

# THE SPECTRUM

ASIAN AMERICAN ALLIANCE

NOVEMBER 2009 - VOLUME 7. ISSUE 1.

## MY ALTERNATIVE SPRING BREAK

By Stanley Abraham



Left: The American flag and old flag of South Vietnam fly together in Versailles. Right: Six Flags sign still says they are "closed for storm."

This past spring, my friends and I participated in a very unique alternative spring break. Rather than doing the more traditional construction-based service trip to New Orleans, which all of us had done before, we instead volunteered with the Vietnamese Youth Leaders Association of New Orleans (VAYLA-NO).

VAYLA saw within the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina an opportunity. The organization is a youth-led, youth organizing community-based organization in New Orleans dedicated to the empowerment of Vietnamese American and underrepresented youth through services, cultural enrichment, and social change. The organization's headquarters is based out of the Village De l'est, known locally as Versailles, a predominantly Vietnamese American community.

The services and resources VAYLA makes available to the community youth are impressive. In addition to providing academic resources like homework help and SAT preparation, the organization provides an impressive array of extra-curricular activities such as a football league, a dance troupe, and "Friday Night Kick-Back Nights," a weekly social event. The headquarters sports a computer lab, a dance studio, and a lounge complete with a television and an XBOX.

Our team of four volunteers headed workshops during our week-long visit, and in return got to see the functioning of a really impressive youth organization. VAYLA took advantage of the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina to re-build the youth community. Once marked by violence and danger, thanks to VAYLA, the youth community of Versailles is now safe and pro-

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## EVENTS FOR ASIAN AMERICAN MONTH

11/5 - STUDENT FACULTY DINNER

11/10 - RYAN TAKEMIYA TALK

11/12 - CHILDREN OF INVENTION  
FILM SCREENING

11/19 - VOICES CONCERT

11/20 - NEXT SPECTRUM  
SUBMISSION DEADLINE

ductive.

One of the organization's most impressive feats was shutting down a landfill in the community. Specifically, VAYLA-NO lead organizing efforts to stop the dumping of construction debris left from Hurricane Katrina less than a mile away from the heart of Versailles in 2006. Known as the Chef Menteur C&D Disposal Site, the dumping site was chosen through an executive order, without community input. VAYLA mobilized both the youth and community elders, and protested aggressively enough to have the landfill moved.

The organization's founder and executive director, Minh Nguyen, was both our host and guide during our visit. Although only slightly older than us, Minh has built an impressive organization with VAYLA. He

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# THE SPECTRUM

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## ABOUT AAA

Asian American Alliance (AAA)'s mission is to bring all members of the Tufts community together by fostering an environment for instituting political changes concerning Asians and Asian Americans, enhancing social interactions among all students, and creating a better understanding of Asian and Asian American identity at Tufts.

## WANT MORE?

Want to learn more about AAA or The Spectrum?

Find us online at <http://ase.tufts.edu/aaa/> or send us an e-mail at [angela.lam@tufts.edu](mailto:angela.lam@tufts.edu) and [allistair.mallillin@tufts.edu](mailto:allistair.mallillin@tufts.edu). We're always looking for contributions so if you have any ideas, let us know!

# Co-Presidents Letter

Hi Spectrum Readers!

This is Lily and Jenny, Co-Presidents of Asian American Alliance (AAA) this year! We are excited to meet members of the Tufts community through AAA's upcoming events. The AAA executive board members are planning some great events this year (some old ones with a new twist, and others completely new). We hope that you are as excited we are and get a chance to check out some of what's in store for all of you!

Some events that we've had this year include our first Bubble Tea Chat in September, and a Know Your Rights Workshop, which was held in mid-October. We took the time and space of our first monthly Bubble Tea Chat to discuss a posted, on-campus flier that perpetuated Asian-American stereotypes. For the Know Your Rights Workshop, a lawyer from the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund came to inform students on rights in potential situations of harassment as well as elaborating on specific courses of action in the cases of racial harassment. The event is particularly relevant in light of the hate incident that occurred last semester that targeted students of the Korean Students Association. Hopefully, students are better equipped to handle incidents of harassment if they happen again (knock on wood).

