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Article

Fan activists and the politics of race in *The Last Airbender*

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Abstract
When the producers of the film *The Last Airbender* announced their casting decisions, a large collective of fans became irate – they argued that the original cartoon was set in an Asian world, so all four lead roles should go to Asian American actors. Instead, producers cast three white actors as the heroes, and an actor of South Asian descent as the villain. This article investigates the fan-activists who organized to protest the casting and utilized the skills they developed as fans to participate in larger conversations about politics and race. Within their demand for changes in the representation of Asian Americans in entertainment media, these politicized fans offer new ways of considering the potential impacts of 'racebending' and the politics of minority representation.

In December 2008, producers of the film adaptation of the Nickelodeon cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender* set off a firestorm of criticism when they announced their casting decisions. Despite the fact that the television show seemed to have appropriated cultural practices, architecture, religious iconography, costumes, calligraphy, and other aesthetic elements from East Asian and Inuit cultures, four white actors had been cast in the lead roles. Many fans became irate, demanding that the roles go to Asian actors because they had always imagined that the characters were racially Asian. When one of the lead actors dropped out of the project he was replaced with Dev Patel, who is of Indian descent, as is the film's director, M. Night Shyamalan.[1] But fans pointed out that the nation his character belonged to were the villains of the series, so now the problem was that three white stars were heroes and the non-white actor and his people were villains. These

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conversations continued in heated online debates and culminated in a number of protest activities, ranging from the creation and spread of counter-media to a boycott of the upcoming film.

This article investigates some of the strategies that these fans employed in protesting Paramount's casting decisions, as well as the political consequences of those actions. Given that the arguments of these fan-activists are centered on proving that the world of *The Last Airbender* is specifically Asian and should be populated with Asian bodies, the group is put in the difficult position of defining what and who counts as Asian. They also struggle to describe how the show's Asian identity impacts their own fascination as fans, since they represent a wide spectrum of racial backgrounds and can be seen in some ways to view the show through an Orientalizing lens. Through a careful assessment of their discourse, we can see the term 'racebending' as part of a long history of racial masquerade that can work both to destabilize the fixity of identity, as well as to shore up racialized hegemonic power structures.

But their battle also offers a rare example of fan activism, as their fannish engagement with a fictional text translates into an organized set of politicized actions. Usually when we talk about 'fan activism' we are more accurately simply describing active fans – passionate viewers of a particular text who unite with like-minded individuals for a singular goal. Such fans participate in multi-textual activities such as interacting in online forums, creating works of fan art and fan fiction, or consuming collectibles. Yet their goals often remain within the world of the text itself, in 'nonpolitical claims … culturally-oriented and consumer-based claims' (Earl and Kimport, 2009: 220). Fans have used their collective power to demand that a certain romantic relationship blossom within the show's narrative (Scodari and Felder, 2000; Tabron, 2004), that a show stay on the air despite low ratings (Scardaville, 2005) or, as is sometimes the case with anime, that a show be imported to the US (Levi, 2006). Work that focuses on this type of fan activity has been necessary in helping to counteract the stereotype that viewers are passive, easily duped or simply foolish. Yet fan activism can encompass a broader range of activities, some of which are distinctly political and may contribute to an increased level of civic engagement. Academics are now beginning to recognize the ways that fans engage with issues that extend beyond the world of their fan text – in this case, allying themselves with established nonprofit groups and seeking to expand their knowledge of political discourse and the real-world implications of their fandom.

In this case we can see that fans of *The Last Airbender* are able to transition from everyday fans to political activists – but, more significantly, we can see the way that this transition is facilitated through the language and culture of fandom itself. Some of the organization's strongest and most effective tactics rely on the skills developed as members of the fan community: honing their arguments through community discussions, producing and editing multimedia creations, educating themselves about every facet of their issue, and relying on their trusted networks to provide a database of information. Through interviews with leaders of the movement, textual analysis of the group's online communities, and an 18-month long ethnographic investigation of the group's leaders in action, I consider the ways that the fascination and frustration of fans can be potentially harnessed in promoting civic engagement, as well as wider conversations about racial representations and Asian American identities.

