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Racist Cute: Caricature, *Kawaii*-Style, and the Asian Thing

Leslie Bow

> Asians have history. Many of us can trace our families back to China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Sanrio.
>
> —Eddie Huang, "Based FOB," August 29, 2014

In 2015 two convicts tunneled out of a prison in upstate New York, leaving a note that thumbed their noses at authorities: "Have a nice day!" Accompanying this message was the image of a buck-toothed, slanty-eyed Asian face (fig. 1). The racist caricature saturated US media outlets as attempts to locate the fugitives dragged on. Against the ubiquitous display of the Asian caricature left by the fugitives, only NBC News blurred the image as if in belated awareness of the injury underlying racially reductive imagery.

The much-broadcast Asian caricature uncannily reflects an almost identical, also uncensored image: a juicer, manufactured by Alessi, Italian purveyor of upscale household goods (fig. 2). Ludic but functional, the design of the Mandarin Citrus-squeezer is too clever by half: the conical hat comes off to reveal a juicer; the head is a drinking cup. I found it in San Francisco in 2006 at the intersection between the financial district and Chinatown, around the corner from a Sanrio flagship store, purveyor of Hello Kitty tchotchkes. At one level, the anthropomorphic object is appalling, marketed with no awareness of the hoary tradition of segregation-era racist kitsch, mammy cookie jars and the like. Given that dissonance, the object seemed to embody a teachable moment. I bought it. But I wanted it for a less rational reason: I also thought it was *adorable*.

Mundane household goods personifying largely, but not exclusively, East Asian iconography seem to circulate freely in the United States—Asianized coin banks, rice bowls, kitchen timers, or handbags (fig. 3). These items share an economy of design that is a hallmark of both modernism and cartooning, yet their minimalist aesthetic relies on both the reduction of stereotyping and the exaggeration of caricature. Engaging a visual rhetoric that confers "on

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Figure 1.
"Have a nice day!" note left by fugitives from Clinton Correctional Facility, 2015

Figure 2.
Mandarin Citrus-squeezer, Alessi, Italy, in collaboration with the National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2007

Figure 3.
Pucca coin bank, Canada / South Korea, 2006

things some properties of persons" in keeping with the mysticism of commodity fetishism,[1] they reflect the seeming inverse of capitalist reification, the fantasy of anthropomorphism, of things come to life.

Asianized objects resurrect a specific racial form at the millennium. Yet we understand displays of segregation-era goods embodying African Americans as racial microaggressions instigating negative feeling. In contrast, twenty-first-century versions of kitsch bought and sold in the US—the imaginary Asian as salt shaker, handbag, or toy—somehow elude contextualization as *racist* kitsch. Given the relatively uncensored presence of what are arguably racial caricatures in the US, at some level, we are in the realm of something different, something that enables us to separate these artifacts from the very feeling that now surrounds their progenitors. How do these novelties evade, in Sara Ahmed's words, the "affective economy" of racist caricature tied to mockery?[2] I want to suggest that the difference lies not only in divergent racial histories but in the convergence between theories of commodity aesthetics and the specificity of Asian American racialization. The objects under consideration here do not represent just any manifestation of anthropomorphic form but embody the Japanese aesthetic known as *kawaii*, or cute-style. They are not intended to produce feelings of disgust or ridicule, but another sentiment: affection.

From its grassroots origins in Japan in the 1970s, *kawaii*-style has since gone global. At the outset, one of the first and largest purveyors of *kawaii* goods, Sanrio, cultivated a brand that self-consciously disguised its Japanese roots and sells briskly in over thirty countries.[3] Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry belatedly recognized its potential in branding national exports, launching the "Cool Japan" campaign in 2013 to promote consumerism via youth culture around the world. As evidenced by the Mandarin (fig. 2), other manufacturers of *kawaii*-style goods cooperate in the circulation of cute: the juicer represents a collaboration between Alessi and no less than the National Palace Museum in Taipei, holder of Chinese antiquities.

As the personified thing circulates in a global market, its reception is conditioned by local and imperial histories, by uneven and changing economic fortunes, and by the shifting meanings that accrue to racial difference across Europe, the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific Rim. That is, depending on its audience, the Mandarin Citrus-squeezer can be variously read as orientalist, as a parody of orientalism, as anti-Chinese, or as whimsical homage to Chinese heritage. Yet the infamous history of mammy cookie jars and lawn jockeys situates anthropomorphic form as intimately bound to the circulation of negative racial feeling in the US. At first glance, the cute Asianized thing likewise represents a demeaning visual joke that can, in Sigmund Freud's words, "evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible."[4]

In what follows, I explore the affective implications of this racial form as it reflects *kawaii*. In her seminal work on minor aesthetic categories, Sianne Ngai has suggested that cuteness represents "the name of encounter with difference—a perceived difference in the power of the subject and object"; she connects the rise of *kawaii* commodities with asymmetrical global power.[5] In keeping with recent scholarship in cuteness studies, the present essay amplifies Ngai's work by highlighting how cuteness is implicated in a US racial imaginary with heightened stakes for Asian Americans.[6] I extend her analysis by arguing that the anthropomorphic form complicates the association between racial caricature and harm through the affective responses evoked by the cute. It allows for the enjoyment of unequal relations of power, circumventing the prohibitions placed on racial desires in the twenty-first century.

If the reception of Asian things within East Asia reveals sincere attachment and an awareness of cultural homage, in contrast, given the legacy of white supremacy in the US, they may well be seen as a form of hate speech. As physical iterations of "discriminatory action,"[7] they thus represent "risky objects," in Bruno Latour's words, objects that "break other actors down."[8]

They reveal the ways in which Asian American racialization differs from that of African Americans on the surface, while nonetheless enacting the reductions and ambivalences of stereotyping. Cute things betray uncertainties surrounding race as it is seen as *straying* from type, uncertainties nevertheless veiled by positive feeling. Cute anthropomorphic things, I suggest, reveal the ways in which Asian stereotyping in the US reflects anxieties surrounding global market competition.

In contrast to speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, I do not want to suggest that anthropomorphic objects assert a resistant materiality or autonomy outside a system of social relations. Rather, in keeping with new materialism's focus on objects, I consider the agency of the nonhuman within asymmetrical social networks, objects, in Latour's terms, as "actants" or "participants in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration."[9] These human proxies are sources for discovering, as in Bill Brown's "thing theory" and his analysis of earlier iterations of this racial form, "not epistemological or phenomenological truth but the truth about what force things . . . might have in each society," particularly as *kawaii*-style renders things intimately knowable through the aura of innocence.[10]

More complexly, figures such as Alessi's Mandarin generate ambivalent responses among the spectators they putatively embody—I both hate it and love it—in ways that complicate understanding of the stereotype and Ngai's work on the demands of the cute. "Loving" anthropomorphic *kawaii* things represents a conundrum for Asian American spectators, particularly those who identify as activists whose aim is to *challenge* stereotypical, injurious representations such as racial caricature. Does ambivalence toward the racial thing compromise membership in political community, in coalition? In parsing how the putatively negative image might generate positive feeling, I explore the vacillation between pleasure and pain underlying Asian American spectatorship surrounding anthropomorphic things, particularly as they embody the paradox of what might be called the "racist cute." Such objects make visible the affect seemingly required by the designation "Asian American activist." In contrast to Joseph Jonghyun Jeon's analysis of racialized things that avoid the pitfalls of identity politics through their defamiliarizing embodiment,[11] the racial things of this essay unveil the foundations of the coalitional identity, "Asian American" to be a community predicated on shared feeling.