As seen through our events, Asian American Alliance strives to bring all members of the Tufts community together by encouraging discourse on institutional changes that concern Asians and Asian Americans through social and educational programming. AAA hopes to enhance social interactions among all students, and create a better understanding of the multi-faceted Asian and Asian American identities at Tufts.

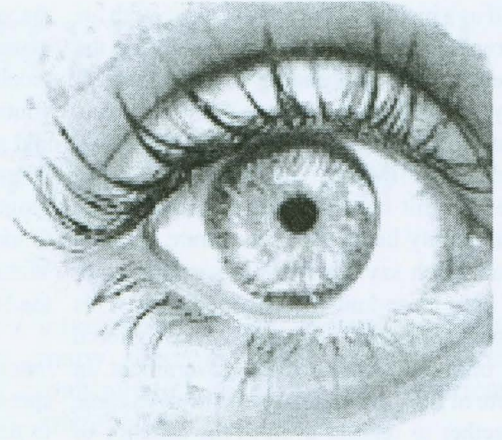
November is Asian American Awareness Month at Tufts! In the Spring, you can look forward to AAA's annual Service Auction in February; Fusion, our annual hip-hop and spoken word concert, in March; and Images of Asian America Art Gallery in April. In addition to these events, AAA offers several volunteer opportunities relevant to the Asian American community throughout the year (like writing for Spectrum, this newsletter!). You can always check out our website for more information: <http://ase.tufts.edu/aaa/index.html>.

With that, we hope that you and your friends are able to check out our events and possibly get involved, if you are interested. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at [lily.zhang@tufts.edu](mailto:lily.zhang@tufts.edu) and/or [jenny.lau@tufts.edu](mailto:jenny.lau@tufts.edu). Our weekly open board meetings are on Sundays, so if you want to stop by and share ideas or news, feel free to contact us! We look forward to a great year and to seeing you at AAA's events this year!

Sincerely,  
Lily and Jenny

# MY CULTURAL LENS

by Eugenia Lee



People did not know what to do with me in Kenya. Children ran after me, pondering aloud in Swahili if I was a *mzungu* (white foreigner) or Chinese. In Kampala, Uganda, a shopkeeper approached me to ask if I was Mexican.

In Taiwan, I was stared at for the dark skin I had accumulated after four months in Africa, for my strange accent when I spoke Mandarin, for my apparent lack of concern over making sure my skin stayed pale and flawless.

When I returned to the United States after four months in Kenya and another month in Taiwan (I had spent five consecutive months out of the country), I felt overwhelmed by my

inability to articulate just what culture I belonged to and where I wanted to be. I felt a little lost, but this was not anything new.

The thing about being raised by immigrant parents in the United States is that you do not end up in the so-called mythical melting pot, blending in with American society. Instead, you are stuck in cultural limbo, belonging neither to western culture or eastern culture.

In America, I grew up wanting to be someone other than myself. Blond hair and blue eyes were coveted and I was embarrassed when no one understood what Buddhism (the religion I had practiced my entire life) was. I would confuse my Mandarin and English, not understanding that the two were separate languages; even now, I am still figuring out differences between Taiwanese and Mandarin. In short, cultural confusion has been a regular part of my life and identity for as long as I can remember.

For all its diverse cultures, I encounter racism and impatience when accompanying my parents in various errands in the United States. I see the way clerks impatiently roll their eyes when they hear my mother's broken English. I see the way airport

personnel processing new Chinese immigrants in the John F. Kennedy Airport in New York will look for a white person in the crowd to make eye contact with, a look that says, See what I have to go through with these people?

