

# IN FOCUS: Asian American Film and Media

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## Introduction

by BRIAN HU and VINCENT N. PHAM, editors

The opportunity to assemble an In Focus section dedicated to Asian American film and media, a first for *Cinema Journal*, is a special moment, bringing a field at least a quarter century in the making into the mainstream of cinema and media studies. But if Asian American media history has taught us anything, it's that crossing over should always give us pause. The Oliver Stone–produced *The Joy Luck Club*'s (Wayne Wang, 1993) cross-generational story of four Chinese American families earned critical acclaim, being placed on Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel's list of top ten films of 1993. *All-American Girl* (ABC, 1994–1995) debuted in 1994 as the first prime-time sitcom with an all Asian American cast and marked Margaret Cho's entrée into the living rooms of mainstream America. *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Justin Lin, 2002) rocked the 2002 Sundance Film Festival, legendary for its conflict-ridden question-and-answer session that spurred Ebert to come to defend the movie against hostile audience members, and became the first movie acquired by MTV Films.

Despite this collective excitement, these well-heralded instances of rare prime-time and commercial exposure have all proved less pivotal than audiences, commentators, and studios once imagined, relegated to discussions of missed opportunities or representational politics in the Asian American community. Repeatedly in the mainstream, Asian American communities have seen hopes dashed and voices marginalized in a racial landscape that is predominantly white and occasionally black. The 2016 Oscars telecast showed how a referendum on race in Hollywood still managed to relegate Asian Americans as a subject to stereotypical jokes by Chris Rock and Sacha Baron Cohen. The ongoing casting controversy over “whitewashing”—by which Asian characters

are replaced with white or “colorblind” versions—in Hollywood films like *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016) and *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017) shows the lengths to which the mainstream is willing to go to erase Asians from the visual landscape of its original source material. Even more “positive” examples, like the ascendancy of directors like Justin Lin, whom *Variety* dubbed the “Billion Dollar Filmmaker,” and Cary Fukunaga, have not generated meaningful conversations about race, authorship, and labor beyond merely proving that Asian Americans, too, can successfully helm white franchises like *Star Trek* and *True Detective*.<sup>1</sup> Despite the many inroads by Asian American content creators in mainstream film and media, their potential remains unrealized as an add-on or part of a cursory conversation on the periphery.

Moreover, Asian Americans are merely the third token that follows African Americans and Latinos in the United States, an afterthought among afterthoughts. We are not suggesting that we supplant African Americans and Latinos in the conversation on race, cinema, and the larger media. Rather, we aim to give cinema and media studies a reason to center Asian America beyond the mere occasion, like Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, and beyond the customary turn taking of such occasions. We center Asian American media studies as a way to consider the potential of cinema and media studies to deepen our understanding of the relationality of race, where visual identification is central to representation and vice versa. And we argue that considering Asian American media studies can deepen cinema and media studies’ attention to race as a whole and not as a tokenizing project of the discipline that also seeks to discipline its emancipatory potential.

Despite the challenges within the mainstream, Asian Americans have more recently become everyday faces in American television and on-demand media. South Asian actors and actresses, such as Mindy Kaling, Aziz Ansari, Priyanka Chopra, and Danny Pudi, appear in their own television shows while leveraging their fame to help green-light other shows. Ali Wong’s *Baby Cobra* (Jay Karas, 2016) is one of Netflix’s most celebrated and high-profile new comedy specials, garnering Wong interviews with NPR’s *Fresh Air* and coverage in the *New York Times*. Ken Jeong’s name is on the executive producer’s chair, the lead actor’s trailer door, and in the title of an ABC television show. The presence of Asian faces on mainstream television is no longer singularly novel; on the contrary, its propensity at this moment, across various shows and spaces, beckons our attention.

Beyond just noting additional colors in mainstream television’s spectrum, the presence of Asian faces on air and over the box speaks to shifting dynamics in approaching genre, transnationality, gender, and comedy in contemporary television while reconsidering the power relations within traditional mainstream media, evolving media platforms, and the agency of those attempting to create in such spaces. For example, Aziz Ansari’s *Master of None* (Netflix, 2016) is one of mainstream

1 Scott Foundas, “Justin Lin: ‘Furious’ Filmmaker Finds Even Better Luck Tomorrow,” *Variety*, May 1, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/film/features/justin-lin-1200409626/>. *Variety* magazine’s opening paragraph to an April 30, 2013, article tells the reader, “Imagine that you are 42 years old, your last three films earned over \$1.1 billion at the worldwide box office, you have transformed a sagging franchise into a robust film series, and you are a native Mandarin speaker at a time when Hollywood is hungry to plant a flag in the Chinese market,” before exclaiming, “It’s a great moment to be Justin Lin.” It also dubs Lin as a “Billion Dollar Filmmaker.”

entertainment's most probing works of industry self-reflexivity on issues of race and the politics of erasure. These works also ask questions about popular transformations of the "model minority myth," in which Asian Americans have historically been lauded for hard work, sacrifice, and silence in the face of difficulty or discrimination, effectively alienating any Asian American who doesn't fit within those stereotypes and then punishing other minorities for speaking out against injustice. Shows like *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC, 2015–present) rework those fundamental myths of race in America, navigating expectations of the American dream and the cultural capital of blackness. Asian American cinema and media studies require us to examine these expectations of race, the American dream, and the politics of erasure as they play out in television sitcoms, Netflix original series, comedy specials, and other mainstream venues.

Asian American media, though, need not exist solely to penetrate or reinforce the mainstream. At least as early as Marion Wong's 1916 *The Curse of Quon Gwon*, Asian Americans have produced independent films, and later video art and online media, that were made for personal, cultural, or political reasons beyond commercial legitimization. Filmmakers like Robert Nakamura, Alan Ohashi, Eddie Wong, and Duane Kubo emerged in Los Angeles alongside black filmmakers of the LA Rebellion. Visual artists like Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, and the Yonemoto brothers harnessed the critical and spectacular qualities of the moving image. Beyond simply "filling in the gaps" of American film history, itself one of the clumsier motivations behind tokenism, studying the history of Asian American media production refocuses crucial moments in the history of public television (as in the work of Jun Okada), in the racialized representations of sexuality (as in the work of Celine Parreñas Shimizu), and in the development of film movements (as in the work of Glen Mimura).

Critically, the history of Asian American media informs the present moment of on-line activism, in which Asian Americans have been especially active, in issues pertinent to the Asian American community and in alliance with the efforts of other marginalized groups. Meanwhile, there is a wave of self-consciously apolitical and deracialized work made for YouTube, as in the videos of Wong Fu Productions. If the Asian American film movement took shape in the 1970s as primarily a pan-ethnic political project, what does the splintering of Asian American media production tell us about the significance of "Asian American media" as a category altogether? And how does it help scholars better understand the relationship between digital media and race?

Perhaps not surprisingly, much of the activism produced online by Asian Americans has centered on the anxieties of invisibility, the very topic that has inspired this In Focus section, and perhaps a topic that has always haunted Asian American cinema to begin with. As Celine Parreñas Shimizu writes in her essay, "'Asian American' as both an identity category and a genre of cinema are politically necessary fictions," gesturing to the necessity of the Asian American cinema project, as well as the shaky ambivalence that comes from a coalition of voices deriving from the diverse cultures, languages, histories, politics, and bodies of the world's largest continent, to say nothing about the forces that nationally continue to marginalize or tokenize conversations about Asian Americans.

Even in ways that the demographic changes, in the case of mixed race, or technological innovation or implementation, such as special effects' ability to "Asianize"

(e.g., the “yellowface” filter in Snapchat), “Asian American” as an identity category and media genre points to the need to envision racial projects that decenter whiteness and expand the productive possibilities for Asian Americans in the wider public imaginary.<sup>2</sup> Invisibility and its related concept of legibility remain central preoccupations of Asian American media production, consumption criticism, teaching, and study. That is, even if it appears that the conditions of (in)visibility have changed, in what ways does legibility enact itself and at what cost? The contributors to this In Focus consider the ramifications of invisibility and legibility to both the objects of Asian American media and the category itself.

LeiLani Nishime looks at the liminal, and perhaps “illegible,” case of mixed-race Asians in American film and television, examining racial passing and whitewashing to consider how the seeming periphery of Asian America speaks to exactly the power of Asian American cultural criticism. Sylvia Chong reflects on the internal legibility of “Asian American media” as a category, challenging the ways that Asian American media organizations like film festivals participate in a kind of erasure of the Asian American project under the weight of its own fictions.

Meanwhile, Jun Okada considers the external legibility of Asian American media artists, their works, and their careers. Considering the cases of Nam June Paik and Laurel Nakadate, Okada shows how the mainstream art world reads or ignores race in national and transnational contexts. Peter Feng confronts issues of legibility directly, bringing the fundamental quandary of form and content upon recent televisual works like *Master of None* (Netflix, 2016), *Dr. Ken* (ABC, 2015–present), and *The Mindy Project* (Fox, 2012–2015; Hulu, 2015–present). Turning to issues of sound, Shilpa Davé explores the structuring role of accents in the racialization and aural legibility and presence of Asian Americans in the media.

We kick things off with Shimizu’s rallying call for Asian American cinema under the threat of institutional invisibility. If other cultural critics have called out the whiteness of the Academy, Shimizu calls out the whiteness of the academy, its pedagogical tendencies, and its disciplinary stasis, to which she exclaims with the energy, volume, and passion of the Asian and Asian American works that inspire her, “See our films!” With that, Shimizu reminds us that Asian American cinema and media are worth studying not simply because it is intellectually responsible or politically correct, but also because their vitality produces sensations and conversations that refuse to be ignored. \*

2 Alexandra Mosher, “Snapchat under Fire for ‘Yellowface’ Filter,” *USA Today*, August 10, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2016/08/10/snapchat-yellowface-racially-insensitive-filter/88521252/>. See this article for more information on Snapchat’s “yellowface” filter, which overlaid “Asian” characteristics on photos.

# Gnawing at the Whiteness of Cinema Studies: On Asian American Media Now

by CELINE PARREÑAS SHIMIZU

**W**ithout ambiguity, without ambivalence, we must reject the minoritization of Asian American cinema studies. To relegate Asian American cinema to the margins of our discipline is an epistemological problem that truly deserves an increasingly transnational and nonwhite student body whose presence demands that we halt a myopic understanding of our enterprise as unified. This article argues for increasing the study of Asian American and other racial, ethnic cinema traditions—especially in presenting how filmmakers of color produce and audiences of color watch differently. To recognize the distinct investments filmmakers and spectators of color bring to our discipline is to decenter whiteness, to diversify film and media departments with faculty trained to understand racial difference, and to enable us to see Asian American cinema as a harbinger for the future of the discipline.