This essay transcends the offensive–inoffensive framework of spectatorship that imposes an ethical dimension on interpretation in order to explore the desiring structures underlying stereotyping itself. At first glance, trivial, small,

and mundane new iterations of kitsch at the millennium are seemingly unlike the antiblack, grotesque commodities of the early twentieth century: they are Asian and they are cute. And yet, cuteness, I argue, aestheticizes anti-Asian bias. On behalf of those of us who trace our families back to Sanrio, I ask, how is the pleasure of cute things racialized and to what effect?

Caricature as Microaggression

Ethnic caricature is not cute; indeed, it constitutes a form of hate speech. In 2005 the American Psychological Association called for the immediate retirement of American Indian mascots. In doing so, it follows in the footsteps of grassroots, tribal, and student activism, legal challenges, and academic work that make explicit the correlation between the reductive racial image and psychological harm, representation and injury. Ever since *Brown v. Board of Education* cited Kenneth and Mamie Clark's doll study to reinforce the connection between race and self-esteem, the idea that representation constitutes "discriminatory action" continues to animate activism. Thus stereotyping is recognized as a microaggression that negatively affects the mental health and well-being of people of color.[12]

A visual iteration of the stereotype, caricature, from the Italian *caricare*, "to load," is "overloaded representation," an exaggeration often invoked in the service of satire. Aristotle noted that "comedy is an imitation of inferior things and people."[13] A form of hostile humor, the comic-grotesque underlying racial caricature is sadistic in nature. As Freud notes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, "By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him."[14] Caricature represents a specific type of humor whose pleasures lie not in nonsense or absurdity but in eliciting the pleasures of dominance. At the same time, the visual rhetoric of ethnic humor claims to evade taboos surrounding race in its seeming triviality as "just" a joke.

By the 1980s the association between caricature as a specific form of typing and psychological harm coalesced in the notion of legally actionable hate speech and its correlate, "wordless speech." Critical race theory braved the minefield of First Amendment interpretation to explore the limits to free speech.[15] The toll imposed by "words that wound" found parallel in images and objects symbolizing racial-ethnic hatred: swastikas, nooses, burning crosses, cotton balls. Efforts to promote inclusive environments thus prohibit visuals deemed offensive or inflammatory, limiting what can be displayed in communal living

spaces or the workplace. In 2015 ethnic Halloween costumes became "risky objects" stimulating debates over racism and insensitivity, culminating in campus protests across the country.

Slow changes in corporate culture and marketing follow from the recognition of this unevenly assumed risk. For example, by 1966 Pillsbury replaced the ethnic caricatures on its Chinese Cherry and Injun Orange drink mixes with the neutrally named Choo-Choo Cherry and Jolly Olly Orange. The Frito Bandito, a cartoon figure enlisted to sell corn chips, was forced into retirement by 1972. Chief Wahoo, mascot of the Cleveland Indians, has been granted a quiet, unpublicized phaseout in favor of the letter *C*. The waning use of caricature to endear products to consumers reflects the gradual evolution of community awareness surrounding caricature as ethnic slur, as visual jokes that transgress shared covenants surrounding racial representation in liberal public culture. But even in the context of this now tenuously held prohibition, such figures are not entirely repressed. The *kawaii* Asian thing represents a new iteration of a historical form that is itself undergoing recontextualization.

By common consensus we now repudiate the display of earlier manifestations of such caricatures in the form of ceramic mammies and lawn jockeys because we recognize how the weight of racial ideology resides in the mundane. Mostly grotesque in form, novelties embodying the mammy, coon, or pickaninny relied on the comic reduction (and exaggeration) of the stereotype. Their proliferation from 1880 to 1930 corresponded with the rise of segregation, but they continued to be manufactured into the 1960s and after the millennium.[16] A reminder of race–class subordination, they blurred servants' roles with servants themselves. In effect, these anthropomorphic household objects substituted for the black servants whom working-class whites could not afford.[17] As evidenced by multiple iterations of an "Oriental" laundry aid designed to "sprinkle plenty" of water on one's ironing, the conflation between servant and task applied to Asians in the US as well (fig. 4).

The affect that these ceramic avatars projected was essential to the work they performed. Identifying the use of black servants to brand household goods in segregation-era advertising, the historian Kenneth Goings coins the term *spokesservant* to describe figures such as Rastus, a character developed to advertise Cream of Wheat, and Aunt Jemima, the original "pancake mammy." Their grins sanitized dehumanization, allowing white spectators with limited buying power to take pleasure in racial subordination. In their ubiquity, they invoke the ambivalent structure of stereotyping itself, which, as Homi Bhabha notes, "vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated."[18]

Figure 4.
Sprinkle Plenty, US mass-produced laundry aid

Figure 5.
Harajuku Lovers fragrance by Gwen Stefani, Coty, 2008

This historical frame, I argue, conditions the legibility of racialized things. And yet the millennial anthropomorphic Asian thing seems to have eluded this framing in part because Asians provoke different structures of feeling than do African Americans, and in part because of their aesthetic form. The Harajuku Lovers perfume bottle launched by the transnational cosmetics conglomerate Coty in 2008 provides a case in point (fig. 5). Based on the Harajuku Girls, Japanese backup dancers to US pop star and fashion designer Gwen Stefani, the bottles are marketed around the world. According to plan, every year the characters were to appear in different outfits with the fragrances remaining the same; that is, the *form* of the bottle, not its contents, was object of consumer desire. The nature of that desire was trumpeted in its name: one could not simply "like" them. Taking pleasure in Asianized racial objects such as these depends in part on the rise of the Japanese aesthetic since the 1970s known as *kawaii*, or "cute-style." As depicted in figures 2, 3, and 5, twenty-first-century anthropomorphic things appear to circumvent taboos surrounding ethnic caricature or parallels to mammy cookie jars and their US-centered history simply because they are cute. To state the obvious, these are subject to different forms of spectatorship in Asia that I would not mark as racialized per se: as evidenced by the highly touted 2012 rollout of nearly identical Harajuku knockoffs, Pan's Ko Lovers perfume, in Hong Kong, Asian reception of such objects is not haunted by *racialized* dehumanization. In its "universal" appeal, cuteness becomes an instrument of neoliberal globalization by seeming to erase national resonances, dematerializing history and local specificity. Yet cuteness also aestheticizes anti-Asian bias. Designed to evoke affective responses associated with the cute, *kawaii*-style figures nevertheless complicate the association between caricature and harm, illuminating the very conditions that history places on racial legibility for Asian Americans in the twenty-first century.