Enraged fans take action

When the news broke that white actors would be playing the starring roles of Aang, Katara, Sokka and Zuko, one of the first responses was from artists who had worked on the show. Under the handle 'Aang Ain't White', they anonymously created a LiveJournal website and initiated a letter-writing campaign. Although hundreds of fans and non-fans learned about the issue through the site and mailed letters, most were returned to sender unopened. Soon thereafter, casting for the film was completed and production began with no changes to the cast. One consequence of creating this forum, however, was that like-minded participants had a chance to meet each other in this virtual arena and establish a basis for future conversations. Two such individuals, known on the site as glockgal and jedifreac, decided to start their own forum. They created a site called Racebending.com, as well as a corresponding community on LiveJournal. The name was a playful riff on the notion of 'bending' that was an important part of the universe of *The Last Airbender* – each tribe is based on a natural element, and individuals known as 'Benders' have the ability to manipulate that element.

The creation of this term can be read as an example of 'textual poaching' (Jenkins, 1992) or the act of fans repurposing ideas from their beloved texts to demonstrate resistance and agency. By referencing 'bending' the activists mark their fandom and attachment to the world of the franchise, even as they use the same term to articulate their frustration with an industry where roles are systematically taken from Asian Americans and given to white actors. The filmmakers seemed to be saying that audiences would only support movies starring white actors, and, as dedicated fans of a fantastical world populated by multiracial, multicultural peoples, they knew that this was not the case. Members of the community also noted that the casting call had used the phrase 'Caucasian or any other ethnicity' when looking for these lead roles, which they found troubling and discriminatory, as it seemed that Paramount Pictures had specifically sought out white actors. In this sense, their definition of 'racebending' can be seen as more than simply changing the race of a character: it is changing the race of characters of color to white for reasons of marketability.[2]

By the spring of 2009, the Racebending.com website was managed by six main contributors, including three based in Los Angeles, one in British Columbia, one in New York, and one in Washington. Out of the six leaders of the movement, only one had been an active fan, participating in fan communities and engaging in fannish practices such as fan art and fan fiction. Four considered themselves general fans of the show but not at a serious level, and one had never seen an episode of the show and only joined the group to protest the casting. Nevertheless, the leaders of the group relied heavily on fan communities to provide the base for rallying individuals to take action. In an informal poll of 1200 Racebending.com supporters, the movement is seen to be spread across 50 countries, and racially nearly half of their supporters are white, with only a quarter of their participants identifying as Asian.[3] Although the website has gone through a few different incarnations, it generally serves as a place for newcomers to learn about the controversy, discover ways of becoming involved and read updates on the latest news.

The work of these fan activists was brought to my attention in January 2009, when the leaders of the movement reached out to Asian American activist organizations in Los

Angeles for support. After hearing one of their presentations, I began to track the group's movement online. Over the next 18 months, I participated in regular conversations with the group's leaders – both online and offline – and observed the group in action at out-reach events, strategy meetings and protests. I also conducted formal interviews with all six main contributors, most of which lasted an hour or longer. Although the organization is still growing and changing form as they respond to the release of the film, this study focuses on their initial growth and development from January 2009 to June 2010.

As with any ethnography, the identity of the researcher plays a critical role in the kind of information that is shared and how the research can be conducted, so it is important to consider the impact that my own identity may have had on this project. In many ways I entered this project as an outsider – I had never watched an episode of *The Last Airbender* (although over the course of my research did dedicate myself to viewing the entire series and found it greatly enjoyable), and I was not a participant in their online communities. Yet our original connection had come from my participation in an Asian American advo-cacy organization, and most of the activists were the same age as me, so I almost imme-diately took on the role of a fellow community activist rather than just a researcher. My opinions and advice were openly solicited and given during our many conversations about the group's strategies, and when a protest was planned, it was clear I was expected to be there shouting and waving a picket sign, rather than simply observing and taking notes on the side. This position has obvious benefits and drawbacks – on the one hand, being seen as an equal participant rather than an authoritative academic made our con-versations flow easily and with what I felt was true candor. When a response during a more formal interview seemed canned or overly rehearsed – as if it was the kind of response someone had already given to reporters, which many of them had – I would push the individual on that issue later in a chat online, or over dinner, to seek nuance and clarification. On the other hand, although my project remains critical of Racebending.com and the organization's discourse, it is clear that I am invested in their goals of politi-cization and advocacy, and have even contributed to some of their outcomes by my par-ticipation, so I cannot claim to have remained an outside observer throughout.

