers, and so on)—characterizes for many fashion observers the democratizing effects of personal style blogs on the business and culture of fashion.

Yet the interactivity that bloggers facilitate through the work of creating, assigning, and managing hypertext links (and, in Song's blog, supplementary links to alternative garment choices) is not entirely a complimentary service. While these links are free to click on, and readers are free to click or not on any links they want, superblogs are fully and carefully monetized to convert readers' attention and activities into financial capital for the blogger, fashion and other retailers, and Internet companies. Even when a reader does not click on any links or purchase any items from affiliate retailers, just going to a personal style blog can create value for the blogger. For example, it can help to provide a search engine optimization boost (helping the site rise in the ranks of search engine results). Alternatively, bloggers who have cost per impression (as opposed to cost per click) arrangements with retailers can earn money based on the number of views an ad gets on their site (like in the case of a television commercial).

Just as important to bloggers' monetizing efforts as the hyperlinked text is the nonlinked text. When descriptions of garments or brands featured in an outfit post are not hyperlinked to a brand or retailer, this means that the blogger does not have an affiliate relationship with them. Because bloggers are not compensated for Internet activities that readers do off their site, static text is one way to make the most of blog reading activities. Hyperlinking only the text that will lead to value creation is a strategy for relegating (and regulating) blog readers' activities, directing them only to what creates value for the blogger. This demonstrates Espen Aarseth's important point that hypertext is best understood as a "fiction of interactivity."¹⁶ The affiliate links in personal style blogs mean that readers are not free to traverse the blog however they want. Bloggers use hypermedia to attempt to control the experience of blog reading by limiting the choices people can make as readers and fashion consumers.

Personal style blog "hobbyists"—those who produce outfit posts casually and do not actively seek to attract large audiences—often are not interested in or do not know how to monetize their blogs. As I noted above, superblogger's style stories are practices of taste work that require some level of coding and system administration skills. Even popular advertising programs like Google's AdSense (which automatically places ads based on a site's content and audience) require some code work. Once bloggers have been approved for an account (based on a wide range of criteria having to do with the site's language, content, and use and activity level), they still have to know how to install plug-in extensions or components that enhance the operations of their blogs so they can accept affiliate links and how to manually code links so that they are trackable. Some bloggers also manually code links to cloak affiliate partnerships so that they do not trigger ad blockers, spam filters, and search engine penalties.¹⁷

The textual and code work involved in superblogger's style stories—as well as the computational work they perform or actively and passively agree to having others perform—are difficult to classify into traditional labor categories. They are free labor because readers do not pay for these services. However, they are paid labor inasmuch as bloggers are indirectly compensated by commercial affiliates for the work they and their readers do for free. Though bloggers are not paid to write their style stories or manage their system's online content and relationships, they stand to earn informational capital (for example, a higher search engine optimization ranking), cultural capital (such as more readers and more online traffic), and—once the style stories are posted and tracking scripts (for affiliate links, banner ads, and so on) are in place—financial capital for themselves and their commercial sponsors. Likewise, superblogger's style stories are inarguably creative modes of labor, but they are also thoroughly instrumental modes of labor, literally designed (using computer codes) to accumulate capital.

The variety of work practices that superbloggers employ in the production of style stories highlights the porousness of traditional labor categories as well as some of the overlap between Asian fashion workers in digital media and those in apparel manufacturing sectors in terms of work arrangements. Both groups work on a temporary and contract basis, for which compensation is conditioned to a great extent on consumer demand (measured in terms of outbound clicks and/or retail sales). And just as the

work of making clothes is done by wage-insecure outsourced labor, so too is the work of marketing and promoting clothes.

The more salient point for this discussion about the permeability of labor categories with respect to digital media and manufacturing fashion work is that digital media in general and digital interactivity in particular have not so much transformed the dominant fashion industry as they have been incorporated into, and put to work for, it. That is, if personal style bloggers and their readers are empowered by new media technologies to express their own fashion opinions and style stories and to communicate more directly with retailers and other consumers, this empowerment is conditioned on the willingness to work at all hours of the day for little to no money. The taste work practices that superb bloggers apply to creating style stories, like generating and coding varieties of hypermedia, and the work that readers do just by going onto the site or clicking hypermedia are all potentially value-adding activities of which fashion companies are the ultimate beneficiaries.