To invest in cinema is to write oneself and one's communities into history, argued the late Loni Ding in her essay "Strategies of an Asian American Filmmaker."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the so-called Yellow Power, or Asian American civil rights, movement looked toward the invisibility, subordination, and misrepresentations and distortions of Asian Americans as a testimony to their larger marginality in US society. Established fifty years ago, "Asian American" as both an identity category and a genre of cinema are politically necessary fictions. To understand this is to grasp the changing subjectivities of our globalized era and the different struggles for representation that various people of color have engaged in from the very beginnings of cinema itself. The name "Asian American" registers a grievance for Asian and Asian American people in addressing their experiences of domestic racism, xenophobia, transnational displacement, and colonialism. It identifies a Hollywood tradition of how ethnic and racial groups who live under this sign are treated unfairly: Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu, Dragon Lady, Lotus Blossom, Prostitute with a Heart of Gold, Martial Artist,

1 Loni Ding, "Strategies of an Asian American Filmmaker," in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell Leong (Los Angeles: California Asian American Studies Central, 1991), 46–59.

Schoolgirl. These stereotypes create a particular viewing experience that necessitates a historical approach in framing our understanding of films and of looking at the cultural context that creates films.

In the context of US civil rights and third-world liberation struggles in the 1970s, Asian American cinema started as a movement to protest Asian Americans' representational status as the butt of the joke in Hollywood films. As Robert Lee argues in *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, Hollywood installed images of Asians in America into forever foreign, perverse, and caricatured stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Filmmaker, poet, and editor Russell Leong's book *Moving the Image: Asian Pacific American Media Arts* documented the activist framework motivating many of the Asian American cinema movement's pioneers.<sup>3</sup> Their works intended to inspire action through developing an artful aesthetic language. They included the work of award-winning documentarian and organizer Loni Ding (cofounder of the Center for Asian American Media), documentarian Bob Nakamura (cofounder of Visual Communications), the queer experimental documentary filmmaker Richard Fung, the experimental and documentary video makers Valerie Soe and Rea Tajiri, and the Oscar-nominated documentarians Christine Choy and Renee Tajima. These pioneers also worked in higher education. Loni Ding raised cohorts of filmmakers in her Third World Media course in the Department of Ethnic Studies at University of California, Berkeley. A longtime professor at the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television, Bob Nakamura nurtured generations of Asian American filmmakers before reestablishing the EthnoCommunications Program at UCLA's Department of Asian American Studies. Richard Fung continues to work as a professor and cultural activist in Toronto. In California, Valerie Soe teaches at San Francisco State University as a professor in Asian American studies, and Renee Tajima-Peña produces and teaches as a professor in ethno-communications at UCLA and formerly in community studies at University of California, Santa Cruz. On the East Coast, Rea Tajiri works as professor of film and media arts at Temple University, and Christine Choy serves as professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

From the 1980s to the present, Asian American cinema has moved smoothly between nonprofit organizations and universities to industry and independent media locations. The circuit loops between festivals, classrooms, studios, living rooms, and beyond. The Center for Asian American Media (San Francisco), Asian CineVision (New York), Pacific Arts Movement (San Diego), Visual Communications (Los Angeles), and many other nonprofit media organizations across the United States organize acclaimed and established film festivals where industry insiders and independent media makers network. Panels featuring scholars are regularly scheduled and widely attended. The nonprofits also administer major grants or help shepherd projects into major funding contention from the Public Broadcasting Service, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Schools from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and New York University to the Universities of

2 Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

3 Russell Leong, ed., *Moving the Image: Asian Pacific American Media Arts* (Los Angeles: California Asian American Studies Central, 1991).

Virginia, Utah, California, and Hawaii grow audiences, critics, and scholars in classes that historicize, survey, and theorize the works of Asian American cinema makers.

Industry film and media makers enjoy prominence and setbacks simultaneously. We witness Justin Lin's rise from the Sundance hit *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) to the *Fast and the Furious* (2006–2013) franchise to the new *Star Trek Beyond* (2016) blockbuster; the success of Sandra Oh, Mindy Kaling, and Aziz Ansari on television; and the primetime television shows *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC, 2015–present) and *Dr. Ken* (ABC, 2015–present). The online media network known as You Offend Me, You Offend My Family (YOMYOMF) shows how Asian Americans occupy the very rooms where productions are green-lighted or simply uploaded online for immediate viewing by millions of fans on YouTube. Asian American vloggers and online media makers enjoy prominence all over the world: Ryan Higa's "How to Be Emo" (2009), KevJumba's "I Have to Deal with Stereotypes" (2007), Wong Fu Productions' "Yellow Fever" (2006), HappySlip's (Christine Gambito) "Mixed Nuts" (2010), Natalie Tran's "How to Fake a Six Pack" (2008), and Michelle Phan's numerous makeup tutorials (2007–present) present a gambit of Asians (both American and Australian) with different, relatable, and beloved personalities.<sup>4</sup> Their everyday scenes about the mundane particularity of their lives diversify Asian representations globally with an up-to-the-minute relevance.

Yet equality has not been achieved, despite the constellation of opportunities now available since the turn of the new century. Inequalities persist as access to media resources is still limited. Who can get inside the rooms to pitch ideas in the expected languages and required manner? Does one have to be educated in elite schools and present as a cisgendered, heterosexual Asian male in order to be heard? Why do men still control the mythmaking narrative voice that we find in *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Justin Lin, 2002), *Charlotte Sometimes* (Eric Byler, 2002), and *The People I've Slept With* (Quentin Lee, 2009)? And why are women so much the embodiment of male fantasy in these male-authored works? Note how YOMYOMF—the independent media network—announces its powerful launch with phallic scenarios in which women serve or eat bananas while men engage in spectacular violence in their oft-viewed "Bananapocalypse" (2012).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, women are relegated to the helm of documentary—that harder craft of confronting reality and making a work that serves their communities—in a genre lacking big money. There are exceptions, however, in the impactful feature-film work of Alice Wu in *Saving Face* (2004); the long career of Mira Nair of *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), and *The Namesake* (2006); and the powerful voice of major documentarian Ramona

4 Ryan Higa, "How to Be Emo," YouTube video, 4:55, posted by nigahiga, November 24, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK4bLMdOavU>; KevJumba, "I Have to Deal with Stereotypes," YouTube video, 4:54, posted by kev, March 8, 2007; Wong Fu Productions, "Yellow Fever," YouTube video, 15:27, posted by lixstix, January 29, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2ojpefxk6o>; Christine Gambito, "Mixed Nuts," YouTube video, 2:52, posted by HappySlip, November 16, 2006, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_3y\\_hX0noRo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3y_hX0noRo); Natalie Tran, "How to Fake a Six Pack," YouTube video, 1:38, posted by communitychannel, May 10, 2008, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijgfBwq\\_vkM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijgfBwq_vkM); and Michelle Phan's numerous makeup tutorials, including Michelle Phan, "Natural Looking Makeup Tutorial," YouTube video, 7:09, posted by Michelle Phan, May 20, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB8nfJCOIeE>.

5 Justin Lin, "It Has Begun: Bananapocalypse," YouTube video, 5:27, posted by YOMYOMF Network, June 3, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92z1C-lurE4>.

Diaz in *Imelda* (2003), *The Learning* (2011), and *Don't Stop Believin': Everyman's Journey* (2012), and *Motherland* (2017).

When filmmakers gnaw at their relegation to the margins, cinema and media studies should chew on its lack of recognition of the complexity of Asian American work and then chip away at the discipline's whiteness that still treats films by and about people of color as "race films." According to film scholar Jacqueline Stewart in her essay "Negroes Laughing at Themselves," the phrase "race film" refers to cultural works produced by and for African American audiences since the beginning of cinema itself.<sup>6</sup> She argues that works like Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920) and Spencer Williams's *The Blood of Jesus* (1941) gauge the way African Americans were invested in cinema as an important institution worth their cultural and artistic intervention, especially in the context of the industry's racist content and contextual operations. The notion of Asian American authors making films only for Asian Americans alone should not persist today. The discipline's center must take heed to decenter its whiteness. For cinema and media studies to remain relevant, it should consider the films of not only Asian Americans but also other minoritized groups and cinematic traditions as central to its canon. See our films! In the case of Asian American cinema, Asian American-authored films establish a presence on the screen like their impact on the scene: through the globalization of culture, the influx of new migrants, technological innovation, and the burgeoning influence on shaping what we know as cool, beautiful, and fun. Similarly, cinema and media studies should recognize the power of Asian American stories to represent the new face of America and beyond. Globally aware, educated in domestic racism, and occupying the nexus of gender, class, and sexual subjection, Asian American subjects reveal the power of cinema to offer recognition of both shared and differing human subjectivities. That is, Asian Americans occupy a historical and structural location that deserves stories on the screen and reveals the limited lens Hollywood has offered in the past.

Why do we have an Asian American Caucus in the Society for Cinema and Media Studies? The work of our caucus, both in its activism and in its writing, ensures against our discipline's own outdated and persistent whiteness. Today we move from a monolithic identification of an Asian American cinema to its specificities. While the cultural history of Asian American engagement with media is well told in Jun Okada's recent book *Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements*, we see how Nguyen Tan Hoang's *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* evaluates the power of bottomhood and redefines the association of anality and Asianness in moving images. Shilpa Davé's *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* urges us to go beyond a visual understanding of South Asian characters and to hear the production of accented difference as another form of otherness.<sup>7</sup> Both Nguyen and Davé study diverse media, showing that the conception of Asian American media cannot be singular.

6 Jacqueline Stewart, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 650–677.

7 Jun Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Nguyen Tan Hoang, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual*

Moreover, Asian American cinema refers to both Asian and Asian American production. Film festivals mounted by nonprofit organizations showcase not only Asian American films that find audiences in mainstream festivals but also transnational productions featuring citizens who traverse borders, both physical and psychic, such as Shonali Bose's *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), which screened at the San Francisco Asian American, Pusan, and Toronto film festivals. It features the actor Kalki Koechlin, herself a transnational and translingual figure. Notably, in the past decades, Asian American festivals have screened films that fit into the Asian American cinema movement, but their programs simultaneously have attended to the different national cinemas and demonstrated attunement to the development of various ethnic Asian American cinemas and traditions. Energy infuses the attendance of these film festivals. Community members seeking the latest work from their homelands mix with students who address what their curriculum lacks. Without prompt and without extra credit, my students go in search of better and more diverse images. They attend panels, go to screenings, and meet the filmmakers and organizers. Fueled by hunger for moving images that regard their lives as worth telling, they seek how the form can do justice to their lives. Magnified in whatever ways—funny, serious—it does not matter. They crave screens that validate belonging and seek ideas for how to establish the world they want. We need to harness this energy to serve the overall and continuing growth of film and media studies in the academy.