'Whiteness' and 'Asian-ness'

The practice of using white actors to tell the stories of people of color has a long cine-matic history. In the specific case of Asian Americans, there are countless examples of white actors taking on Asian characters such as Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, or, famously. Mr Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Similar to the adoption of 'blackface', the white actors participate in 'yellowface' by wearing prosthetics over their eyes, buck teeth, and garish costumes, often speaking in an exaggerated accent. Unfortunately, such practices have not disappeared; white actor David Carradine beat out Bruce Lee for the lead role of a Shaolin monk in the 1970s television show *Kung Fu*, and Rob Schneider played an offensively stereotypical Asian nerd in *I Now Pronounce you Chuck and Larry* in 2007. Beyond this practice of using costume and make-up to approximate Asian-ness, Asian actors are also systemically excluded from mainstream media through the less overt practice of whitewashing. In the case of whitewashing, Asian stories are embodied by white actors without even hinting at the erasure that is occurring, as if whiteness can

adequately stand in for all racial difference. Some examples include the movie *21*, wherein white actors were cast to play the Asian Americans who actually participated in beating the casinos in Vegas, or the recent film *Extraordinary Measures*, whose star Harrison Ford portrays the real life Asian American doctor who developed the cure for Pompe disease.

The practice of whitewashing is particularly dangerous because of the way that these representations reify whiteness as both invisible and dominant. As Dyer argues, 'this property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power' (1999: 458). Whiteness is seen as the lack of ethnicity and color, as if it is not part of its own representational category. While we may not know the reasons behind Paramount's casting decisions in *The Last Airbender*, it is nonetheless clear that the film participates in maintaining the cultural hegemony of whiteness – perhaps even to the extent that film studios assume that minority audiences prefer to watch white actors rather than actors who share their own racial background. The impact of conveying primary narratives through the bodies of white actors while engaging with only extraneous people of color and their culture cannot be underestimated.

Although the Nickelodeon cartoon was created by two white Americans – Mike DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko – fans of the show had always been particularly attuned to the Asian aspects of the show. They proudly noted that the visuals were remarkably accurate in their portrayal of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Inuit cultures, even though the story took place in a somewhat mythical, alternate world. Despite the fact that the race of animated characters can be underdetermined, ambiguous, or deliberately obscured (Lu, 2009), operating under the Japanese idea of *mukokuseki*, or 'lacking any nationality' (Iwabuchi, 2004), many fans actively searched for proof that these characters were actually Asian. To that end, there are countless video montages on their websites showing images from the show and comparing them to ethnographic photographs of Japanese clothing, Inuit housing, Chinese calligraphy, and other evidential images from those cultures. Within these comparisons there is a relentless insistence that we can pinpoint what Asia and Asian culture[4] are by looking at these visual artifacts.

Yet we must consider how this discourse contributes to an essentialized or fixed notion of Asia. Not only do these images suggest that an escalating pile of artifacts can be used to ascertain what is really Asian and what is not, as if Asian identities cannot exist outside of these artifacts, but we are to use this evidence to match a racialized body to this perfect image of Asianness. This becomes somewhat difficult given that the show seemingly appropriates and mixes cultural artifacts from a wide range of Asian cultures, none of which could be accurately represented by any single actor. Moreover, who and what constitutes 'Asia' is also a debatable topic, given that the geographical, racial and cultural boundaries surrounding what we might consider 'Asia' are shifting and contextually constructed (Chuh, 2003; Ono, 1995). The demand for an Asian actor to play the role of Aang also assumes that identity and representation can be collapsed within an actor's body, when representation is always a mediation and our identities can rarely be straightforwardly mapped out without any complexity or shading.

This fixing of Asian culture as a specific set of material practices and a particular physicality is made even more problematic when accusations of Orientalism arise within the group. On the LiveJournal community, one contributor posted the following message:

> I have a friend who says that the Last Airbender race fail does not bother him because he does not see it as whitewashing because he does not see the Avatar world as Asian in the first place. To him, the world and its cultures do not code as Asian, but as more in the vein of white Orientalism. It's characters putting on Asian costumes in an exotic Asian world, for white people. Essentially, to cast the characters as white is only fitting.[5]

In the discussion that follows this posting, the participants debate whether or not the show is, at its core, authentically Asian or superficially Asian, as well as who gets to arbitrate such a debate given the diverse positionalities of those who are arguing each position. Given that over half of the fans and most active Racebending.com participants are not Asian, they would likely not want to detract from their own ability to participate in the Asian fantasy of the show. One contributor further adds, 'there's the undeniable fact that Avatar: The Last Airbender is a hybrid … [it] is Asian American, and of course Asian Americans come in different flavors'.[6] These debates, which begin to spiral out of control rather than reaching resolutions, point to the slipperiness of authenticity and identity, and perhaps the weakness in the group relying so heavily on these discourses.

