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Practitioner Essay

Asian Americans and the Media

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Abstract

The representation of Asian Americans in mainstream media has undergone dramatic change in the past two decades, and this can be expected to continue in the next twenty-five years in all forms of entertainment and media. A combination of the rapidly increasing numbers of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs), the growing recognition by traditional media of the economic power of AAPI consumers, and the ease of entry into content creation and distribution afforded to new voices by new technologies will likely result by 2040 in a rich diversity of stories by and about Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, and mixed-race AAPIs.

Seeing AAPIs in the Media: Why Does It Matter?

> It was so rare to see a real Asian American on television when I was a kid [in the 1960s] that we had a family ritual when one was spotted. It constituted what I now call an "Asian sighting." A hoot went out: "Hey, come see this, look now!" …
>
> We only shouted when we saw regular Asian Americans like us, on the news, game shows, variety programs, or beauty pageants. We would then drop everything and make a frenzied rush to the tube to see who had entered that mysterious TV land where people of Asian descent were virtually non-existent.
>
> (Helen Zia, 2000: 252-3)

The entertainment industry was dominated by white people from its inception. Countless studies by government commissions, civil rights groups, and academics have documented the fact that, for several decades running, people of color were not employed in Hollywood by anything close to their percentage of the general population (Children Now, 2004; Chin et al., 2004, 2006; Dargis, 2015; GLAAD, 2014; Hunt, 2003; Kerner Commission, 1968; Smith et al., 2015, 2016;

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977, 1979). And when they were depicted, especially in movies, people of color were usually relegated to racial stereotypes, background roles, or characters that supported white lead characters.[1]

In television, the story for AAPIs has historically been more a problem of invisibility than racist stereotypes. George Takei portraying a starship's helmsman in *Star Trek* (1966–9) was a rare early example of an Asian American in a regular role on a TV series. It was not until 1994 that *All-American Girl*, the first Asian American family sitcom, debuted but it was canceled after only nineteen episodes. More than twenty long years would pass before another AAPI family would have their own show on network television.

Popular culture, especially the visual media of television and film, wields enormous power and influence over public perceptions and attitudes. To the extent Hollywood depicts AAPIs as likeable and relatable people with the same kinds of lives, loves, hopes, fears, dreams, and challenges as other Americans, the public will be more inclined to view AAPI Americans as fellow citizens rather than as the perpetual foreigner, the submissive China doll, the sexless math nerd, or, for Pacific Islanders, the huge football player or the hula dancer (Wu, 2002). The result would not only enhance the self-esteem of AAPIs; it would redound to our benefit in public policies that embrace AAPIs as full participants in the democratic process, just as the number of AAPIs in the voting electorate is poised to dramatically increase (Ong and Ong, 2015).

Progress in "Color TV" Achieved through Advocacy and Economics

At least since the civil rights era, communities of color have complained that American television shows were overwhelmingly populated with white people and failed to live up to the potential of "color TV." This general lack of diversity in network television came to a head in the summer of 1999. That was when the four major television networks—ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC—offered a total of twenty-six new fall shows but not a single person of color was cast in a leading role on any of them (Braxton, 1999). Understanding how and why this changed over the past fifteen years can provide lessons for media representations in the future.

The reaction by community activists to this all-white television schedule was swift and explosive.[2] A national, multiethnic coalition,

including the Asian Pacific American Media Coalition (APAMC), was formed to demand that the networks take concrete steps that would lead to lasting change.[3] Faced with the embarrassing spectacle of an all-white slate of new shows and a well-organized multiethnic coalition poised to launch viewer and/or advertiser boycotts, ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC decided to act. Each agreed to come up with specific and wide-ranging policies and programs to increase opportunities in network television for people of color, both in front of and behind the cameras.[4]

In their mandated annual meetings with the network executives, APAMC activists touted the economic benefits of diversifying, as a means to attract a variety of audience members who may want to watch characters who looked like they do. The APAMC invoked Asian Americans' enormous economic clout as a boon to TV advertisers, pointing out that AAPIs' buying power is expected to hit one trillion dollars by 2018, and that the U.S. Asian market already outshines the entire economies of all but eighteen countries (Nielson Company, 2015a). The APAMC also argued that, in light of the dramatic demographic changes taking place in America, all-white shows were missing opportunities to appeal to an ever-expanding nonwhite audience.

Gradually, diversification in casting in prime-time network series began to pay dividends in increased viewership, critical acclaim, and the opening up of new storylines. After several years of being relegated mostly to roles as sidekicks and other minor supporting characters, AAPIs in recent years have been increasingly included in series as an integral part of ensembles. In 2011, the APAMC challenged the networks to, within three seasons, create, and broadcast television series that actually *starred* AAPIs.