In Taiwan, I look like everyone else but not really. People can take a quick glance at me and know that I am an ABC, or American Born Chinese. On buses, I have had local people approach me after hearing my accent, curious to know where I was born and raised. To my little cousins, I am "Mei guo jie jie", or "American big sister". My identity is defined precisely by not belonging.

I have spent my whole life having to explain to people who I am—whether in Chinese culture, American culture, or any other foreign culture I encounter through my travels. This does not disconcert me as it used to, however; I regard myself as a citizen of the world, lucky enough to be able to see things through many different cultural lenses at once. I would not be who I am today without it.

*Eugenia Lee is a junior majoring in Anthropology and International Relations.*

told us a history of the area, starting with his parents' immigration to the area during the Vietnam War and ending with the present day. Versailles' experience with Hurricane Katrina had been a unique one: although technically located within the 9th Ward, the area hit hardest by the hurricane, the community had a 90% return rate within a year. Minh says that this is partly a result of how close-knit the community is. This Asian American community was ignored by both the media and the government. In spite of this, the members themselves came together to rebuild even in the absence of outside assistance.

And in the wake of the damage, VAYLA was born to make the community even better than it had been before. While

the youth population had formerly been marked by gang violence, VAYLA provided a safe and fun alternative for the youth. It has been highly successful and grown quickly, both through word of mouth and comprehensive outreach programs. The organization is looking to expand into other communities with Vietnamese American populations in the New Orleans area.

Our group's workshops ranged in topic from creative writing and public speaking to Asian American stereotypes in film and television. I was impressed by the eagerness of all the youth to participate, but was even more impressed by their general willingness to befriend and spend time with us. Both VAYLA's

staff and the youth themselves were amazingly friendly and welcoming, and everyone had a story to tell. For my part, I was incredibly glad they were willing to share them. VAYLA's continuing success serves as an example of the good that come of tragedy, and of what can be achieved even in the face of challenging circumstances.

*Stanley Abraham is a senior majoring in History and Spanish.*

# The Intern Experience

By Camden Lee

This past summer, I was part of the Organization of Chinese Americans Summer Internship Program. OCA is a national organization dedicated to advancing the social, political, and economic well-being of all Asian Pacific Americans in the United States. The program brings together Asian Pacific American students from across the country and places them at government agencies, congressional offices, non-profits, and at the OCA National Center. Every week, OCA gathers the intern class to discuss issues in the APA community. The interns also attend events and get together outside of work.

This summer, I was placed at the OCA National Center working on communications. I got to see how OCA works not only with the members but also with the press and other APA organizations. The experience I gained at OCA was phenomenal.

The best part of my experience was all of

the events I was able to attend. I attended U.S. Senate hearings, networking events, leadership seminars, and OCA brown bag lunches. These events allowed me to see the impact of the APA community on the national stage. At these events, I was able to meet influential leaders in the APA community such as Congressman Mike Honda, Tina Tchen, and Kalpen Modi. I also got to meet many community leaders who do some of the most important work in the community, but do not get the publicity.

I also got to meet many young APA leaders through the internship program. Not only did I get to meet the other OCA interns, but I also got to meet interns from the APA-ICS, CAPAL, and ILF internship programs. I was able to share my experiences while learning from them.

My internship experience culminated when my fellow 28 interns and I were flown out to San Francisco for the 2009 OCA National Convention. We went to help run the convention and to experience the event. The trip was mostly for work, but it was a great chance to bond with the

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# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ASIAN AMERICAN?

by William Huang

Have you ever been asked this question before: "What kind of Asian are you?" If you have, you can identify with anger that portrays Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Surprisingly to many whites, however, is the fact that Asians have been in the Americas since before the founding of the United States; Filipino sailors escaped to Louisiana to escape Spanish tyranny. The history of Asian immigrants in the United States is reflective of the political, economic, and social institutions in place in America before, during, and after arrival of the immigrants. To understand the place of Asian Americans in American society today, it is necessary to deconstruct the history and apply critical thinking skills in analyzing the interactions between Asian immigrants and other groups.

