# Talking Back to Nike

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*Now, it is true that the nature of society is to create, among its citizens, an illusion of safety; but it is also absolutely true that the safety is always necessarily an illusion.* Artists are here to disturb the peace. (emphasis added)

James Baldwin

## Introduction

In a 1961 interview with Studs Terkel, James Baldwin described art as a kind of rebellion against the "illusion of safety," words that connect well to the concept of "culture jamming," a form of contemporary media activism that undermines the dream world of advertising. Defined by Mark Dery as "media hacking, information warfare, terrorart, and guerrilla semiotics, all in one," culture jamming subverts the messages of mainstream cultural institutions such as multinational corporations by "mimicking" the branding methods of highly budgeted advertising campaigns. In his book, *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge – and Why We Must*, media activist Kalle Lasn writes, "A well produced print 'subvertisement' mimics the look and feel of the target ad, prompting the classic double take as viewers realize what they're seeing is the very opposite of what they expected" (131).

Lasn's anti-consumerist magazine, *Adbusters*, one of the best known culture jamming entities, appropriated sophisticated Photoshop techniques to produce the famous alteration of the iconic Calvin Klein "Obsession" perfume advertisement. Redirecting the message to draw attention to the fashion industry's promotion of excessive thinness, the *Adbusters* "Obsession Women" subvert shows the emaciated back of a bulimic woman hunched over a toilet bowl ("Spoof Ads: Fashion"). Another subvert strikingly critiques the sweatshop practices of globalized labor by depicting a sleek black sneaker over which is scrawled "NIKE $250/ SWEATSHOP 83¢" ("Stop NIKE").

Drawing visual attention to conditions of income inequality, environmental destruction, and overconsumption, *Adbusters* spurs critical

reflection upon global capitalism and its effects. As a form of guerrilla art, culture jamming can sometimes be playful; yet its intention is to identify unsustainable and inequitable economic practices. In my teaching of sociology, I draw on a definition of sustainability which, emphasizing inter- and intragenerational equity in the social as well as environmental spheres, stresses the interconnectedness of ecological and human concerns (Meadows et al.; Meadows, Meadows, and Randers). Within sociology, the concept of sustainability is integral to critical perspectives that link capitalism to increasing global inequality and an impending ecological crisis (Harvey; Hardt, and Negri). As Molotch argues, in order to remain competitive, large companies have embraced a "make nothing, control everything" agenda, outsourcing production to developing countries where labor and environmental protections are minimal and abuses common. In my introductory sociology course, we examine how companies manage their identities and production methods in order to mask unsustainable production practices; we look in particular at Indonesian and Indian sweatshops[1] that produce goods for Nike and the Gap. We also reflect on gendered interaction with the market, reflecting on the role of consumerism in consigning women to subordinate roles and in distracting us from questioning the human and ecological cost of the goods we consume.

Culture jamming's visual provocations lend relevance and immediacy to abstract concepts, overlapping neatly with a variety of disciplinary themes. One of my broad goals as a teacher of sociology is to develop in my students an understanding of themselves as social actors capable of change, disturbers of the peace who can use their knowledge of sociology to analyze and question contexts of power and culture. While planning my classes in the summer of 2009, I began to consider culture jamming as a method of stimulating classroom engagement, one that would encourage an active grasp of basic sociological concepts such as exploited labor, profit incentive, and gender socialization. Targeting immediately recognizable brands and symbols to hack, culture jamming could also prompt students to articulate the values and ethical decisions underlying the popular products they consume. Culture jamming presented itself as a way to "talk back" to a proliferation of advertising images; by creating their own altered images, students could step out of positions of culture *consumers* to become culture *producers*. In what follows, I describe the process of integrating culture jamming

into sociology course content. Referring to examples of student work, I critically evaluate its pedagogical effectiveness in aiding the application of sociology concepts to contemporary culture and personal life.