Politics of *Kawaii*-Style: "D" Is for Dominance

In suggesting that *kawaii* functions as a racial aesthetic in the US, I deviate from its neutral, seemingly innocent origins in Japan. *Kawaii* arose out of a popular movement among teenage girls in Japan who affected a simple, loopy handwriting deemed *koneko ji*, or "kitten writing," in 1974 and spread to trends in slang, clothing, fandom, and other facets of consumer culture.[19] A global aesthetic, it permeates fashion, advertising, cosplay, high art, television, foodways, and digital culture. *Kawaii* commodities are marketed to and consumed by girls and young women, or *shōjo* (young unmarried females). Sharon Kinsella sug-

gests that this marketing was facilitated by changes in post-occupation Japanese culture, which imported Western gift-giving occasions such as birthdays, but more significantly represented an understated youth rebellion, a resistance to taking on the social responsibilities of adults. As Christine Yano writes in *Pink Globalization*, "The shōjo and her 'girl culture' marked the rise of kawaii as a galvanizing touchstone of female, youth-oriented, affective, aestheticized, commodified Japan."[20] Of course, what was marketed to her was not in fact *fanshii guzzu* (fancy goods) but affordable kitsch.

One of the most successful marketers of *kawaii* goods continues to be Sanrio, the Japanese manufacturer of Hello Kitty products and, as importantly, her myth. An anthropologist observing its transnational corporate culture, Yano reveals that Sanrio's marketing strategy does not necessarily have a basis in research and development as in the past; rather, choosing products for the US market depends on Sanrio's ability to elicit the very affective response from its employees that it requires from consumers. The largely Asian American and female staff in its San Francisco office made decisions for product-line distribution on the West Coast based on the "awww" factor each item inspired. Representing the ultimate commodity fetish, the *kawaii* object dispenses with use value: one does not really "need" Hello Kitty figurines or stickers. That is, the function of such commodities is precisely to incite the (presumed female) buyer's good will, to elicit emotion.

Kanako Shiokawa notes that *kawaii* "conveys a message of positive aesthetics. When someone or something is 'cute,' s/he/it is either charming, likable, plush, fluffy, endearing, acceptable, desirable, or some combination of the above."[21] "The concept of *kawaii* includes elements such as 'cute', 'pretty,' and 'lovely,'" writes Yuko Hasegawa. "It also implies something precious: something that we are drawn towards and which stimulates one's feeling of wanting to protect something that is pure and innocent."[22] A gendered aesthetic, *kawaii*'s popularity is attributed to the fact that it elicits motherly, caregiving impulses stimulated by helpless babies, children, and animals. *Kawaii* is an aesthetic form characterized by positive, specifically maternal feeling.

Kawaii-style thus allows spectators to take pleasure in asymmetries of social power. Ngai's awareness of the violence underlying an aesthetic "organized around a small, helpless, or deformed object" thus has particular relevance for the study of race: when she asserts that "cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness," she might as well be describing the processes of racialization.[23] While the association between affect and race is more obviously bound to the circulation of negative feeling (hate, fear, anxiety), that associative stickiness

applies to "minor affects" such as affection as well. If cuteness allows for the enjoyment of unequal relations of power (adult to child, human to animal), then its underlying violence in producing racial feeling becomes clear. Cuteness veils pleasure in domination; the cute object's extreme passivity incites a desire for control. "Cuteness, in short, is not something we find in our children," Daniel Harris writes, "but something we *do* to them."[24] The pleasure taken in cute things derives from their unequal status, a dynamic that is both masked and, in regard to race at the millennium, rendered partially taboo.

The cute things here thus invoke asymmetries of power underlying racialization: they appear to mitigate anti-Asian sentiment through positive feeling. And yet they recall another reductive typing: the oriental as thing. If early twentieth-century kitsch objects recalled the thingness of slaves, as Brown theorized,[25] in contrast, the anthropomorphic Asian figurine reinforces the association between thingness and the Orient evident both in the perception of the machine-like qualities of coolie labor and in the popularization of *chinoiserie* and *japonisme*; it conflates Orient and accessory. As trade in the "East Indies" assumed rising importance in eighteenth-century Europe and the North American colonies, imported goods (textiles, lacquers, porcelain) reflected an ornamental style "*a la Chine*" in accordance with Western tastes.[26] Whether fabric, chinaware, or figurine, the Chinese decorative object in the colonies was emptied of cultural meaning in order to stand as a sign of consumer narcissism linked to a mastery of overseas trade.[27] The desire for exotic décor found analogues in the twentieth century in the mania for hawaiiana in the 1950s and what Sunaina Maira calls "indo-chic" in the 1980s.[28] South Asian accessorizing, she argues, represents the extension of imperialist logic resurrected as "late capitalist orientalism," global consumption of the exotic.[29]

Cute things both extend and complicate these asymmetric global exchanges. Their aura at the millennium encompasses a slightly different domestic mood as reflected in the original Harajuku Girls (fig. 5), who, as backup dancers, *accessorize* their blonde leader. In 2015 consumer response to the decorative tchotchke "sumo," offered by the US retailer cb2, sister company of Crate and Barrel (fig. 6), showcases the use value of the cute accessory: to instigate feeling or, in the decluttering guru Marie Kondo's terms, to "spark joy." In this modernist and arguably *kawaii* figurine, Japanese cultural difference is stripped to a minimalist essence: topknot, belt, morphology, stance. On the company's website, "Annie" takes pleasure in the supposed uniqueness of the mass-produced commodity: "I enjoy adding something unexpected (weird perhaps?) and quirky to the rooms in my home—it makes my home unique

Figure 6.
“sumo,” cb2, USA, 2015

and interesting.”[30] “Jana” enthuses, “this fun home accessory makes a great statement and is sure to get guests talking.”[31] In contrast to earlier periods in which *chinoiserie* and *japonisme* conveyed luxury and domination of overseas trade, racial things produce lighthearted ambiance: they are “fun.”

To render something cute reinforces power differentials underlying racialization by introducing the question of scale as it graphs onto authority: the small as insignificant. Taking delight in the diminutive is enhanced by the socially leveling nature of caricature, the miniature fighter as mock heroic. The delight taken in mascots and caricature converge in Alessi’s Mandarin (fig. 2) and the Chin Family, a series of kitchen goods encompassing chopstick holders, egg cups, and salt and pepper shakers. The series has the imprimatur of the National Palace Museum of Taiwan (NPM), which launched an initiative dubbed “Old Is New” in 2005 that attempted to rebrand its historical holdings to appeal to a younger audience. The museum called on Alessi’s head designer, Stefano Giovannoni, to create “new symbols of auspicious themes (mascots) based on art objects in the NPM.”[32] Giovannoni took his inspiration for the Chin Family from the portrait of Ch’ing dynasty emperor Ch’ien-lung (1711–1799) held by the museum (fig. 7). The series’ *kawaii*-style design and appeal to the

Figure 7.
"Old is New": Alessi's the "Chin Family" kitchen timer, 2007 inspired by portrait of Ch'ing dynasty emperor, Ch'ien-lung

cute no doubt served the museum's intention to use "trendy aspects of today's youth to enliven ancient objects." Of course, it does so by submitting authority to downward mobility: one's eggs are served by no less than the emperor of China. With his slanted eyes and traditional Chinese garb, the now-demoted "*Mr.* Chin" evokes Freud's notion that caricature "brings about degradation by emphasizing in the general impression given by the exalted object a single trait which is comic in itself but was bound to be overlooked."[33] Invoking a shared history between Taiwan and the mainland, as much as homage, the figure may be thus read as Taiwan's rebuke to centralized state power. A mascot is imbued with positive feelings of ownership in part derived from socially leveling infantilization. In the case of the anthropomorphic object's circulation in the US, this reduction takes on a racial cast. Here "Mr. Chin" represents the awkward collisions/collusions of global trade; while *kawaii*-style intends to impart the fresh vigor of youth, it likewise conveys its puerility and insignificance, here, inadvertently also a conduit of racial meaning outside Asia. To be clear: the inadvertently caricatured Italian design represents late capitalist orientalism even as it was commissioned by a Taiwanese source for Asian and non-Asian consumption alike. Yet it may also be read as symptom, as an anxious response to the latent and impending racialization of neoliberal global flows, reflecting Bhabha's reading of the vacillation underlying the stereotype.