Let us examine the mainstream view of Chinese immigration to the United States in history textbooks. Chinese laborers, in the nineteenth century, decided to sail to America – known as "Gold Mountain" and helped build much of the physical infrastructure of the West Coast (railroads, farms, etc.). Most historical accounts neglect to mention the push factors leading to Chinese immigration. In reality, many of the Chinese were from the southern province of Guangdong. During the Qing Dynasty, the British wanted to open up China for trade, but the nation refused. The British smuggled opium from India through the port of Hong Kong to get the Chinese addicted. When Qing government officials started to seize British ships and merchants for their dubious drug

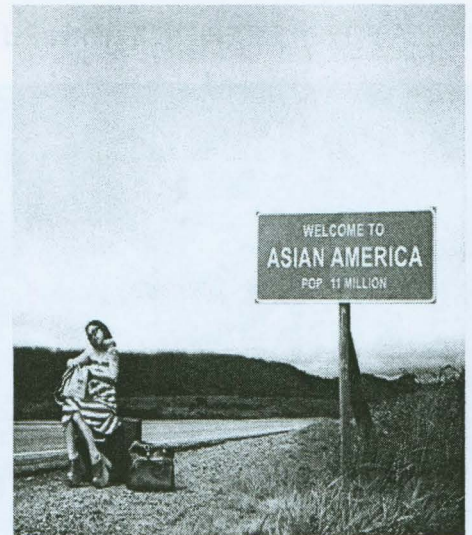
trade, the British decided to declare war on China in retaliation. The Qing government was forced to raise taxes on farmers to fund this illegitimate war, putting strain on an already tenuous population of sustenance farmers. Many men were forced to sail into an unknown land, America, hoping to earn enough to feed their starving families. Rather than deconstructing such events, most history textbooks report the Chinese being lured by gold and quick fortunes.

Next up, let's examine Japanese internment during the 1940s. With the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the US government was quick to react in classifying all Japanese living in America, citizens included, as possible enemies. This is a case of selective perception, where the racially different Japanese were seen as enemies while ethnic whites such as German and Italian Americans were seen as allies, even if those countries were at war with America. A complex socioeconomic reason is also at play for Japanese internment. All along the west coast of the United States, the Japanese had brought their successful irrigation techniques to increase crop yield for a variety of produce. Seeing so many successful large Japanese American farms made many white farmers envious, so they supported the interment of Japanese Americans as well as the confiscation of their land and homes. Hawaii was the lone exception along the west coast, as Japanese Americans made up an irreplaceable proportion of the working force. Japanese Americans lacked the political clout and population necessary to protest

internment in the Western US, so many were forcibly interned even manipulated to renounce American citizenship.

I implore you to apply critical thinking to glib statements made by others to defend their racist thoughts. Racism is an institution designed to benefit whites at the expense of people of color, Asian Americans included. To understand the full Asian American experience is to look past the easy answer and apply critical thinking skills in examining the interplays at work in constructing a situation. After all, if you don't do it, who will?

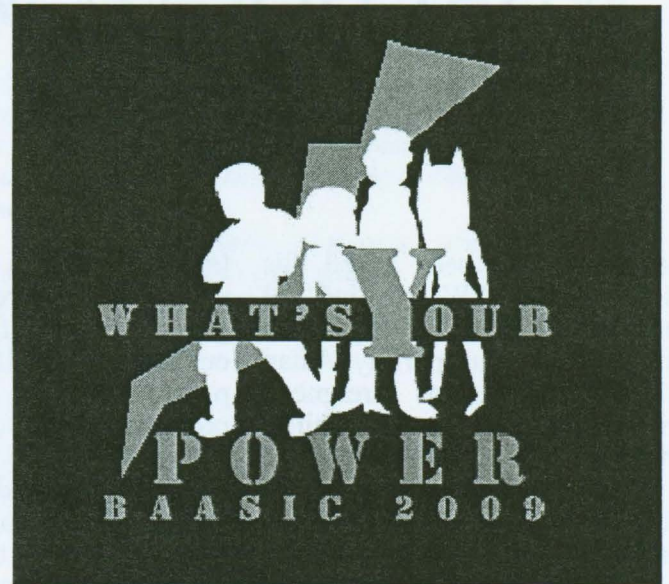
*William Huang is a sophomore majoring in International Relations.*



