

I'm Not Racist, I Eat Dim Sims! The Commodification and Consumption of Asianness within White Australia

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'I shop, therefore I am'

IN OUR current capitalist society, we need to consume to live. Whether it is a conscious or unconscious process, we consume to construct our identities, we consume to partake in society, we consume in the pursuit of happiness and we even consume to rebel. Virtually everything can now be bought and sold at a price and nothing remains sacred in a world regulated by the laws of demand and supply. Rather than being an apolitical space of mindless activity, however, consumption is infused with politics, privilege and power. It is an arena in which contestations over 'inequality, individualism, identity, and social and economic stratification'¹ take place. These contestations include struggles over racial identity and racial politics in which the consumption of signs of Otherness plays a significant role. Whilst signs of Otherness may lend themselves to a plurality of interpretations and allow for a level of 'free play', signs of Otherness are not endlessly polysemic. The development and manipulation of signs of Otherness within society is directed and constrained by dominant discourses around race, gender, sexuality and class, making the production and interpretation of particular signs of Otherness more prevalent than others. Within the West, the signification of 'Asianness' has tended to be constrained by the dominant racial discourse of 'Orientalism'.² As a country whose dominant culture is of British heritage, the discourse of Orientalism has influenced Australia's perception of its Asian neighbours. Australia's unique position as a 'white' country located in the Asia-Pacific has meant that Australia has needed to interact with Asia for economic, security and humanitarian reasons. This has at times weighed heavily on the white Australian psyche which has struggled to negotiate between the competing tensions of 'multicultural' and racially tolerant policies and a lingering fear of the 'teeming millions' of its Asian neighbours. The commodification and consumption of Asianness, both as physical objects and 'signs', plays a pivotal role in white Australia's negotiations with Asian culture(s). The commodification of Asianness which has reduced Asian cultures to consumable objects and attempts to reap the economic value of 'exoticism' has often operated within, and can reproduce, Orientalist ideologies and discourses around Asia. Rather than being an expression of progressive racial awareness, the consumption of Asianness works to domesticate the threat of difference and can detract from a real engagement with racial politics.

Of late, there has been somewhat of a 'theorrhoea' around modern/postmodern³ consumer society. A noticeable feature of these studies is the large extent to which they have been 'whitewashed'⁴ and have lacked an awareness

of race and culture, or more specifically, as I would argue, have taken the white/Western academic perspective as *the* (unacknowledged yet authoritative) perspective on consumer society. Tim Edwards asserts that this is largely due to the 'very Whiteness of consumer society itself'.⁵ Whilst it is unmistakable that the level of consumption often discussed by theorists is only possible in affluent countries, most of which are situated in the 'West' where Whiteness is the normative ethnicity, the West is not *only* white. Many different cultures and races co-exist within the West and impact on the West from the 'outside'. Hence, Western consumer society is full of racial politics and ideological racism.

The interaction of race and consumption, however, has usually only been visible when the consumption is practiced by those who are *other* than white. The continuing tradition of racializing the practices of people of colour has allowed the practices of those who are white to remain invisible and hence, evade scrutiny and questioning. A progressive exploration of the racial politics of consumption in the West, therefore, should not only concern the consumption practices of 'ethnic minorities' – whose existence has always been explicitly racialized – but also the (racial) consumption practices of the white majority who have often escaped racialization. If the 'issue' of 'ethnicity' is only raised when the consumption is practised by those whose ethnicity is not white, then the focus on the 'special case' of people of colour will continue to allow Whiteness to remain 'colourless' and will leave the normativity and power of Whiteness intact. As Richard Dyer writes in his book, *White*, there is more at stake in scrutinising Whiteness than simply filling in a gap in the research.⁶ Rather, it involves dislodging Whiteness from its privileged position of 'neutrality' and invisibility which enables it to maintain its power.⁷ This paper will, therefore, concern itself with not only exploring how Asian products are commodified within Orientalist constructs but also the operation of 'Whiteness' at the moment of the consumption of these commodities.

