

It is because of—what I am suggesting is—the insufficiency of a traditional African American studies—evidenced by the arrival onto the scene, in turn and over time, of black feminist critique, black diaspora studies (which addresses the transatlantic or global context of African American studies), and, more recently, black queer studies, which has insisted on bringing home issues of sexuality in an African American studies context—that Baldwin has only in more recent years come into a kind of critical vogue. Baldwin's early work like *Giovanni's Room* posed challenges, as I have already discussed, not only for literary studies, but for what would become black studies and queer studies. The specificity of the challenges posed are now being met by the specificity of the sensibility of black queer studies—located at the porous limits of both African American studies and of queer studies.<sup>16</sup> Baldwin's work not only reminds us again and again, but, indeed, insists on the constant rearticulation of the "complexity of racial identities."<sup>17</sup> He reminds us that whenever we are speaking of race, we are always already speaking about gender, sexuality, and class.

Dwight A. McBride  
Why I Hate Abercrombie  
and Fitch: Essays on  
Race and Sexuality.

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## 2 Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch

The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multinational corporations over the last fifteen years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980s: that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products. —Naomi Klein, *No Logo*

The company's [Abercrombie & Fitch's] success depends on the teenager's basic psychological yearning to belong. (Remember, the Columbine shootings happened at a school some reportedly called "Abercrombie High.") And that means more than just selling the right kinds of clothes. —Lauren Goldstein, "The Alpha Teenager"

Although [Bruce] Weber has drawn upon a style and even content pioneered by [George] Quaintance, he has not fulfilled the promise of the earlier artist. Weber has little compunction about appropriating a style of clearly gay male sensibility, marketing it, but making small but significant changes that deny and repress its historical conditions and antecedents.

This is not all that surprising, for Bear Pond is little more than Bruce Weber advertising, a new form of reactionary art. If the earlier Weber photos were used (explicitly) to sell Mr. Klein's briefs these later photos are peddling a new—post Ronald Reagan, Ed Meese, and Bowers v. Hardwick—version of (gay) male eroticism. . . . Unable to deny the existence of (gay) male sexuality Weber has de-sexualized it and reduced it to obscured indicators and marketed it as free sexual expression.

—Michael Bronski, "Blatant Male Pulchritude: The Art of George Quaintance and Bruce Weber's *Bear Pond*"

My interest—a polite way of labeling it perhaps—in Abercrombie & Fitch began quite a few years back. It was a rather ordinary weekend night much like countless others where friends and I were out having drinks at a bar (which bar is not important to the story, as will soon become apparent). For the first time, I noticed that easily one-third of the men in the bar were wearing some item of clothing or another that sported the label of “Abercrombie & Fitch,” “A&F,” or just plain “Abercrombie.” I asked one of my friends, “What is Abercrombie & Fitch?” And it was with that—at the time—rather innocent question that my intellectual and political sojourn with Abercrombie began. Once I saw it, I literally could not stop seeing it in any number of the gay spaces that I frequented. Whether I was at home in Chicago or traveling in New York City, Los Angeles, Houston, or Atlanta, in any mainstream gay venue there was sure to be a hefty showing of Abercrombie wear among the men frequenting these establishments. Even at the time of this writing (in the summer of 2003), the trend has only lessened slightly among white men in the U.S. urban gay male scene. Since this label has managed to capture the imagination (to say nothing of the wallets) of young, middle-to-upper-middle-class, white gay men (well at least mostly young—there are some men who are far beyond anything resembling Abercrombie’s purported target age demographic of eighteen through twenty-two wearing this stuff, and occasionally one does see gay men of color sporting the brand, though not many), I recognized this trend as a phenomenon about which it might be worth finding out more.

What is it about Abercrombie—especially with its particular practice of explicitly branding its products—that seems to have a lock on this particular population? What is it about the “brand” that they identify with so strongly? What kind of statement are the men sporting this brand in this sexually charged, gay marketplace of desire making to their would-be observers or potential . . . interlocutors? And why is it that the men of color in these same spaces have not taken to this brand with equal fervor? What about the men

of color who have? The central question, put somewhat more broadly, might be: what is it that Abercrombie is selling that gay white men seem so desperate to buy in legion?

Let me be extremely clear from the outset that my quarrel with Abercrombie is not of the Corrine Wood variety (she is a former lieutenant governor of Illinois), whose conservative diatribe against the “indecentry” of the company’s advertising could once be found at her state-sanctioned Web site. Nor is my beef with the company and its marketing strategy to be confused with that of the American Decency Association (ADA). Indeed, I hope never in my life to be associated with anything taking a principled stance on “decency.” Quite a lot of that already seems to be going on in the United States these days without much help from the likes of me. If anything, ours is a country that could stand to loosen its puritanical belt a bit and adopt more of a live-and-let-live policy when it comes to human pleasures. Dare I say that we need more of a public discussion about pleasure, a better way of talking without shame in the United States about it—where we seek it out, how it is a great common denominator, how we all (conservatives and liberals alike) want and need it? Such an open dialogue about pleasure might carry us far toward understanding some of the realities of our society, which are currently labeled “vices” and therefore banished from the realm of any “rational” discussion by “decent” people. Upon closer inspection, perhaps some of these so-called vices might be better understood as extensions of our humanity rather than deviations from some idealized form of it. Such a radical approach to conceiving of our humanity, our existence as sexual beings, might go far toward altering the circumstances of those recently much-discussed brothers on the “down low,” for example, who have been newly “discovered” in the pages of the *New York Times Magazine* and elsewhere. For I remain convinced that the primary solution to the conditions that lead people to participate in unsafe sexual practices, young gay teens to commit suicide, and cultures of violence to produce and even sanction gay bashings and the like, resides in a loosening of the stranglehold that a puritanical, uncompassionate, intolerant morality (too often masking itself as Christian) has on the

neck of our society. So let me set aside the concerns of readers who might lump this critique with those who have cast their lot with the decency police against Abercrombie. My concerns here, I am afraid, go far beyond anything quite so facile or pedestrian.