I conclude with the demand that faculty and students look around and consider who constitutes film and media departments and classrooms. Who sits in the conference rooms deciding the curriculum and envisioning our work in the university? Do all of us consider the different experiences and backgrounds of students of color, whose specific needs we must recognize as they attempt to gain entry into film and media theory and production? To diversify the curriculum and the faculty is to render the discipline of film and media more accurately as a socially contentious experience and field of study. We all need to examine how faculty members teach classes, mentor students, prioritize faculty searches and conduct hiring, and how students organize their study and focus their interest in fields of study. How do faculty present the history of authorship and spectatorship within a field of historical inequality and lack of access to the means of production and consumption? Which objects deserve engagement and attention? Asian American cinema, or works concerned with centering Asian and Asian American life, presents the future of our discipline. Through the films that compose Asian American cinema today, we see an energetic force that illuminates our discipline's enterprise. Asian American cinema shows how a new constellation of venues for production and forms of distribution organizes our objects of study. In effect, the Asian American cinema movement embodies the changes not only in the way films get made but also in how they circulate transnationally.

Most important, Asian American cinema helps us to understand the power of cinema today. By introducing global characters that cross physical borders, Asian

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*Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Shilpa Davé, *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

American cinema enables us to see psychic lives informed by other cultures both distinct from and similar to our own. Together, the physical movement and the psychic life on-screen isolate the special power of cinema (whether on your lap, on the TV, or on the large screen) in its ability to create intimacy and proximity in an increasingly global world. This is what we need to make space for: film and media that present better understanding of ourselves in a world that is moving toward virtual reality and the production of others as even more distant.

My discussion best ends with a glimpse of my new book, *The Proximity of Other Skins: Screening Transnational Sexualities*.<sup>8</sup> It focuses on films that present brown-skinned bodies enmeshed in poverty, pollution, and filth. Film scholar J. B. Capino, in his award-winning book *Dream Factories of a Former Colony*, argues that the soapy dancers of 1980s Filipino sexploitation films present pornography as its politics.<sup>9</sup> Building from Capino, I consider Brillante Mendoza's *Serbis* (2009), a film set inside a Philippine movie theater where generations of a crestfallen family live. Mendoza's festering wounds and puddles of urine and feces provide spectators outside the Global South with opportunities to cut across distance in order to empathize with the unfamiliar. I also look at how the film *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros* (2006) by Auraeus Solito shows us a different coming-of-age story for a gay preteen boy growing up in the slums of Manila. We won't see the violence of gay youth being condemned to death and rape like in Hollywood cinema, but the love of Maximo's criminal family and the tenderness, respect, recognition, and understanding from the policeman he develops feelings for. In these films and others, we can see that as Asian American cinema decenters whiteness, it uses lenses other than our own to teach different sexualities, ethnicities, and genders, making important diverse voices on and off screen, in and out of the classroom. \*

*I thank Chi-hui Yang and Karin Chien for inviting me to serve as the featured scholar at the "Present/Future Summit: A Community Conversation on Asian American Media" at the 2012 Center for Asian American Media Fest, where I developed my ideas for this essay. Please see a recording of my comments at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvFLyipre2c>. I am grateful to Shelley Lee, Jerry Miller, and Bakirathi Mani for comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I appreciate Anitra Grisales for copyediting. Generations of scholars and filmmakers composing the SCMS Asian Pacific American Caucus deserve recognition for the community and support they provide.*

8 Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Proximity of Other Skins: Screening Transnational Sexualities* (forthcoming).

9 J. B. Capino, *Dream Factories of a Former Colony: American Fantasies, Philippine Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

# Asian American Media Studies and the Problem of Legibility

by PETER X FENG

In February 2016, I participated in a roundtable discussion about *Master of None*, the Netflix series created by Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang (2015–present). Hosted by the Asian Arts Initiative, a multidisciplinary arts center based in Philadelphia’s Chinatown, the evening brought together fans of a post-network TV series for a lively discussion. At one point, filmmaker (and curator) Sara Zia Ebrahimi commented that there was a remarkable degree of narrative experimentation across the ten-episode season that may have affected the show’s accessibility; it seems likely that a network concerned about building a week-by-week following would not have allowed Ansari and Yang to play with the show’s tone and narrative structure to the extent allowed by Netflix. Toward the end of the evening, an audience member asked the panel to comment on her sense that *Master of None* was well received in the Asian American community while *The Mindy Project* (created by Mindy Kaling; Fox, 2012–2015; Hulu, 2015–present) was subject to extended criticism. Inspired by Ebrahimi’s observation, I noted that *The Mindy Project* engaged with the conventions of the sitcom and the romantic comedy in an entirely accessible way, and that while creator Mindy Kaling was clearly engaged in an ongoing commentary on those forms, she had just as clearly embraced their conventions to make her points. (Furthermore, an unexamined bias against the romantic comedy and other “women’s genres” likely contributed to the critical dismissal of *The Mindy Project*.) Following Thomas Schatz, I understand genres like the romantic comedy as articulating fundamentally irreconcilable ideological contradictions (even as they produce narrative closure through a symbolic resolution of those contradictions).<sup>1</sup> By contrast, *Master of None*’s open-ended narratives force the audience to consider social issues that do not have easy answers. *Master of None* refuses to leave “the mind at rest” with a palatable narrative resolution that minority audiences may perceive as accommodating mainstream audiences.<sup>2</sup>

1 Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981).

2 E. P. St. John, *Stories and Storytelling*, qtd. in Herman Harrell Horne, *Storytelling, Questioning and Studying* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 26, and in Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 142.

I think this point becomes even clearer when we compare both shows with the ABC network's two Asian American sitcoms, *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC, 2015–present) and *Dr. Ken* (ABC, 2015–present), which are extremely legible as prime-time sitcoms. *Dr. Ken* is a multicamera family-and-workplace sitcom with archetypal sitcom characters (nutty dad, grounded mom, boundary-pushing teenage daughter, nerdy prepubescent son, and four varieties of coworker: sassy, naïve, arrogant-oblivious, and gay)—in fact, *Dr. Ken* feels like a cryogenically preserved 1980s sitcom. *Fresh off the Boat* draws from more contemporary trends (e.g., the tightly edited cutaway gags that interrupt expository dialogue) but also features archetypal characters (Old World–values mom, New World–loving dad, hardheaded but good-hearted teenage son, two precocious younger brothers, and acid-tongued grandmother). While *Master of None* is the smartest and riskiest of the four, the Asian American community is perhaps most excited about *Fresh off the Boat*, which is set in the 1990s and thereby softens its racial commentary by locating it in a less enlightened but still familiar time. *Fresh off the Boat* is identifiably Asian American but also accessible to ABC's viewers.

The contradiction between originality and comprehensibility is foregrounded by the rhetorical backflips that mainstream media outlets perform when promoting programs that ostensibly present minority viewpoints. At the Television Critics Association press tour, the president of ABC Entertainment Group observed that ABC's fall 2014 slate was “a mission statement to reflect America. . . . In a way it's not so much diversity as it is authenticity.”<sup>3</sup> He then went on to say: “We picked them up because they were great television . . . but they sort of for us unleashed a creative vein that was unmissable. We think these shows are deeply relatable (to broad audiences). When I watch *Fresh off the Boat*, or *Blackish* or *Cristela*—I am those families. . . . Great stories about great characters will resonate in the heart and gut anywhere in the world.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, these shows are specific enough that racial minorities will find them authentic, but they are relatable enough that they are universal. These shows must be racialized (and thus situated firmly within identity politics) without being formally illegible.

Asian American independent filmmakers face a similar conundrum. Insofar as filmmakers are motivated to present Asian American content, it is necessary for them to present legible representations in the context of US racial discourse. However, it could be argued (following Comolli and Narboni) that political cinema can succeed only if it is political at the level of both content and form—that is, that Asian American filmmakers must address not just the US racial context but conventional cinematic discourse as well.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1970s, Asian American film and video have been characterized by a tension between formal critique (i.e., attacks on conventional cinematic representation) and the representational clarity required for political efficacy

3 Cynthia Littleton, “ABC's Paul Lee Talks Diversity, Scheduling and Last Season's Stumbles,” *Variety*, July 15, 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/tv/news/abcs-paul-lee-on-diversity-it-is-a-mission-statement-to-reflect-america-1201262614>.

4 Ibid.

5 Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” in *Film Theory & Criticism*, 7th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 686–693. Originally published in John Ellis, ed., *Screen Reader One: Cinema, Ideology, Politics* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, British Film Institute, and Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

and identity politics (i.e., legibility in the US racial context). Recent scholarship on Asian American media has shown that this tension is central and even constitutive. In the opening chapter of *Making Asian American Film and Video*, Jun Okada returns us to the 1978 Asian American International Film Festival, programmed in New York by Daryl Chin, who championed avant-garde film as a counter to cultural nationalist projects that he labeled “noble and uplifting and boring as hell.”<sup>6</sup> Glen M. Mimura’s *Ghostlife of Third Cinema* argues that Asian American media is engaged in an ongoing critique of third cinema, distinguishing itself from nationalist and heteronormative cinemas of decolonization; Mimura examines how the field of Asian American studies has grappled with transnationalism (i.e., the ways that a diasporic conception of Asian migration troubles a US-centric understanding of Asian American history).<sup>7</sup> In short, Okada and Mimura situate the birth and growth of Asian American media production in the context of institutions and discourses that frame media texts in terms of identity politics and cultural nationalism, a context that depends on attention to formal concerns even as its corpus is necessarily defined in terms of content.

What Chin’s assessment may obscure (and what Mimura’s critique points us toward) is the politics of pleasure. By distancing himself from cultural nationalist texts that are noble and uplifting, Chin signals an interest in moving beyond a politics of injury (what Nietzsche called resentment), distrusting the coherent subject position that such texts offer. In its place, Chin offers an avant-garde cinematic practice that interrogates “the realist text as an ideological strategy,” refusing what he labeled “illusionist continuity.”<sup>8</sup> In doing so, Chin is implicitly calling for a rejection of the pleasure produced by the realist text. By comparison, third cinema aims to provoke its audience to action by calling attention to historical discontinuities. Third cinema runs into problems when it moves beyond decolonization to construct national identities, falling back into the illusion of continuity.<sup>9</sup> The point is not that Asian American media cannot traffic in pleasure if it seeks to produce social change, but that Asian American media is caught in a bind when it seeks to move beyond identity politics.

Asian American media is not alone in facing this bind, although the limited range of popular media representations of Asian Americans poses an especial problem for independent media producers. The reception of *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Justin Lin, 2002) at Sundance reveals that many consumers of Asian American media—both Asian American and beyond—have projected the model minority myth onto filmmakers. At a postscreening Q&A at the 2002 film festival, an audience member labeled *Better*

6 Jun Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video: Histories, Institutions, Movements* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 27.