I want to suggest, then, that the pleasure surrounding *kawaii* commodities, their enactment of *complimentary* racial stereotyping, masks a fetishistic anxiety surrounding East Asia writ large. To understand how the racialized anthropomorphic object skirts the borders of the acceptable without breaking American covenants surrounding ethnic caricature, I turn to their interaction with a dominant perception of Asians in the US. Unpacking the relationship between group stereotypes and emotional valence, the social psychologist Susan Fiske and her colleagues implicitly ask us to consider Asian American "model minority" perception on a dual axis reflecting both positive and negative connotations:

> Social psychologists have typically viewed only unflattering stereotypes as indicating prejudice, where prejudice is a uniform antipathy or contempt. . . . We argue instead that stereotypes are captured by two dimensions (warmth and competence) and that subjectively positive stereotypes on one dimension do not contradict prejudice but often are functionally consistent with unflattering stereotypes on the other dimension.[34]

Fiske suggests that stereotyping works on two axes that incite contrary emotional valence: the perception of competence that generates envy and respect,

and the perception of warmth that generates affection. Some groups elicit positive feeling, but are perceived to be less competent ("housewives," "the elderly," "the disabled"). Others are deemed highly competent yet score low on warmth, something that Asians apparently share with "the rich," "feminists," "business women," and "Jews." Thus, in the US, they are perceived to possess an "excessive, threatening competence."[35] In other words, Asians are respected but disliked; the consequence of so-called positive stereotyping is that the other shoe always drops.

At first glance, *kawaii*-style enables an affective response to racial difference that compensates for this dominant stereotype; it mitigates envy by conveying warmth. The cute anthropomorphic orientalized object may avoid touching the third rail of American racial politics because it seems to counter the Asian stereotype of "threatening competence" by inscribing its opposite: the Asian as endearing, amusing, lovable. Addressed to children and young women, their aesthetic marks an association with dependence and innocence. The racialized object speaks to both the split affect tied to Asian stereotyping and, more broadly, to the contingency of "positive" stereotypes. It counters perception of unlikability only to replace it with the incompetence of the infantile, the diminutive. While Fiske measures emotional valence from positive to negative, the Valence, Arousal, Dominance (VAD) scale in psychology measures two other continuums of feeling: arousal (the intensity of emotion), and dominance (feelings of control). In part, these objects circulate without the outrage associated with caricature because they generate affirmative feelings attached to the helpless, igniting a corresponding feeling of dominance. As Shiokawa notes about *kawaii*-style, "By far the most outstanding feature of cuteness, is its complete lack of anything observably threatening."[36] Cuteness counters the threat of, in the words of the novelist Kevin Kwan, crazy rich Asians, the unspoken specter of neoliberal globalization in the West.

Risky *Kawaii*

The prominence of *kawaii* as an aesthetic category since the 1970s coincides with Western awareness of Asian "competence" on a global scale, particularly in the realm of transnational finance and manufacturing. Along with Japan, by the 1980s newly industrializing countries–South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—refused conflating "the West" with the global North. The volatility of uneven neoliberal economic development allowed East Asian regions to, in the words of David Harvey, "advance spectacularly (at least for a time) at

the expense of others."[37] Following Japan's rapid ascendency in electronics and automobile manufacturing in the 1980s, its exports in the "children's entertainment business"—anime, manga, and video games—generated a purported US$8 billion in 2001, one of the few avenues of postrecession growth.[38] The uneven reception of commodity forms makes visible the social contradictions occasioned by these large- and small-scale shifts in status.

The oriental thing-as-person appears at a moment of global economic shift producing anxiety surrounding transnational trade and the shifting fortunes that attend it. The expanded circulation of racist kitsch typified by mammy figurines occurred, as Brown argues, at a moment of increasing African American heterogeneity during Reconstruction and into the twentieth century, conveying nostalgia for the system of slavery undone by capitalist modernization. Paradoxically, the circulation of denigrating novelties arose from newly ambiguous status. Critics have likewise linked anxieties surrounding gender to the growth of *kawaii*-style in Japan. As Shiokawa reveals, the manga heroine's "cuteness makes her power and independence more palatable," suggesting that infantilized gender representation compensates for women's increasing equality.[39] In contrast, Kinsella argues that Japanese women's consumption of *kawaii* goods constitutes feminist resistance of a different sort: participating in their own infantilization symbolizes the freedoms associated with childhood and represents a refusal to "grow up" and accept a gender-circumscribed role. She implies that these new social responsibilities were required by Japan's rapid postwar economic development. Yet the artist Takashi Murakami offers an alternative gendered reading linked to geopolitics and echoed in Ngai's work: *kawaii* aestheticizes Japan's occupation-era emasculation, a response to its US-imposed "Peace Constitution" forbidding military buildup:

> Regardless of winning or losing the war, the bottom line is that for the past sixty years, Japan has been a testing ground for an American-style capitalist economy, protected in a greenhouse, nurtured and bloated to the point of explosion. The results are so bizarre, they're perfect. Whatever true intentions underlie "Little Boy," the nickname for Hiroshima's atomic bomb, we Japanese are truly, deeply, pampered children. . . . We throw constant tantrums while enthralled by our own cuteness.[40]

To Murakami, *kawaii* represents a degraded national ethos, a sign of its postwar dependency.

In contrast, nonhuman *kawaii* things could be said to be global commodities par excellence precisely because they strategically disguise national origins as part of their "universal" appeal. Japan's global marketing did not likewise

sell Japanese culture: unlike "Coca-colonization" in which the soft power of US exports is closely identified with the promotion of an American lifestyle, Japanese exporters of *kawaii*-style, character-driven companies such as Nintendo (Pikachu) and Sanrio (Hello Kitty) intentionally cultivated a deterritorialized, culturally neutral product adhering to the notion of *mukokuseki*, or the erasure of racial, ethnic, or cultural resonance.[41] In a deliberate address to global marketing, Pucca's (fig. 3) South Korean creator insists that she has no nationality, a strategy that culminated in merchandizing success in Europe through a collaboration with Benetton.[42] The journalist Douglas McGray attributed the rise of Japan's domestic economy to its "genius" in largely ignoring concerns surrounding cultural erosion in the face of globalization in 2002: "Hello Kitty is Western, so she will sell in Japan. She is Japanese, so she will sell in the West. It is a marketing boomerang that firms like Sanrio, Sony, and Nintendo manage effortlessly."[43] Yet Koichi Iwabuchi implies an alternative reason of *mukokuseki*: "Anime and manga are more popular in Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Taiwan than they are in the West . . . but to Japanese cultural chauvinists success in Asian markets does not count for much."[44] What McGray saw as genius, others saw as a failure of national branding or, in the case of anime, as a distinct preference for non-Japanese characters as a result of US occupation.[45] This perhaps accounts for the underlying contradiction of *mukokuseki*: the whiteness of human anime characters.