I begin first with a brief history of the company and the label of Abercrombie & Fitch itself. Second, I want to spend some time discussing the "A&F look," especially as it is exemplified in the *A&F Quarterly*—the sexy quarterly catalog/magazine that has been the source of much controversy among the decency police, the source of great interest among its young target audience and gay men, and the source of capital for serious collectors of the volumes, which sell in some cases for as much as seventy-five dollars on eBay. This last fact my research assistant and I discovered when we began to collect them for the purposes of this book. Third, I consider some aspects of the corporate culture of Abercrombie as it is represented by its stores, managers, and brand reps (as the clerks are called in Abercrombie-speak). This might help provide some insight into the current class action lawsuit that Abercrombie is facing (at the time of this writing) on discrimination charges in their hiring practices. And, finally, I hope to refer back to these points in my analysis of how "Abercrombie" functions as an idea, in order to justify the title claim of this essay in putting forth why it is I hate Abercrombie & Fitch.

The label "Abercrombie & Fitch" dates back to 1892, when David T. Abercrombie opened David T. Abercrombie & Co., a small shop and factory in downtown Manhattan. Abercrombie, born in Baltimore, was himself an engineer, prospector, and committed outdoorsman. His love for the great outdoors was his inspiration for founding Abercrombie & Co., dedicated to producing high-end gear for hunters, fishermen, campers, and explorers. Among his early clientele and devotees was Ezra Fitch, a lawyer who sought adventure hiking in the Adirondacks and fishing in the Catskills. He came to depend upon Abercrombie's goods to outfit him for his excursions. In 1900 Fitch approached Abercrombie about entering into a business partnership

with him. By 1904 the shop had relocated to 314 Broadway and was incorporated under the name "Abercrombie & Fitch."

The partnership was uneasy almost from its inception. Both men were headstrong and embraced very different ideas about the company's future. Abercrombie was content to continue to do what they were already doing well—outfitting professional outdoorsmen. Fitch, on the other hand, wanted to expand the business so that they could sell the idea of the outdoors and its delights to the general public. In retrospect, this might have been one of the very earliest cases of big business ideology winning out over small. The result of these feuds was that Abercrombie resigned from the company in 1907.

After his resignation, the company did follow Fitch's vision for its future and expanded into one of the largest purveyors of outdoor gear in the country. Abercrombie & Fitch was no ordinary retail store either. Fitch brought an IKEA-like innovation to the selling and displaying of his goods: stock was displayed as if in use; tents were set up and equipped as if they were in the great outdoors; and the sales staff was made up not of professional salesmen, but of outdoorsmen as well.

By 1913 Abercrombie & Fitch had expanded its inventory once again to include sport clothing. The company maintains that it was the first store in New York to supply such clothing to both women and men. In 1917 Abercrombie & Fitch changed locations once again, this time to a twelve-story building at Madison Avenue and Forty-fifth Street. By this point it had become the largest sporting goods store in the world. At this location, Fitch took the display tactics for which the company was by this time famous to an entirely new level, constructing a log cabin on the roof (which he used as a townhouse), an armored rifle range in the basement, and a golf school in the building. By this time the merchandise the store carried had expanded once again to include such exotic items as hot air balloons, portable trampolines, and yachting pennants, to name but a sampling.

Abercrombie's reputation was so well established by this point that it was known as the outfitter of the rich, famous, and powerful. Abercrombie

outfitted Teddy Roosevelt's trips to Africa and the Amazon as well as Robert Peary's famous trip to the North Pole. James Brady recently reminded us in *Advertising Age* that Hem and Wolfe (i.e., Ernest Hemingway and Winston Frederick Churchill Guest) also shopped there. In an article bearing the title "Abercrombie & Fitch Forgets Its Days of Hem and Wolfe," Brady recounts the "real man" glory days of Abercrombie & Fitch while bemoaning the A&F of our day, when the company takes out a double-truck ad in *Rolling Stone* featuring half-naked, boxer-wearing white boys on roller skates sporting backwards baseball caps. The masculine anxiety of that writer's article notwithstanding, he does refer us back to a relevant source in Lillian Ross's 1950 *New Yorker* profile of Hemingway, where one of Hem's shopping trips to Abercrombie is recounted. Other famous early A&F clientele included such notables as Amelia Earhart, Presidents William Howard Taft and John F. Kennedy, Katherine Hepburn, Greta Garbo, Clark Gable, and Cole Porter. And apparently during prohibition, A&F was also a place to buy hip flasks.

It is evident that even in its earliest incarnation, Abercrombie was closely allied with white men (and to a lesser extent white women) of means, the life of the leisure classes, and a Norman Rockwell-like image of life in the United States, for which they were famous even then. It is not surprising that the clothier we know today developed from a company with early roots in exploration, adventure, and cultural tourism, which catered to the white upper classes. The advertising from any of its early catalogs even adopts an innocent, idealistic Rockwellian aesthetic in many instances. It was not long after Abercrombie's resignation in 1907 that the company published its first catalog, which was more than 450 pages long. Some 50,000 copies were shipped to prospective customers around the world. So A&F's legacy of an unabashed consumer celebration of whiteness, and of an elite class of whiteness at that, in the face of a nation whose past and present are riddled with racist ideas, politics, and ideology, is not entirely new. Still, I believe the particular form it has taken in our time bears our careful consideration for the harm that it does to our ways of thinking about and imagining our current racial realities

in this country, as well as for the seemingly elusive difficulty it poses in our attempts to understand what about it makes many of us so uneasy.