There are, as always, difficulties theorizing race and culture. As articulated by Bonnie Honig, culture 'is a way of life, a rich and timeworn grammar of human activity, a set of diverse and often conflicting narratives whereby communal (mis)understandings, roles and responsibilities are negotiated'.⁸ The fluid nature of culture makes it difficult to capture as it is continually being transformed through political contestations by members from within the culture, as well as, forces outside of it. Hence, to use such broad terms as 'white Australian' and 'Asian' is problematic due to its sweeping homogenization of both groups and its dependence on essentialist and stereotyped understandings of 'White' and 'Asian'. The term 'white Australian' overlooks the differences that exist between Australians who are white, including their cultural and racial understandings of themselves and their ancestry (e.g. Irish, French, Canadian). Furthermore the term 'Asian' is similarly homogenizing as it collapses the great distinctions between different Asian cultures and races (e.g. Indian, Vietnamese, Korean). It is also problematic in the sense as to, where one should draw the line of what areas of the world should be considered 'Asian'⁹ Despite the generalizations made by these terms, however, they continue to be employed and reveal the prevailing criteria used – such as skin colour - to distinguish between these two groups.

'I sign, therefore I am'

Marx's exploration of the process of commodification under capitalism, and semiological investigations into the functioning of signs and systems of signification, has helped lay the groundwork for Baudrillard's work.¹⁰ Semiotics, as originating in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, is based upon the idea that knowledge and understandings of the world arise from an organised system of signs, such as language.¹¹ Theorists following Saussure have used and extended semiology as a way of studying cultural forms beyond language such as, for example, the system of signification found in architecture, fashion or food.¹²

In *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (FCPES), Baudrillard attempts to analyse the sign form through a critique of the political economy of the sign, just as the commodity form has been analysed through a Marxist critique of political economy.¹³ Baudrillard argues that the consumption of these signs' values now constitutes the primary form of consumption¹⁴ and adds two 'dimensions' to Marx's theory about the use and exchange values of commodities.¹⁵ These are the 'differential logic of sign value' and the 'logic of symbolic exchange'.¹⁶ The consumption of sign values, which are organized along a hierarchical 'code', socially integrates individuals into a system where their productive forces can be harnessed for the purposes of consumption.¹⁷ The differentially valued signs meanwhile, serve to stratify consumers into 'status groups'.¹⁸ Consumption also serves as a system of communication through the production and exchange of coded values of the sign which communicates the ideological values or morality of the consumer.¹⁹ Whilst sign values involve the positivity of the sign, symbolic exchange, on the other hand, exists beyond positive value. Instead, it exists in the realm of 'ambivalence' which Baudrillard suggests is radically different from the exchange value and sign value. Moreover, it has the potential to rupture the political economy of the sign.²⁰

Mark Gottdiener calls Baudrillard's early work 'an exemplary exercise in materialist semiotics'.²¹ Baudrillard's later work, however, moves him from the sign value to the fatalism of symbolic exchange as he rejects Marxist ideologies and turns towards postmodernism. He eventually falls off the brink of reality into the 'hyperreal', where the implosion of simulation and simulacra (which is at once meaningless and overflowing with meaning in an ecstasy of communication) has oversaturated and replaced 'reality'. In *Postmodern Semiotics*, Gottdiener attempts to rescue material semiotics or 'socio-semiotics' by reinstating the material culture which he believes postmodern theorists have neglected in their descent into idealism, reductionism and fatalism.²² Gottdiener's socio-semiotic model of the sign attempts to incorporate both the value system of the sign and the materiality of the sign's expression²³, thereby maintaining a grip on both the 'commodification of reality' and the 'reality of commodification'.²⁴ While a level of 'free play' of signs is possible, he also acknowledges that the system of signification occurs within a 'semantic field' which constrains and directs the production, consumption and manipulation of signs.²⁵ Although Gottdiener points out that structures of power/knowledge, similar to those theorized by Foucault, are part of the exo-semiotic forces influencing and constraining the system of signification, he does not identify what these 'hierarchical structures of power'²⁶ are.²⁷ I argue that the structures of power/knowledge that influence the system of signification include dominant discourses on race, gender, class and sexuality.

The dominant racial discourse which influences the signification of Asianness in the West is Orientalism. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is a European construction which reflects not so much the Orient itself but rather the West's construction of the Orient as its 'contrasting image, idea, personality and experience'.²⁸ The Orient is constructed as a place of exoticism, mystery and danger whilst the West is seen as normal, known and safe; the Orient is sensual, sexual and animalistic whereas the West is civilized and proper; the Orient is spiritual, superstitious and traditional whilst the West is rational, progressive and Christian; and the Orient is infantilized and feminized, natural and virginal, waiting to be explored and conquered whereas the West is adult-like, cultured and masculine, ready to do the exploring and conquering. Rather than an apolitical 'collective daydream'²⁹ Said argued that 'Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them').'³⁰ Acknowledging his indebtedness to Foucault, Said argues that this 'knowledge' of the Orient is related to structures of power and domination through which the Orient could be controlled³¹ and through which imperialism and colonialism were legitimized.³² Furthermore, this discourse on Orientalism did not fade away after the end of imperialism but continues to influence the perception of Asia within the West,³³ including the processes of commodification and consumption of Asianness within Western consumer culture.