Having discussed the literary and computer code work that bloggers do to construct style stories in ways that represent their taste, I want to turn now to a discussion of a different kind of code work that Asian superb bloggers engage in. As racial minorities in a white-dominated cultural and economic field and in the upper echelon of the personal style blogosphere, Asian superb bloggers' taste work involves practices of code switching not necessarily between languages but between expressions of their identity. Code switching is a common linguistic practice of identity work that minoritized people engage in online and offline to preemptively manage the negative and stereotypical perceptions others may have about them and to convey group belonging. (I discuss fashion blogger poses as nonverbal job performances of impression management in chapter 4.)

In the context of the personal style blogosphere, Asian superb bloggers code-switch racial difference with sartorial distinction. Categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality are recoded and depoliticized into individual style. A blog post Lau wrote on January 31, 2011, called "Chinoiserie Query" illustrates what I mean. Discussing the reappearance of Chinoiserie on fashion runways that year, Lau acknowledges that while these collections "might not sit all that well with actual Chinese women," she was "dazzled." Still, she concedes that she would not be wearing any of these clothes since "I don't really wish to wear my ethnicity on my sleeve." For Lau, both her

taste and distaste for Chinoiserie are individuating devices. Unlike "actual Chinese women," she appreciates the aesthetic value of these Western adaptations of Asian design ("so much of Louis Vuitton was decorative in all the ways that tickled my fancy").¹⁸ But by preferring not to wear her ethnicity on her sleeve, she also sets herself apart from Chinese women who do (maybe the same or a different group of actual Chinese women). In any case, Lau constructs or recodes her Chineseness as individual and individuating taste. Lau's Chineseness, her personal style of being Chinese, distinguishes her individuality from the collectivity of "actual Chinese women."

Such practices of code switching often involve balancing on a razor's edge between legitimate and illegitimate difference. In their style stories, Asian superb bloggers must strategically recast their racial difference as an element of style and social distinction—something that helps them stand out in an increasingly crowded and highly competitive marketplace where, as has been so often stated, attention is currency. At the same time, their stylization of difference helps them stand out without making them stand out too much. To draw mainstream audiences, maintain high volumes of readers and traffic, and acquire lucrative contracts with top fashion and marketing companies, Asian superb bloggers' style must be distinct but not different, exotic but not too exotic. As the enduring, if hackneyed, examples of the lists of the best dressed and worst dressed make crystal clear, there are good and bad ways of sartorially standing out.

There is an irony in Lau's statement about preferring not to wear her ethnicity on her sleeve. In disassociating her racial identity from the broader category of group identification and recoding it as a feature of her personal style, she and other Asian superb bloggers use practices of taste work to move the signification of race from the physical and social body to the sites of aesthetic sartorial choice. If the visible evidence of Chineseness or Asianness is found in the clothes one chooses to wear or not wear, then Lau and other Asian superb bloggers are in fact wearing their now individuated ethnicities and race. How they wear and style (materially, textually, visually, and so on) their Asianness as a legitimate difference is the work that Asian superb bloggers' taste practices do.

To give a sense of the wide range of creative ways that Asian superb bloggers approach and perform the task of written taste work, I turn to two very different modes of textual taste work in the style stories of Song and

Yambao. A comparative discussion of their code switching also has important implications for our understanding of the ways in which social difference is generated and circulated in digital popular culture as value-adding style.