Yet dematerializing national origins is indeed how transnational capital works. Harajuku Lovers perfume (fig. 5), for example, is licensed by Gwen Stefani to Coty, a transnational corporation whose French origins and US base obfuscate its German ownership. Coty's perfume bottle appears to enhance Japaneseness not through cultural signs per se but in its very form: diminutive, childlike, cute. While the rise of cuteness has been understood as a soothing response to economic instability and social atomization, my focus on Asian things foregrounds the aesthetic as a response to shifts in global economic power.[46]

The "Asianness" of the *kawaii* commodities I discuss here interrupts the seemingly free flow of capital under neoliberal globalization. Shifting to a US interpretative context highlighting racialization creates hermeneutic dissonance particularly when the *intention* underlying a product line (celebration, homage) or the erasure of the local in more typical nonhuman *kawaii* commodity forms is at odds with discursive meanings generated by its global circulation. Reading for injurious intent informs these commodities' US reception. When I ask audiences how they read these anthropomorphic objects, they reveal that they feel more authorized to deem them cute if they are sourced from Asia:

they viewed "samurai" and "geisha" bento boxes, for example, as inoffensive because they were perceived to be Japanese forms produced in Japan for Japanese children. Within this projection of a closed circuit, a Japanese spectator's identification with the personified object would not be "self-orientalizing" because this implies a double consciousness based on an external (Western) standard for self-valuation. Nor would "samurai" or "geisha" signify as fetishistic types in Japan. Asian spectators might consume such images according to the hallmark of *kawaii*-style: sincere attachment. This does not obviate the fact that a South Korean consumer experiences such Japanese iconography with other complex routes of identification and disassociation—or indifference. After all, exports such as K-pop, K-drama, and K-beauty engage cuteness quite differently and trumpet their national branding. While anthropomorphic hula dancers, buddhas, and swamis likewise circulate, their orientalist intent is not sanitized by *kawaii* aesthetic.

In contrast, US viewers repudiated the "china doll" handbag designed by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel's Paris-Shanghai collection to inaugurate its foray into the Chinese luxury market in 2010 because it was accompanied by the image of another item in the product line, a handbag in the shape of the ubiquitous "Chinese take-out" container.[47] Invoking the history of Chinese food service workers in the US, the handbag trades on capitalist metonymy: as in African American "spokesservants" of the past, personhood becomes undifferentiated from the object of labor. The specific regional embodiment of this form is thus telling: not South Asia or Southeast Asia but East Asia, an area made up of nations both desired and feared as potential consumers and competitors within a neoliberal global economy. Insisting on an American studies context for reading irrespective of a commodity's origin within or outside Asia illuminates the dissonances created by globalization itself. As it is wrested from local contexts and its meaning fails to translate, the *limits* to the free flow of capital come into view. If the soft power of *kawaii*-style lies in its deliberate erasure of Japanese origins in deracinated anthropomorphic animals, pillows, and food, then caricatured humanoid things represent its aberration. In flouting *mukokuseki*, I would argue that they represent a subset of the aesthetic category, not *kowaii* (scary kawaii) but risky *kawaii*: racialized things that not only testify to the fine line between affection and mockery but interrupt the seamless fluidity of global commodity flows to insist on the residues of the local. Latour's notion of "'risky' objects" thus applies to Chanel's Paris-Shanghai Take Away Bag in more than one sense.[48] Its kitsch form situates "crazy rich Asians," those who can afford US$7,500 for handbags (now $28,500 resale),

as the butt of a leveling joke: you may be "crazy rich," but you are Asian. In doing so, the handbag also instigates what I would identify as an alternative notion of risk: in constituting "discriminatory action" breaking actors down, it betrays Western anxieties about a potential loss of dominance in an impending new world order. As in the case of other cute, Asianized things, the very repetition of type flags uncertainties about those who have begun to stray from type. The paradox it embodies—likable and offensive—reflects the ambivalence underlying stereotyping itself as it vacillates between, to echo Bhabha, what is already known and "what must be anxiously repeated." In this sense, caricature represents a leveling response to perceived empowerment, the "threatening competence" of Asians.

The interplay between contrary feelings here—warmth and envy—underscores the stereotyping's split desiring structure. Here, as in the case of African Americans at the turn of the previous century, that tension highlights the anxieties that Asians in the US arouse, recirculated as pleasure. The question is, whose pleasure?

Asian American Spectatorship and the Racist Cute

A foundation of US race activism rests on mobilizing against the stereotypical image, against demeaning caricature. If the racially reductive figure is implicated in maintaining status hierarchy, how do we understand the attachment that cute anthropomorphic things elicit among the spectators and consumers they mimic and embody? In addressing the potential ambivalence they provoke in Asian American spectators, I include myself. If this seems like a confession, it is because, along with media and student activists, ethnic studies has been instrumental in heightening awareness of caricature as discriminatory action. Yet in illuminating the space between political rationality (it is offensive) and other affective responses (I love it), these objects likewise uncover the emotional attachment required by activism itself. That is, the very split feeling invoked by things both racist and cute illuminates the boundaries of coalition as a community seemingly bound by a uniformity of feeling. *Kawaii* spectatorship illuminates the ambivalent structures of feeling underlying the stereotype.

When Ngai searched the *Oxford English Dictionary* for references to "cute," she identified an additional resonance of the word: those who seek to "publicize or share their feelings."[49] One might say that the desire to create a community of shared feeling underlies coalition itself even as it is mobilized not by affection but by outrage. Thus, the split feeling that the object evokes exposes coalition's

disciplining of affective boundaries: why is taking pleasure in racialized things a guilty pleasure? The blog *Why Did I Buy That Toy? Blogging Away Buyer's Remorse*, which publicizes the blogger's hobby, mini-figure collecting, provides an example of the vacillation underlying Asian American encounters with the anthropomorphic object.[50] Using the moniker "Action Ranger Timmy," the blogger acknowledges his "ongoing quest" to collect Asian proxies such as Playmobil samurais and Lego coolies, and, in the process, explore his love–hate relationship with cute, racist things. "I like to ironically collect unintentionally racist action figures of Asian people," he writes. "I'm Asian, I'm sensitive to this kind of thing."