In 1928 Fitch retired from the business. The company continued to grow and expand well into the 1960s, opening stores in the Midwest and on the West Coast. In the late 1960s, however, the store fell on economic hard times—likely due to the rapid changes in American values associated with that era—and filed for bankruptcy in 1977. The company was bought by Houston, Texas-based Oshman's Sporting Goods. The business continued to decline until Abercrombie was acquired by the Limited, Inc., in 1988. The Limited tried to position the brand as a men's clothing line and later added a preppy women's line under the label as well. These efforts, too, failed, until the Abercrombie makeover began to take shape in earnest under the hand of Michael Jeffries, the current CEO of Abercrombie & Fitch, in 1992. Jeffries was no stranger to the retail world before his arrival at Abercrombie. He had done a stint at then-bankrupt retailer Paul Harris, Inc., had a hand at running his own chain (Alcott & Andrews), and a long run at Federated Department Stores, Inc. After assuming his post with Abercrombie, Jeffries hired his own team of fashion designers. He tapped superstar fashion photographer Bruce Weber (widely known for his Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and Karl Lagerfeld ads) for the playful coed shots on the walls of Abercrombie stores. Weber would go on, of course, to become the photographer for the infamous *A&F Quarterly* as well. The *A&F Quarterly* was launched in 1997 to, as one commentator puts it, "glamorize the hedonistic collegiate lifestyle on which the company built its irreverent brand image." Even the words of the commentator here are extraordinary for how "collegiate" and "irreverent" are conflated in the image of Abercrombie. Indeed, it is testimony to part of A&F's genius that it successfully produced a false radicalism by hitching its label to a "collegiate" lifestyle that is inevitably and overwhelming white and upper middle class. Whatever the case, what we do know is that Abercrombie has been a financial success since 1994, only two years after Jeffries took over and reorganized the brand with his own variety of lifestyle marketing, to which they remain thoroughly committed. In 1998, the year following the

launching of the *A&F Quarterly*, Abercrombie spun off from the Limited to become once again an independent, publicly traded company.

Abercrombie & Fitch has devised a very clear marketing and advertising strategy that celebrates whiteness—a particularly privileged and leisure-class whiteness—and makes use of it as a “lifestyle” that it commodifies to sell otherwise extremely dull, uninspiring, and ordinary clothing. I am not, by the way, the first commentator to recognize this fact about the clothes themselves. The danger of such a marketing scheme is that it depends upon the racist thinking of its consumer population in order to thrive. Anyone familiar with the rise of the company and its label in recent years recognizes that it has done precisely that.

Abercrombie has worked hard to produce a brand strongly associated with a young, white, upper-class, leisure lifestyle. Nowhere is this more evident than in the *A&F Quarterly*. Since, however, I could not bring myself to ask for, only to be denied, permission to use photographs from those pages in this book, or to participate in a vicious cycle of perpetuating the lure of those images by repeating them here, I leave it to my reader to seek them out, as they relate to this analysis. They are readily available online and in any number of media venues. Instead, I would like to consider in some detail a document where the A&F look gets perhaps its clearest articulation: the *Abercrombie Look Book: Guidelines for Brand Representatives of Abercrombie & Fitch* (revised August 1996).

Affectionately known in the everyday corporate parlance of Abercrombie as the *Look Book*, this pocket-size (3.5 x 5.5-inch and approximately 30-page-long) book devotes equal time to images and text. The book contains twelve images—all photographs of model brand representatives, save one sketch (which we will come to later). Four of the eleven photos (including the cover) are group shots; the remaining ones feature individual models. Of the group shots, two include the one African American model (or even visible person of color) in these pages, while all of the rest of the photos are of male and female models who appear to be white. All of the models also appear to be

solidly within Abercrombie’s stated target age group of eighteen through twenty-two, and they all appear in the photographs smiling and often in various states of repose. The book divides neatly into five sections: an introductory section, which addresses the relationship between the brand representative and the A&F look; a section entitled “Our Past,” which gives a brief history of the company; a section called “Our Present”, followed by an “Our Future” section; and then finally the longest section (making up more than half the book) on “The A&F Look” (with subsections titled “Discipline,” “Personal Appearance,” and “Exceptions”). I provide such detail so that the reader will have an image of this book as an object, as well as a sense of its formal content.

The *Look Book* begins thus:

Exhibiting the “A&F Look” is a tremendously important part of the overall experience at the Abercrombie & Fitch Stores. We are selling an experience for our customer; an energized store environment creates an atmosphere that people want to experience again and again. The combination of our Brand Representatives’ style and our Stores Visual Presentation has brought brand recognition across the country.

Our people in the store are an inspiration to the customer. The customer sees the natural Abercrombie style and wants to be like the Brand Representative. . . .

Our Brand is natural, classic and current, with an emphasis on style. This is what a Brand Representative must be; this is what a Brand Representative must represent in order to fulfill the conditions of employment. [Emphases appear as they do in the *Look Book*.]

The book continues in much the same vein, touting the virtues of the ideal brand representative. In the approximately seventeen pages of text in the book, the word “natural,” for example, appears as a descriptor no fewer than fourteen times. In this regard, it is closely followed by its companion terms “American” and “classic” to account for what the book identifies alternately

as the "A&F look" and the "A&F style." Such words in the context not only of Abercrombie, but in the context of U.S. culture more broadly, are often understood for the coded ways of delineating the whiteness that they represent. Indeed, most of us carry in our imagination a very specific image that we readily access when such monikers as "natural, classic, American" are used. That image is not likely of the Native American, who has far more historic claim to such signifiers than those whom we have learned to associate with them. This fact, I think, speaks volumes about the incredible and abiding ideological feat that we encounter in the whiteness of the idea of "America" and of "the American."

Indeed, citizenship in the United States touches upon matters of social identity, including race and gender. While the dominant rhetoric of our national identity presents a color-blind, "united-we-stand," Horatio Alger narrative of upward mobility, in reality, citizenship is raced, gendered, and classed, and the original texts that define citizenship and national identity in the United States reflect this reality. UC Berkeley ethnic studies professor Evelyn Nakano Glenn touches upon one aspect of American ideological citizenship when she discusses the importance of whiteness, and autonomy in contrast with non-whiteness, subservience, and dependence:

Since the earliest days of the nation, the idea of whiteness has been closely tied to notions of independence and self-control necessary for republican government. This conception of whiteness developed in concert with the conquest and colonization of non-Western societies by Europeans. Imagining non-European "others" as dependent and lacking the capacity for self-governance helped rationalize the takeover of their lands, resources and labor (Glenn 18).