When Peacocks Twirl and Camp

In this book, I have mentioned Suzy Menkes's anti-blogger article "The Circus of Fashion" a number of times. The article stirred up a considerable amount of controversy and debate that has continued up to the time of this writing. The blogger-editor feud began mildly enough in the mid-2000s, but by 2011 it had become an anxiety-laden preoccupation with whether bloggers (above all Asian superbloggerers, with their cheap work ethic and cheap fashion sense) had the right to share space with credentialed fashion journalists. Treading on this familiar battleground, Menkes's 2013 article stirred up old grudges and unresolved feelings. Not surprisingly, it easily gained traction in the fashion and social media. Controversies about whether or not bloggers belong at major fashion events have been largely one-sided debates. Op-eds and news stories written by fashion and lifestyle journalists and published in a wide range of Western media outlets dominated the public discourse.¹⁹ Bloggers have publicly downplayed these controversies as media inventions, but this does not mean that they have not reacted to the controversies.²⁰ Song's and Yambao's style stories provide some understanding of the complex ways in which Asian superbloggerers have responded to and, sometimes, rearticulated perceptions of themselves and their style.

One of the more common tactics Asian superbloggerers employ to express and enact their legitimate difference is to adopt the linguistic and broader ideological norms of fashion discourse (for example, Song's "pop of color"). Devon Carbado and Mitu Gulati, legal scholars who have published widely on the ways in which people of color "work their identity" to manage subtle and overt workplace discrimination, describe this tactic as a mode of "partial passing." Partial passing, unlike complete passing, does not involve fully claiming a white identity but rather "selectively 'escaping' the attributes of their Outsider identity." People might do this by distancing themselves from other members of their group or "by affirmatively identifying or associating with institutions, cultural practices, and

social activities that are stereotypically perceived to be white. They might, in other words, express an affinity for 'stuff white people like.'"²¹

Song's habits of using popular fashion idioms like "pop of color"²² and "boyfriend jeans/sweatshirt"²³; of enumerating wardrobe "essentials"²⁴ and of providing tips for a seemingly endless list of "appropriate" clothes (from "business appropriate"²⁵ and "dinner appropriate"²⁶ to "fall appropriate"²⁷ and "appropriate for music festivals"²⁸)—along with her constant refrain about keeping her style "simple,"²⁹ "polished,"³⁰ and "flattering"³¹—demonstrate her knowledge of and facility with popular fashion language as well as her conformity to normative presentations of identity. In short, Song's style stories are constructed through partial passing. They suggest that her racially marked difference makes no real difference at all. She is just a California girl whose style is also just like California: easy, simple, and—as she regularly describes it—"casual chic" (as in the case of the palm prints). This is not to say that she conceals her Asianness. Although Song rarely discusses her social identity, the massive numbers of outfit photos posted to her blog (recall that a full 97 percent of her blog posts are outfit posts) and to her Instagram account (seen by 1.9 million followers) are visual affirmations of her Asianness. More to the point, they are representations of her style of Asianness.

If we understand style stories as Barthian systems of signification and meaning making, then Song's stories function as descriptions both of her personal style and of a broader idea about her style of embodiment. Taking care to be "appropriate," "polished," and "simple" while still maintaining some element of distinctiveness that is interesting but contained in ways that ensure it is inoffensive (for example, "casual chic" and "pop of color") and so harmless in Bourdieu's sense of not destroying the fashion institution writ large involves more than a style of dress. The qualities of appropriateness, inoffensiveness, and harmlessness have long characterized a gendered style of Asian embodiment. To invoke Gabriella Lukács again, we can say that Song's style is "cute." Her style stories exemplify the "semantic flexibility" and accommodative nature (toward both the fashion norms and expectations of mainstream fashion blog readers) that Lukács argues are the definitive qualities of Asian cuteness.³² Historically, the attribution of these aesthetic qualities to Asian women (represented as small, soft, compliant, and vulnerable) has engendered a popular racial perception that they are naturally predisposed to service labor. What

is distinct about Asian cuteness as an aesthetic of gendered racial service in Lukács's discussion of Net Idols (see chapter 1) and in the present discussion of Asian superblogger is that it is attached not to working-class identities but to elite social and economic statuses. This is not a radical distinction, though. The elite status of Asian cuteness in these contexts says more about the value of service work in informational economies than about a real rise in the value of Asianness.