In the 2014–15 season, ABC made a big bet on diversity. ABC premiered *Selfie* (featuring a budding romance between John Cho and Karen Gillan), and family sitcoms based on a Taiwanese American immigrant family (*Fresh Off the Boat*), a multigenerational Latino family (*Cristela*), and a suburban African American family (*Black-ish*). *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Black-ish* proved to be substantial hits and validated ABC's strategy to, as then-network president Paul Lee remarked, put on shows that "reflect America. In a way, it's not so much diversity as it is authenticity" (Littleton, 2014).

Fox also launched *Empire*, broadcast a series centered on an African American family with a burgeoning hip-hop music dynasty, whose ratings were a genuine phenomenon (Adalian, 2015). The APAMC has been relying for years on the equivalent of the *Field of Dreams* pitch: "If

you include us, we will watch." Previously, the APAMC had only anecdotal evidence to back up our promise. But in the 2014–15 season, we finally secured Nielsen data to demonstrate the truth of our assertion, proving that the AAPI community was more likely to watch shows that featured Asian Americans.[5]

With the proven success of diverse shows, the networks aggressively sought to include people of color in most of their pilot shows being considered for the 2015–16 season. The results reflect remarkable gains for AAPIs and other people of color in prime time. Never have so many AAPIs been featured as the stars or lead characters in television series at the same time,[6] and this portends a future in which shows reflecting AAPIs and other people of color will be considered "normative" and expected.

Making Our Own Content

> Asian Americans—many of whom arrived in the U.S. from native countries with advanced technology attitudes—are avid adopters of digital devices and social media. . . .In the fourth quarter of 2014, while Asian Americans spent less time than the general population on traditional TV . . . they spent significantly more time on multimedia streaming devices, Internet on the computer and watching video online either on their computer or smartphone.
>
> (Nielsen Company, 2015a: 23-5)

Undoubtedly due in part to being historically underrepresented in traditional media, some Asian Americans have seized the initiative to create their own programming on new platforms such as YouTube. This has been aided by the fact that AAPIs are adopting new technologies earlier and at a greater rate than other groups. It is not surprising, then, that Asian Americans have come to dominate social media, regularly using YouTube at twice the rate of a composite "All 18+" group and Twitter 3.5 times more often than whites (Mayeda, 2012).

What appears to be especially appealing particularly to younger AAPIs is content that was largely absent on mainstream outlets such as sketch comedy segments featuring Asian Americans and short videos depicting Asian Americans in romantic relationships. Among YouTube's top stars are comedians Ryan Higa (NigaHiga), with more than 2.3 billion total views and nearly sixteen million subscribers; Freddie Wong (Freddiew), with more than 1.2 billion total views and nearly 7.7 million subscribers; and Kevin Wu (KevJumba), with 360 million total

views and three million subscribers. Other popular sources of YouTube content are Wong Fu Productions, a group of young filmmakers who specialize in vignettes and music videos about AAPIs in relationships, and the Fung Brothers, two guys who create music videos and talk about girls, food, and Asian American issues. Film director Justin Lin (*Better Luck Tomorrow*, *Fast and Furious* films) also has partnered with Google to develop a popular YouTube channel targeting Asian American viewers, called YOMYOMF (based on the pop culture blog, You Offend Me You Offend My Family).

YouTube has also become a very popular distribution outlet for aspiring musicians of all backgrounds and, due in part to Asian American overrepresentation among YouTube users, has made stars out of several young Asian American singer-songwriters, such as David Choi, Kina Grannis, Legaci, and Run River North. The remarkable popularity of music from young girl and boy groups from Korea ("K-Pop") can undoubtedly be attributed in part to the emergence of YouTube as an international music hub. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this phenomenon more than Psy, whose irresistibly catchy tune and amusing music video for "Gangnam Style" has, as of March 1, 2016, commanded an astonishing 2.53 billion views on YouTube.

Finally, YouTube illustrates the economic power of attracting an underrepresented group to content they can't get anywhere else. As the most popular makeup/style celebrity on YouTube, Michelle Pham has now parlayed her Internet fame into a partnership with global brand Endemol to launch an international lifestyle network that will be made available on multiple platforms including Roku, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Twitter.