Glenn goes on to emphasize early in her essay that it is not just whiteness but masculine whiteness that "was being constructed in the discourse on citizenship." Colonization is a key aspect of this ideology of masculine whiteness, according to Glenn:

Imagining non-European "others" as dependent and lacking the capacity for self-governance helped rationalize the takeover of their lands, resources and labor. In North America, the extermination and forced removal of Indians and the enslavement of Blacks by European settlers therefore seemed justified. This formulation was transferred to other racialized groups, such as the Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos, who were brought to the U.S. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as low wage laborers. Often working under coercive conditions of indenture or contract labor, they were treated as "unfree labor" and denied the right to become naturalized citizens (18).

A commitment to masculine whiteness, with its emphasis on territoriality, exploitation of resources, and the perception of other non-whites as dependent and lacking in political and mental capacity, is part of the master narrative that formed an important foundation for our ideas of American citizenship. Indeed, we have come to a point in our history where any real variation on what we might mean when we say "American" or "America" is scarcely thinkable. The ideological work of equating American with whites and America with whiteness has been thoroughly achieved. Viewed in this way, Abercrombie's early beginnings as an outfitter of upper-class explorers, adventurers, and outdoorsmen may perhaps be more relevant to our understanding and appreciation of the label's appeal than we first imagined.

The *Look Book* is noteworthy for some of the contradictions it raises as well. For example, the A&F dress code delineates its commitment to whiteness even in terms of what it deems acceptable in the way of appearance. The investment here in whiteness is also an investment in class. Recall the earlier mention in the introduction to this book of the whiteness of capital. Consider the following guidelines:

- For men and women, a neatly combed, attractive, natural, classic hairstyle is acceptable.

- Any type of "fade" cut (more scalp is visible than hair) for men is unacceptable.
- Shaving of the head or any portion of the head or eyebrow for men or women is unacceptable.
- Dreadlocks are unacceptable for men and women.

It is also in this section of the *Look Book* that we are presented with the only sketch that appears in the book. It is a combination sketch of seven heads and faces, which carries the caption "Some Acceptable Hairstyles." Included in these drawings is an African American man with a neatly cut natural (a very short afro cut). There is also among these faces a man who appears much older than the A&F target age group. In fact, this is the only place in the book where an older person is ever pictured. Indeed, it would also be unusual to find older adults working as brand representatives in their stores or being featured as models in the *A&F Quarterly*.

What is interesting to note about the acceptable hairstyles is what is out and what is in. In the mid-90s, when this edition of the *Look Book* was published, the fade was a popular hairstyle for African American men. I confess, somewhat reluctantly, that I had one myself. Also, since shaved heads are excluded, this also would put a mounting segment (at the time) of African American men out of the running along with the odd white skinhead. Finally, dreadlocks, while considered by some to be among the most "natural" of hairstyles available to African Americans, are out. Indeed dreads, as they are often referred to, are even somewhat controversial within African American communities for their association with, among other things, Rastafarianism. So other than as a commitment to a white aesthetic, the exclusion of dreads (even in terms of A&F's own commitment to the "natural" look) seems curious.

On jewelry, the *Look Book* offers the following:

Jewelry must be simple and classic. A ring may be worn on any finger except the thumb. Gold chains are not acceptable for men. Women may

wear a thin, short delicate silver necklace. Ankle bracelets are unacceptable. Dressy (e.g., gold-banded or diamond) watches are also unacceptable; watches should be understated and cool (e.g., leather straps or stainless steel). No more than two earrings in each ear can be worn at a time for women. Only one in one ear for men. Earrings should be no larger than a dime, and large dangling or large hoop earrings are unacceptable. . . . No other pierced jewelry is appropriate (e.g., nose rings, pierced lips, etc.)

Thumb rings signify alternative lifestyles at best and queer at worst. No gold chains for men? Who has been overidentified or even stereotyped with these in the popular imagination more than black men—from Mr. T to any number of rap artists, and "ballers" more generally? In either case, the signifier "gold chain" demarcates potential employees of A&F in coded ways along race and class lines. A similar case can be made with regard to the reference to "large dangling or large hoop earrings." Here, too, Abercrombie codes for race and class without actually having to name it.

Still, of all of the dress code rules, the most amusing one to me has to be the following: "Brand Representatives are required to wear appropriate undergarments at all times." Is Abercrombie afraid that their brand representatives might actually be sexualized? The image of male genitalia flopping about in cargo shorts or, alternatively, of an 18–22-year-old version of the now infamous Sharon Stone leg-crossing scene in the film *Basic Instinct* (1992) comes to mind. Call me crazy, but there is just something about a company that flies in the face of such propriety in the pages of the *A&F Quarterly*—wherein no one seems to wear underwear or much else for that matter—being concerned about the appropriateness of the undergarments of its employees that strikes me as the height of hilarity and hypocrisy.

If the frequent use of such coded monikers in the *Look Book* were not enough to convince us that the A&F look is styled on a celebration of racial and cultural whiteness, consider that the *A&F Quarterly* is chock full

of images of young white men and women (mostly men) with very little in the way of representation of people of color. Consider that criticism of Abercrombie's chosen photographer, Bruce Weber, draws him as (in)famous for his unabashed celebration of the white male nude. Recall the release by A&F in April 2003 of that inflammatory line of "Asian" themed T-shirts, which were hotly protested by the Asian American community among others. One of the shirts featured two stereotypical Chinese men drawn with exaggeratedly slanted eyes, donning pointed hats, and holding a banner between them that read: "Two Wongs Can Make It White." A spokesperson for A&F, when asked to respond to the controversy raised by the T-shirts, said, "We thought it would add humor." The line was pulled by the company soon after they were released. Consider also the variety of social engineering that goes into producing a virtually all-white sales staff in A&F stores. As one former assistant manager of one of Abercrombie's larger stores in the Midwest informed me, all the brand reps in his store were white, and all of the people who worked in the stockroom were black. Stockroom employees (in the larger stores where they employ such staff separately from brand reps) are less visible and are often assigned to work overnight shifts restocking the store.