The fact that Asian cuteness now stretches to encompass elite as well as subordinated labors underlines the essential character of this racial semantic system. Historically, the term Asian has accommodated multiple and contradictory subject positions, including Asians who are honorary whites (for example, model minorities) to whites who are politically and socially Asian (such as the Asian Republican Coalition, whose members are almost exclusively affluent white men). Asian has also embodied a wide range of threats to the economy, to the racial and linguistic composition of universities and workplaces (for example, the "Little Asias" discussed in the introduction), to national security (such as spies), and to white Americans' public health (for example, severe acute respiratory syndrome, better known as SARS). Asian accommodation makes the racial category of Asianness particularly flexible and so uniquely suited to postracial definition and rearticulation.

Appropriate, polished, and simple—like Asian—are terms whose specific meanings can be interpreted in a wide range of ways. We see this in Song's style stories. Rather than using a stable set of sartorial signs, Song articulates her style as a jumble of opposing qualities: casual and chic, girly but also edgy, rock and roll grungy but also chic, monochromatic but with "a pop of color." Just as Lukács's Net Idols do, Song's style of dress and of embodiment accommodates: it offers something for everyone while offending no one. Not surprisingly, Song is seldom targeted in attacks on bloggers. Her taste for moderate styles of dress and embodiment leaves no racial aftertaste. Also not surprising is her mainstream popularity among readers and corporate entities, which seek her out, willing to pay a lot of money to have her as a brand partner. Her style of embodiment—like her vaunted style of dress—is ethnic but neutral, and according to branding and marketing standards, this is a virtue of mainstream multicultural appeal.³³

Song's construction of her personal style and style of embodiment is consistent with the logics of racial neoliberalism theorized by Imani Perry, David Theo Goldberg, Herman Gray, and others.³⁴ Under racial neoliberalism, race and racialized markers of difference are tied to market logics of consumer sovereignty, personal branding, and freedom of expression through a free market of endless consumer choices. As Gray explains, "within racial neoliberalism, we celebrate identity as post-racial multicultural difference with a small 'd.'" Race is not historically or structurally distinct, but is just one of many "proliferating diversities" that are reduced to fashion and lifestyle choices.³⁵ Gray characterizes neoliberal projects of racial identification, recognition, and visibility as projects of self-enhancement undertaken by the "self-crafting entrepreneurial subject whose racial difference is the source of brand value celebrated and marketed as diversity."³⁶

Song's written taste articulates a racial and class-based identity that is sartorially coded as normative—ever appropriate and polished. Her descriptions of "boyfriend jeans" and "flattering" clothes that show off her waist, legs, and bottom imply a heteronormative gender identity in which women have boyfriends and are attentive to the physical qualities that represent and conform to standards of ideal white femininity. Song's frequently stated preference for dresses that inspire her to twirl are another example of sartorial expressions of heteronormative middle-class feminine identity. Twirling in a full-skirted dress is girlish and suggestive but not overtly sexy, since it only plays with the possibility of exposure.³⁷

Song's construction of her racial and ethnic identities as an Asian American and Korean American are depolitized and privatized as universal forms of kinship. Through her sister, father, and grandmother (whom she writes about and, in the case of her grandmother, visits in Korea), she is Korean and Asian. But by these standards then, as Rey Chow writes, "everyone is ethnic." The liberal attitude that everyone is something, simply by dint of being born into a particular racial or ethnic group, "implies there should be no more violence and no more discrimination; there should only be humanistic tolerance."³⁸ Song's style of dress and embodiment express a neoliberal multicultural Asianness in which Asian identity is celebrated, incorporated, and neutralized as one possible style choice among many. Chow describes this in terms of the "protestant ethnic" self that is defined not by subjecthood but consumer objecthood.³⁹ Song's neoliberal

multicultural Asianness is perhaps best illustrated in her numerous style stories and outfit posts dedicated to kimonos.