Peering into a Future Driven by Marketplace Demand, Entrepreneurial Opportunities, and Diverse Storytelling

> The Hollywood race and gender problem documented in this report is nothing new. From the earliest days of the industry, white males have dominated the plum positions in front of and behind the camera, thereby marginalizing women and minorities. . . . What's new is that business as usual in the Hollywood industry may soon be unsustainable. Evidence from this report (and its predecessor in the series) shows clearly that America's increasingly diverse audiences prefer diverse content created with the input of diverse talent. Diversity sells.
>
> (Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramon, 2015: 53)

Young millennials (roughly those born between 1980 and 2000) are growing up in a media landscape that bears little resemblance to the ones experienced by their parents or grandparents. They don't find it remarkable to see an Asian American on television; they find it odd and out of date when a series is set in a hospital or a college or in a big city and does not include AAPIs as major players. They know that AAPIs are involved in a variety of romantic relationships, with each other and with non-Asians alike, and they take it for granted that these relationships should be depicted on television and in movies.

Given the rapidly changing demographics of America, these millennials are increasingly likely to get what they demand. Inclusive of mixed-race AAPIs, the AAPI population is projected to grow from 20.5 million in 2015 to 35.7 million by 2040. As a proportion of the total population, nearly one out of every ten Americans will be AAPI and there will be a dramatic transformation from a mostly foreign-born population to one that is younger and U.S.-born (Ong and Ong, 2015). While AAPIs are the fastest-growing racial group, Latinos/Hispanics follow closely behind and start with a larger base. The result is an America that is rapidly becoming "majority minority."

Armed with the inexorable march to a browning America and data confirming that audiences want to consume content that includes them in an authentic way, advocacy groups will continue to push for stories and roles that depict all people of color as fully dimensional beings each with our own valuable contributions to American culture.

Traditional media gatekeepers who fail to respond to these demographic shifts will leave dollars on the table and their work will be increasingly viewed as old-fashioned. These are lessons that must be learned at all levels and in all art forms, from television and film, to music and books, to dance and theater, to new forms of content driven by new technologies.

As is the case in television, the movie industry is finally beginning to realize the potency of appealing to a broader demographic audience. The blockbuster *Fast and Furious* motion picture franchise represents a shining example of this point. These movies tapped into the fact that people of color bought 45 percent of all movie tickets in the United States in 2013. An astonishing 75 percent of the audience for both *Fast and Furious 6* and *Furious 7* were nonwhite, comprised of ample proportions of Latinos, African Americans, and AAPIs. The movies also proved that multiracial casts can lead to higher appeal overseas: respectively, 70 percent and 77 percent of *Fast and Furious 6*'s and *Furious 7*'s box office

was earned in foreign markets (Lee, 2015). And, "[t]he increased importance of the international marketplace is also affecting casting," with Asian and Asian American actors being employed in Hollywood films to increase their appeal in Asian countries (Brock, 2014). With the top Asian countries cumulatively eclipsing North America as the top film market, the value of Asian American actors in movie casts will surely rise in the future (McDuling, 2015).

Of course, Hollywood studios are still heavily reliant on the perceived power of stars, and until more AAPI actors are given the chance to show they can generate big ticket sales, change may come slowly. The motion picture industry is still an area that will require continued advocacy. In February 2016, capitalizing on the controversy generated by that year's Academy Awards' acting nominations—which, for the second straight year, were comprised of no nonwhite actors or actresses—the same multiethnic coalition that advocated for diversity and inclusion in network TV announced a new initiative to go after the top film studios (Robb, 2016).

However, even if Hollywood is not yet providing a steady diet of movies featuring AAPIs, the number of independent films starring and created by Asian Americans is increasing. Even a decade ago, most of the offerings at Asian American film festivals would consist of documentaries, shorts, or movies from Asia. But today, such film festivals regularly offer dozens of full-length feature films by AAPI filmmakers that star Asian Americans (Cullado, 2015). Not coincidentally, the number of Asian American film festivals has been growing so that folks in some twenty urban areas across the United States can look forward to seeing these new features at least on an annual basis (Niwano, 2015). Also, for everyone with a broadband Internet connection, many of these independent films are being distributed using streaming and/or video on demand.