Many people have asked me while I was working on this project—no doubt many will continue to do so—what's the big deal? Why pick on Abercrombie? They are doing no more or no less than Ralph Lauren or Banana Republic. I have said to those people and continue to say that such a simple equation is not only untrue, but denies the specificity of the particular brand of evil that Abercrombie is involved in capitalizing on. Ralph Lauren does, to be sure, commodify a particular upper-class American lifestyle. Banana Republic has a history of a similar marketing scheme. However, A&F successfully crystallizes a racism that is only rumbling beneath the surface of other stores' advertising. Also, Ralph Lauren attempts to market and sell that lifestyle to everyone equally. That is, the underlying ethos of Ralph Lauren is not unlike the ideology of the American dream itself: you, too, can have this if you work for it.

Ralph Lauren "diversified" its ad campaigns in the 1990s. To demonstrate that fact, among other things, Ralph Lauren in 1993 took on Tyson Beckford, a black model of Jamaican and Chinese parentage, to represent its Polo Sport line exclusively. True, this diversity was of the variety of CNN diversity: news is read by white and Asian reporters, while black reporters do sports and entertainment and occasionally "substitute" for white news reporters. In the same vein, Beckford was engaged to model for Ralph Lauren's "sport" line and not its "blue label" (i.e., blue blood) line of suits, formal wear, and elegant apparel. Still, Beckford's own rags-to-riches story made for good press for a company clearly working its own variety of the diversity angle, which was a popular marketing strategy among hip retailers in the 1990s. Beckford represents perhaps the most notable example of this. He grew up in Jamaica and in Rochester, New York. As a youth he was involved in gangs, drugs, and was on his way down the road toward a life of crime, when an editor of the hip-hop magazine the *Source* discovered him. Not long thereafter, it would be Bruce Weber who would introduce Beckford to Ralph Lauren—whose signing of Beckford sent his modeling career into the stratosphere. Beckford himself has recognized that he would likely be dead or in jail had he not been taken up by that editor from the *Source*. There has been speculation about the veracity of Beckford's narrative of class ascension. Regardless, its construction generated good press for Ralph Lauren.

I should note, too, that neither Banana Republic nor Ralph Lauren participate in the kind of social engineering in terms of their store employees that A&F does. The employees of Banana Republic represent diverse racial backgrounds, while the sales associates at Ralph Lauren tend to represent an older model of the suit-wearing salesman in an upscale shop. The latter, in addition to the Polo stores, also sells its line in fine department stores, where they have no direct control over choosing sales associates to represent the line. An added bit of anecdotal information with regard to Banana Republic also comes in the form of the person of Eduardo Gonzalez—one of the named litigants in the pending class action employment discrimination lawsuit against A&F. The class action complaint notes that Gonzalez, who was not

hired as a brand representative at Abercrombie, was offered a job at Banana Republic:

Indeed, immediately following his Abercrombie interview, he crossed the hall within the same mall to apply for a job at Banana Republic, a similar retail clothing store that competes directly with Abercrombie for customers and employees. An employee of Banana Republic asked Mr. Gonzalez if he was interested in applying to work as a manager. He applied to work as a sales associate, and is still employed by Banana Republic in that capacity.

If, as I suggest in chapter 6, images tend more often to follow and demonstrate where we are as a society rather than play the role of leading us to new places, then the particular brand of a socially engineered whitewashed world being advertised, branded, and sold to U.S. consumers by Abercrombie should give us pause. Movie lovers may recall the song "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" from the film version of *Cabaret*. The song begins, like the lyrics, in a pastoral mode. The camera is tight on the face of the beautiful, young, blond, boy soprano. The scene is comforting, indeed beautiful. With each successive verse, however, the camera begins to pull back and to show more and more and more of the boy's body . . . donning a Hitler-youth uniform. His face becomes increasingly emphatic and angry. By the time we get to the fourth verse of the tune, the others in the crowd have joined in the song with a seriousness of purpose that can only be described as frightening:

*The sun on the meadow is summery warm*

*The stag in the forest runs free*

*But gathered together to greet the storm*

*Tomorrow belongs to me*

*The branch on the linden is leafy and green*

*The Rhine gives its gold to the sea*

*But somewhere a glory awaits unseen  
Tomorrow belongs to me*

*The babe in his cradle is closing his eyes  
The blossom embraces the bee  
But soon says the whisper, arise, arise  
Tomorrow belongs to me*

*Now Fatherland, Fatherland, show us the sign  
Your children have waited to see  
The morning will come  
When the world is mine  
Tomorrow belongs to me  
Tomorrow belongs to me  
Tomorrow belongs to me*

The number concludes with the final verse above being repeated twice more in a chilling, thunderous unity, as the crowd of townspeople gathered at the picnic joins in.

Some may call a comparison such as the one I am drawing here hyperbole. Others might say that I am overstating Abercrombie's case and undervaluing the realities of the Holocaust. Neither is my intention. I do, however, believe fervently in what Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* once called "the banality of evil." I am convinced that a version of it is what is at work in the politics of race in U.S. society today, and that Abercrombie's marketing and branding practices represent only a symptom of that larger concern. Indeed, according to Edward Herman, "Arendt's thesis [in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*] was that people who carry out unspeakable crimes, like Eichmann, a top administrator in the machinery of the Nazi death camps, may not be crazy fanatics at all, but rather ordinary individuals who simply accept the premises of their state and participate in any ongoing enterprise with the energy of good bureaucrats." In the words of another philosopher-commentator on

the “banality of evil”: “Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality.” This statement well describes the corporate culture of Abercrombie and the quasi-cultish devotion they seem to inspire.

There are those, no doubt, reading these pages who will find that it takes far too much of a liberal leap of faith to appreciate the argument I pose here against Abercrombie & Fitch. There are those who will not grasp, or who will feign confusion about grasping, the coded nature of the whiteness that A&F so clearly employs. It is for those readers that I include the more practical, everyday, anecdotal evidence that follows. The purview of such hard-boiled evidence (that which is usually associated with the “simple truth,” a term whose discussion began this book) can usually be found in the area of the law.