Although arguments for authenticity proliferate on the websites, when talking to the leaders in person, they rarely discuss this issue. Instead, they rely heavily on a more general concern that Asian Americans are being systemically excluded from 'heroic roles'. In a presentation at a college campus, a Racebending.com leader stated:

> In an ideal world, John Cho could play George Bush and Keanu Reeves could play Martin Luther King Jr. But I think we can all agree that we are not there yet. People of color are still not being allowed to tell their own stories.

These arguments are not connected to authenticity or accuracy, but to general casting practices in Hollywood and the overall invisibility of minorities. We can also see evidence of this position being upheld in the group's response to cosplay, or dressing up in costume to represent and perform characters from the show. When asked if they thought that only Asians could cosplay the characters from *The Last Airbender*, Racebending.com supporters strongly affirmed that individuals of all backgrounds could take on the role of Aang and other 'Asian' characters. This statement is confirmed in one of the videos on Racebending.com of interviews conducted at Comic-Con. In the video, an African American woman playing the (arguably Inuit) Sokka and a white woman playing the (arguably East Asian man) Iroh are both given the chance to explain why they are against the casting decisions for the movie. The interviews show not only that Racebending.com supporters support people from all backgrounds playing the character of their choosing, but that these 'racebending/genderbending' individuals are indeed part of the Racebending. com movement itself. It seems that in some instances, then, racebending is perfectly acceptable, regardless of an individual's racial background or authentic connection to that culture, because these individuals and their decision about what character to portray is not part of the larger discrimination against Asian Americans in the industry.

We might wonder, then, why so much of the Racebending.com online community focuses on these questions of authenticity at all. To this question I offer the possibility that a professed desire for authenticity on the part of the organization's leaders is simply part of their strategy to appeal to fans of the show. Since it is important to prove their own

fandom in order to avoid outright rejection from the fan community, their claim to respect the Asian elements – and thus want to see the film reflect these Asian elements – may be their only way of using a commitment to the world of the show as a reason to protest the casting. While their claim to authenticity is not a particularly strong position, it may be a requirement that the group profess to hold it in order to maintain their connection to fans of the show, who are more openly concerned with questions of fidelity.

From fans to fan-activists

This focus on the desires of the fan community brings up another important question – why is the Racebending.com movement so focused on fans? As mentioned earlier, only one of the leaders was a serious fan, and the others cannot be said to be part of the show's dedicated fan community. Thus, their continual reliance on fan communities for support of their cause can be seen as deliberate and strategic. This might seem counterintuitive at first, since passionate fans would seem the most difficult group to convince to boycott the film version of their beloved show. Yet from this case study we can see how the set of skills exercised and utilized by fan communities have the potential to translate effectively into skills for a new mode of activism that takes place largely online. Van Zoonen (2004) makes a strong case for the similarity between fan communities and political constituencies, arguing that their emotional investments are both a result of performance, and that their activities are similarly concerned with things like knowledge, discussion and participation. But the mobilization of fans around this particular issue takes us one step further – not only do the activities and affective realities of fans resemble those of political constituencies, but fan activities can be seen to facilitate the development of a set of skills that are particularly suited to political activism in the era of Web 2.0.

The first move that the leaders of the community made toward engaging with fans of the show was to create a website called Racebending.com and a community on LiveJournal. LiveJournal, a blogging website that has been a platform for fan communities since 2003 (Derecho, 2006), was already a hub of fan activity surrounding *The Last Airbender*, so the community quickly grew in popularity. The Racebending.com leaders were able to tap into an already existing network of individuals who had a strong connection to the show. If they could make the argument that their beloved property was being mistreated, that passion could be redirected against the live action film. We can see that this move has been extremely effective – the LiveJournal community continues to be the most active site for conversation surrounding the issue, with daily posts written by a large number of community members and an extremely active base of commenters turning each post into a rousing debate. It is not uncommon for a single post to have anywhere from 40 to 80 comments following it.