**The Cluster and the Course**

Part of a first-year Liberal Arts cluster entitled "Sex Wars: Sexuality, Power, and Culture in a Global Context," my Fall 2009 Introduction to Sociology course (SSS100) was offered to students in conjunction with two English courses, taught by a single English instructor – English Composition I (ENG101) and The Research Paper (ENG103) – and a history course on The Politics of Sexuality (SSN210). In keeping with the structure of most learning communities, the content of the courses was thematically linked. As is also typical of most learning communities, the three collaborating faculty members approached readings and other materials from our distinct disciplinary constructs. For example, I designed my syllabus to address the sociological concept of capitalist exploitation as articulated by Marx, examining particular instances of sweatshop labor and female gender socialization. My class explored the former in terms of such realities as the hired gangsters who harass factory workers when they try to organize, and the latter in relation to women's roles as underpaid producers and insecure consumers. My selection of course materials included readings in classic and contemporary primary texts and recent newspaper articles, several short films, and fact sheets based on materials from textbooks.

During the segment on sweatshops, students compared Marx's description in *Capital* of the prevalence of child labor and deplorable working conditions in Victorian factories to "Behind the Swoosh" (Keady), a contemporary documentary film investigation of Nike's Indonesian factories. The goal was to convey to students the idea that labor exploitation is a continuous, rather than an historical, feature of capitalism. The film highlights the company's illegal practices of dumping and burning waste rubber and plastic near the residential areas where children play, the low wages that require workers to put in significant amounts of overtime in order to subsist, and the sometimes brutal intimidation of workers who try to form unions. Students also discussed articles about the Gap's continued use of child labor: one article exposes a Gap subcontractor in New Delhi where "slave" children work 16- to 20-hour shifts embroidering clothes in an unventilated

and polluted backstreet factory (McDougall, "Child Sweatshop") and others demonstrate how such exposure helps ameliorate shameful conditions (McDougall, "Gap Plans"; Lawrence). In class, we compared the contemporary readings and documentary footage with Marx's vivid description of nineteenth-century factories, where boys of eight and nine commonly worked 15-hour shifts, sometimes being fed at the machines (Chap. X). Citing Employment Commission reports, Marx listed the diseases suffered by workers in the pottery and match-making industries, attributed by surgeons of the day to long hours and chemical exposure (Chap. X). Surprised to learn of the parallels between Victorian and contemporary production methods, students discussed in class how these "truths" have been effectively hidden by advertising and branding campaigns.

Similarly, in their exploration of gender socialization processes, students read an excerpt from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* that offers an analysis of the ways in which qualities associated with femininity are social constructs, rather than innate properties of the female sex. In class, I juxtaposed de Beauvoir's text with an episode of *I Dream of Jeannie*, the second-most watched show on television in the sixties (and still aired in reruns). In the episode, Jeannie reads a magazine article on how to be a modern American woman and tries to follow its advice, using her attractiveness to persuade Major Nelson to pay for a new wardrobe, refusing to do the cooking or housework, and getting a job in a department store, then requiring rescue by Nelson when her magic powers create a furor among the customers ("Americanization"). Roughly contemporary with *The Second Sex*, the assigned episode explores the relationship between feminine sexuality and economic power, emphasizing the centrality of magazine culture and shopping in prescribing female identity. As with the sweatshop theme, I encouraged students to make a connection between these "historical" artifacts and contemporary society, discussing student interactions with fashion and lifestyle magazines. Connecting Marx and de Beauvoir, we discussed the profit incentive as a driving force behind some of the pressures placed on young women (and, increasingly, on men), stimulating overconsumption, creating unfulfilled needs, and conveying an illusory and distracting sense of power.

**Culture Jamming Project**
*Process, Content, and Goals*
My students generally execute some kind of class project worth around 30% of the class grade. Approximately one of the three hours of class time per week is usually devoted to the project. This pre-existing structure made it relatively easy to introduce culture jamming into the syllabus. For the duration of the semester, the project hour was devoted to learning about culture jamming, examining texts and images about this form of activism, acquiring the necessary graphic design skills, and executing individual projects in Photoshop. Having received Photoshop instruction and chosen a theme[2], each student was required to produce a culture-jammed 8.5"x 11" poster accompanied by a one-page brief that explained their motivation, tied together course concepts, and described their creative process. On the final day of class, students shared their images and briefs with the class as part of a poster session.