As a system, the law deals in bodies, experience (rendered through testimony), and reveals in the making of distinctions. The law is no place for nuances, ambiguities, subtleties, and, even at times, the vagaries so often associated with theoretical, academic discussion—and with the humanities in general. The law represents yet another realm in which the “simple truth” carries the day. Indeed, before the law, human complexity, the complexity of identities, the complexities of sexuality and desire, the complexities of social and economic circumstances, the complexities of institutional and corporate cultures and the unspoken codes by which they operate, the complexities of deep-seated racism, sexism, heterosexism, elitism, and so much more, all become flattened, cognizable, weighable, and therefore able to be adjudicated. I suppose this is why my sentiments about the law have always been conflicted. On the one hand, I have long admired the law’s simplicity and the definitive clarity with which it makes claims and decides cases; on the other, I have bemoaned the law’s inability to address concerns of specificity, to deal compassionately with human frailty, and to account in its judgment for the ambiguity and complexity of circumstances. Like most systems, the law is, of course, not simple. Its ways have evolved through crooks and turns—and

not always ones that we would associate with justice and the good—that have brought it to this place in its history and development. It did not spring fully formed and perfect as if from the head of Zeus. As such, the law has evolved its own biases for what constitutes evidence, how evidence can and should be presented, what cases can come before the law, and how precedent drives the law’s machinery. So even though I personally do not hold the truth of the law above other ways of creating and recognizing truth, I present the following here because I know that among the readers of this book will be those who do.

On June 17, 2003, a class action lawsuit was filed against Abercrombie & Fitch in the United States District Court of San Francisco, California, alleging discrimination in its hiring practices. Specifically, the complaint alleges that A&F discriminates against people of color, including Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans, in the hiring, job assignment, compensation, termination, and other terms and conditions of employment. There are nine named litigants in the complaint who filed on behalf of the class they represent: Eduardo Gonzalez, Anthony Ocampo, Encarnacion Gutierrez, Johan Montoya, Juan Carlos Gomez-Montealano, Jennifer Lu, Austin Chu, Ivy Nguyen, and Angelina Wu. These litigants are represented by counsel from the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund; the Asian Pacific American Legal Center; the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund; and the law firm of Lief, Cabraser, Helmann & Bernstein. In August 2003 I had the privilege of meeting Anthony Ocampo, one of the named litigants in the lawsuit, over dinner in Chicago. Though I am not at liberty to discuss the particulars related to our dinner conversation that evening about the pending case, I do want to say what an impressive, brave, and astute—even if a bit shy—Young man Ocampo is. With that, let me share some thoughts about the complaint itself (as a matter of public record), which I think further illuminates much of what I have been presenting up to this point about Abercrombie & Fitch.

What follows first are some representative points from the “Introductory Statement” portion of the complaint:

- Defendant Abercrombie & Fitch . . . is a national retail clothing seller that discriminates against minority individuals, including Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans . . . on the basis of race, color, and/or national origin, with respect to hiring, firing, job assignment, compensation and other terms and conditions of employment by enforcing a nationwide corporate policy of preferring white employees for sales positions, desirable job assignments, and favorable work scheduled in its stores throughout the United States.
- Abercrombie implements its discriminatory employment policies and practices in part through a detailed and rigorous "Appearance Policy," which requires that all Brand Representatives must exhibit the "A&F Look." The "A&F Look" is a virtually all-white image that Abercrombie uses not only to market its clothing, but also to implement its discriminatory employment policies and practices.
- When people who do not fit the "A&F Look" inquire about employment, managers sometimes tell them that the store is not hiring, or may provide them with applications even though they have no intention of considering them for employment. If applicants who do not fit the "A&F Look" submit applications, managers and/or Brand Representatives acting at their direction sometimes throw them away without reviewing them.
- Abercrombie publishes and distributes to its employees a "Look Book" that explains the importance of the Appearance Policy and the "A&F Look," and that closely regulates the Brand Representatives' appearance. The Company requires its managers to hire and continue to employ only Brand Representatives who fit within the narrow confines of the "Look Book," resulting in a disproportionately white Brand Representative workforce.
- . . . Each store prominently posts large photographs of models—virtually all of whom are white. In addition, the Company publishes and sells *A&F Quarterly*, a magazine/catalog featuring almost exclusively white models . . .
- The Company rigorously maintains the "A&F Look" by careful scrutiny and monitoring of its stores by regional and district managers and corporate representatives. These managers and corporate representatives visit stores frequently to ensure, among other things, that the store is properly implementing the Company's discriminatory employment policies and practices. These visits are referred to as "blitzes." When managers or corporate representatives discover that minority Brand Representatives have been hired, they have directed that these Brand Representatives be fired, moved to the stock room or overnight shift, or have their hours "zeroed out," which is the equivalent of termination.
- The Company also scrutinizes and enforces compliance with the "A&F Look" by requiring all stores to submit a picture of roughly 10 of their Brand Representatives who "fit the 'Look' to headquarters each quarter. The corporate officials then select roughly 15 stores' pictures as exemplary models that perpetuate the Company's discriminatory employment practices. They then disseminate these pictures to the over 600 A&F stores. The Brand Representatives in the pictures are almost invariably white. This practice and policy, like the others described above, constitutes an official directive to give preference to white Brand Representatives and applicants, and to discriminate against minority Brand Representatives and applicants.
- The A&F image is not limited to appearance; the Company accomplishes its discriminatory employment policies or practices by defining its desired "classic" and "cool" workforce as exclusively white . . . Abercrombie also encourages the recruitment and hiring of members of specified overwhelmingly white intercollegiate sports. However, the Company does not encourage recruitment from fraternities, sororities, or sports teams with significant minority populations.

It will surely come as no surprise that my sympathies where Abercrombie concerned are very much in line with those of this lawsuit. When I first

started thinking about this work more than two years ago now, the more I discovered about the company and its marketing and employment practices, the more surprised I was that a suit had not been brought against them sooner. Such naiveté on my part underestimated the resourcefulness of A&F's ingenuity and, indeed, the ingenuity of racist discourse in our time to mask itself in the form of coded language. Some of this language I have been discussing, and some is attested to in the excerpts from the legal complaint that I have presented. The creation of an "A&F Look," which almost invariably functions to produce an exclusively white staff of brand representatives in Abercrombie's stores, might be understood as an elaborately devised method by the company of forestalling the potential legal exposure of such an exclusionary employment policy. The formal workings of what we might call the "corporate culture" of A&F provide the infrastructure for maintaining and reproducing the discriminatory, virtually all-white A&F look.