The Racebending.com community on LiveJournal makes use of the already existing online network of individuals, but also puts them to work in sorting through and accumulating new information about the issue at hand. Fans have long been known as great collectors of information about their fan object; in an exploration of the wiki called *Lostpedia*, Mittell finds that the community website's 'core function is as a shared archive of data, culling information from the show, its brand extensions, and its cultural references to make sense of the show's mysteries and narrative web' (Mittell, 2009). The

high level of fascination and attention to shows like *Lost* are multiplied when fan communities unite to pool their resources, making their data set incredibly comprehensive and detailed. Jenkins (2006) further expands on this phenomenon, comparing the advantages of Pierre Levy's notion of collective intelligence to Peter Walsh's more traditional 'expert paradigm'. He argues that there are many pleasurable reasons for people to participate in the production of collective knowledge: the exercise of generally unacknowledged skills, the assumption that individuals have something worthwhile to contribute, and the generally democratic principles that lead to a dynamic process of acquiring knowledge. This notion of collective labor maps perfectly onto the case of Racebending. com, where it is not always the leaders who provide the latest news regarding the production and promotion of the film. Rather, it is a collective of motivated individuals who sporadically contribute, leaving no stone unturned in their search for new details and developments.

Beyond updates on the making of the film, the site is also a place for a host of related discussions, including questions about racial politics, re-examinations of episodes of the show in the context of this new politicization, and the drawing of attention to similar issues in other media representations. In his examination of the cultural economy of fandom, Fiske finds that fans are 'particularly productive', and that 'all such productivity occurs at the interface between the industrially-produced cultural commodity … and the everyday life of the fan' (1992: 37). He specifically outlines three kinds of productivity, two of which we see in action here – enunciative productivity, or fan talk, and textual productivity, or fan art. With regard to enunciative productivity, we can see these regular conversations and debates on LiveJournal as evidence that fan talk is productive of deeper knowledge about the text itself, as well as the political implications of the way that the film has been cast. Through these discussions and debates, participants are able to sharpen their own arguments and solidify their stance on what is clearly a politically fraught issue.

With regard to textual productivity, we can look to the copious production of fan artwork and fan videos as additional components of knowledge creation. Coppa defines vidding as, among other things, 'a visual essay that stages an argument' (2008), and indeed the videos made by Racebending.com participants articulate nuanced arguments through their humorous montages, sarcastic rants, and compelling collections of evidence. There has also been a movement to create videos of individuals stating why they are participating in a boycott of the movie, which can contribute to a show of strength in numbers. In addition to these videos on YouTube, many fan artists have turned their visual arts skills toward the cause, creating original works of art that can be used as banners, t-shirts, buttons, icons, or personalized avatars. In this way, the artistic and creative skills that fans regularly employ in the creation of fan art and vids has been used to propel the arguments of the Racebending.com cause.

The group's collective use of 'comment-bombing' can also be seen as related to Fiske's notion of 'enunciative productivity'. Any time that a news organization publishes information about the upcoming film, new behind-the-scenes information, interviews with actors and cast members, or promotional material for other whitewashed projects, Racebending.com participants will direct members of the community to post comments. The community is very comfortable with the act of commenting since they participate in

regular online dialogues with members of their own community, and dozens comply with these requests, overwhelming the article with their viewpoint and offering counterpoints to any opposing arguments. In the era of online newswriting, comments can be seen as an important component of online discourse, and can even contribute to the creation of further legitimized conversation. For instance, *The Los Angeles Times* wrote an article based on an interview with director M. Night Shyamalan, and members of the Racebending.com community were encouraged to comment on the article. This action led to the writing of another article with the headline 'The Last Airbender is causing a casting commotion',[7] which was published in the *Los Angeles Times* blog. Although this blog often focuses on discussions that take place in the online comments, the fact that a respected newspaper like the *Los Angeles Times* would take note of online comments legitimates the commenting arena as important and worthy of concern.

Conversations around commenting are also important to note because they serve the purpose of policing the boundaries of acceptable fan behavior. This helps the group to retain their image as a respectable group of activists rather than flamers or trolls who are only interested in inciting anger or stymieing discourse. One LiveJournal post directing individuals to comment on a recent blog post included the warning, 'Just remember to be polite and keep your cool. If you come off as angry (Season 1 Zuko!) they have yet another excuse to dismiss you. Make your points calmly and confidently.'[8] Since fan communities spend so much time engaging in online discourse, there are often strict rules about the kinds of participation that are allowed and the kinds that are discouraged. In her examination of soap opera communities, Baym finds:

> Politeness is a criterion of communicative competence…. If conflicts were to become personal (or degenerate into 'flame wars'), people would be inhibited from contributing potentially controversial opinions, and the primary function of the group as an interpretive forum would be disrupted. (1997: 117)

If we apply this logic to the Racebending.com community, we can see that a similar desire for the primary function of the group – propelling the cause into mainstream media and convincing viewers to boycott the film – could be inhibited by allowing a lack of respect and decorum.