Song mentions a number of times in her blog that the kimono is one of her favorite garments. Unlike Lau, who eschews Asian and particularly Chinese fashion design features because she worries about “looking like a waitress in a dodgy restaurant or a roleplay actor in a theme park,”⁴⁰ Song seems to have no such concern about being stereotyped. In fact, Song’s kimonos are a way to manage and shape perceptions that others might have about her Asianness. The kimono, a Japanese garment, is recoded in her style stories as a fashion sign of consummate flexibility. Tellingly, none of the garments she wears in her outfit posts are actual kimonos; rather, they are kimono-style garments designed and sold by UK-based designers and fashion companies. Her kimonos are thus Japanese without being too Japanese, exotic but not too exotic. In their moderate neutrality, they express her taste for styles of dress and embodiment that are different but still within the bounds of Western fashion legitimacy.

In and through Song’s style stories, kimono-style garments are described to be as perfectly suited for a yacht ride in Mexico as they are for a trip to Morocco.⁴¹ For her visit to the Huntington Botanical Gardens in Southern California, she also wears a “kimono.” As she puts it, “what better place to wear this beautiful floral print kimono to than the botanical gardens?”⁴² In another outfit post, the kimono is just the right garment for “running (and driving) back and forth working on my day job” (as an interior designer), and in yet another post, it is the ideal garment for sort of helping her boyfriend build a deck in their backyard (“I tried to help him shovel but instead, I had him take a photo of me!”).⁴³ Though all the kimono-style garments featured in these outfit posts are different pieces, they are unified by their ability to fit into and be aesthetically pleasing in a variety of contexts. In Song’s stories, the kimono-style garment is the sartorial sign par excellence of racially gendered accommodation. Not only are these (somewhat) Japanese women’s garments universally and equally appropriate in a wide range of contexts, but they are also presumably an appropriate fashion choice for the wide range of consumers that her mainstream audience of readers represents. In providing affiliate links and supplementary source information about the kimonos she is wearing and those she is not, Song—who is not Japanese or Japanese American but is

an influential Asian American superblogger with strong public and industry support—gives her implicit approval to readers and anyone else who wants to wear kimono-style garments. As with her approach to kimonos, Song approaches her self-representation from the standpoint of neoliberal multiculturalism. Her style stories empty the material signs of Asianness (both the kimono and her body) of their social, cultural, and political specificities. Her gendered racial identity, like the kimono, is just another aesthetic feature that enhances her personal brand of universal style.

In stark contrast to Song’s taste for the polished and appropriate, Yambao is “obsessed” with “everything colourful and embellished.”⁴⁴ In a style story published on May 1, 2014, he asserts: “My roots are firmly planted in the land of all things shiny and excessive. I love a good bling!”⁴⁵ Yambao is referring to his style of dress, but he might just as well be talking about his style of communication and embodiment. Reading through his style stories, especially the earlier ones, readers quickly get a sense of his bombastic (but not loud, as I will explain in chapter 4) sartorial style, his affected vulgarity, his obnoxious—sometimes caustic—humor, and his seemingly reflexive but clearly self-conscious tendency to exaggerate.

While personal style bloggers generally represent themselves as “real people” (as opposed to airbrushed models), Yambao revels in artifice and shallowness. In fact, one of his blog posts is titled “Everything about Me Is Fake and I’m Perfect.” He is deliberately superficial, ostentatious, and self-contradictory. In another post, in which he pleads to his readers to send him an Anya Hindmarch tote bag that is not for sale in the Philippines “because I live in the cesspit of Asia. My country doesn’t exist according to the people at Anya Hindmarch,” he ends with a self-aware statement about his materialism: “There really is no excuse for you people not to get me one. Do it for the poor. Do it for the whales. Do it for the seals. Do it for the third world kids. Do it for me because I’m preeeeeettttt!! Hahaha. Ok. Over and out. This obsession is silly. Silly, I tell you!”⁴⁶