7 Glen M. Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

8 Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video*, 15; Daryl Chin, “The Asian American Film Festival,” program notes, Asian American Film Festival, Asian CineVision, New York City, June 5, 12, 19, and 26, 1981. Quoted in Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video*, 29. Nietzsche discusses and did not translate “resentment” in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

9 My argument here is heavily indebted to Benedict Anderson’s discussion of Ernest Renan’s famous statement, “The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.” Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

*Luck Tomorrow* “empty and amoral for Asian Americans,” prompting an impassioned defense from Roger Ebert, who rose from the audience to point out that the same criticism would never be leveled at a white filmmaker. Ebert no doubt recognized that minority filmmakers are often expected to present “positive images” in response to their communities’ marginalization by mainstream media. In this case, *Better Luck Tomorrow* was startling not because it confirmed stereotypes but precisely because it thematized (and critiqued) the model-minority myth.

The idea that Asian Americans’ cultural heritage has enabled them to succeed in the United States maintains traction within as well as without the Asian American community. I take the reception of Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* as emblematic of the current attitude toward the model-minority myth, in that the book’s model of strict parenting was widely perceived both by proponents and by critics as touting the virtues of a Chinese cultural upbringing in contradistinction to a more permissive and nurturing “Western” approach. Chua noted that the *Wall Street Journal*’s publication of advance excerpts from her book under the headline “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior” served to obscure the irony and nuance of her account of an evolving philosophy of parenting—but then she doubled down with 2014’s *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America* (coauthored with Jed Rubenfeld).<sup>10</sup> In failing to account for structural factors that shape educational achievement and economic mobility, Chua and Rubenfeld’s argument that cultural factors explain American success stories is remarkably misguided; I cite it here to highlight the persistence of the model-minority myth, which survives under new labels while continuing to redirect animus about the opportunity gap away from structural inequality and toward Asian Americans and other cultural groups. The fact that many Asian Americans buy into and perpetuate this rhetoric betrays a fundamental failure to apprehend the history of racial formation in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the film festival circuit, beyond the pundit sphere of best-seller lists and talk shows, there is a friendlier forum for independent Asian American media artists: YouTube. HappySlip (Christine Gambito), KevJumba (Kevin Wu), nigahiga (Ryan Higa), RocketJump (Freddie Wong), Michelle Phan, David Choi, and Wong Fu Productions (Wesley Chan, Ted Fu, and Philip Wang) are some of the better-known Asian American channels on YouTube. As Kent A. Ono pointed out in a 2011 *New York Times* article about the success of Asian American YouTube celebrities, studies have found that as many as 87 percent of Asian Americans consume media online and via broadband, which may explain the remarkable success of Asian American-produced content online in contrast to its virtual absence from multiplexes and broadcast television.<sup>12</sup> The YouTube audience overlaps somewhat with the independent media

10 Kate Zernike, “Retreat of the ‘Tiger Mother,’” *New York Times*, January 14, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/fashion/16Cultural.html>.

11 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

12 I am indebted to many of my colleagues for their work on Asian American YouTube celebrities, most notably Vincent Pham, Konrad Ng, and Lori Kido Lopez, in *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Austin Considine, “For Asian-American Stars, Many Web Fans,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/fashion/for-asian-stars-many-web-fans.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/fashion/for-asian-stars-many-web-fans.html?_r=0).

audience that attends Asian American film festivals (most notably those in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and San Diego), but the (still emerging) ethos of YouTube videos is quite distinct from the genres featured in those festivals. Setting aside instructional videos and video blogs, the narrative videos produced by these YouTube celebrities are dominated by comedic shorts (including music-video parodies, feature-film parodies, sketches and skits, and short films), which is to say that these YouTube videos draw on established conventions—they are highly legible.

It is not surprising that minority media producers and consumers have turned to the Internet and its promise of democratization (the opportunity for producers and consumers to circumvent gatekeepers). But while YouTube may employ the terminology of “channels,” the Internet is much more than an alternative distribution network following the broadcast model (producer, distributor, audience): it also consists of user-generated content (i.e., commenting, blogging and reviewing, and “liking”). Social media helps new viewers to find interesting content: regular followers may “tune in” to their favorite YouTube “channels” and then recommend videos to their friends, who will in turn recommend videos to their friends, driven in part by the pleasure of having found something sooner than other people in their circles. (Consumers share what they like with one another, but a video goes “viral” only when consumers are motivated to share quickly, urgently—beating their friends to the punch. The virus metaphor is more appropriate to some situations than others: it is one thing when consumers distribute what they consume by reposting it, but when consumers tweet URLs or “like” video content, they are not producing new copies of the virus as much as they are linking other consumers to the point of contact.) How important is legibility for social media? By some accounts, the most popular viral videos were not produced but captured (brief clips like the “double rainbow” that are appreciated for their absurdist qualities, found, not produced, and unconventional, therefore sidestepping the question of legibility)—but setting those videos aside and focusing on “produced” pieces such as those from YouTube celebrities, it seems that the most liked, forwarded, and linked short films are comedic.<sup>13</sup> It is comedy, not drama, that is produced, liked, and therefore most widely seen. What does it mean for the future of Asian American media if web video overwhelmingly favors comedy?

Throughout this discussion of Asian American cinematic discourse, I have been referring to legibility as if it were a fixed standard, as if things were either legible or incomprehensible. But of course discourses evolve, and one way of understanding that evolution is by thinking of cinematic texts as simultaneously drawing on cinematic conventions and straining against their limitations—as working to make audiences receptive to unconventional forms and thereby to establish new horizons of legibility. It’s not that formal experimentation and representational clarity are mutually exclusive, but that the tension between them produces new modes of representation. Faced with sitcoms like *Dr. Ken* and best sellers like *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Asian Americans are all too aware of the intractability of racialized representational regimes. If the tension between representational clarity and formal critique is indeed constitutive

13 “Yosemitebear Mountain Double Rainbow 1-8-10,” YouTube video, 3:29, posted by “Yosemitebear62,” January 8, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSNhk5ICTI>.

to Asian American media, it is because Asian Americans are understandably drawn to coherent subject positions (e.g., the model minority) even as we recognize that coherence is based on the illusion of historical continuity. \*

*I am grateful to Sarah Wasserman for helping me to think about web culture.*

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## What Was Asian American Cinema?

by SYLVIA SHIN HUEY CHONG

**T**he year 2016 has had a bumper crop of media controversies involving Asian American representation. Just before their Super Bowl appearance, Coldplay and Beyoncé were criticized for appropriating Indian culture in their video “Hymn for the Weekend” (Ben Mor, 2016). Then, despite (or perhaps because of) the #OscarsSoWhite controversy, comedians Chris Rock and Ali G cracked anti-Asian jokes at the Academy Awards, sparking condemnation from prominent Asian American directors and actors such as Ang Lee and Sandra Oh. Of course, there was the endless stream of poor casting choices, from Tilda Swinton as a Tibetan monk in the comic-book film *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016) to Scarlett Johansson as Major Kusanagi in a live-action remake of a famous Japanese anime, *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017), and, most recently, Matt Damon as an unnamed white savior in the transnational production *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2017)—all of these echoing earlier controversies over *Aloha* (Cameron Crowe, 2015), *The Last Airbender* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2010), and *21* (Robert Luketic, 2008). In addition to the vociferous criticism of these announcements on Twitter and blogs, Asian American performers also spoke out against such practices in public forums, including *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC, 2015–present) star Constance Wu, at a panel sponsored by the Chinese American group Committee of 100 in Los Angeles, and veteran actor B. D. Wong at an event titled “Beyond Orientalism” in New York directed at theater professionals. The terms “yellowface” and “whitewashing” even began showing up outside of academia and the blogosphere, entering the mainstream media.

With such growing consciousness of the need for Asian American representation, might we conclude that the time is ripe for something called “Asian American cinema”? If the problem with racist misrepresentation is racial invisibility, then the solution seems to call

for some kind of forced integration of American popular culture in order to claim visibility. And what might that cinema look like? Perhaps one clue might be found in the recent Internet meme sparked by these controversies: #StarringJohnCho, photoshopping the Korean American actor into a variety of films ranging from *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), *Jurassic World* (Colin Trevorrow, 2015), and the latest James Bond flick, to the rom-com *Me before You* (Thea Sharrock, 2016), the buddy film *The Nice Guys* (Shane Black, 2016), and so on. (A similar meme places Constance Wu in *The Hunger Games* [Gary Ross, 2012] and *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* [Mark Waters, 2009].) In essence, the campaign is a new-media sit-in of the mostly white world of Hollywood films and television shows, replacing white bodies with Asian ones so as to highlight their erasure from popular representation, but also to assert their utter normalcy in these contexts. We are asked to accept the possibility of Asian American heroes and love interests—the latter in particular confronting the ghosts of antimiscegenation that kept Asian and Asian American actors out of older films such as *The Good Earth* (Sidney Franklin, 1937) and *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932).

These calls for Asian American representation and inclusion in the media are certainly important, and they highlight not only the symbolic importance of the cultural industry but also its economic dimensions; the paucity of jobs for Asian American actors, directors, writers, and producers points to a form of employment discrimination that would be actionable in other fields that cannot claim the invisible hand of “the box office” as an excuse. Yet the call for economic parity is overdetermined by the symbolic economy in which these roles, especially on-screen ones, participate. It is not enough to simply have more Asian American deliverymen, dry cleaners, prostitutes, martial artists, or dictators in films and television. But on the flip side, the clamor for “better” roles potentially buys into fantasies of power that Hollywood peddles not only to audiences of color but to all consumers. What, for example, does an Asian American James Bond or Captain America accomplish, other than recruit Asian Americans into a toxic heterosexual masculinity in order to make up for their historical emasculation? This discourse of visibility is partial at best, for it imagines the goal of racial justice as merely inclusion in a system that is already deeply racist and troubled. Yet the desire to see oneself as desirable, through an on-screen proxy, can be powerful, despite all of the pitfalls of such an embrace. The mixed-race video artist Kip Fulbeck once characterized the desperation of Asian American audiences for figures such as Bruce Lee: “America loved him. And the Chinese loved him. Or maybe they loved America loving him.”<sup>1</sup> In a racist world, perhaps the only imaginable self-love is the one measured through the mirror of the dominant group.