With Marx and de Beauvoir laying the foundation for a critique of contemporary labor practices and gender socialization processes, students were prepared to undertake culture jamming projects, selecting issues of particular importance to them. To introduce the concept of culture jamming in some theoretical depth, I assigned Christine Harold's article in which she describes the practice and reflects critically on its ability to disrupt the sales pitches of corporate brands such as Nike and Camel. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, Harold argues that "the proliferation of the rhetoric of consumerism, in part, marks [a] shift from discipline to control" (194), underscoring the role of the advertising industry in masking exploitation and oppression. While individuals are now ostensibly granted increasing autonomy in the workplace, and are able, via the Internet, to access ever greater amounts of information, human experiences are nevertheless "managed" by an elaborate cultural apparatus that projects carefully crafted brand identities and corporate ideologies. I hoped that, in reading the article, students would grasp the *subtlety* of social control as a distinguishing feature of contemporary capitalism, perhaps being able to reflect on how this mechanism plays out in their own lives.

Several goals guided the integration of culture jamming into the sociology syllabus. First, the project required students to connect sociological concepts to contemporary culture and personal experience. Second, it prompted a visual approach to learning, drawing in students

with more advanced computer skills, and exposing all to cutting-edge technical skills. As mentioned earlier, intrinsic to the power of culture jamming is the appropriation of corporate communication techniques such as Photoshop to mimic the look and feel of highly budgeted advertisements. In their posters and briefs, students exploited Photoshop's capacity to alter images and applied the concepts of Marx and de Beauvoir to their critiques of the messages of advertising. Finally, sharing their "products" with classmates, students could experience their work as forms of creative "capital," directly participating in the production of multimedia images that could potentially be broadcast to a wider audience.

**Examples of Student Projects**
This section highlights several successful culture jamming projects, and illustrates the degree to which students were able to achieve some of the assignment's goals. Student work varied greatly in quality; possible causes of incomplete or inadequate student work are detailed later in this paper.

As stated above, a unifying goal of the project was the successful synthesis of sociological concepts and contemporary culture, and, as a result, the realization of the everyday relevance of sociological scholarship. Using Photoshop's filters and text tools, *Samantha* modified a Gap T-shirt advertisement to raise questions about the company's manufacturing practices. The original ad, which featured the prominent slogan "Can a T-Shirt change the world?" and a T-shirt-clad man curling his muscular bicep, was part of the Gap's fundraising campaign for African AIDS prevention. Samantha modified the image to create a broken, burned-out effect, also inscribing the model's arms and torso with information from news articles on the Gap's use of child labor. This text was small and somewhat distorted, requiring the viewer to examine the image closely in order to read it. In the accompanying brief, Samantha commented on the continuity between the working conditions described in Marx's writings and those of contemporary sweatshops, and discussed the contradiction between the public image of the Gap as a socially conscious brand and its profit-maximizing strategies that lead to child exploitation. She also reflected on her effort to represent graphically the hidden reality behind the Gap brand, using distorted text to symbolise the company's obfuscation of the truth and

the need for closer examination by consumers. Detecting a dimension of hypocrisy within corporate philanthropy, Samantha's critique draws attention to the clothing industry as a business in which contradictions are made invisible by slick marketing.