# BOSTON ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS INTERCOLLEGIATE CONFERENCE

by Brandon Lee

On Saturday, October 10, I attended BAASIC, the Boston Asian American Students Intercollegiate Conference, a conference in its seventh year that brings awareness about Asian American issues to many Boston college students. This year, it was held at Northeastern, although the location changes every year. Like the many other students that I came with, we were going for various reasons: to mingle with students from other schools, to learn about the various issues in the Asian American community; and some just simply came for the performances at the end of the conference. I had to admit it was a great performance, especially seeing Magnetic North and Taiyo Na there. Besides the performances, there was more to do. There were the two sessions of workshops that they offered. There were an incredible variety of workshops that people could attend, such as ones like “The Brownstar Revolution presents: Writing wri-volutions; Reclaiming memory with the power of the pen.” This workshop, led by the Spoken word duo Brownstar, showed people techniques used in writing spoken word poetry to put significant memories into art. While attending these workshops were great, the opportunity to meet new people and “network” is incredible. People from



around the New England area who attend different schools came together at this conference. It was definitely a place for people to come together to help each other out and work together on Asian American issues that are important to us as a community.

*Brandon Lee is a sophomore majoring in Child Development. Tufts BAASIC attendees were graciously sponsored by the Asian American Center at Tufts.*

## THE OCA INTERN EXPERIENCE continued



other interns at the end of the summer. It was great to have all the interns together for 5 days at the end of the internship program.

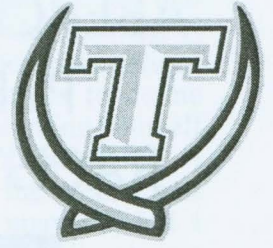
My experience as an intern in the OCA Summer Internship Program is unforgettable. It is one of the most valuable experiences that I have ever had, and it will continue to affect my life. I met so many amazing people and have created a network of contacts in the APA community. The OCA Summer Internship Program is the best way that I could have spent my summer.

*Camden Lee is a junior majoring in Asian American Studies at the University of Maryland College Park.*

On September 16th, a freshman posted a flier in and around the areas of Hill Hall. The flier was supposedly advertising for a candidate for the TCU Senate Class of 2013, but it was later discovered that the candidate on the flier was not actually running for office. The flier displayed a stereotypical picture of an Asian American male with geeky eyeglasses and a goofy smile, and read “Squinty Eyes, Big Vision; (kimchi!),” mocking a flier of an actual TCU Senate candidate that read, “Small Person, Big Ideas.” At the bottom of the flier, written out phonetically to express a stereotypical Asian accent and broken English, “Please vote me! I work rearry hard!”

In the wake of the flier incident, the Asian American Alliance, along with the Group of Six, wanted to promote campus awareness about racism and acts of racism on the Tufts campus. Although there was support within

# The Campus Response



by Jennifer Duong

the community, much of the conversations that came out of the incident were not favorable. Many did not understand the implications of the flier and why the reaction from the Asian American community was what it was. Instead of delving into the different reactions that took place across campus, I will relate my personal reactions and why I think the flier needed to be addressed.

The stereotypes described in the flier are nothing new. Even without a picture of the Asian American student on it, most of us would have been able to guess that the flier was portraying stereotypes of an Asian in the United States. To be instantly able to recognize a racial group based on a couple of sentences is a powerful testament to how deeply embedded stereotypes are in our society. For an individual from the Asian American community to be propagating these stereotypes as joke is an example of what we are up against. The narrative is so powerful that we have become to believe how others define us. We must ask ourselves, who creates these racial stereotypes? What purpose do these racial differences serve and for whom are they serving? The image of the stereotypical Asian is detrimental to not only the individual psyche, but to the collective community.