Passing through the local shopping centre, watching the advertisements on television and walking down Chinatown, it becomes clear that Orientalism acts as both a productive and restraining exo-semiotic force in the signification of Asianness. Orientalism both contributes to the production of particular signs of Asianness, as well as constrains the range of signs that may be attributed the quality of Asianness and the range of interpretations that these signs may take. Therefore, far from existing within a 'colour-free' zone, the system of signification and the commodification of reality is influenced by dominant discourses on race, culture and ethnicity. Features of the commodification of reality which are explored by Baudrillard, such as the collapse of signifier and signified, the self-referentiality of sign, and the rupture of time, history and depth, all interact with the discourse of Orientalism to reproduce particular signs of Asia and to produce particular forms of 'Asian' commodities.

This is not to imply, however, that the intersection of capitalism and race always creates a totalizing regime of regulation and domination. Although it may be true that within late capitalist societies consumption is, as Baudrillard argues, 'regulated, forced, instructed [and] stimulated'³⁴, this does not determine the use to which commodities can be put nor does it necessitate the indiscriminate acceptance of meanings encoded in signs at their moment of production or by dominant structures of power/knowledge. The consumption of commodities can be used to construct identities in opposition to the status quo and can be used in the maintenance of minority cultures in the face of pressures exerted by the dominant culture.³⁵ Furthermore, commodities can be re-signified at the point of consumption, opening up gaps in the regulatory regime for the renegotiation of racial discourses and thereby, disputing the overdetermination of the sign. Such re-significations and 'subversive' uses of commodities can provide opportunities for resistance or

'freedom' within commodity culture. Therefore, the realm of consumption ultimately constitutes an arena of *contestation* of racial politics and not just a total domination.

Baudrillard's explorations of the system of signification stem from Saussure's pioneering work on semiotics in which he argued that the sign consisted of the signifier, the signified and the arbitrary bond between them.³⁶ In an anti-Saussurean turn, Baudrillard collapses the distinction between signifier and signified and argues that the referent is no more 'real', 'true' or 'final' than the signifier.³⁷ Whilst Baudrillard takes this analysis to its nihilistic end in his later writings, his seminal postmodern focus is illustrated in the way he questions the existence of an underlying 'reality' or 'truth' (i.e. the referent). He argues that 'the referent does not constitute an autonomous reality at all'.³⁸ Take, by way of illustration, the shelves of a supermarket. Products marketed for their Asianness are saturated with signs of Asia, however these signs lack both an autonomous reality and any 'real' connection to Asia as a region or as a group of people. An 'Asian-style' font for example that consists of brush-stroke calligraphy effects is used to signify 'Asianness' while actually forming English words, such as the brand names on Campbell's 'Asian' range of soups and 'Blue Dragon' Asian sauces. Whilst the typography loosely alludes to Chinese or Japanese calligraphy, these 'signs of Asia' lacks any actual referent since Chinese and Japanese calligraphy constitute the formation of Chinese and Japanese characters rather than the romanized alphabets of the English language. Hence, the reality (and finality) of this signification of Asianness appears to be the sign itself.

The commodification of Asianness also creates a homogenization of and flatness to Asian culture. In Baudrillard's exploration of the commodification of home furnishings, he notes, as paraphrased by Kellner, that 'in the new organization of objects and interiors, objects are no longer subjective, expressive, familial, traditional and decorative as they once were. They are functional, more homogenous, artificial and without depth'.³⁹ In the commodification of Asian culture, Asianness becomes standardized, sanitized and superficial. Signifiers of Asianness, such as chopsticks,⁴⁰ dragons,⁴¹ and woks⁴², despite originating from different countries, lose their specific historical origins. Instead they come to take on some essential, timeless and locationless Asianness – a generic Asian™. Likewise, characters from the Chinese script, for example, have come to stand for generic Asian™. In their ability to stand for all of (homogenized) Asia, Chinese characters are written next to the 'Asian Foods' sign in Coles supermarkets, despite the section also containing foods from India, Singapore, Japan and Greece. The ability of the Chinese script to represent all of Asia comes from its embodiment of Orientalist notions of Asia as different, mysterious and exotic, which is not found in 'boring' scripts such as Vietnamese.