Connecting course material to her mother's experience as a low-wage garment worker in New York City, *Janelle* focused on the issue of sweatshop labor. In her project brief, she reflected on her mother's working conditions, "I don't think it's fair that she works 10 hours a day, 7 days a week and gets paid only $200 weekly." Janelle sees a continuum of exploitation between her mother's situation in the United States and labor conditions in India and Indonesia and she is critical of the Gap and Nike: "If they're so successful, then why can't they pay their workers better? Why can't they give them better working conditions?" Her poster features clothing company logos and the slogan "Made by Slaves for Free People" set against an image of women working in sweatshop conditions in a developing country. Janelle's project validates her life experience of growing up in economically straitened circumstances in New York City, while also helping her to see her mother's struggle as part of a larger system of exploitation resulting from clothing firms' need to maximize profit, rather than as an individual shortcoming. By sharing this story, Janelle helped her classmates to see how global exploitation of garment workers plays out in the New York City labor market, explaining how competition with underpaid workers in developing countries decreased her mother's negotiating power and made her family economically vulnerable.

Many posters reflected interest in themes related to female socialization and body image. For example, *Zaynep's* poster, "Victoria's *Reality*, Not *Secret*," was inspired by the pressure she feels from magazines to live up to unrealistic standards. She wrote, "I am affected by these images of women … if there were more ads where women were portrayed in larger clothing sizes, I don't think we would face as many problems as we do." A capable and focused student, Zaynep created a professional-looking Photoshop image inspired by Victoria's Secret lingerie advertisements: "My project is called Victoria's *Reality*, meaning that it's a reality to have meat on your body." Her poster shows a "plus size" woman in a bathing suit, adorned with white wings and set against an attractive starry background. The poster text stresses Zaynep's belief that women of all sizes should be able to feel proud

of their bodies. The accompanying project brief makes connections to de Beauvoir and the vulnerability of women to media-driven notions of perfection, which lock them into consumer practices in the pursuit of elusive "fixes." Also referring to readings on female sexuality from one of the other cluster courses, Zaynep felt that this project had inspired her to think about alternative and positive visions for women whose bodies do not conform to stereotypical ideals of the female form.

The lab sessions communicated a playfulness and openness that energized the class. One academically talented student, *Veronica*, saw the project as a way to expose her more light-hearted side; her work was fun and relatively simple, yet spoke to a serious concern about female body image. Modifying a magazine cover girl with Photoshop's simple paint effects, she blacked out one of the model's teeth and adorned her face with pink, black, and yellow spots, creating a cheeky and striking image in a style suggestive of guerrilla-style graffiti. "By making the image imperfect," she writes, "I am trying to convey the message that beauty is within. Just because you don't have perfect skin or perfect teeth does not mean you're not beautiful." The more visually inclined learners responded to the project's lab sessions with increased engagement, as did those students with advanced computer skills. Starting out with a DKNY lingerie ad, *George* used the liquify filter to exaggerate the model's thinness, creating an undernourished and elongated appearance that expressed his concern that the fashion industry tacitly promotes eating disorders. Most important, George went beyond the class training sessions to research additional YouTube Photoshop techniques that he later demonstrated to the class, an opportunity that allowed him to shine before his peers.

Overall, the culture jamming projects reflected critical interaction with advertising images; drawing on course readings, video resources, and their personal experiences, the students' posters and briefs pointed to and analyzed aspects of clothing production that are usually hidden by corporate branding campaigns. Their altered images expressed – often with a sense of humor – the contradiction between corporate claims to social responsibility or self-fulfillment and the dehumanizing logic of profit maximization. While some students critiqued processes at the manufacturing level, others engaged with the role of the market in intensifying the insecurities of young adults, in both cases making

connection to their own experiences and wielding powerful design tools to respond to the advertising that surrounds them.

**Evaluation of Culture Jamming**

The culture jamming activity had a number of pedagogical advantages: It encouraged student engagement in the classroom, it helped students understand product image as a construct that is removed from harsh social realities yet capable of powerfully impacting social life, and it empowered them as critical actors using a slick digital medium. Through the project, they were able to apply sociological concepts, whether trying to look at the familiar and accepted with a critical eye or taking up specific ideas such as capital's inherent need to minimize production costs. The hands-on Photoshop training and project work addressed some attention issues that existed among the twenty-eight students, sixteen of whom were in their first semester of college. It has been my experience that students who spend over ten hours together each week in a Liberal Arts cluster often become emotionally involved and increasingly distracted as the semester progresses. Engaging in a hands-on project with a tangible outcome refocused their attention and energy, while encouraging appropriate levels of peer support and mentoring activity. The visual rather than text-based medium facilitated sharing and collaboration; students were enthusiastic about working together to solve technical problems and sharing their newly acquired skills during the lab hour.