The dominant stereotype about Asian and Asian Americans

is that we are the “model minority.” The model minority stereotypes include Asians being smart, especially at science and math, work hard, are quiet, and never want any trouble. Now these stereotypes are problematic for several reasons. Take for example the idea that we, as a group, are all smart. For me, working hard at school and having the accomplishment of being a top student in my high school is diminished because that is what is “expected.” Since I was really the only Asian student in my class, fellow students and teachers perceived my good grades as the norm. No one acknowledged my hard work and effort. Of course, I would be smart, so why would it be a big deal? For Asian refugees living in America, this stereotype is extremely devastating because they are expected to be able to subside on their own. Many of my friends who were immigrants were not able to succeed in school because they were not given the support they needed. They were expected to learn fast and so they were not given extra English classes that other struggling students were given. Teachers believed that they did not need it. As a result, many Asians immigrants in my community in New Hampshire did not graduate. That is the devastating result when the dominant narrative tells you who and what you should

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# ABERCROMBIE & FITCH: PERPETUATING RACIST STEREOTYPES

by Kay Lowe



When I picture Abercrombie ads, I picture the “all-American”: fair-haired, blue-eyed jocks and girls. When I look through Abercrombie and Fitch catalogues or its website, I am hard pressed to find any Asian American faces. Walking into the store presents me with the same dilemma. Is Abercrombie sending a message that upholding an all-American image means upholding an all-white image?

Abercrombie not only appears to be trying to create a primarily white image in its catalogues and ads, but also in its stores. This September, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed a lawsuit against Abercrombie and Fitch on behalf of Samantha Elauf, a seventeen-year-old Muslim girl who claimed she was turned down for a job at an Oklahoma branch because she wore a hijab that violated the store’s “Look Policy”. This is not the first time that the company has been accused of a racially-biased hiring policy; Abercrombie has already faced multiple lawsuits. In 2004, Abercrombie paid 40 million dollars to settle a lawsuit filed by twelve Hispanics and Asian Americans

who had either been fired or turned down for a job at Abercrombie. They claimed Abercrombie not only hired a disproportionate number of Caucasian sales people, but also selected mostly Caucasians to work in the front of the store as opposed to in the stockroom. Anthony Ocampo, one of the college students who filed the lawsuit, told 60 Minutes in 2003, “The greeters and the people that worked in the in-season clothing, most, if not all of them, were white. The people that worked in the stock room, where nobody sees them, were mostly Asian American, Filipino, Mexican, Latino.”

One could argue that these students were declined a job or relegated to the stock room not because of their race, but simply because they did not live up to Abercrombie’s standards of beauty. White prospective employees who are unattractive are not hired either. After all, Abercrombie is a company looking to make a profit, and hiring attractive employees to encourage people to buy clothes is simply part of the business. But if this is the case, why are Abercrombie stores also not filled with beautiful employees of different races and ethnicities?

Abercrombie and Fitch is not the only company that portrays very few minorities in its ads. The ads of other major clothing brands, such as J. Crew and Banana Republic, are also dominated by Caucasian models. These ads are simply perpetuating the idea that being beautiful means being white. In order to move away from the logic that blonde hair and blue eyes is the definition of beauty, Abercrombie and other major clothing brands need to also start portraying minorities in their ads.