The isolation and amplification of Asian signifiers also ruptures a sense of time and space. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodern late capitalist society has ransacked history and culture, spewing forth a schizophrenia⁴³ of signification which ruptures temporal continuity and the coherency of language. This breakdown in temporal continuity and language causes signifiers to become isolated and disconnected, and amplifies the experience of the present.⁴⁴ The commodification of Asianness produces signs which are stripped of their historicity and whose communication of Asianness lacks the syntax of language. The colour red, for

example, once associated with celebration, good luck and prosperity in China, now stands as a historically isolated and disconnected signifier of generic Asian™. The colour red, especially when teamed with gold or black,⁴⁵ seals the commodity in an aura of Asianness. With the loss of its traditional associations, the colour red exists as a timeless yet eternally present, vividly amplified yet silent, sign of Asianness.

This signification of Asianness is not just confined to foodstuff found in supermarkets. It also exists in other parts of Western culture, such as the fashion industry. Sara Ahmed, in her article on 'Oriental-inspired' fashion, notes the use of Asian culture and history in the production of a homogenous, depthless and amplified Asianness.⁴⁶ In her analysis of a fashion editorial in *Marie Claire* magazine (May 1994) called 'The Orient', she argues that the signifiers of Asianness are understood within the discourse of Orientalism and the binary of Occident/Orient.⁴⁷ The images contained in the series depict a western construction of what, as written on the introductory page, the 'natural elegance of Oriental style' is supposed to be.⁴⁸ The blurred Vietnamese backgrounds are never identified as 'Vietnamese' but come to stand for a homogenous Orient.⁴⁹ 'Oriental objects' such as bamboo hats appear repeatedly throughout the series of photographs, amplifying the signifiers that show how Asian the place really is. The Orient becomes surface and background. As 'surface' fashion commodities are pieces of clothing to be put on and taken off by the white female model in a postmodern world of endlessly disposable identities. As 'background', the set against which the white model poses is the environment against which her Whiteness and Westernness is defined.⁵⁰ The commodification of Asianness into a fashion accessory creates signifiers of Asian culture (or in this case Vietnamese culture) that are depthless, ahistorical, homogenous and functional.

Stripped of depth and of a 'real', 'final' or physical referent, Baudrillard argues that signs derive their meaning instead from their relationship to other signs and their arrangement within a network of objects.⁵¹ The self-referential nature of signs can be seen in the arrangement of Asian signifiers in the window display of Matchbox (a home furnishings store) which are organized in accordance to their differences and similarities with other signs of 'other-worldliness' in order to create an ambiance of exoticism. Dark wooden chopsticks and green-brown rice bowls, designed to appear as though they are 'aged', are arranged next to a ball of woven wooden 'string' from a non-specific, developmentally lagging, exotic part of the world. Furthermore there are miniature 'aged' wooden statues of monkeys wearing clothes that imply African origins. These objects have nothing in common except that they originate, in the European imagination, from far-away, exotic, tribal and mysterious places. Their coherence as a network of commodities is also signified through the earthy and weathered colours of green, brown, tan and orange, again signalling the relationship between the countries of origin and nature. This is in contrast to the 'modern' (Western) décor contained in the rest of the store, which emphasises cleanliness, functionality and contemporary innovation. The 'advanced design' and shiny metallic surfaces of different kitchen appliances signify that they are future-oriented rather than from a culture for which time appears to have been frozen. Again, the production and understanding of signifiers of Asianness (and Otherness) is framed within the dominant racial discourse of Orientalism.

'I consume, therefore I am'

We no longer live in a world surrounded by other human beings. Instead, we are surrounded by objects and it is the consumption of these objects that, as Baudrillard argues, now dictates the rhythm of our life.⁵² In this world of objects it is possible to consume and 'know' Asianness without ever needing to step beyond the comfort zone of one's own culture. The sight, sound and taste of Asia can now be enjoyed in a threat-free, Western environment courtesy of commodified Asian products. Whilst alternative meanings of signs of Asianness may be generated and subversive uses of commodified Asian products found, dominant social constructions within mainstream Australian society of 'what is Asian', generate and perpetuate particular ways of understanding and knowing these signs.