The acquisition of Photoshop skills used in the design industry also had a certain cachet: Students learned a useful professional skill and obtained "insider" knowledge about how advertising images are manipulated. Several students showed their interest in the assignment by contributing Photoshop-related news articles and, as noted earlier, online tutorials that they had discovered outside of class time. During the training sessions, students were impressed by the professional quality of the effects they were able to generate using "makeover" techniques such as airbrushing. In many cases, this sense of empowerment carried over into their individual projects.

In general, the project was an effective vehicle for transmitting the concepts of social construction and agency that are central to an introductory sociology class. I found that the experience of culture jamming provided rich examples with which to illustrate abstract ideas

during lectures and class discussions. The application of airbrushing and reshaping used routinely in corporate advertising images rendered media distortion visible and concrete, and heightened awareness that our culture, even our sense of beauty, is dictated by powerful social forces. The ability to use these techniques to enter a critical dialogue with the media encouraged students to see themselves as social actors, capable of shifting or influencing culture. As a means of using corporate industry's tactics against itself, culture jamming calls forth reflection on the possibilities of subversive humor and effective activism.

Despite these advantages, the culture jamming project raised a number of technological challenges and pedagogical concerns. First, Photoshop is a professional software tool that is not commonly installed in college labs and is differentially available to students outside of class. LaGuardia students often face severe economic challenges, and it is not uncommon for a student to lack access to a home computer. For those who do have a computer, Photoshop is expensive, costing around $200 for an educational user license. However, it is available as a free thirty-day download, and students were advised of this option as an alternative way of working on their projects outside of class time. Unfortunately, requiring the use of such software for a class project may have created an incentive for students to seek illegal or unauthorized Photoshop downloads, potentially placing themselves at risk of legal repercussions from software vendors. Undoubtedly, students who were able to work on the project in Photoshop outside of the classroom had an advantage. Addressing the imbalance of opportunity among students of unequal means, I required everyone to report on the resources of time and technology that had supported the execution of their projects. When it was evident that the student could not work on the project outside of class time, I adjusted assessment of image quality and sophistication accordingly.

Although most students seemed comfortable with the Photoshop training, some were overwhelmed by the challenge of creating their own project and did not complete a poster in the allotted time. As a solution, I introduced the option of creating a traditional paper collage as a substitute for a Photoshop poster. While relieving the anxiety of some students, this option may have resulted in inefficient use of lab time by others. Nevertheless, 60% of the class managed to produce a poster using Photoshop.

The problem of distraction among some cluster students continued during the training sessions and the time set aside for individual project work. It was clear, too, that some students used the lab hour for work that should have been completed outside of class. Yet the inability of some students to complete the project must be attributed to the challenge of learning to use Photoshop within the space of a semester.[3] Staging take-home assignments during the early part of the semester could provide a partial solution to this challenge; they would have the benefit of requiring students to start collecting images and sketching out ideas outside of class so that they could use lab time more efficiently.

While open to many creative interpretations, culture jamming is attached to the specific practice of using the tools of the advertising industry against itself. In this sense, it can be thought of as a sort of Tai Chi approach to activism, one that absorbs the opponent's energy in order to defeat its oppressive force. Most students grasped this idea very well; others retreated into simple negation, (e.g., Don't Buy Nike! or End Sweatshop Labor!), and lost touch with the need to address the audience with the industry's smooth, persuasive rhetoric.