In part, racial activism in blogging allows him to counter the "buyer's remorse" of a collector. At one level, the blog exemplifies the ambivalent response embedded in the paradox of the racist cute: equal parts identification and disassociation. In regard to a German Playmobil toy that he dubs "Asian Kung-Fu Guy," he writes, "This guy is even more racist than I usually expect. He's not just a martial artist. He doesn't just have the slanted eyes that all Playmobil figures of Asian people have. He's got a fu-manchu mustache. Oh, and angry eyebrows so you know his fu-manchu-stache means he's evil." The blogger's first response is that of the activist: he provides a tutorial in reading ethnic caricature: if the eyes don't signify, the facial hair does. The racial tropes are, by now, accessible to all. But his second comment questions not the reading but his own response to it: "I don't really think this guy is all that racist. But then I look at the mustache and I don't know. I just don't know." His comment evokes the anxious repetition of stereotyping itself; in this case, ambivalence stems not necessarily from second-guessing his reading of racial iconography but from whether he shares the emotional response it is supposed to generate, one that would hail him as Asian American and, in part, justify his "ironic" collecting.

The miniature figure or mini-fig forces multiple reactions: anger, delight, and then confusion over delight. About another questionable figure, he writes, "The Samurai has the upturned, squinty Asian eyes, but I can't get mad because of how much I love the details on the samurai armor." Here, the racial reduction of caricature ("squinty" eyes) contrasts with its stylistic opposite, the unexpectedly excessive detail of the costume. His stalled reaction, "I can't get mad," recalls bell hooks's discussion of black female spectatorship in the context of mainstream Hollywood film. Black women's experiencing cinematic pleasure, hooks argues, requires a suspension of rationality: "Every black woman I spoke with who was/is an ardent moviegoer, a lover of the Hollywood film, testified

that to experience fully the pleasure of that cinema they had to close down critique, analysis; they had to forget racism."[51] Identification is represented here as masochistic and self-negating; black female viewing pleasure is always already suspect. In contrast, on what it means to read *Gone with the Wind* as a black woman, the artist Kara Walker conveys split identification, wanting to be the white heroine at the same time wanting to kill her.[52] Timmy's divided response to the cute object betrays an intellectual awareness of those equations, an unwillingness to be "seduced" by his toys. But his response likewise begs the question, who *wants* him to "get mad"?

His ambivalence betrays a veiled anxiety over his credentials within the coalitional identity "Asian American." His conflict over reductive typing and cuteness reveals the tension between the sentiments putatively shared by political community (outrage) and its interruption (delight). The latter sentiment only becomes suspect in the context of the former, with the awareness that his pleasure in the object is subject to censure. Identifying with the racist cute forces a seeming wedge between political knowledge and feeling that might be otherwise rationalized by the admission "I'm helpless before the cute."

In choosing "feelings" that go against the grain of group consensus, Goings confesses an untoward attachment to black memorabilia. An avid collector, he accumulated several hundred items to write *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (1994). Beyond their use to his academic study, Goings articulates his reasons for collecting by invoking sentiment and personification rather than a desire to reclaim the power of the fetish object through possession: "When I see Aunt Jemima and Uncle Mose resting on my shelves, I think of them as people." He adds, "I hope the reader will not think that I have completely lost my sense of reality when I personify the collectibles in the way I have. After all, I have been studying these objects for the last seven years and they do now seem like people, like friends."[53] Goings gives himself over to the pleasures of attachment, here coincident with the feelings provoked by cute-style: sincerity, innocence, affection. In animating the artifacts through his regard, he imbued them with a lost humanity. Yet this corrective identification is offered as an apology, one made with the awareness that he is confessing something aberrant, subject to disapproval.

Indeed, in Spike Lee's much-analyzed film *Bamboozled*, which critiques the pleasures of minstrelsy at the millennium, anthropomorphic objects' coming to life is indeed a sign that the hapless protagonist has lost his sense of reality. Brown reads the animated black memorabilia of the film as sitting in judgment and protest of this degrading history's recirculation: they are not objects to

be embraced. They recapitulate slavery's uncanny, the uncertainty about the distinction between person and thing, its "ontological instability." Yet Brown's reading also highlights why the anthropomorphic racial object, as in Timmy's spectatorship, now evokes both repulsion and fascination as simultaneously the most "despised and most prized object."[54] In what follows, I explore this split reaction to racialized things, one marked by the pleasures not of affection or repudiation but of irony and camp.

Activism and Ironic Spectatorship

If cuteness implies attachment, does it foreclose a sense of camp? Millennials' consumption of Hello Kitty in the US might well represent postfeminist irony, a "wink on pink,"[55] that dovetails with self-avowed feminists' attachment to Barbie dolls. Phil Yu's website, "Angry Asian Man," which compiles and comments on Asian American activism or news worthy of circulation and intervention, took as its mascot the cartoon character Quick Kick, yet another "Asian Kung-Fu Guy." The lone Asian on G.I. Joe's multicultural team of soldiers, the toy represents the activist's proxy, emphasizing both his need to "fight" and his pleasure in the absurdity of misrecognition. "I chose the figure because it's actually rather ridiculous, embodying the attributes of the stereotypical martial arts hero. Shirtless, shoeless, sockless—all rather impractical for going into battle with the G.I. Joe team," Yu writes.[56] His pleasure in the stereotype derives from the ironic distance between lived reality and the excesses of a US racial imaginary. Freud's notion that irony "can only be employed when the other person is prepared to hear the opposite" is operative here: the activist unexpectedly identifying with retrograde representation.[57] As in Walker's controversial "A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby," an oversized mammy sphinx sculpture made of sugar attended by a series of more diminutive but no less controversial figures, Yu embraces the stereotype as defiant proclamation.

Yet the question of scale implied by the cute influences a reading of the ironic detachment. Yu's use of the Asian male stereotype changed over time: at one point, the portal to Angry Asian Man used the character as it was embodied in an action figure by the US toymaker Hasbro (fig. 8). In Yu's toy proxy, it is the very affective response elicited by the cute that might distinguish his engagement from Walker's. The monumentalism of "The Marvelous Sugar Baby" asks the viewer to claim ownership of monstrousness of the racial fantastic as well as the gigantic, sticky mess it left behind. In contrast, Yu's former portal might be seen as an ironic commentary on the minorness of Asian American

Figure 8.
Portal to "Angry Asian Man," 2014: Quick Kick action figure, Hasbro, USA

activism itself, the blogger's mission as mock heroic reflecting the belief that Asian American grievances are not seen as commensurate to those of other minority groups. We are angry, he suggests, but maybe not that much.