The commodification and Westernisation of Asian commodities makes these products more palatable to the Western consumer. Moreover it allows people to have a 'taste' of Asia without ever threatening the integrity of one's identity as white Australian. For example, one can consume Continental's 'Oriental fried rice' on a familiar white dinner plate alongside one's 'meat and veg', as pictured on the package. No understanding of Asian etiquette or customs surrounding meals is needed. No shift is required from the 'individualistic' Western cultural approach (where each family member's meal is contained on a separate plate) to a more 'collectivist' Asian method (where the substantial portion of the meal is eaten off a central plate together). The feel and sentiment of Asia, its philosophy and spirituality can even be experienced through purchasing Maxwell Williams 'Shanghai Chic' chopsticks. The packaging of which informs the consumer that 'these chopsticks enhance aesthetic feeling and create a sense of balance and well-being'. In consumer culture, commodities now mediate between people of different cultures, enabling an experience of Asia for white Australia without the threat of actually having to confront the Other. The need to only interact with Asia through commodified products also ensures that the extent to which Asianness is incorporated into one's life is under the control of the consumer, as it is they who have the power to accept, or reject, Asian commodities as they please.

In this new consumer society, Baudrillard argues that consumption is no longer driven by the *need* for an *object* but rather by the *desire* for the *sign*.⁵³ In postmodern consumer society, the object has now taken on the value of the sign and it is the sign which is consumed.⁵⁴ Instead of a one-to-one connection between need and object, the desire for the sign manifests itself as a flirtation with one signifier to the next, and much like the symptoms of a psychosomatic disorder, cannot be quelled or satisfied through the attainment of any specific object/sign.⁵⁵ Suggesting a washing machine as an illustration of his idea, Baudrillard argues that its consumption is based on the desire for its signs of comfort or prestige. It is a desire which can be also directed at other objects with similar signification (e.g. cars, dishwashers). In the case of the washing machines, the desire to have it eclipses the desire to wash clothes.⁵⁶

Under this analysis, it is the desire for the sign of Asianness which directs the consumption of commodified Asian products. As discussed above, the discourse of Orientalism can influence the understanding of signs of Asianness as arising from 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences'.⁵⁷ The desire for such experiences in white consumer society translates to the desire for the consumption of particular commodity/signs which promise these

experiences. It is the desire for the signifiers of exoticism, mysteriousness, spirituality, sensuality, tradition and difference which underpins the consumption of Asianness. The success of the commodification of Otherness, argues bell hooks, is because it offers 'a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling'.⁵⁸ For example, the commonality of vegetables such as pumpkin, potato and carrot within Anglo-Australian culture might result in these vegetables signifying not only comfort and familiarity but also boredom and routine. Hence, whilst consumers of Asian backgrounds may purchase Heinz's 'Asian' range of soups as a Westernised substitute for the foods that they are used to, the white Australian consumer may pass by Heinz's 'regular' vegetable soups which are illustrated with 'boring' vegetables such as pumpkin and potato to purchase from their 'Asian' range which are illustrated with chillies, lime and exotic looking herbs because of their desire to consume the spice, excitement and novelty that such exotic foods signify.

The desire to consume signs of Asianness is not only a desire for what these signs signify but also a desire for what the consumption of such signs communicates about the consumer. For Baudrillard, consumption forms a system of communication through the production and exchange of the coded values of the sign.⁵⁹ The 'differential logic of the sign value' stratifies consumers in accordance to the different ideological values which their choice of consumer objects communicates about them.⁶⁰ The consumption of signifiers of Asianness can be used to communicate an acceptance and tolerance of Asia on behalf of the consumer. The overcoming of racial prejudice and fear can be displayed through one's accumulation and ease with 'different' objects (and object-people). The ability to eat so-called, exotic food, attend Asian festivals and tolerate the 'strange' smells and 'weird' customs, communicates a worldliness, a maturity, an adventurousness and a wealth of experience and knowledge that differentiates and elevates oneself above the 'ignorant masses' which view Otherness with fear. In mainstream Australian culture where the desire to be seen as a non-racist and where 'multicultural' often sits in conflict with the fear of the Other, namely an 'Asian invasion',⁶¹ the consumption of commodified Asianness can play a role in the sublimation of such anxieties. Indeed, the consumption of Asianness can become a sign of one's cosmopolitan credentials.