The leaders of the Racebending.com movement have conducted a fair amount of research into academic venues as well. Together they have accumulated an impressive amount of information on the topics of historical yellowface, the scarcity of Asian Americans in the media, the negative effects of racial stereotyping on children, the perils of a 'post-racial' rhetoric, and other issues. This knowledge has been gained through internet research, trips to local university libraries, and conversations with professors. For instance, two members of Racebending.com conducted a phone interview with Rebecca Bigler, PhD, who studies developmental psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. Although some of the conversation revolves around findings from Bigler's study entitled 'A developmental intergroup theory of social stereotypes and prejudice', their conversation never delves into the 'mechanisms and rules that govern the processes by which children single out groups as targets', as the study does. Rather, the interviewers ask where children learn about stereotypes, and Bigler responds that children

recognize the racial segregation of kids sitting together in the cafeteria, and then slowly start to come up with their own explanations for racial difference. The published interview continues in this straightforward, jargon-free language, and includes pull-out quotations that help to summarize the main points.[9] Interviews like these clearly contribute to the factual basis for responses to Racebending.com's long list of Frequently Asked Questions, such as 'Why is Racebending.com so concerned over just a kid's movie?'[10] As with this interview, much of the material found on Racebending.com organizes and translates academic research into more easily understood language that helps everyday fans to better equip themselves for arguing their case.

Politicizing beyond *The Last Airbender*

The group focused on two main goals during the course of this study: the first was to affect casting, and the second was to affect ticket sales after the summer 2010 release and derail plans for a second and third movie. But beyond these goals that are directly connected to *The Last Airbender*, they have also begun to take on the cause of promoting the general casting of Asian Americans and other minorities. As Scardaville finds, many fan activism groups share a common origin story: 'A single act or a pattern of offending acts mobilize individuals to unite. After the goal is either achieved or no longer attainable, the protesting group may, with time, evolve into a watchdog organization' (2005: 886). The Racebending.com movement seems to follow this typology, since the casting decision led to the mobilization of the group, but the ongoing issue of racism in representation is what continues to motivate their collective. The Racebending.com website lists as their mission: 'We are a coalition and community dedicated to encouraging fair casting practices. As a far-reaching movement of consumers, students, parents, and professionals, we promote just and equal opportunities in the entertainment industry.'[11] This statement clearly moves beyond the film itself to advocate for a change in casting practices in general.

One campaign that epitomized this expanded goal was against the whitewashing of a comic book called *The Weapon*. The comic book starred an Asian American hero named Tommy Zhou, but when the story was set to be remade into a film, a white actor was cast to play him. Members of the Racebending.com communities were very supportive of efforts to protest this casting. The coordinators wrote a letter condemning the decision in the name of Racebending.com, and one coordinator actually had an extended phone conversation with the executive producer of the film to convey their message. The group's support for these actions revealed an interest in working on projects outside of *The Last Airbender*. Overall, in the period between the movie's production and the premiere, the majority of new posts were about issues outside the world of *The Last Airbender*, and only infrequent contained updates on the progress of the film's promotion or the occasional tidbit of new information from the main contributors.

Yet it is also important to examine some of the group's struggles; for instance, members of the Racebending.com community have been difficult to call into action with regard to real-life protest activities – particularly early in the course of their organizing – such as attending rallies or collecting pen-and-paper signed petitions. A Racebending.com leader in New York organized a protest at the film's casting call for background actors in March 2009, but only a handful of people showed up. Together they held signs and tried to gain

visibility, but with the lack of bodies their impact was minimal. Similarly, the Los Angeles 'Street Team' organized a group of Racebending.com supporters at Comic-Con in San Diego in July 2009, but the two leaders ended up doing most of the work by themselves, 'full-on yelling into the crowd, handing out flyers and buttons, getting signatures',[12] with little support from their fellow Racebending.com members. Another missed opportunity for on-the-ground activism came when the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) organized a protest at Paramount Studios against an offensive scene in their recent film *The Goods: Live Hard, Sell Hard*. MANAA approached Racebending.com to see if they wanted to use the protest to promote their cause, since Paramount was also the studio producing *The Last Airbender*, but only one member of the Los Angeles Street Team showed up to the protest. Although enthusiasm for the cause is seemingly boundless in online forums, it has been difficult to get even the most vocal members of the group to put a name to their face and show up for a local event.[13]