Or perhaps more accurately, Yu's website maintained an awareness that ironic distance is somehow incommensurate with activism. This is certainly borne out in regard to contemporary responses to racial caricature. In 2002 Asian American activists led a successful action against the US retailer Abercrombie and Fitch after its release of Asian-themed T-shirts. One read "Pizza Dojo: Eat in or Wok Out"; another proclaimed "Two Wongs can make it white" and featured cartoon figures of Chinese laundrymen. Reaction was swift: student groups from around the country called for a boycott of the Ohio-based company and succeeded in having the offending shirts removed from the shelves. It was not the first time that the company elicited controversy: it had previously come under scrutiny for sexist T-shirt slogans, sexual ads, and discriminatory

hiring practices.[58] Given this track record, its use of ludic imagery was taken as a sign of corporate racism. Nevertheless, a befuddled Abercrombie and Fitch public relations representative noted in response to the collective action, "We personally thought Asians would love this T-shirt."[59]

Indeed, if worn by an Asian person, the shirt enacts irony's double gesture: it both displays and disavows type by creating dissonance between the individual and the fantasy image. Moreover, the shirt's tagline, "make it white" could itself be seen as a deliberate reference to a racial double standard: it takes two Asians to make one "white." The double entendre is just subtle enough to function as subversive repetition; as in new ethnic jokes, the shirts can be read as both racist and a parody of racism. By all accounts, however, the company miscalculated, revealing that the term *borderline offensive* is a misnomer: the moment the question arises, that border has already been crossed. In 2016 the app developer Snapchat made a similar faux pas, introducing a face-warping filter that transformed the user into a slanty-eyed, buck-toothed, East Asian caricature. It was meant to be playful, an homage to anime. Yet Snapchat's "homage" to Bob Marley had already been criticized as digital blackface. After protests on social media, the filter was disabled after only one day in acknowledgment that Asian Americans bore the "risks" of its caricature.[60] Collective action reveals the ways in which Asian American activism is predicated on a unanimity of feeling likewise shared by fans of *kawaii*: sincerity. Likewise, boycotts do not entertain the notion of camp. As activist groups reveal, coalition represents a community of *unequivocally* shared feeling, one that would foreclose the ambiguities of irony.

Pathos of Things: Racial Stereotyping, Racial Profiling

> Recently, an expression that keeps coming to mind as I work with my clients [on decluttering] is *mono no aware*. This Japanese term, which literally means "pathos of things," . . . also refers to the essence of things and our ability to feel that essence.
>
> —Marie Kondo, *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up*, 2016

At the millennium, one might say that there can be no minor affects surrounding race. Likewise, exploring the personification of things may seem trivial in regard to its opposite, understanding the thingification of persons as a result of capitalist reification. And contrary to my argument here, situating personified, Asianized things as a repository for ambivalent feeling might well be met with plausible denial: to some, Pucca, "sumo," or Mr. Chin are simply racist

(figs. 3, 6, 7). In highlighting the split desiring structure they encode, I may very well be risking my own credentials: one could not simultaneously *like* the Mandarin and claim to be Asian American (fig. 2). Moreover, in ethnic studies, investigating stereotyping and caricature can appear to be somewhat passé. That is, the predetermined outcome of stereotype analysis (inaccurate, outrageous, racist) has ironically become a stereotype of the field itself. Positioned as old school activism, "taking offense" may be seen as complicit with ethnic management and consumerist logic.

Nevertheless, the personification of things compels our attention, I argue, particularly as it invites an examination of the desiring structures that underlie the stereotype as racial form. Like the boycott of Abercrombie and Fitch, campus protests over ethnic Halloween costumes succeeded in reinforcing liberal belief in the injurious nature of caricature, but did not push discussion beyond a safety–free speech framework predicated on a loss of rights on both sides. But I would highlight the raised stakes of these protests by linking them to contemporaneous and more highly publicized actions over systemic police violence, as in the Black Lives Matter movement, violence initiated by misrecognition. That is, Asian Americans' spotlight on the mimetic, harmful effects of caricature's economical reduction represents an analogue to racial profiling, the source of discriminatory police violence against black and Latino men. Eric Gardner, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tony Robinson were seen as interchangeable; they became the targets of undue discipline because of the emotions and expectations that accrue to *type*. While the affect produced by the stereotype of black, youthful masculinity obviously differs in valence (negative) and arousal (excited) from the racial form I have engaged here, I would stress that both unveil a continuum of racial feeling enabled by the paradox of simultaneous reduction and exaggeration. However differently it materializes across communities of color in the United States, the stereotype is a conduit of racialized affect.

Whether in the form of belittling racial caricature intrinsic to mammy cookie jars and Harajuku perfume bottles or in the projection of carceral subjects to be feared, racial typing increases feelings of control or dominance through fixed meaning. To be clear, I am not suggesting that consumer boycotts are equivalent to mass protests surrounding surveillance and challenging the state's "legitimate" use of force: being offended by a Snapchat filter is not equal to being shot in the street. Black Lives Matter exposed racism to be, in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's terms, "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[61] Here,

racial vulnerability is a matter of life and death, not the perceived vulnerability of the childlike, which precipitates care. But it is not the outcome, scale, or varied *content* of racialization that I want to emphasize here. Rather, racial profiling, like racial caricature, represents a specific desiring structure: it fixes racial meaning through repetition to produce the illusion of control. Operating on seemingly opposite sides of an affective continuum, affection and fear nevertheless contribute to differential racialization through, in Ahmed's terms, an associative "stickiness" that accrues to populations within an economy of feeling, the valuation of things within a network of emotional effects. Cute things likewise allow for feelings of dominance, if not also sadistic pleasure. Yet cuteness also paradoxically represents an aesthetic of anti-Asian bias in part because satire depends on an *elevated* target.

My goal has thus been to call into account the ways in which objects become "risky" social actants as they are wrested from global circulation into the context of US spectatorship informed by the legacy of movement activism. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to engage the meanings that these largely East Asian figures circulate within uneven geopolitical and cultural formations across Asia and the Pacific Rim, I would note that *kawaii*'s capacity to veil national origins in keeping with the philosophy of *mukokuseki* may very well originate with the history of Japanese imperialism in the region as much as an address to the West per se. Here, I read racialized cute things as symptom, as reflecting an anxiety about who directs flows of neoliberal capital and from where. Anthropomorphic *kawaii* things haunt the seamless movement of global commodities with the residues of colonial fantasy; in this sense, they resurrect the "Yellow Peril" stereotype in a new, seemingly innocuous form.

As Latour notes, "To be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts. If no trace is produced, they offer no information to the observer and will have no visible effect on other agents. They remain silent and are no longer actors: they remain, literally, unaccountable."[62] I make no claims here about the radical agency of the nonhuman as in speculative realism, aspects of which, I would suggest, share common ground with Marie Kondo's Shinto-derived, inadvertently antiphenomenological belief in the absolute essence of things. Rather, I hope to account for one blind spot in theorizing the nonhuman: the attribution of "thingness" as it fundamentally underlies racial stereotyping. The anthropologist Lawrence Hirschfeld once noted that "the intuitive object of a prejudice is more likely to be a kind of thing rather than a property of that thing."[63] Race and ethnicity are "psychologically privileged" insofar as they are seen to be "inalienable aspects of a person's being."[64] The anthropomorphic

objects of this essay invert and reinforce this privileging: racial meaning as part of the seemingly "inalienable aspects" of things.