One could argue that a shadow economy of self-love and self-representation already exists in the form of an independent Asian and Asian American cinema produced outside of Hollywood and circulated in Asian American film festivals, cultural events, and university programming. The largest and most established of these festivals, such as CAAMFest, the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, and Asian CineVision, were founded in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in part to counter the prevailing

1 From *Game of Death* (Kip Fulbeck, 3/4 video; Video Data Bank, 1991), a seven-minute experimental film based on found footage from the original *Game of Death* (Robert Clouse and Bruce Lee, 1978).

negative images of Asian Americans in the culture industry of their time.<sup>2</sup> In turn, these larger festivals feed a network of smaller, regional Asian American film festivals, as well as provide distribution and marketing to films that eventually find their way into university curricula and student-led programming. While most of these films never receive a national theatrical release—at best, some are picked up by PBS or made available through cable and online streaming—they occupy an important niche; not only the actors and narratives on-screen, but also the directors and writers, reflect the diversity, heterogeneity, and transnationality of Asian America that goes unseen in more mainstream productions. Just to take my local Asian Pacific American film festival, DC APA Film, as an example: its 2016 festival included feature-length fictional films such as *Road to Perdition* (Yaser Talebi), an Iranian dark comedy; *Someone Else* (Nelson Kim), a Korean American psychological thriller; and *Welcome to Happy Days* (Gavin Lin), a Taiwanese rom-com. These features were supplemented with documentaries and shorts on such varied topics as the Mississippi Chinese, Filipino farmworkers in 1960s California, Japanese war brides from the post–World War II era, Vietnamese American nail salons, and professional basketball in mainland China. As even this quick survey reveals, these films depart from the paradigm of #StarringJohnCho and #StarringConstanceWu, in which highly assimilated Asian Americans are placed into “American” social groups and settings with negligible friction over their racial identities, national origins, or class standing. The documentary offerings of Asian American film festivals are particularly diligent at highlighting Asian American history and politics, especially in ways that disrupt the dominant narrative of happy, model-minority immigrants pursuing an unproblematic American dream.

The film festivals’ wide embrace of all things Asian American is partly an artifact of the coalitional and pan-ethnic nature of the designation “Asian American” itself. Arising in the late 1960s, the term “Asian American” referenced a history of shared racialization.<sup>3</sup> Many of the people who first identified themselves as Asian American were the American-born descendants of these original migrants from the early 1900s, but after the 1970s, the category has dramatically morphed to include new Asian immigrant communities quite distinct from those that had already settled in the United States. These new migrants may identify more as Asian than Asian American, and the line separating the two groups has also blurred, as satellite television, DVDs, and the Internet have fostered closer ties with Asian culture and media than previous generations would have found possible—hence, the transnational plot of *Welcome*

2 See Stephen Gong, “A History in Progress: Asian American Media Arts Centers, 1970–1990,” in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell C. Leong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1992), 1–9.

3 For a more detailed history of this term, see Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). While the invocation of the Asian continent may suggest a broad geographical scope encompassing everyone from Turkey to Russia, the specific history of immigration, American imperialism, and militarism created a grouping in the United States of predominantly Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and Korean migrants and their descendants. Other groups such as Armenians, Lebanese, Afghans, and Russians were generally excluded from the category of “Asian American” in the United States because, at various points, they were legally separated from other Asians and included under the category of “white” for the purposes of immigration and citizenship (since those other, nonwhite Asians were ineligible for naturalization and barred from entering the country during the early twentieth century).

to *Happy Days*, which features an Asian American tourist falling in love with a local Taiwanese girl. Newly coined acronyms such as “APA” (Asian Pacific American) have acknowledged the influence of Native Hawaiians and Polynesians on Asian American history and politics. With the rise of Islamophobia affecting not only Arab Americans but also South Asian Americans, many have begun to reclaim the “Asianness” of the Middle East and forge new political coalitions (witness the inclusion of the Iranian *Road to Perdition* in the DC APA lineup). Growing numbers of transnational adoptees from Korea, China, and Vietnam complicate the notion of racialization by kinship versus descent. And mixed-race and mixed-ethnic Asian Americans also trouble traditional definitions of racial identity as singular, instead occupying different racial and ethnic subject positions at different times. Thus, even the simplest way of defining Asian American cinema—any film with an Asian American director, writer, or actor—already engages in a complicated classificatory dance.<sup>4</sup>

While the broadness of the category of “Asian American” is to be celebrated, it also means that films and filmmakers get included that have little investment in the “socially committed cinema,” described by Renee Tajima-Peña in 1992, which characterized the independent films championed by the first Asian American film festivals and media arts centers.<sup>5</sup> One of the paradoxes of our supposedly postracial era is that “Asian American” is simultaneously a desired and disavowed category. On the one hand, it adds a drop of exotic color to the multicultural landscape, allowing one to claim “diversity” in relatively safe ways. Many film festivals seek out corporate sponsorship, promoting investment in Asian American cinema as a way to reach a desirable demographic group while at the same time helping these businesses signal their progressiveness—a kind of “yellow washing” just as distasteful as the “whitewashing” of Asian American roles. On the other hand, these uses of “Asian American” have to be devoid of actual racial difference, since that would harken back to histories (and the continuing relevance) of discrimination and exclusion that refute the postracial dream. Promoting the contemporary success of Asian American performers and filmmakers as part of a universalist artistic triumph—look, they’re just like everybody else!—helps avoid the issue of economic and symbolic exclusion and allows Asian Americans to be used as a battering ram against other groups of color’s claims of discrimination. I have seen “Asian American” filmmakers take advantage of Asian American film festivals to help promote films that have nary an Asian American character or topic, as if transcending their racial identity to make “universal” films. In this way, despite their oppositional roots, Asian American film festivals can be made to serve the same ideology of inclusion for inclusion’s sake that mars the visibility politics of mainstream film protests like #StarringJohnCho.

4 Peter Feng raised many of these definitional issues regarding Asian American cinema in a pair of articles he wrote for *Cineaste* magazine in the 1990s, although my discussion here has extended his line of questioning to more recent trends. See Peter Feng, “In Search of Asian American Cinema?,” *Cineaste* 21, nos. 1 and 2 (1995): 32–35; “The State of Asian American Cinema: In Search of Community,” *Cineaste* 24, no. 4 (1999): 20–24.

5 Renee Tajima, “Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking 1970–1990,” in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell C. Leong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1992), 10–33, 12.

The transnational dimensions of Asian American cinema can be equally problematic. It is one thing to acknowledge the blurred boundaries between Asia and Asian America today as American audiences and filmmakers alike are immersed in Asian film and media cultures such as Korean dramas, Bollywood musicals, Japanese anime, and Hong Kong action flicks. They do not necessarily rely on Asian American cinema as their sole source of images of Asian bodies on the screen. But it is altogether another thing when “Asia” is elided with “Asian America” for the purposes of diversity politics. As Asian American film festivals have incorporated more Asian films in their programming, their efforts are aided by quasi-diplomatic organizations like the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) or the Korean Embassy’s Cultural Center (KORUS House), which view such programming as a form of soft power diplomacy. International programming such as TECRO’s sponsorship of *Welcome to Happy Days* tends to sidestep issues of racism and celebrate foreign film cultures in ways that promote exoticism and further the “forever foreigner” stereotype of Asian Americans. The protests over Hollywood films such as *Doctor Strange* and *The Great Wall* reveal further complexity over these issues as the producers of such films dismiss the complaints of Asian American fans by claiming that the “real” Asians—in these cases, mainland Chinese film distributors or directors—have no problem with the casting of white actors, even preferring them for their box-office appeal. And even without whitewashing or yellowface, films like *The Great Wall* simply substitute one problematic cultural nationalism (Chinese) for another (American), using Asian American discontent to paper over intra-Chinese dissent.

To be clear, I am not saying that Asian American film festivals are engaging in these tactics of obfuscation and depoliticization. Rather, the racial category of “Asian American,” and thus the associated category of “Asian American cinema,” participates in a larger symbolic economy that serves the interests of groups that are far from engaged in antiracist politics. And thus, we turn full circle to the problems of visibility and representation. The film festivals attempt to skirt this bifurcation of aesthetics and politics by presuming that the mere screening of Asian American films will heal this rift. After all, the idea of the film festival itself suggests an elevation of cultural capital that will raise the value of its associated auteurs and subjects, thus marrying cinephilia with identity politics. But the audience for the contemporary Asian American film festival is as much corporate and governmental sponsors, hungry for the discretionary income and attention of these model minorities, as it is Asian Americans in need of consciousness-raising and self-affirmation. Does the heterogeneity of Asian American cinema today serve a purpose beyond the reification of a neoliberal consumer category? Does the category of Asian American cinema help “serve the people”—to invoke the Maoist slogan of a bygone era—or does it serve the system at large that perpetuates Asian American racialization and marginalization, or even worse, mobilize Asian American identity to suppress the political claims of other racialized groups?

The title of this essay may betray my biases on this issue, as I am not merely trying to double down on a better definition of Asian American cinema moving forward but am arguing for the obsolescence of this category, along the same lines as those posited by

literary critic Kenneth Warren regarding African American literature.<sup>6</sup> Warren argued that African American literature was tied inextricably to the existence of a Jim Crow society that had waned since the 1950s. This was not to say that African American *people* had disappeared, or that they had stopped producing literature, but to propose, rather, that what black authors wrote after the civil rights era was fundamentally different from what they wrote before, and that the notion of a literature bound to an identity category was antiquated and perhaps even politically dangerous. Similarly, what if the historical moment for Asian American cinema has passed, dissolved not by the disappearance of anti-Asian racism as such but rather by the co-opting of the category by “postracial” concerns under the banner of diversity?

Even if relegated to a historical phenomenon, “Asian American cinema” is still worth screening and studying. But I no longer have faith in the ability of this category to do the social, political, and aesthetic work associated with it in the past, even if it wanted to. Is it even worth fighting over whether Tilda Swinton or an Asian American actor plays the already ridiculously Orientalized Tibetan monk in *Doctor Strange*? Perhaps, as my literary colleague Timothy Yu has suggested, Asian American cinema has “failed”—impotent to intervene in national debates about Asian Americans like the current rehashing of the black-Asian “divide” in media coverage of police officer Peter Liang, who was convicted of manslaughter in the death of Akai Gurley in Brooklyn—yet still trotted out whenever it is needed to add a drop of “color” to a syllabus, a cultural festival, a university events calendar.<sup>7</sup> But that failure—the pastness of Asian American cinema—speaks to a potential future cinema that is yet to be envisioned. Will that future cinema star John Cho or Constance Wu? Maybe. But I want their visibility to count for something rather than to be a goal in and of itself.

6 Warren posed a provocative question—“What was African American literature?”—in a series of lectures at Harvard, and in a condensed form online, which sparked a tremendous amount of debate and consternation. See Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Warren, “Does African-American Literature Exist?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 24, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/Does-African-American/126483/>. Obviously, many have contested Warren’s formulations, questioning, among other things, his overreliance on legislative-judicial fiats in defining a people, his hostility to identity politics, and his privileging of a bourgeois literary culture. See Marlon B. Ross, “Kenneth W. Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?*: A Review Essay,” *Callaloo* 35, no. 3 (2012): 604–612; Erica Edwards and Walter Benn Michaels, “*What Was African American Literature?* A Symposium,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 13, 2011, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/what-was-african-american-literature-a-symposium>.

7 Timothy Yu, “Has Asian American Studies Failed?,” *tympa*n (blog), December 20, 2011, <http://tympa.n.blogspot.com/2011/12/has-asian-american-studies-failed.html>.