These examples of the group's less successful campaigns are interesting to view in the context of the successful utilization of fan skills for activism. It is possible that these more traditionally political activities veer too far from the everyday activities of fan communities, and this is why they have floundered. Like many fan communities, this particular community resides largely online, with very few members ever having met face to face, so it makes sense that their most successful collective actions take place virtually. Malcolm Gladwell has suggested that demonstrations and protests, or what he calls 'high-risk activism', are reliant on strong ties that cannot be built or activated using social media. In a provocative *New Yorker* article, Gladwell (2010) asserts that 'Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice'. The example of Racebending.com is a rich example for exploring Gladwell's claims, given the group's reliance on social media as well as its struggles to organize in-person actions. We might worry that the work of this group is all talk and no outcome, and that their 100 percent virtual set of activities is somehow a weakness. Yet we must be careful about suggesting that their lack of face-to-face mobilizing represents a failure to become truly politicized, or that the group cannot be considered to be engaged in 'real activism'. Although disputing the casting of a film may not be as significant an action as Gladwell's examples from the civil rights movement, where physical violence and legal battles were imminent threats, the group is still participating in important discursive and educational work. As we have seen in this discussion, the group effectively propagates their message using online organizing and has communicated their message to a broad audience of fans and non-fans. Further, they have moved their mission toward general casting and racial representation issues that are not even related to their original fan object – a trend that can only be seen as political, since it no longer relies on the affective ties of fandom – and that through this shift, they have been a part of important conversations with industry executives.

Conclusion: fan-activism and the consumer-citizen

As we consider this movement of fans toward politicized organizing and activist movements that extend beyond the text of *The Last Airbender* itself, it is important to

consider the ways that their project can be framed as a consumer movement. As fans they may want to see their favorite text represented accurately, and as activists they may want to see people of color telling their own stories, but we cannot neglect their identities and motivations as consumers as well. Because the film and *The Last Airbender* franchise are both commercial entities, at the core of this protest is the idea that the fans want to be able to spend their dollars on their favorite text. As mentioned earlier, the term 'racebending' itself was poached from the media world, so even as the fans are attempting to impact the bottom line at Paramount they are still supporting the franchise in many ways. As consumer-citizens, they use consumption as a site for enacting their politics – their central goal is to impact the film industry through the collective power of their boycott, and in doing so, convey a message about how important racial politics are to them.

From the perspective of Paramount, of course, the creation of the film is not premised on the ethics of the racial dynamics of casting in Hollywood, but simply on the commercial viability of their multi-million dollar business venture. We can see the tensions between these two motives in conversations within the Racebending.com community that revolve around the marketability of Asian American actors and actresses in the American and international media landscape. Many prominent members of the Asian American community have propagated the narrative that one of the reasons why Asian Americans are marginalized within Hollywood is because of the spending patterns of Asian American audiences. One writer and activist stated:

> Unlike black and Latino audiences, Hollywood doesn't even track Asian audiences separately. They don't need to; we essentially have the same consuming patterns as white audiences. If a studio releases an 'Asian American' film, our community is about as likely to support that as a white audience. (Chung, 2007)

Although it is unclear whether or not this statement is true, Chung nevertheless asserts the importance of Asian American consumption in the ethical imperative of the Racebending.com movement. The argument that an 'Asian American' film – or a film that stars Asian Americans, as Racebending.com members would like *The Last Airbender* to be – would draw a diverse audience only helps to strengthen their argument that their representation is important, and that the only way we will know it is important is through consumption. In an entry on the Racebending.com community on LiveJournal, jedifreac writes:

> There are about 18.9 million people of Asian descent in the United States and Canada, and about 3.5 million people of American Indian/Alaska Native/First Nations/Inuit/Métis descent.… So to all the people who argue that Asian Americans and Native Americans are 'too small of a group' to deserve to be represented in movies or to have any purchasing power … that it's not worth it for Paramount to represent people from those groups in lead roles, well …

It is clear that 'the numbers game' has played a role in the rhetoric of the movement.