Caricature has been subject to public censure for good reason. "Today, in the face of the emergence of new racism and sexism," Slavoj Žižek writes, "the strategy should be to *make such enunciation unutterable*, so that anyone relying on them automatically disqualifies himself."[65] In the US, Donald Trump's presidential candidacy in 2016 ruptured covenants surrounding the prohibition of hate speech in order to capitalize on religious and racial typing as a source of fear. More complexly, that prohibition may indeed enable new pleasures surrounding racism and sexism as taboo creates the very conditions for desire. Taking pleasure in race—or in this case, the semblance of race—through the diminutive, kitsch figurine unveils the larger stakes underlying the US racial imaginary in the context of globalization, specifically, how we enjoy difference and how we fear it. The racist cute engages a specific desiring structure akin to fetishism: pleasure that masks anxiety. The cute allows for an attachment that veils an untoward enjoyment in asymmetries of social power, the very pleasure that underlies caricature itself. *Kawaii*-style helps evade the prohibitions placed on racial desires in the twenty-first century through positive feeling, perhaps controversially, for multiple sites of spectatorship. The anthropomorphic Asianized object reveals how the "pathos of things" is likewise bound to racial pleasures. Seduced by our toys, we allow cute things to travel where the Frito Bandito and Chief Wahoo cannot follow.

Notes

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1. Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 23.
2. Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text*, no. 79 (2004): 117.
3. See Mary Roach, "Cute Inc.," *Wired*, July 12, 1999, www.wired.com/1999/12/cute/; Christine R. Yano, *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); and Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntyre, and Diane Negra, eds., *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
4. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 123.
5. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 87.
6. While Ngai's work engages aesthetic categories as conduits of racialization, it more overtly addresses African Americans through the "ideologeme of racial animatedness" (*Our Aesthetic Categories*, 92).

She also acutely connects cuteness to minstrelsy and slavery, noting the ways in which both kinship and ownership are activated by the cute. More recent work gestures to a wider variety of racial effects: see Dale et al., *Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*.

7. Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 2.2 (1990): 105–25.
8. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81.
9. On object-oriented ontology, see, e.g., Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012). In contrast, for Latour, proponent of "Actor-Network Theory," positing symmetry between humans and nonhumans is "absurd" (*Reassembling the Social*, 76, 71, 72).
10. Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 9.
11. Joseph Jonghyun Jeon, *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012).
12. See, e.g., Derald Wing Sue et al. "Racial Microaggressions and the Asian American Experience," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13.1 (2007): 72–81.
13. Aristotle, *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, trans. J. L. Creed and A. E. Wardman, ed. Renford Bambrough (New York: Signet, 2011), 470.
14. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 122.
15. For an overview of CRT views on hate speech, see Mari Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlè Williams Crenshaw, *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 18.
16. See Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
17. Steve C. Durbin, "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture," *Social Problems* 34.2 (1987): 198.
18. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1983; repr. London: Routledge, 1994), 18.
19. Sharon Kinsella, "Cuties in Japan," in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, ed. Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 220–54.
20. Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 46.
21. Kanako Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics," in *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, ed. John A. Lent (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 94.
22. Yuko Hasegawa, "Post-identity Kawaii: Commerce, Gender, and Contemporary Japanese Art," in *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, ed. Fran Lloyd (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 128.
23. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 78, 64.
24. Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry, and Romantic* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 5.
25. Bill Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," *Critical Inquiry* 32.2 (2006): 175–207.
26. See Dawn Jacobson, *Chinoiserie* (London: Phaidon, 1993).
27. Caroline Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 156.
28. Sunaina Maira, "Indo-Chic: Late Capitalist Orientalism and Imperial Culture," in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 220–41.
29. Maira, 223.
30. Quoted on cb2's website, www.cb2.com/, accessed February 15, 2015.
31. Quoted on Trend Hunter's website, www.trendhunter.com/trends/sumo-figurine, accessed July 31, 2015.
32. Quoted on the National Palace Museum website, www.npm.gov.tw/digital/index3_3_5_en.html, accessed July 14, 2014.
33. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 249.
34. Susan T. Fiske, Amy J. Cuddy, Peter Glick, and Jun Xu, "A Model of (Often Mixed) Stereotype Content: Competence and Warmth Respectively Follow from Perceived Status and Competition," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82.6 (2002): 878.

35. Fiske et al.
36. Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly," 94.
37. David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2006), 42.
38. Quoted in Anne Allison, "Cuteness as Japan's Millennial Product," in *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 36. What some see as the continuing success of Japan's cultural exports, others position as its failure to capitalize on its intellectual property, pre- and postrecession (Roland Kelts, *How Japanese Pop Culture Invaded the U.S.* [New York: Palgrave, 2006]).
39. Shiokawa, "Cute but Deadly," 120.
40. Takashi Murakami, *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 141.
41. Koichi Iwabuchi, "How 'Japanese' Is Pokémon?," in *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, ed. Joseph Tobin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 61.
42. Quoted in Jung Hyung-mo JoongAng Ilbo, "How High Will the Pucca Man Fly His Babies?," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, July 26, 2008, koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2892805. Despite backing from Disney, Pucca merchandise failed to take hold in North America.
43. Douglas M. McGray, "Japan's Gross National Cool," *Foreign Policy*, May–June 2002, 50.
44. Iwabuchi, "How 'Japanese' Is Pokémon?," 60.
45. See Kelts, *How Japanese Pop Culture Invaded the U.S.* Iwabuchi nevertheless notes, "The propensity of Japanese animators to make their products appear nonJapanese is evidence that a Western-dominated cultural hierarchy continues to govern transnational cultural flows. But there's more to this story" ("How 'Japanese' Is Pokémon?," 59).
46. See Dale et al., *Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*.
47. This reaction was one I documented in workshops with Asian American studies classes at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.
48. Latour's example of one such "risky" object is the space shuttle *Columbia*, which, upon reentering the Earth's atmosphere, suddenly flip-flopped its mode of existence (*Reassembling the Social*, 81).
49. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 60.
50. See the blog *Why Did I Buy That Toy? Blogging Away Buyer's Remorse*, October 26, 2012, whydidibuythat.blogspot.com/#uds-search-results.
51. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 120.
52. "Kara Walker: The Melodrama of 'Gone with the Wind,'" *art21*, November 2011,www.art21.org/texts/kara-walker/interview-kara-walker-the-melodrama-of-gone-with-the-wind.
53. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, xxiv.
54. Brown, "Reification," 199.
55. Quoted in Yano, *Pink Globalization,* 7.
56. Phil Yu, pers. comm., April 15, 2015.
57. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 216.
58. For a discussion of the controversy, see Vincent N. Pham and Kent A. Ono, "'Artful Bigotry & Kitsch': A Study of Stereotype, Mimicry, and Satire in Asian American T-Shirt Rhetoric," in *Asian American Rhetorics*, ed. Luming Mao and Morris Young (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 175–96; and Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
59. Quoted in Jenny Strausburg, "Abercrombie & Glitch: Asian Americans Rip Retailer for Stereotypes on T-Shirts," *SFGate*, April 18, 2002, www.sfgate.com/news/article/ABERCROMBIE-GLITCH-Asian-Americans-rip-2850702.php.
60. See Leslie Bow, "Snapchat's Messed-Up Racial Filter," *Progressive*, August 15, 2016, progressive.org/topics/leslie-bow/.
61. I am indebted to an anonymous reader for this reference: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
62. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 79.
63. Lawrence A. Hirschfeld, "On Acquiring Social Categories: Cognitive Development and Anthropological Wisdom," *Man* 23.4 (1988): 628.
64. Hirschfeld, 628.
65. Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review* 225 (1997): 34; emphasis mine.