The desire for Otherness is also often used as proof of anti-racism. For bell hooks, this desire manifests itself not only in the desire for signifiers and objects of Otherness but also in the desire of white men for the physical consumption of a woman of colour.⁶² In *Eating the Other* hooks argues that this declaration of desire for the 'Other', not just a willingness to tolerate the Other but a need or craving for cultural difference, is often a way of 'publicly announc[ing] their break with a white supremacist past'.⁶³ It is used as evidence of the rejection of racist ideology which treats the Other with fear, loathing, hatred or disgust. Rather than a repulsion of Asians and telling Asians to 'go home', there is a craving for intimacy with the Other that goes beyond simply 'sharing Australian soil'. There is a longing to taste Asian, touch Asian, view Asian, and to consume the spectacular theatricalness and exoticism that is Asianness to them. Whilst the desire for Asianness may, on the surface, appear to be the opposite of hatred, hooks argues that rather than being 'proof' of the end of white supremacy, the desire for consuming the Other can be a form of 'imperialist nostalgia',⁶⁴ colonization and domination. This desire to 'eat the

Other' climaxes at the point where the white Australian man purchases the body of the Asian girl to fulfil his sexual desires. Whether on 'sex-tours' to Asia or in brothels in Australia, the intersection of patriarchal, racist, heterosexist and classist discourses ensures that the taste, touch and view of her Asianness is now his, to be offered up for his consumption, pleasure and satisfaction; 'it is by eating the Other that one asserts power and privilege'.⁶⁵

The extent of cultural awareness or progressive racial politics, therefore, cannot be measured through the willingness to consume commodified Asianness. From chopsticks that promise Orientalist 'balance and well-being' through to the bodies of Asian women, the notion that they are consumer objects within the capitalist market means that they exist as all other consumer objects exist – to be bought and sold, to be used until their novelty or ability to satisfy runs out. Then they are discarded, forgotten.

'I act, therefore I am'

The consumption of commodified Asianness can detract from, or even entirely negate, a real engagement with racial politics or cultural awareness. Whether the consumption of Asianness is driven by the desire for exoticism, an enactment of multiculturalism, a sublimation of fear or a domination of the Other, the very nature of consumption with its focus on an individualistic pursuit for pleasure and possessions, limits the transformative potential of this form of 'cultural interaction'. Bill Yousman, in his article on the love/hate mentality with which white American youth consume black rap music, concludes that such consumption does not produce progressive racial relations. The basis for his conclusion is his belief in the difference between consumerism and citizenship⁶⁶. Whilst the issue of whether consumerism and citizenship are antithetical or whether they can co-exist or support one another is beyond this paper, Yousman argues that they are separate notions as citizenship concerns the 'active participation in the governing of society...and working for the greater good'⁶⁷ whereas consumerism concerns 'individual gratification and the attempt to solve all perceived problems through the purchasing of goods'.⁶⁸

Consumerism can subsume a critical engagement with racial politics rather than catalyse social activism.⁶⁹ Therefore, for a real engagement with racial politics, a move beyond consumerism is required. The 'cultural interaction' possible within the framework of consumerism is inadequate because it is based on a limited acceptance and understanding of Asianness. Whilst consumerism does taint all areas of human activity, consumption need not be, and has yet to become, the *basis* for all human interactions. For progressive racial relations to occur, more than just a relationship mediated through commodities/signs is needed. Rather, an understanding of racial politics and how dominant racial discourses construct, legitimize and maintain structural and ideological racism needs to be developed. This involves not only the questioning of 'Otherness', a demand that the Other speak and 'tell their stories' so that their difference can be scrutinized, explained and understood, but moreover it demands the questioning of 'non-Otherness', of Whiteness. In this way, Whiteness will then no longer define normality from a traditional position of privileged invisibility. The operation of Whiteness through the consumption and commodification of Asianness needs to be exposed as a site where Orientalist

discourses can be reproduced and where racial politics are disguised by the seemingly 'apolitical' nature of consumption.

Baudrillard's work recognises that although consumption may be a collective behaviour, it also stratifies consumers and assigns them a place along the 'code' which prevents collective solidarity from arising.⁷⁰ Whilst solidarity may not be possible within the realm of consumption as it focuses on individual gratification, there remains realms of human existence outside consumption, albeit not untouched by consumption, in which solidarity remains a possibility. Such a unification between people of different cultures can be forged when cultural difference is not consumed and discarded, but when it 'invites engagement in a revolutionary ethos that dares to challenge and disrupt the status quo'.⁷¹ As bell hooks argues, it is when the encountering of racial difference is coupled with political realisations and a willingness to transgress cultural boundaries that new and alternative relations between people can be produced.⁷² Instead of commodification and consumption, a confrontation and commitment to changing patterns of racial domination needs to be developed so that real, substantial and progressive relationships between different cultures may be achieved.