Perhaps comprehension of the concept of culture jamming would have been better facilitated in my class by a selection of different reading and writing assignments. For example, although the Harold article provides a thorough overview of culture jamming, as well as a sound and subtle critique of the practice, its theoretical language was unfamiliar and confusing to most readers in my class. One solution would be to stage reading and writing assignments. If carefully matched in level of complexity, staged reading and writing activities could encourage student progress toward making substantive and integrated connections among sociological theories and concepts, and help them to write briefs that support poster presentations more concretely. For example, the Harold article explains the difference between forms of protest that employ oppositional logic versus techniques that subvert or challenge powerful institutions through appropriation and strategic imitation. However, the language used in this part of the article is somewhat dense and challenging and students tended to skim the more difficult passages. A closer reading of the article would have helped students to understand culture jamming as an action that goes beyond simple negation of the rhetoric of advertising (Don't Buy Nike!) to both borrow its tools and critique its effects.

Difficulties with the readings may also have contributed to the weakness that characterized the quality of the writing in the briefs that were meant to integrate the images the students created, personal experience, and sociological theory. While students were adept at connecting their projects, their personal lives, and the concepts covered in class discussions, the written integration of the excerpts from Marx and de Beauvoir tended to be underdeveloped and weakly articulated, with many students limiting themselves to vague allusions to video resources such as *Behind the Swoosh*. Again, careful staging of reading and writing assignments would strengthen student abilities to connect theory to practice and to articulate these connections in their writing.

While the culture jamming project encountered challenges to academic skill and disciplinary background cited above, it succeeded in helping students think about the products they consume as part of complex social structures affected by notions of power, profit, and identity. As illustrated by the student examples above, many projects and briefs exhibited a sharpened sensitivity to the global inequality behind contemporary consumer culture and an understanding of sustainability that encompasses ethical and social as well as ecological concerns.

In particular, the projects reflected on how advertising shapes our perceptions of ourselves and of the products we consume, shielding companies against uncomfortable questions about the wider social and environmental costs of the goods they sell. As I refine this approach in future semesters, I hope to offer students the opportunity to mimic more closely the advertising model by broadcasting their work to a wider audience through a college wall display or via the Internet. In spite of the concerns and challenges raised, the culture jamming projects succeeded in engaging students with social issues and developing their potential to be more critical and ethical consumers, "disturbers of the peace," who are able to contribute actively to building a sustainable society.

## Notes

1. "There are several different ways to define a sweatshop. According to the US Department of Labor, a sweatshop is any factory that violates more than one of the fundamental US labor laws, which include paying a minimum wage and keeping a time card, paying overtime, and paying on time. The Union of Needletrades Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), the US garment workers union, says any factory that does not respect workers' right to organize an independent union is a sweatshop. Global Exchange and other corporate accountability groups in the anti-sweatshop movement would add to this definition any factory that does not pay its workers a living wage – that is, a wage that can support the basic needs of a small family." ("Frequently")

2. I broke down the available time to allow approximately four hours for Photoshop instruction and seven hours for in-class project work. During the training sessions, students learned how to work with layers; use the airbrush, text, blur, and eyedropper tools; apply filters; and scale images to the required dimensions. Students scanned in images from magazines or used the Google search engine to locate images that they wished to "jam," and modified these images using Photoshop in a way that reflected one of the themes covered in class.

   Although I was well equipped to teach the necessary technical skills (I had previously worked as a Web designer and have taught introductory courses in graphic design), acquiring an appropriate lab required a degree of luck. Photoshop is relatively "high-end" software and is available in only a few specialized labs on campus that are generally used by photography and media students. However, with the assistance of LaGuardia's Information Technology staff, I was able to take advantage of a rare open slot and secure the use of one of these labs for one hour per week.

3. Photoshop is such a sophisticated, full-featured tool that it is easy to take a wrong turn, and students often became temporarily confused or stuck. I was able to move around the lab resolving problems and, as mentioned earlier, technically proficient students provided guidance to slower ones, but this assistance was insufficient to bring everyone's project to completion during the available lab hours.

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