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# Nam June Paik and Laurel Nakadate at the Margins of Asian American Film and Video

by JUN OKADA

**M**y 2015 book *Making Asian American Film and Video* argued that public institutions played a definitive role in the history of Asian American film and video, grounding the genre in the public funding, exhibition, and broadcasting of American independent film and video.<sup>1</sup> The book argues that state-funded public institutions like PBS and their policies on multiculturalism shaped the burgeoning genre of Asian American film and video. Recently, a lot of attention has been paid to how online platforms like YouTube have uncovered new possibilities for Asian American filmmakers to thrive, which seems to continue the legacy of communal, institutional filmmaking. And yet what is often minimized in this discourse is the role of experimental and avant-garde film and video in Asian American film and video, which has hovered on the edges of the discourse of mainstream institution building in Asian American film and video. Despite the marginalization of that role, it has been crucial in upholding diversity within the genre. In addition to experimental media's historical marginality in Asian American film and video, other boundary-defying issues, such as notions of the postracial and the transnational, are also important sites of inquiry not only in determining the definitive boundaries of Asian American film and video but also in locating its future directions.

Therefore, what I am interested in at the moment is an alternative history of Asian American film and video filtered through the international avant-garde and its descendants within the larger art world as a way of rethinking the interaction of the transnational and the place of race in Asian American film and video. Here I reenvision, for example, the work of the past (the pioneering video art of Nam June Paik) and the present (the films and video installations of Laurel Nakadate) as works of Asian American moving-image art to show how experimental media can be much more open and incisive than those narrative fictional feature films and shorts, as well as acclaimed documentaries, that currently fill out the center of the received history

1 Jun Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

of Asian American film and video, yet still raise questions about institutional and representational racism. Therefore, #OscarsSoWhite notwithstanding, despite the evidence that Asian American media may be evolving and exploding in positive ways through online communities like YouTube, the texts and contexts of Asian American experimental film and video illuminate the continued problem of institutional racism against Asian American artists and the discursive invisibility of Asian Americans.

One of the most critical issues of Asian American studies in the past few decades has been the tension between “national” and “transnational” identifications. That is, the cultural and social transformations created by post-1970s globalization and migration have blurred the boundary between Asian and Asian American identities. The media studies landscape in particular has become inundated with the wish to coalesce “Asian” and “Asian American” through the notion of a common diaspora. And yet, as Sau-ling Wong reminds us, this “denationalization” tendency veers toward a dehistoricization and depoliticization of crucial decades of establishing recognition for Asian Americans in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

Although written thirty years ago, Wong’s influential article “Denationalization” points out that it is not a question of coalescing toward a “more transnational” Asian American subjectivity, but that the transnational is a trend that comes and goes in different guises and with different flows that occur over time within the Asian diaspora. Therefore, Wong urges that to understand the shifting relationship between transnational and nationalist discourses of Asianness, “we need to historicize the push to globalize Asian American cultural criticism. Without such historicizing, one of the most important aspirations of denationalization—to dialogize and trouble American myths of nation—may end up being more subverted than realized.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, often the utopian vision of transnationalism coexists, interestingly enough, with the challenges of institutional racism against Asian Americans, illuminating exactly what Wong describes. For example, one important comparison worth exploring is that between Paik’s global vision of liberated televisual global flow and the ethos of resistance against institutional closed doors represented by the experiences of Asian American filmmakers of the same period. Although Paik and other Fluxus artists experienced racism, how did this affect their work? How did institutional definitions allow certain artists from Asia to bypass the racism experienced by Asian American filmmakers who allied themselves not with Fluxus, but with third-worldist ideals? Paik’s influential video installation *Global Groove* begins with the lines, “This is a glimpse of the video landscape of tomorrow, when you will be able to switch to any TV station on the earth, and *TV Guide* will be as fat as the Manhattan telephone book.”<sup>4</sup> What follows is a neon-colored dreamscape of people from various corners of the world dancing, talking, playing, and making art, at times transforming into swirling analog video effects. Paik’s Fluxus vision inclined itself to crossing borders and dissolving difference through the power of televisual flow. By comparison, Asian American film

2 Sau-ling C. Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” *Amerasia Journal* 21, nos. 1–2 (1995): 1–27.

3 *Ibid.*, 17.

4 Nam June Paik, *Global Groove* (1973).

and video emerged out of a desire to fight against Orientalist depictions and to resist invisibility and the negative images of Asian Americans in the mainstream media. Effectively, the question that undergirds my exploration into the comparative Asian and Asian American moving-image cultures is the ethos of flow (including Fluxus and televisual flow) versus resistance that is a hallmark of the two divergent yet connected communities.

Most commentary on Paik's global, transnational vision has celebrated his border-crossing aesthetic, and some have even seen it as a counterpoint to techno-Orientalism. In particular, Paik's video sculptures, which reference Zen and Buddhism, are read as both unproblematically Orientalist as well as transcending borders. Yet the binaries of East and West that attend critiques of Orientalism often do not take into consideration the complexities of technology and the possibilities they offer. Indeed, as Charles Park suggests, "One must read Paik's art as demonstrating the fluidity with which cultural and technological exchanges occur, and just how quickly these exchanges can be absorbed to generate hybrid identities and cultures."<sup>5</sup> Although this is a significant point, how, then, can we accommodate the seemingly opposed philosophies of flow versus resistance?

In considering the role of Paik during the era of Asian American institution building, I am interested in how Paik gets read through the lens of Asian American studies, particularly as his work was so important to the identity of New York, and the United States, as the new postwar art capital. What immediately jumps out at me is the tension between Paik's liberating aesthetic of global televisual flow proposed by such media installations as *Global Groove* (1973), and the anti-Asian and/or anti-Asian American violence surrounding the fallout of the US auto industry as a result of competition with Japanese automakers. As a Korean national who worked within the international avant-garde and Fluxus groups in New York City, Paik represented the possibility of television, specifically, of that offered by the Sony Portapak portable camera, to immediately connect anyone in any place to another, a technology that suggested the breaking down of borders and differences. Sony video products epitomize what Koichi Iwabuchi has named the "cultural odorlessness" of Japanese consumer products that helped Japan become a global economic power.<sup>6</sup> And Sun Jung has remarked on a similar marketing strategy, *mugukjeok*, which has been used to package pop stars in South Korea.<sup>7</sup> The strategy of making and selling nondescript, neutral products that did not hold strong cultural markers in a postwar consumer global society was key to Japan's success. And yet the economic triumph of one of these culturally odorless products, namely automobiles made by Toyota, Honda, and other Japanese automakers, became the catalyst for the destruction of the US automobile industry in addition to the anti-Asian racist hate crimes embodied by the murder of

5 Charles Park, "A Poor Man from a Poor Country: Nam June Paik, *TV Buddha*, and the Techno-Orientalist Lens," in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 209–220.

6 Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

7 Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

Vincent Chin in 1982. Therefore, although Japanese products for global consumption may have made their fortune through their lack of cultural odor, the case of Vincent Chin—a case that brought the legality of racial hate crimes to national attention and whose representation in Renee Tajima-Peña and Christine Choy’s award-winning film *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987) helped consolidate Asian American film and video as a legitimate genre—problematizes Iwabuchi’s theory about Japan and globalization in the 1980s. Namely, in the context of Asian American history and racial hate crime, Japaneseness, Asianness, and Asian otherness most definitely carry a distinct odor, one whose fumes are strong enough to disturb the notion that race is odorless in the global marketplace and on other world stages.

The notion of Japanese and Korean cultural odorlessness, upon further examination, is therefore challenged by the cultural vortex around the Vincent Chin murder and trial, an event that involves race, representation, and global capitalism on a transnational stage. Vincent Chin and anti-Asian violence in the 1980s, during the peak of the Japanese economic bubble and the waning of the prominence of US car manufacturing, resists the notion of an unproblematic cultural odorlessness. In fact, the odor of racism was alive and well in Detroit when laid-off autoworkers and their sympathizers wrecked Hondas and Toyotas on the evening news and echoed the anti-Japan rhetoric left over from World War II. Cultural odorlessness exists in tension with techno-Orientalism to provide an ambivalent landscape of covert racism that is coded into the new technology spearheaded by Asian conglomerates. The Sony Portapak is an ideal product or apparatus to scrutinize when it comes to this ambivalence. Since the apocryphal story of Nam June Paik’s “invention” of video art as the first person to purchase a Sony Portapak, the world’s first portable video camera, and record and play back on the same day, Paik has become synonymous with video art, but his link to techno-Orientalism’s effect on Asian American history has been less known. And perhaps a further investigation into where the transnational and Asian American meet under these terms will yield new vistas in media and Asian American studies.

Paik’s work suggested the utopian possibilities of erasing racial boundaries, ironically through the discourse of techno-Orientalism and cultural odorlessness. In contrast, the erasure of race in art also becomes a burden, a notion that is suggested by the work of Laurel Nakadate, a mixed-race Asian American filmmaker and photographer who has become famous, not in the feature-film circuit, although she has made several low-budget independent films, but in the New York art world. I explore the problem of the postracial in Nakadate’s work. In particular, her video installations *I Wanna Be Your Midlife Crisis* (2002) and *Lessons 1–10* (2001), play on conventions of the male gaze, in which she, a conventionally attractive young woman in revealing clothing, performs various suggestive, yet nonsexual scenarios with middle-aged, white bachelors living on the fringes of society, whom she randomly picks up in small towns across America. The videos yield a typical feminist reading as engaging and being critical of cinematic and other visual codes of the look. By gazing directly and knowingly at the camera, Nakadate problematizes the gaze of the spectator in both classical Western painting and cinema.

Yet a critical element of Nakadate’s work and persona is the absence of a discourse of race. Nakadate’s avoidance of race as a complicating factor in her discourse of

power and objectification raises some questions about the state of Asian American identity and the politics of minority art production in America against a backdrop of neoliberal values. In the same way that the utopia of transnationalism gets reread in the Asian American context, the contemporary dream of postraciality cannot be extricated from the discourse of race, which troubles the white establishment art world. The poles of collectivity and individuality that undergird the discussion of Asian American moving-image art specifically are ultimately irrelevant to racialized identity and the production of art. And though collectivity in Asian American media production has historically been a political response to marginalization, elitism, and racism, it marginalizes those who work alone and whose work thematizes aloneness apart from the collective, despite being inevitably categorized as part of an Asian American collectivity. Laurel Nakadate is an example of an artist who has experienced success outside of Asian American collectivity, despite being included within a critical context that takes into account her mixed-raced identity as an important aspect of authorship. One of the controversial things about Nakadate, which I detail in my forthcoming research article “Relationality, Spectacle, and the End of Collectivity in Laurel Nakadate’s Post-Racial Identity Aesthetics” is that she will always be grouped as an Asian American artist, despite her seeming lack of awareness of it.<sup>8</sup> In 2014, the poet and art critic John Yau, writing for *Hyperallergic*, commented:

Now that the Whitney Biennial is finally over, did anyone notice that Patty Chang, Nikki S. Lee, and Laurel Nakadate weren’t included, just to mention three mid-career, Asian-American women artists who were conspicuously absent? Forget about younger Asian-American women artists like Jiha Moon and Chie Fueki—they don’t seem to stand a chance. And of course Mel Chin wasn’t in the Biennial, because what’s he ever done for you lately? What’s up with that?