In our everyday negotiations it is often hard to remember that every interaction we have is infused with power and politics. Even the seemingly mundane and 'apolitical' areas of our lives – our shopping centres, our living rooms, our classrooms and our bedrooms – contain overlapping and contesting discourses around race, gender, sexuality and class which support or challenge the status quo and the domination of privileged groups. Struggles over power and politics occur within the commodification of Asianness, in which the intersection of capitalism and Orientalism produce signifiers of Asianness that reproduce oppressive perceptions of Asia. Whilst the consumption and desire for signifiers of Asianness have often been couched in notions of multiculturalism and the transcendence of white supremacy, the desire for the Other can constitute a form of 'nostalgic imperialism' and the acceptance extended to Asians within the paradigm of consumerism is limited. The commodification and consumption of Asianness, however, forms only a small part of the intersection of racial politics and capitalism, which themselves intersect with broader discourses around gender, class and sexuality in a global context. From the 'sale' of Third World children and the surrounding discourses on good (white) motherhood and bad (third-world) motherhood, to the tourism industry and surrounding discourses on 'backward' versus 'civilised' cultures, to the trafficking of women from Asia and notions of Oriental sexuality, the intersection of race, capitalism and gender continues to perpetuate a global system of suffering and oppression of poor (mainly non-white) women and men for the profit and pleasure of the affluent world. Although nobody can stand above or beyond consumerism in a society driven by capitalism, this does not mean that we are unable to critically reflect on how the commodification and consumption of Otherness intersects and reproduces racial oppression. Whilst spaces can be forged within the field of consumption to contest dominant racial discourses, it is ultimately beyond consumption where a real engagement with racial politics, with fellow human beings and life, exists.

NOTES

¹ Tim Edwards, *Contradictions of Consumption: Concepts, Practices and Politics in Consumer Society*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2000, pp.3-4.

² See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, London, 1978/2003.

³ There have been many debates over whether 'late modernity' or 'postmodernity' is the best terminology to describe late capitalist society. Douglas Kellner argues that both positions are equally arbitrary and suggests that features of both are in existence at the same time. See Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and Postmodern*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995.

⁴ Edwards, p.141.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Richard Dyer, *White*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p.1.

⁷ *ibid.*, pp.1-2.

⁸ Bonnie Honig, "My culture made me do it", in S. M. Okin, ed., *Is multiculturalism bad for women?*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p.39.

⁹ Martin M. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A critique of metageography*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and California. Lewis and Wigen examine the ways in which the geographical boundary between the East and the West has shifted throughout history since the time of the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and how such a geographical divide reinforces the myth that 'suggests that the global is divided into two fundamental and ultimately comparable groupings of humanity' (p.48).

¹⁰ Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989, p.8.

¹¹ Mark Gottdiener, *Postmodern Semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford and Cambridge, 1995, pp.4-5.

¹² *ibid.*, p.8.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Telos Press, St. Louis, 1981, p.143.

¹⁵ Baudrillard disagrees with Marx, however, that use value is in any way more 'concrete', 'real' or 'final' than exchange value. Instead, he argues that use value is as much an abstraction as exchange value, and that both constitute commodity fetishism. See *ibid.*, pp.130-42.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.123.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 1970/1998, pp.81-83.

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Objects", in M. Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, p.19.

¹⁹ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, p.78.

²⁰ Baudrillard, *Political Economy*, pp.159-63. Baudrillard loses his hope for the 'total revolution' (p.163) in his later work, however, as he extends his analysis of the symbolic to construct a totalizing and fatalistic regime. See for example Jean Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death", in M. Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 119-48; Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations", in M. Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp.166-84.

²¹ Gottdiener, *Postmodern Semiotics*, p.40.

²² *ibid.*, p.49.

²³ *ibid.*, p.27.

²⁴ Steven Best, "The Commodification of Reality and the Reality of Commodification: Baudrillard, Debord and Postmodern Theory", in D. Kellner, ed., *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford and Cambridge, 1994, pp. 41-66. Steven Best makes a similar attempt, arguing also that the extremes of Baudrillard's later work are self-defeating and that a critical and dialectic hermeneutics should be maintained (like that found in Debord's (earlier) work).