While Yambao’s obsession may be silly—even to him—it would be a mistake to disregard his style stories as just silly. In fact, they are quintessential examples of what Susan Gubar terms “racial camp.” Building on Andrew Ross’s understanding of camp as “contain[ing] an explicit commentary on feasts of survival in a world dominated by the taste, interests, and definitions of others,” Gubar argues that “racial camp hints that feasts of

survival occur through inauthentic mimicry that affronts the blatantly suspect arbiters of good taste.”⁴⁷ In Yambao’s style stories, the pretentiousness, classism, and affective responses associated with luxury fashion are amplified to the point of humor and sometimes way beyond. Yambao does not just like something, he’s obsessed with it, and the latest “must-have” fashion accessory becomes something he really must have at any cost—including prostituting himself.

However, in exaggerating the language and behavior of the fashion elite, Yambao is not simply mocking them. He is coping with his exclusion from the fashion elite and surviving through camp until he is included. As Christopher Isherwood has observed, “you can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance.”⁴⁸ Yambao’s camp-inflected strategies facilitate the survival of his self-image as a queer global superstar in “the cesspit of Asia” as well as the survival of his love for fashion in spite of the Western fashion industry’s racist imaginary (in which the Philippines and, by extension, Filipinos do not exist).

Yambao’s style stories are camping taste on two fronts. One is the homophobic Catholic tastes of mainstream Filipino society. Because of his nonnormative gender presentations of identity through both men’s and women’s clothes and accessories and feminine consumer practices, he is often subject to verbal and nonverbal gay bashing. He experiences this so frequently in Manila that he has become acutely aware of even subtle forms of discrimination. As he puts it, his “entire body is covered with invisible ‘You’re-Staring-At-Me-And-Giving-Me-Crappy-Looks’ sensors.” So too is his women’s luxury handbag: “Heck, even my [Hermès] Birkin bag, which I used today, is covered with such detectors.” In the same post, he gets back at those who go “all hoity toity on me” by writing (in neon pink bold text), “Punk kid my ass when my Birkin bag is DEFINITELY more than their third world annual income.”⁴⁹ This remark exemplifies Yambao’s camp-inflected practices of taste work. It is an obnoxiously self-aggrandizing display of Western materialism and classism even as it is a clearly pained expression of alienation.

Yambao’s attempts to distance himself from other citizens of the Philippines (which he regularly refers to in his excessively pretentious fake French as “the land of the brown, l’exotique and the natives”⁵⁰) may be one reason

he is more popular in North America and Europe than in the Philippines. In 2006, less than 4 percent of his readers were from the Philippines: “The number of people who read my site outside the shithole I call home easily outnumbers my fellow brown ricers.” What does this mean? According to Yambao, “Well, geography is no boundary when it comes to Bryanboy’s faggotry and at this point, the world is my fucking oyster.”⁵¹ In 2009, the composition of his readers had not changed. In one blog post, Yambao calls readers from Germany, Italy, and Canada his “target audience” since “not even [popular retailers] Shoemart (or Rustan’s) in the Philippines probably doesn’t even know I exist!!!”⁵²

Yambao’s tendency to assert his status with Western expressions and forms of material culture does not mean that the Western fashion elite is spared from the blogger’s critical camp aesthetic strategies. In his use of obscene language and his discussions of obscene behaviors that almost always have to do with Western fashion commodities, his style stories are affronts to the social etiquette and cultural norms of luxury fashion even as they are testaments to his desire to belong to this world. Yambao once blogged “screw Anna Wintour”—a blasphemous if not professionally suicidal statement against the doyenne of the fashion world.⁵³ In an open letter to Riccardo Tisci, creative director of the French luxury fashion house Givenchy, Yambao embraces the title of the “fashion whore” by offering the Italian designer sexual favors in exchange for free clothes.⁵⁴ He also describes his “obsession” with new fashion garments and his excitement about the opening of a new luxury fashion retail store in terms of highly graphic, painstakingly detailed bodily functions—all those his body is capable of and some it is not (such as menstruation).