When the ubiquitous term “people of color” is used, does the speaker or writer also mean Asian Americans—itsself a complicated category? Or do yellow and red get tossed out, like dirty bathwater? Or should Asian Americans simply check the box labeled “Other” and quietly and politely go—like all well-behaved Asian Americans—into the room marked INVISIBLE.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, as Yau points out, it doesn’t matter if an Asian American artist disavows race; she will be grouped as such because of an inherent institutional marginalization. And even despite the well-documented continuation of institutional racism and gender marginalization in the art world, Nakadate and others refute the need to address this either in their work or outside of it. For example, in her more recent show of photographs, *Strangers and Relations* (2014), Nakadate eschews her Asianness altogether not only by not appearing in the images—a first—but also by taking photographs exclusively of her relatives on her white American mother’s side of the family, which

8 Jun Okada, “Relationality, Spectacle, and the end of Collectivity” in Laurel Nakadate’s Post-Racial Identity Aesthetics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media*, ed. Lori Kido Lopez and Vincent N. Pham (New York: Routledge, 2017).

9 John Yau, “Postscript to the Whitney Biennial: An Asian American Perspective,” *Hyperallergic*.

she found using a DNA testing service. Nakadate bases this series of images on her white, or at least non-Asian, lineage, completely bypassing the so-called genetics of her father's Japanese American lineage, which the gallery that represents her mentions in brief.

She comments, "In my early videos, I physically appeared in the work. In these new portraits, I am allowing my body, my DNA, to navigate my direction; where I will travel and whom I will meet. These strangers, who are also distant cousins, share bits of DNA with me—in some ways, these images become modern day self-portraits. I see these strangers, who are also relatives, as little glimmers of the ancestors who connected us hundreds of years ago."<sup>10</sup> By creating a lineage of her own in her work as that starting with herself ("I physically appeared in the work") and moving on to images of her distant American relatives, she seems to suggest a celebration of white America with a subtle sweeping under the rug of the complications of her "DNA." And yet this work also points to Nakadate's own determination of her identity as mostly "Midwestern," having been born and raised in Iowa, rather than any significant racial or ethnic label, which in itself is a valid and often not-talked-about circumstance of racial identity in the United States: that is, not identifying with race at all. So despite her marginalization as an Asian American, which is a racial issue, her work at once deliberately eschews race while at the same time strangely and powerfully invoking it.

While one may regard this work as Nakadate passing for white or a further denial of her Asian Americanness, what is clear is that, as Yau asks, "Is it true that if you are a person of color (black, brown, yellow, or red), the only way to get into the Biennial is to make work that deals with racial identity in a way that is acceptable? Who determines that agenda? If you go by the Whitney's curatorial choices, the answer is obvious. You have to do what white curators want or you are going to remain invisible. So while everyone was applauding the number of mid-career abstract women artists who were in this year's Biennial, no one gave a hoot that they were all white."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, although one may critique Nakadate's choice to avoid the topic of race, by avoiding it, she does not fall into the trap of making race explicit in order to be recognized by the white establishment. Ultimately, this is a paradox relating to the question of contemporary Asian American media, and it seems that the postracial trend of resisting racial community and collectivity is both necessary and problematic. Nakadate's work reflects a post-Asian American aesthetic that attempts to dispel the notion that race matters but is ironically ignored because of it. It seems that for artists of color to transcend this institutional racism, they must continue making art that doesn't reference race. And collectives like Asian American film and video must grapple with the implications, but also the agency, reflected in such choices. \*

10 Laurel Nakadate, *Strangers and Relations*, May 11–July 26, 2013 (press release), Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, [http://www.tonkonow.com/nakadate2013\\_press.html](http://www.tonkonow.com/nakadate2013_press.html).

11 Yau, "Postscript."

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# Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies

by SHILPA DAVÉ

In the episode “Indians on TV” of the Netflix comedy series *Master of None* (2015–present), Emmy Award–winning cocreators Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang chronicle the trials and tribulations of an Indian American auditioning for acting jobs in the American television and film industry. The protagonist, Dev Shah (Ansari), who is an actor in New York City, questions himself and others about whether or not he should do a “funny Indian accent” to land a role. In discussions with his friends, his agent, casting directors, and network industry decision makers, he muses about why Indians and Asians are sidekicks in most Hollywood plotlines and why there can’t be two Indian characters who are friends and talk to each other in a mainstream comedy. The show also brings up the role of Asian American representations compared to representations of other racialized groups, and how nonwhite entertainers and actors operate when confronted with racism in the industry. The decision to use or not to use the constructed Indian accent translates into a cultural and professional crisis of identity for Dev. To perform the accent means success and recognition in standard Hollywood narratives, but it also denies the individuality, variety of experiences, and diversity of the actors who long to challenge the preexisting character stereotypes.

While representations of Asian Americans in the US media are dependent on visual politics, casting choices, and acting performances on-screen, another factor that marks Asian Americans, South Asians, and in particular Indian Americans as a racially identifiable and distinct group is the presence and performance of vocal and racial accents. Increasingly, as cultural and social debates proliferate about language and word usage, communication and political correctness, and racial, gendered, and class rhetoric, the study of the relationship between race and language and accent offers a lens through which to examine the complex and variable nature of racial hierarchies presented in and by mass media. *Master of None’s* narrative offers a frank appraisal of the racial representations of Indians and Asians in a complex hierarchy of racial and gendered relationships and depictions and specifically points to the prolific representation of Indian and Asian accents of English as a particular racializing trope for South Asian Americans and Asian Americans.<sup>1</sup>

1 Similarly, Stephen J. Kung’s film *A Leading Man* (2013) depicts the trials and tribulations of

The accent is representative of stereotypical roles that have enjoyed longevity and commercial success in Hollywood. The animated character, Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, (from *The Simpsons* [Fox, 1989–present]) has been on television since 1990 and has been followed by other incarnations of Indians speaking English with an accent on TV, including the popular Raj Koothrappali (played by Indian actor Kunal Nayyar) on the long-running comedy *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007–present). As I have previously argued, representations of Indians and South Asians have been racialized by their accents or “brown voices” in American TV and film.<sup>2</sup> “Brown voice” is the act of speaking in accented English associated with Indian nationals and immigrants and is a combination of linguistic and phonetic markers that include stress points on particular words, cultural references, and words out of order. The performance of brown voice is adopted and used by South Asians and non-South Asians (most famously by Hank Azaria as the voice actor of Apu). More significant, brown voice operates as a racializing characteristic among South Asians that suggests both foreignness and familiarity in a US context.

Historically, industry executives, producers, and casting agents tend to privilege physical difference or the visual contrast with the dominant white characters in their casting practices. In her book on colorblind television casting, Kristen J. Warner concurs, pointing out that “Hollywood logic discourse suggests progress in diversity is at the level of skin color.”<sup>3</sup> And yet although the casting process may be called colorblind, Warner points out that most of the roles are written as “race neutral” or characters who are written as white, so when a nonwhite actor is cast, the backstory or dialogue does not reflect ethnic or racial experiences. When race or ethnic roles are needed or emphasized, there is an inevitable exaggeration of racialized characteristics, or what I have called an accent.<sup>4</sup> Thus, accent is not limited to sound or the performance of brown voice; it can also be defined as an accessory or cultural characteristic that is designed to highlight a dominant look, feature, or “race neutral” (white, heteronormative, American middle class) story line, such as inserting a subplot about arranged marriage to contrast Indian cultural practices with American ideas of romance. On the screen in the episode of *Master of None*, the choices among the offered roles are slim for Dev, and the conflict for Asian American actors or emerging nonwhite actors is to take the job in the hope it will lead to a successful series with good money and exposure or wait for (or create) another role that allows for some variety and flexibility. So while some may have qualms about the roles, nonwhite actors are driven to take the roles that pay the bills. In “Indians on TV,” Dev’s fellow actor Ravi (Ravi Patel) first performs in brown voice but then later refuses to do the Indian accent, thus creating an opportunity for a job and a role for Dev if he does agree to use an accent.

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a Chinese American actor trying to forge a career in Hollywood, where success means playing stereotypical roles of Asians speaking broken English and the comic relief sidekick.

2 For more on accent as a racializing trope for South Asians, see *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013); and “Apu’s Brown Voice: Cultural Inflection and South Asian Accents,” in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, ed. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

3 Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (London: Routledge, 2015), 131.

4 Davé, *Indian Accents*.

Brown voice or accent racialization is most often used in conjunction with comedic narratives and representations. The proliferation of Asian American and South Asian American leading roles and characters who are identified as racial minorities and who address their race and ethnic background in the narrative arc of the story appear primarily in comedic genres. In progressive sitcom TV series that feature Asian Americans and Indian Americans in central roles (in front of as well as behind the camera as producers and writers) such as *The Mindy Project* (Fox, Hulu, 2013–present), *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC, 2014–present), and *Master of None* (Netflix, 2015–present), either the characters do not have stereotypical Indian or Asian accents or the writers do not make those accents the center of the comedic story line. *Fresh off the Boat* features a multigenerational family that includes an immigrant grandmother who doesn't speak English fluently, two parents who speak with either a regional American accent or fluent English, and children who speak in fluent English with cultural slang. The show is representative of the different kinds of accents and genealogies that exist in a multigenerational family. In *The Mindy Project* and *Master of None*, neither of the main characters speaks with an Indian accent. As the star, writer, and producer of her own series, Mindy Kaling makes headlines with the topics she tackles on her show that relate to women's body image and women in the workplace. Although it is not a principal part of her show, Kaling's character, Mindy Lahiri, talks about her racial and ethnic heritage and presents a racial alternative—and an alternative in terms of her age and profession—to the twentysomething heroines of romantic comedies who dominate the situation comedy genre. Aziz Ansari goes even further by writing stories for his show that contemplate how his cultural heritage and ethnic background inform his everyday life, from his consumer choices to his relationships to his profession. All these series represent the variety of voices that Asian Americans bring to everyday issues of love, family, education, and employment. The contemporary comedic genre therefore includes both stereotypical roles in which the “funny accent” is part of the comic appeal of Asian American and Indian American characters and a few progressive narratives that showcase alternative representations and voices.

Accents can act as cultural currency as popular references about what Indian Americans and Asian Americans in the United States look and sound like. But how does accent work outside of comedy in genres such as drama or action adventure? While the stereotypical roles of the sidekick, scientist, spiritual storyteller, foreign immigrant, and comic relief continue, there also is a trend to move away from casting visibly obvious racial or ethnic roles to the practice of casting physically ethnically ambiguous actors in television and film roles. Part of being ethnically ambiguous also means eliminating “brown voice” or racial vocal accents, or the process of accent neutralization.