Abercrombie has also been found guilty of racism specifically targeting the Asian American community. In 2002, Abercrombie introduced t-shirts portraying caricatures with slanted eyes and hats worn by Chinese workers in the 20th century. One shirt displayed the slogan “Wong Brothers Laundry Service - Two Wongs can Make it White”. What Abercrombie did not seem to realize is that these t-shirts, though meant to be humorous, were perpetuating the stereotypes about Asian Americans that have existed for centuries. They also allowed people to laugh at images that were blatantly derogatory to Asian Americans. Right after the shirts were released, the Organization of Chinese Americans told the San Francisco Chronicle, “These racist images were meant to be a parody, and the Asian Pacific American community takes offense that a corporation would use common stereotypes for cheap laughs and profit”. Because of the outrage expressed by the Asian American community at the time, Abercrombie apologized for the t-shirts and pulled them from stores.

I am not saying this t-shirt incident or the previous racially-based lawsuits filed against Abercrombie necessarily show that the company is guilty of pigeonholing minority groups. However, the company definitely needs to start paying more attention to the corporate image that it portrays to its hordes of young customers. Abercrombie should work towards more racial diversity in its ads as well as in stores; and I hope that in the future it will be associated with more positive portrayals of Asian Americans and other minorities.

*Kay Lowe is a freshman who has not declared a major.*



be. I challenge you to understand why other stereotypes are serving to equally disadvantage the Asian and Asian American community.

Model minority types are not only detrimental because it denies the existence of Asian American poverty and inequality, but it also serves to create a racial hierarchy. If a certain group of color is the "ideal", than what does it say about other groups of color? What effect does this then have on racial group relations? Racial tension and resentment arising from these perceptions function to fracture the communities of color, diverting the attention from those who actually have the power in this country. The creation of racial hierarchies helps to maintain the system of power and privilege, to the disadvantage of all people of

color. So the next time someone tells you that it is a good thing that other people think you are smart, I hope you can stand up for the community of color and tell them differently.

Now, I think if a White individual had posted the flier, more people would say that it was racist, that it was targeting a specific group. Since the author of the flier was himself an Asian American, is this then okay? He is one of them right? If you are part of that group, is it okay to joke around in this manner? Because Asian American stereotypes are so embedded in our society, many of us, as Asian Americans, internalize that stereotype. We then take what dominant society believes us as being and believe it too. We let other people define

who we are for us, and we buy into these stereotypes. That is what is most devastating about internalized racism, allowing others to define who you are and accepting yourself by other people's standards. I know in this case the racism was unintentional and unaware, but I have a greater responsibility to my peers and to myself to address the issue because if we do not give voice our oppression, who will do it for us?

*Jennifer Duong is a senior majoring in Economics.*

## ah-Lin!

by Lillian Chan



05-02-09

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www.lillianchan.com

## Magnetic North

They are unarguably one of the most sought after and admired Asian American hip-hop duos on the East Coast, performing at college venues and Asian American concerts such as Kollaboration. Their lyrics are powerful and speak of the Asian American experience, and they deliver smoothly and passionately. Magnetic North is now on tour with the Asian Hip Hop Summit, sure to hit a city near you soon.



## Alfa Garcia

Alfa Garcia is a Filipino American musician, born in the Philippines and currently residing in New Jersey. She is the vocals, guitarist and pianist for her band. She has performed in major cities such as Boston, Philly, L.A., Seattle, St. Louis, Minneapolis and Toronto. Her music is described as “hydraulics for the heart.” Her first album, ‘Second Skin’ is now available on iTunes, Amazon and many other digital retailers.

## A Village Called Versailles

This documentary is about the Vietnamese American community in Versailles, New Orleans, the effect of Hurricane Katrina on this tight knit community, and their organized effort to close a landfill nearby. It documents a story that needs to be told in the landscape of race politics in the United States. It will be shown at Asian American film festivals around the country and aired on PBS in 2010.



## Children of Invention

This movie is about “two young children living outside Boston are left to fend for themselves when their mother gets embroiled in a pyramid scheme and disappears.” This independent film was an official selection for the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and has won 12 festival awards since. The Asian American Alliance will be holding a film screening on November 12.

*Information and images obtained from Magnetic North/Myspace, Alfa-Music, PBS/A Village Called a Versailles, Children of Invention*