Perhaps even more offensive to the Western fashion establishment than his vulgar language is the vulgar truths Yambao tells about it. As he points out in his style stories, he is a citizen of a country that “doesn’t exist” for Western fashion companies. He also recognizes that the menswear designers he covets do not have him in mind as their ideal consumer. On June 16, 2014, he wrote on his blog: “I’m sure you are aware that I’m on the opposite end of the Raf Simons target demographic spectrum. I’m not a tall and gangly, post-pubescent Aryan situation.”⁵⁵ This is not the first time Yambao has noted the racial homogeneity of men’s fashion media imagery. While the racial problem on women’s fashion runways and in magazines has constantly been a topic in the fashion media in recent years, little

has been said about men's fashion runways. Yambao's observation on his blog that the world of menswear as embodied by male models "is actually more aryan nation compared to women's wear" is astute.⁵⁶

I do not want to idealize Yambao, though. His flagrant classism, racism, sexism, and misogyny have attracted a lot of criticism that he undoubtedly deserves.⁵⁷ One of his critics has gone so far as to hack his website. The permalinks, or permanent URLs, for a significant number of his blog posts are now nonoperational. If you attempt to read these posts (the older ones seem most affected), you are automatically redirected to a website with the address ihatebryanboy.com. If that website ever had original content, it no longer does. As of this writing, the site only shows information about its hosting provider, a company called Bluehost, which is based in Provo, Utah. While Yambao's readers have complained about the redirecting, the blogger hasn't responded to them publicly or, it seems, been able to resolve the problem.

The bulk of the criticism against Yambao takes the form of a tabloid-style exposé whose intent was to uncover some astonishing or dirty truth about the blogger who in the inaugural days of his blog anointed himself "Planet Earth's Favourite Third World Fag."⁵⁸ Like the attacks on bloggers discussed in the previous chapter, the personal attacks against Yambao also emphasize his cheapness or fakeness. But unlike the previously attacks, these are concerned with Yambao's cheap moral character as a person, not just as a fashion blogger.

In September 2012, a Philippines-based arts and culture magazine called *Rogue* published a lengthy investigative story titled "Will the Real BryanBoy Please Stand Up?" The article paints Yambao as a petty, insecure, and immature person who kicked his sick friend out of their hotel room in freezing weather with no money so that he could have sex with three French men he just picked up, and who spent his day planning an outfit for a blogger awards ceremony while his mother was in the hospital undergoing major surgery. But the real focus of the article, as the title suggests, is Yambao's deceitfulness. The article accuses the blogger of a long list of lies, crimes, and moral ambiguities. The article says that he has "an album full of credit cards—with different variations of his name"; that the exclusive private school he supposedly attended has no record of him at either of its campuses; that the home he lived in with his parents was actually in a lower-income town outside of Manila, rather than the tony Ma-

nila neighborhood he claims to be from, and that although the house was "tiny" and "makeshift," his room was oddly crowded with Fendi, Gucci, Prada, and Louis Vuitton clothes, shoes, and luggage; and that the man he introduces as his driver is actually his long-suffering father.⁵⁹ Rumors like these have followed Yambao since the early days of his blog, but to focus on discovering what is true and false about the blogger who once admitted, "I can totally picture myself as a nasty, catty, bitchy, self-centered, delusional, egotistical, so-full-of-me-me-me-and-no-one-but-me *Mean Girls* (Regina George) queen bee-type of person" is to miss the strategic aspect of his taste work.⁶⁰

As I've been suggesting, style stories are strategies by which Asian superbloggers work their identities to negotiate their fraught position as a legitimate difference. Song's style stories legitimize and make legible her difference through written and sartorial constructions of a familiar style of gendered Asian embodiment. Like the kimono-style garments she favors, her racial identity is an aesthetic feature of her personal style that is fashioned to adjust to and be appropriate in any context. No longer understood as a historical category of social difference, racial identity is expressed and enacted in her style stories as a style of embodiment that is distinctive (and thus value adding) but within the bounds of Western legibility and legitimacy.