In the call-center industry, the philosophy behind accent neutralization when speaking English is to separate how a person talks (their accent) from what a person is talking about (an identifiable place and nationality). The call center, which relies on vocal interactions between individuals, is useful for examining how accent is utilized as a similar racializing trope both in and outside of US national borders. In her analysis of call-center training handbooks, Claire Cowie identifies different standards of proficiency of Indian English but ultimately workers were asked to develop a “neutral”

accent—one that is not necessarily associated with American English or British, or with Indian English.<sup>5</sup> Training is not necessarily about mimicking the American accent but instead about achieving a “neutral” voice that is dependent on pronunciation and phonetic issues. The idea behind this “neutrality” is to eliminate traces of regional or geographical raciality and instead focus on speaking about cultural norms and topics, ranging from the weather to sporting events that might be relevant to a customer. Social exchanges are designed to distract from the phonetics and instead focus on the subject, to alleviate anxiety about differences and instead allow for a reliable transfer of information. To help think about the intersection between representations of racial difference and language, and identity, I find the work of Mary Beltrán helpful for discussing how the representations of racial and ethnic ambiguity are also intertwined with racial accents.

In her article on bilingualism and racelessness in the *Fast and Furious* film franchise, Beltrán points to Asian American director Justin Lin as influential in the Hollywood industry because he insisted on including Spanish-speaking characters and subtitles in the fourth *Fast and Furious* (2009) film. He also included Portuguese in *Fast Five* (2011). In Beltrán’s interview with Lin, he explains that even in an action adventure film, it is important to show that Americans live in a global world where they will encounter multiple languages besides English.<sup>6</sup> And yet, despite the progressive gestures toward multilingualism and globalization along the lines of class, the narrative structure of the big-budget action adventure film continues to privilege white, heteronormative masculinity and American English speakers as the norm. The ensemble team assembles for special jobs, but individually they live on the margins and in exile unless they form alliances with the established government systems. Beltrán observes that the white and “off white” heroes “benefit from a cultural flexibility that entails embracing traits often associated with Latino/as including Spanish fluency, placing family loyalty above all else, and enacting a personal spirituality in relation to a higher power.”<sup>7</sup> This idea of cultural flexibility is similar to the idea of racialized accents, a concept related not only to vocal accents but also to cultural accents, which evoke difference or foreignness but can be contained in the structural compositions of Hollywood scripts. This idea of disembodiment, or of separating out racial markers as performative accents or characteristics, is a long-standing practice in the representations of Asian Americans and other racial minorities in Hollywood and television, which frequently has white actors performing blackface, brownface, yellowface, and redface to play different races and ethnicities. The addition is that the emphasis is less on the physical acquisition of racial traits and more about language flexibility and accessibility as a heroic and culturally universal trait. Language works hand in hand with physical performances to achieve the appearance of racelessness or a race-neutral position for the roles in action adventure narratives.

5 Claire Cowie, “The Accents of Outsourcing: The Meanings of ‘Neutral’ in the Indian Call Center Industry,” *World English* 26, no. 3 (2007): 323.

6 Mary Beltrán, “Fast and Bilingual: Fast and Furious and the Latinization of Racelessness,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 1 (2013): 94.

7 *Ibid.*, 89.

When combining the call-center idea of a neutral accent with representations of Asian Americans and South Asian Americans in dramatic roles, one way to read some of these representations is to note that when characters speak with a “neutral accent,” the plotlines erase or bury racial and ethnic markers that include family, friends, cultural practices, and holidays. Although a character may be Asian American, such as Glenn Rhee (Stephen Yuen) from *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–present) or Indian American Alex Parrish (Priyanka Chopra) on *Quantico* (ABC, 2015–present), or even have an Indian name such as Kalinda Sharma (Archie Panjabi) on *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–2016), the roles obfuscate or bury the racial backstory in favor of an assimilated story line. As A. Anness points out, “An accent becomes an accent only when transportation allows one to cross regions of speech; it is an accent only when juxtaposed with others.”<sup>8</sup> Without a defining racializing characteristic of a vocal accent (for either comedic or dramatic purposes) and the absence of cultural or ethnic topics, race and accent are neutralized, and the result is visibly physically different characters that reflect a diverse world but support the existing racial status quo (comfortable racial ambiguity) or perhaps the creation of a new set of intersectional hierarchies that are predicated on language skills (cultural flexibility).

Hollywood writers and producers are engaging in a type of racial accent neutralization for Indian Americans and Asian Americans in Hollywood blockbusters such as *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (J.J. Abrams, 2013) and *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015). One of the foremost villains in the Star Trek universe is Khan Noonien Singh. The original 1960s TV series and 1982 film *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* (Nicolas Meyer, 1982) featured Mexican actor Ricardo Montalbán playing the charming and diabolical South Asian villain, who, ironically, believed in the genetic superiority of his people to overcome all odds. In J. J. Abrams’s reboot, he cast white British actor Benedict Cumberbatch as the iconic villain. Unless the audience knew the original series, there was no explanation or backstory in the film to explain why the character possessed the name Khan, and in this new universe he is playing a highly intelligent and coldhearted terrorist. In one sense, his character has been racially neutralized, and yet even though he is visually a white actor, his cultural characteristics include a Muslim-sounding name, Khan, and his actions proclaim him to be a marginalized other and a threat to our heroes. Even more puzzling is the casting in *The Martian* of the black British actor Chiwetel Ejiofor as Vincent Kapoor (a multiracial character with a Baptist father and Hindu mother) in place of the original character in the book, Venkat Kapoor, the Indian American director of Mars operations at NASA, and white, blonde actress Mackenzie Davis as Mindy Park, who is originally a Korean American NASA engineer in the novel.<sup>9</sup> The Media Action Network for Asian Americans criticized director Ridley Scott for this “whitewashing” of Asian American roles. As Guy Aoki

8 A. Anness, *Neutral Accent: How Language, Labor, and Life Become Global* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 4.

9 See Dave McNary, “‘The Martian’ Slammed over ‘Whitewashing’ Asian American Roles,” *Variety*, October 8, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/the-martian-white-washing-asian-american-ridley-scott-1201614155/>. This type of race neutralization of replacing original Asian American characters with white female actors in Hollywood films continues in *Aloha* (Cameron Crowe, 2015), *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016), and *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017).

asked, “Was Ridley Scott not comfortable having two sets of Asian Americans talking to each other? So few projects are written specifically with Asian American characters in them and he’s now changed them to a white woman and a black man.”<sup>10</sup> This is a return to Aziz Ansari’s question in his series of why two Indian Americans can’t be seen talking to each other in a television comedy. It clearly can work in comedic forms, but the film industry and dramatic genres have been more resistant to casting more than one nonwhite character except in an ensemble series.<sup>11</sup>

Examining accent neutralization, the centering of vocal accents and sound, and their relationship to language is a vital and important method in rethinking how we examine representations of Asian Americans in the media. Visual representations are still dominant in Hollywood casting practices and audience recognition, but by rethinking racial representations through the use of the accent, we are able to see connections between other ethnic representations and to open up alternative forms of research that lead to a larger discussion about performance, national identity, and media industry practices, and to think about how accent influences our perceptions of racial difference. \*

10 Benjamin Lee, “Ridley Scott Accused of ‘Whitewashing’ Asian Roles in ‘The Martian,’” *The Guardian*, October 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/09/the-martian-ridley-scott-accused-whitewashing-asian-roles>.

11 *Hawaii Five-O* (CBS, 2010–present) does have at least three recurring Asian American characters, but the lead detectives are two white actors.

## Contributors

**Sylvia Shin Huey Chong** is associate professor of English and American studies at the University of Virginia, where she also directs the minor in Asian Pacific American studies. Her publications include *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Duke University Press, 2012) and articles on Sam Peckinpah, Oliver Stone, Michael Cimino, violence and pornography, the Virginia Tech massacre, American Orientalism, hopelessness in psychoanalysis, and American and Southern exceptionalism. She also coedited a recent special issue of the *Asian American Literary Review* titled “(Re)Collecting the Vietnam War.” She is currently working on a book-length study on cinematic yellow face and its coemergence with social scientific discourses on race and culture in the mid-twentieth century.

**Shilpa Davé** is assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and an assistant professor of media studies and American studies at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (University of Illinois Press, 2013) and coeditor of *Global Asian American Popular Cultures* (New York University Press, 2016) and *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture* (New York University Press, 2005).

**Peter X Feng** is associate professor of English at the University of Delaware. He is the author of *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Duke University Press, 2002), the editor of *Screening Asian Americans* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), and a coeditor of *Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora* (Temple University Press, 2009). He has published essays on Asian American cinema in *Cineaste*, *Amerasia Journal*, *Jump Cut*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and *Cinema Journal*.

**Brian Hu** is the artistic director of Pacific Arts Movement, the presenter of the San Diego Asian Film Festival. He received his PhD in cinema and media studies from UCLA and has published in *Screen*, *Velvet Light Trap*, *Film Quarterly*, and other journals. He teaches at the University of San Diego.

**LeiLani Nishime** is an associate professor of communication at the University of Washington. She is the author of *Undercover Asian: Multiracial Asian Americans in Visual Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 2015) and coeditor of *Global Asian American Popular Cultures* (2016) and *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture* (2005), both from New York University Press. Her work has appeared in several edited collections and journals, including *Amerasia Journal*, *Cinema Journal*, *Communication Theory*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *International and Intercultural Communication*, *MELUS*, and *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

**Jun Okada** is associate professor in the Department of English at State University of New York, where she teaches film studies and writing. Her book *Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements* was published by Rutgers University Press

in 2015. She has published essays and reviews in such journals as *Cinema Journal*, *Film Quarterly*, *Velvet Light Trap*, and *Screen*.

**Vincent N. Pham** is an assistant professor of communication in the Department of Civic Communication and Media at Willamette University. He received his PhD from University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in 2011 and is coauthor of *Asian Americans and the Media* (Polity Press, 2009) with Kent Ono. He is coediting (with Lori K. Lopez) *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media*, set for release in spring 2017.

**Celine Parreñas Shimizu**, an award-winning filmmaker and film scholar, is professor of cinema at San Francisco State University. She has published numerous articles on race, sex, and cinema in *Concentric*, *Frontiers*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *positions*, *Sexualities*, *Signs*, *Theatre Journal*, *Wide Angle*, and *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*. Her books include *The Feminist Porn Book* (Feminist Press, 2013), *Straitjacket Sexualities* (Stanford University Press, 2012), and *The Hypersexuality of Race* (2007, Duke University Press). Third World Newsreel and Progressive Films distribute her internationally screened films.