The A&F former store managers, former assistant managers, and former and current brand representatives with whom I have spoken over the course of this project all tell eerily similar stories. All of the personnel with whom I had occasion to speak have been white men. They ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-six and were either in college or were college educated. Some were gay, some straight. All of them, almost without exception, expressed how they enjoyed working at the company when they first started there. They also expressed their discomfort with some of the "unspoken" rules of the company, which they cited as their reason for ultimately leaving the employment of A&F. The allure of the experience seemed to hold sway over these men even after they had left the company. The men with whom I conducted formal interviews all cited fond memories from the experience, even as they all were convinced that something about it never felt quite right to them.

Chance (not his actual name), a straight white man in his early twenties, spoke with me about his experience at one of the larger stores on the West Coast, where he was a brand representative. He would later move on to manage a store on the East Coast. On the matter of employment practices he said, "The hiring policy is insane." He went on to suggest that it was the common

practice of the general manager (GM) at the store—who Chance describes as "Abercrombied out"—to say that he was not in the business of hiring "ugly people." Informal games between the men in the stores were encouraged by management, in which they would have contests to see who could get the most "hot high school girls" [phone] numbers." Chance related to me that on the day when the store picture that would be sent to A&F headquarters was to be taken, Leo (not his real name), "the only black guy in the store," was asked by the GM to "watch the front" while they were taking the picture.

David (not his real name), a white gay man in his early twenties, spoke with me about his experience at a smaller store in the Northeast, where he worked during his college years. He would go on to become a manager in training (MIT) and an assistant manager (AM) at a large store in another region of the country. David told me about the corporate practice of tying a "target school" (college or university) to all the stores. One of the things he started to notice when he became an MIT and later an AM was that the brand representatives in his store were almost exclusively white and that "everybody who worked in the stockroom was black." He tells the story of the one African American male employee that he had in his store when he became an AM. He said he was a good employee with a really positive attitude, but the district manager (DM) wanted us (David and the store manager) to get rid of him because he "did not fit the look." "He's not Abercrombie," the DM said to David and the store manager. The DM went on to say to them that "this person cannot be on the schedule anymore." David said that "not having the look" is reason enough to be fired or not hired in the first place. "Race as an issue is implied," David told me. He always understood that to be the case, even though it was unspoken. When I asked him what happened to the guy, David replied, rather matter-of-factly, that he was essentially fired by the manager. The process began with the employee first being "zeroed out" in terms of the hours he was scheduled to work; eventually he was fired. David said that this was a common practice. Instead of actually terminating people, you just stop scheduling them (or "zero them out") until they inevitably get the picture. I asked David why he left the company. He said that he got tired

of the antagonistic relationships that sometimes exist between DMs and store-level management, where he was always hearing: "you can't schedule him . . ." or (in fits of frustration or anger) "your staff is ugly." "I got sick of judging people like that," he said. "I'm going to be a teacher . . . It's just not right." He told me that before leaving his job at A&F, he once expressed his discomfort with some of these company practices to his GM (a white woman). According to David, her reply was: "You'll eventually get over it. You'll learn to let go of your feelings and get over it." David said he still could not believe that a store manager told him that. It was then that he knew his days with the company were numbered.

Randy is a white gay man in his early twenties as well. He started out as a brand representative at a store in the South while he was in college. Later he became an AM in another region of the country. He shared with me some of his observations in those positions. He spoke with alarming candor. At first there appeared to me to be a manner of innocence about his way of reporting this information that seemed almost unconscious of the profound implications of his statements. The more I spoke with him, however, the more I came to see that this was in part his affect and was not a statement on his level of recognition of the gravity of what he was relating.

When Randy began with the company, he had not yet come out as a gay man. The store where he started working had an all-white staff. He recalls that the managers were "really cool," a fact he came to appreciate later when he would learn that this was not the case with most GMs and DMs in the company. He reports that, in the stores, employees were encouraged to "look Abercrombie" and to "speak Abercrombie or Crombie." When they recruited new brand reps, which they all were involved in doing, Randy said that they were very clear on what they were looking for: "all-American," in "good shape," "no facial or skin problems," "clean shaven," "not a lot of makeup for girls . . . natural," "fraternity or football player-looking guys." He went on to say that it used to be "a big deal to look for white people." He added that African Americans and Asian Americans "can be A&F if they act white, have white friends, and are very assimilated." Randy reports feeling pressure

to hire people who looked A&F. Employees who recruited the wrong sort knew they would run the risk of reprisal from the GM or the DM. I asked him what happened to people who were "not Abercrombie" who came in to apply for jobs. He said they were never called. He reports one case that occurred when he was an AM in which a qualified fifty-year-old woman applied for a GM position. Her application was never given to the DM because the DM "would be pissed off at us for wasting his time." He reported another case of an MIT he worked with once who "wasn't very attractive." The regional manager (RM) informed the DM that she needed to go. Randy said that while she wasn't great at her job, had she been "nice-looking she would still have gotten promoted." He cited the case of another girl who had been an A&F model who came to work in the same store. She was, according to Randy, "horrible at her job and still got promoted." She was even eventually sent to the home office.

It was Randy who first informed me about the practice of grading at A&F. The DM would review the work schedules, every name on the schedules had to have a grade (A through F) next to it, which reflected how "good-looking" the employee was. When upper management (especially Michael Jeffries or David Lieno, directors of stores) would come to town for a "blitz" (a word whose associations with Nazi Germany one cannot help noticing), people who were not A's were asked to leave the store. A preponderance of B's or worse in a schedule could be grounds for dismissal of a GM. Brand representatives were never informed of the grade they had been assigned and remained, in most cases, unfamiliar with the practice, according to Randy. When I asked him why he left the company, he said he left "because they were bad to me." He added that they treat management horribly and don't compensate them well, paying them halftime for overtime worked, with base salaries for AMs in the mid-twenty-thousand-dollar range. Even so, they want you to "look like you have money . . . come from a good family."