Yambao's written taste work also expresses race as an individual characteristic rather than a social category, but unlike Song, Yambao imagines his racial identity to be transcendent rather than contained. His use of prestige brands and his brand name-dropping—expressed in his excessively pretentious and theatrical mode of camp—construct an identity plastered with the markers of Western style and status. These designer brands are intended to make legible the distinctiveness of his Filipino or Third World difference. In the terms of Carbado and Gulati's identity work strategies, Yambao employs a tactic of partial passing by racial distancing, as if he is saying: "I may be from the Third World but I'm not like them; as my fashion tastes illustrate, I'm like you."

We see this taste practice of racial distancing in a recent style story in which Yambao recalls browsing in a Chanel store. He tells his readers about a pair of "major" white Chanel sneakers that he loved but ultimately did not buy: "I realized I can't have a multi-logo-a-gogo situation, with what, a Rolex watch, Louis Vuitton trolley and Goyard tote—the lewk [look]

screamed Asian at Duty Free.”⁶¹ For all his trenchant criticism of the Western fashion industry’s racial hierarchies, Yambao has not only internalized but is also reproducing a prevailing racial stereotype about Asian tastes as cheap, tacky, and unsophisticated (less evolved than Western and, tactfully, white tastes). By fashioning himself in and through Western fashion descriptions and fashion choices (including the choices not to buy), his style stories are intended to demonstrate the legitimate difference of his racial body. The message of this style story is that he is not like those other Asians “at duty free” who are cheap foreigners touring the world of luxury fashion; he belongs in this world. By not succumbing to “a multi-logo-a-gogo situation,” he unmarks his body of particularly racialized codes of Asian taste (though he is still wholly ensconced in nonlogo forms of sartorial excess like the Rolex watch and the Louis Vuitton trolley).

Through his style stories and his conscious play with the aesthetic modes of camp sensibility (artifice, exaggeration, pretentiousness, and so on), Yambao brings forth “a vision of the world in terms of style” as well as a vision of his rightful place in it.⁶² He uses his style stories and outfit posts to fashion a public image of himself as the queer global superstar that he has long privately believed himself to be. Less than two years after Yambao published his first outfit post (before there was even a word for that kind of post), what had been dismissed by others and sometimes by the blogger himself as fantasies and self-delusions had become real.⁶³ With Fendi’s appropriation of Yambao’s signature pose and Jacobs’s many public displays of affection for him, it is clear that the self-titled “Le Superstar Fabuleux” is now widely acknowledged, if not universally accepted, in the Western fashion industry.

Chapter 3.

“So Many and All the Same” (but Not Quite): Outfit Photos and the Codes of Asian Eliteness

In January 2011, Franca Sozzani, the outspoken editor in chief of *Vogue Italia*, slammed personal style bloggers for their practice of producing and publishing photos of themselves wearing clothes in public: “They . . . only talk about themselves, take their own pictures wearing absurd outfits. What’s the point? I don’t even know who they are except a few names because they are so many and all the same, they are so worried about what to wear to get noticed that my eyes only see a crowd in the end.”¹ Sozzani does not mention who the exceptions are, but we can assume that at least two of the names she knows are the bloggers who go by the monikers Susie Bubble (Susanna Lau) and BryanBoy (Bryan Grey Yambao). Lau has been prominently featured in Sozzani’s magazine a number of times, most notably in its October 2009 roundup of best blogs. And in September 2010, Sozzani invited Yambao, whom the magazine described as “one of the world’s most famous fashion bloggers,” to shadow her for a day.² But whomever Sozzani was thinking about when she wrote the remarks above, her characterization of bloggers as “so many and all the same” is only partially accurate. By her own account, there are exceptional differences. So while there may be so many, they are not quite all the same.

This chapter takes Sozzani’s description of bloggers and their outfit photos as a valuable provocation to analyze both the work that outfit photos do to construct sameness, difference, and distinction and the cultural