But we must also remember that the numbers game is not the only way in which the group hoped to measure their success. Although much of their activism was explicitly oriented toward impacting ticket sales, they realized that it would be difficult to measure

the effect of their outreach as opposed to, for instance, the film's terrible critical reception. The group also focused on much smaller goals, none of which are numerical: they hoped to meet with the production, to stage a protest at the premiere, to contact media outlets, and to sustain and expand their movement. As one leader stated

> It's not about the battle and we're not going to change Hollywood overnight. It's not about one individual fight, it's about the trajectory of the next ten or twenty years, and the one thing we can do to guarantee we lose in the long run is to sit back and stay quiet.

This case study opens the door to investigations of other fandoms that have taken on social causes as a result of their fascination and frustration with their primary text. In future research on this particular protest, a full analysis of the film's critical reception and financial success or failure in the international marketplace, as well as a textual analysis of the film itself, would be important points to examine. It would also be interesting to examine the sustainability of a cause that is so intimately tied to the event of a film's premiere – does the group have the infrastructure and motivation to continue in their work on racial discrimination once the movie has come and gone? What factors enable a fandom to continue seeking out politicized engagement, and what factors cause the participants to move on to other activities?

This case demonstrates the complications that can arise in engaging with the racial politics of representation. We see that a fannish preoccupation with authenticity can be limiting if it becomes affixed to a relationship between racialized or otherwise marked bodies and the stories they can tell. In the example of racebending within cosplay we can begin to see racebending as an important arena for experimenting with the fluidity of identity, but the film reminds us that even the most imaginative media franchises remain tied to an industry that perpetuates the systematic erasure of minorities from the media. This example also demonstrates the possibility for an organization to strategically rely on fan skills as a mode for engaging participants in political activity – growing their online community using a base of individuals who were already engaged in similar communities, relying on the group's far reach to stay on top of all developments, creating original and multimedia artwork to promote the cause, encouraging members to spread their message through well-worded and thoughtful dialogue, and seeking to bolster their own knowledge from a wide arena. Each of these tactics is particularly well suited for the group's goal of spreading knowledge about the movie and encouraging everyday movie viewers to join the boycott. It is unclear whether or not a different sort of campaign – for instance, a campaign to change governmental policy, or prison reform – could benefit from these fannish skills, or that this model could be usefully imported to work on another cause, given the complexity of this narrative. Yet it is clear that participatory cultures like those around fan communities offer a potential space and set of tools for shifting conversations from fictional texts to the realities that they impact and rely upon.

Funding

Notes

1 To be precise, Patel was born to Gujarati parents who were from Kenya, and he was raised in England. Shyamalan was born in India but raised in Pennsylvania from the age of six weeks.

2 The group is identified throughout as members or participants of Racebending.com – an important distinction, since they are actually 'against racebending'.

3 See: http://www.racebending.com/v3/press/demographics-of-racebending-com-supporters/ (consulted 26 July 2010).

4 Although the Racebending.com supporters also argue that Inuit culture is being represented in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and thus should be represented in the film, the majority of their arguments focus on Asians and Asian Americans.

5 See: http://community.livejournal.com/ontd_political/4893219.html (online comment, 22 December 2009, consulted 24 July 2010).

6 See: http://community.livejournal.com/racebending/133219.html?thread=4072803#t4072803 (online comment, 23 December 2009, consulted 24 July 2010).

7 See: http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/comments_blog/2010/04/the-last-airbender-causes-a-casting-commotion.html (online post, 7 April 2010, consulted 25 July 2010).

8 See: http://community.livejournal.com/racebending/155803.html (online comment, 10 February 2010, consulted 24 July 2010).

9 See: http://www.racebending.com/v3/interviews/rebecca-bigler-developmental-psychologist/ (website, consulted 1 November 2010).

10 See: http://www.racebending.com/v3/faq/ (consulted 1 November 2010)

11 See: http://www.racebending.com/v3/about/ (website, consulted 24 July 2010).

12 See: http://community.livejournal.com/racebending/81024.html (online post, 27 July 2009, consulted 24 July 2010).

13 Members of Racebending.com successfully partnered with the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, National Korean American Service & Education Consortium, and Korean Resource Center for a protest on 1 July 2010 outside a movie theatre in Los Angeles. Over 100 people gathered, and many news outlets covered the protest. Reviews of the film – although largely focused on technical failings – also paid a considerable amount of attention to the issue of race and casting, often including interviews with members of Racebending.com. Analysis of the protest and other events surrounding the premiere of the film are not included in the study, but deserve serious analysis in the future.

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