²⁵ Gottdiener, pp.25-27.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.25.

²⁷ For example, in his chapter "Group Differentiation in a Metropolitan High School: The Influence of Race, Class, Gender and Culture" (pp.192-208), he performs a socio-semiotic analysis of dress and identity in a Californian high school. However, he fails to mention how the signs and materiality of signs is related to structures of power around race, class, gender and sexuality, such as patriarchy and hetero-normativity.

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- ²⁸ Said, p.2.
- ²⁹ V.G. Kiernan cit. Said, p.52.
- ³⁰ Said, p.43.
- ³¹ Said, similarly to Foucault, argued that there was a relationship between knowledge, power and control. He writes that Orientalism is a form of “supremacy...associated with ‘our’ knowledge of [the Orient] and not principally with military or economic power...To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it”. *ibid.*, p.32.
- ³² *ibid.*
- ³³ See Said, pp.284-328.
- ³⁴ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, p.81.
- ³⁵ See for example Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Market of Ethnicity*, Schocker Books, New York, 2000.
- ³⁶ Gottdiener, pp.5-6.
- ³⁷ Baudrillard, *Political Economy*, p.155.
- ³⁸ *ibid.* Baudrillard argues that the distinction between use value as ‘concrete’, ‘real’ or ‘final’ and exchange value as ‘abstracted’ and the seemingly irreconcilable distance between the two is also false. Furthermore the exploitation of the political economy occurs through the ideology that use value is ‘final’ and related the needs, which operates in a similar way to the signifier in the political economy of the sign with its claim to ‘reality’ and its justification through the ideology of psychological motivation. *ibid.*, pp.143-63.
- ³⁹ Kellner, *Baudrillard*, pp.9-10.
- ⁴⁰ For example on the packaging of Ong’s range of Asian sauces, Wokka Indonesian Tomato Curry noodles etc.
- ⁴¹ For example on the packaging of Campbell’s Asian soup range, Blue Dragon Asian sauces etc.
- ⁴² For example on the packaging of Asian Home Gourmet sauces, Maggie Flavour Infusion paste etc.
- ⁴³ Jameson draws on Lacan’s theory of schizophrenia as essentially a language disorder in which the breakdown of language also causes a breakdown of historical continuity and personal identity and in which the present moment, as disconnected and discontinuous, becomes vividly amplified. See Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, in H. Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1983, pp.118-19.
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp.119-120.
- ⁴⁵ For example on the packaging of Campbell’s ‘Asian’ soup range, Continental ‘Asian Rices’ range etc.
- ⁴⁶ Sara Ahmed, “Constructions of Women and/in the Orient”, in T. Cosslet et. al., eds, *Women, Power and Resistance*, Open University, Buckinghamshire, 1996, pp.136-49. However, Ahmed does not use the framework set out by Baudrillard in her analysis.
- ⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.139.
- ⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p.142.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp.143-4. Ahmed argues that white women in Western culture are often seen as the ‘Other’ against which (white) man defines himself, however in this editorial the white woman is placed in the position of positive definition against the ‘Otherness’ of the Orient. While the white woman is still objectified and commodified, in this case “she” gains...value via her distinction from racial Others’ (p.146).
- ⁵¹ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, pp.26-27.
- ⁵² *ibid.*, p.25.
- ⁵³ Baudrillard disagrees with humanists and ‘alienist’ theories of consumption and with the belief that people are driven to consume through the production of false needs for a particular object. In standard postmodern form he argues that it is not that capitalism, consumption, advertising etc. has ‘alienated’ people from their ‘real’ needs or ‘true nature’ but rather that such ‘real needs’ and ‘true nature’ do not exist. *ibid.*, pp.67-76.
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.*, pp.76-77.
- ⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.77.
- ⁵⁶ *ibid.*, pp.76-77.
- ⁵⁷ Said, p.1.

⁵⁸ bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance", in b. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, Boston, 1992, p.21.

⁵⁹ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, p.78.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ A number of writers have explored white Australia's stressed and strained relationship with its Asian neighbours and the 'identity crisis' that such pressures can bring. See for example Jon Stratton, *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis*, Pluto Press, Annadale, 1998; and Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Pluto Press, Annadale, 1998.

⁶² hooks, p.24.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p.25.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p.36.

⁶⁶ Bill Yousman, 'Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy', *Communication Theory*, 13, 4 (November, 2003), p.370.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, pp.85-86.

⁷¹ hooks, p.37.

⁷² hooks, pp.36-37.