Ultimately, I suppose my reasons for hating Abercrombie & Fitch are not so different from the reasons that I have no truck with gay Republicans. It is not

surprising when one observes that the attitudes of those sporting Abercrombie often seem to have a great deal in common with political conservatives as well. In both cases, you have a group of mostly whites (many of them social and economic climbers themselves—less often are they those who were actually born with money), who are desperate to belong to a fraternity that guarantees all the benefits and liberties of white privilege. Recall the earlier discussion in the introduction to this book about vacationing and “getting away from it all.” In the case of gay Republicans, we are often dealing with a group of people who understand themselves—but for this critical difference that their sexuality makes—as in line to be the beneficiaries of their white birthright in the United States: to be and receive the mantle of whiteness and all the privileges it entails. Were it not but for their sexuality, they too could enjoy the same kind of mobility, belonging, non-discrimination, social respect and respectability, wider economic entrepreneurial opportunity, and, indeed, the right to discriminate against all those others who do not belong. After all, to borrow a well-known slogan from a surprisingly appropriate context, “membership has its privileges.” This is seen most readily in the fiscal conservatism of many gay Republicans, who are typically not supporters of affirmative action, welfare, or any other variety of social programs designed to support the poor and people of color in the United States. And when one looks at the disproportionate numbers of blacks and Latinos who make up the poor in the United States, the poor and people of color are populations that in public discussion don’t always require a great deal of delineation.

In my critique of white gay Republicans, I do not mean to suggest that the distinctions between them and white gay liberals are so vast as to avoid mentioning this latter group here as well. Indeed, when it comes to addressing questions about who has access to be able to make the rational choice of a mate in the gay marketplace of desire, the similarities between the two become much clearer, as I will discuss in the next chapter. But even at the philosophical and political levels, Republicanism and liberalism have far more in common than might at first meet the eye. In this regard, gay liberalism and gay Republicanism are no exception. Consider the recent June 2003 Supreme

Court ruling in the Texas sodomy case. What many in the LGBT community have embraced as a radical step forward by a conservative court really represents a new challenge in the struggle for queer liberation. The decision of the High Court effectively protected gay sexuality by privatizing it. After all, the majority opinion is based on arguments centering on privacy rights. The effect of this move is that civil expressions of gayness may at the very least be in for some hard political times ahead, and at the very worst become effectively outlawed. For privatizing gayness does not necessarily pave the way to gay “marriage” or civil unions, open expression of one’s sexual identity in the military, or any number of other radical potentials with which the court’s decision is presently being endowed. The extent to which the decision has a “liberal” look to it, while simultaneously retaining the potential for stultifying conservative Republican ramifications, is the extent to which gay liberalism and gay Republicanism may not be so different from one another in terms of their radical potentialities.

Still, just as much as gay Republicans are desperate to belong to a tribe of privilege and cultural and social dominance, so are those who are a part of the cult of Abercrombie. The cultish ideology that drives the engine of Abercrombie is not unlike the ideology that led Disney’s Little Mermaid, Ariel, after falling in love with the beautiful white prince, to give up her birth identity (even as a princess of the Mer-people) in exchange for her legs (and more importantly her vagina, not to put too fine a point on the matter), so that she can, in the words of her principle number in the movie-musical, be “part of that world” (the world of people). Abercrombie, through its strategy of marketing “the good white life” in what is already a deeply racist society, has convinced a U.S. public—whites (some young and some not so young), some people of color, and gay men—that if we buy their label, we are really buying membership into a privileged fraternity that has eluded us all for so long, even if for such vastly different reasons. In order for such a marketing strategy to work, in all of the diverse ways that this one clearly does, the consumer must necessarily bring to his or her understanding of A&F, and what association with the brand offers him or her, a fundamentally racist belief

that this lifestyle—this young, white, natural, all-American, upper-class lifestyle—being offered by the label is what we all either are, aspire to be, or are hopelessly alienated from ever being. Only when such a perspective as this is brought to the consumer's viewing of the *A&F Quarterly*, to the stores and the special brand of social engineering that takes place by the company to make them "good looking" (and by definition white), and to the very dull and uninspiring clothes themselves (absent the label), does any of this literally cohere or "make sense." The very sense-making, the deciphering of the codes that allow one to appreciate what it is that "Abercrombie" stands for and means in our culture, can only be accomplished when we bring a variety of racist thinking to the experience.

Either way, when you evolve a way to commodify and market the fundamental tenets of racist thinking that have held sway in the United States from the earliest moments of its inception as a republic (a feat Abercrombie seems successfully to have achieved), this example shows us that you can attach the label (whatever it may be) to even the most uninspiring products (in this case clothes), and they will sell in legion. Surely we know that people are not buying "Abercrombie" for the clothes. The catalog itself isn't even about featuring those, after all. People buy "Abercrombie" to purchase membership into a lifestyle. Lisa Marsh, the fashion business writer for the *New York Post*, said that Abercrombie's "aggressive lifestyle marketing makes you feel like you're buying a polo shirt and getting the horse and summer house on Martha's Vineyard with it."

Were that the extent of what they were selling, I might have less of a problem with Abercrombie. But to brazenly evolve a way of playing on consumers' worst racially based fears and inadequacies born of a racist structure that defines everything from standards of beauty to access to having the house on Martha's Vineyard, goes beyond mere "lifestyle marketing." In my judgment, that crosses the line into a kind of racism whose desire—played out to its logical conclusion—is not unlike a variety of ethnic cleansing. Its desire to produce and play on the consumer's desire for a white, "good-looking" world where one can "get away from it all," and to sell that idea as

the "good life" in the context of a racist society, only redeploys and reinscribes the fundamental logic of white supremacy which, at bottom, makes such a marketing strategy possible and even appealing in the first place. This says a great deal, perhaps, about the status of "race relations" in the United States. It says even more about the deep and abiding contradictions that can be accommodated in our public thinking about race today that would scarcely have been possible to imagine even in the late 1960s or 1970s. Another falling of the radicality of liberalism? Perhaps. In any case, the same reasoning that makes Abercrombie palatable to a U.S. public, is the same reasoning that makes claims of "reverse discrimination" palatable and possible in our society. And that, in the end, is why I hate Abercrombie and Fitch.