As for the stage, American theaters have remained overwhelmingly white in their casts and production personnel for decades. To change this dynamic, East West Players (EWP), the nation's longest-running theater of color (celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 2015), recently issued a "51% Preparedness Plan for the American Theatre," (East West Players, 2015). EWP's 51% Plan challenges all theaters to commit to a goal of achieving, within five years, a level of 51 percent of its artists and production personnel to be people of color, women, or people under thirty-five years of age. Although its mission focuses on AAPI communities, EWP is specifically trying to address multiracial and mixed-race audiences, and

is increasingly casting multiculturally; it now boasts an audience that is about 46 percent non-Asian and among the most diverse in the country. EWP's challenge to other theaters has led to more than two dozen theaters (as of June 2015) endorsing the plan (East West Players, 2015). Perhaps coincidentally, but notable nonetheless, the 2015–16 season on Broadway featured a number of plays with diverse casts, including multiple Tony Award winner *The King and I*, *Allegiance* (a new musical about the World War II Japanese American internment camps starring George Takei, Lea Salonga, and Telly Leung), Gloria Estefan's *On Your Feet!*, Jennifer Hudson's *The Color Purple*, and Lin-Manuel Miranda's multiracially cast musical, *Hamilton* (Rooney, 2015).

As far as new forms of media are concerned, AAPIs' growing numbers and economic clout make us well positioned to be a coveted audience for both content creators and their associated advertisers. This can be seen in the rise of the website Buzzfeed. Buzzfeed has made a conscious attempt to appeal to AAPI audiences by tackling subjects such as "Asian Americans Split Over Affirmative Action Complaint" and "The Pain of Casual Racism," in addition to content aimed at more specific ethnic groups such as "22 Signs You Grew Up with Immigrant Chinese Parents," and "29 Polynesian Celebrities Who Are Taking Over Hollywood" (Boykiv, 2015). These strategies have worked so well that NBCUniversal has invested $200 million in Buzzfeed with an agreement to create and share content (Kosoff, 2015).

Video games are another area where AAPIs are uniquely poised to make gains. AAPIs play video games at a higher rate than the general population and a number of prominent video game creators are Asian or Asian American. Yet, a Nielsen study found that Asian Americans are the most dissatisfied among all groups in the level of representation and inclusion of characters of their race (Nielsen Company, 2015b). Nielsen representative Nicole Pike remarked, "This is a consumer call to action. If you can be more relevant to a particular group, that's going to increase your likelihood of keeping them within your franchise" (Burger, 2015).

In the tech world in general, Asian Americans dominate in certain respects. Asian American comprise one-half of all tech jobs in the Silicon Valley and, while they remain severely underrepresented in the executive suites given their numbers in the workforce, several Indian Americans are now CEOs of some of the most prominent tech companies in the world. These include Sundar Pichai, Satya Nadella, Sanjay Mehrotra, Sahntanu Narayen, and Rajeev Suri, the CEOs of Google, Microsoft,

SanDisk, Adobe, and Nokia, respectively (Lien, 2015; Nakaso, 2012; Yang, 2015a). Of course, having an Asian American as the head of a tech company will not lead automatically to more and better depictions of AAPIs through those companies' products or services, but unlike traditional media where the owners and CEOs are predominately white, having such a substantial presence of Asian Americans as key workers, shareholders, and chief executives of tech companies should provide a much more conducive environment for program creators to include AAPIs as a normal part of their stories in the new media of the future.

With the new opportunities opening up for content including and reflecting AAPIs, what will such content look like by 2040? I predict that programming created by both AAPIs and non-AAPIs will reflect a wide variety of themes and portrayals, as content creators experiment to try to find what may be popular among a wide number of people or to hit upon a show that appeals intensely to a smaller community niche. No longer will Asian Americans have to rely on a single program such as *All-American Girl* to perform the impossible task of representing everything about their community. A show such as *Fresh Off the Boa*t can depict the Taiwanese American immigrant experience without having to worry that it does not reflect the Vietnamese refugee experience. Meanwhile, Mindy Kaling's *The Mindy Project* can revolve around an assimilated Indian American woman without focusing on race or ethnicity, while Aziz Ansari's *Master of None* can consciously address racial themes by portraying assimilated Indian American and Chinese American male characters struggling with their immigrant parents and trying to find acting roles that do not involve racial stereotypes.

Because roughly half of the Asian American population will be U.S.-born and half foreign-born by 2040, Asian Americans will undoubtedly continue to be depicted at times as immigrants, speaking with accents, and so forth, but almost certainly we also will see AAPIs portrayed as fully assimilated Americans in a variety of occupations and settings, sometimes touching upon their ethnicity and sometimes not. In other words, I predict that well before 2040, AAPIs will routinely appear on TV as ordinary Americans, but also at times will take part in telling stories that uniquely reflect their ethnic heritage. Program creators, increasingly including AAPIs, will explore their freedom to tell whatever stories interest them and will find success when such stories hit upon authentic themes and emotions.

In addition, I predict that in the coming decades there will be an increase in representation in the media of mixed-race people, including

multiracial AAPIs. Between 2015 and 2040, the Asian American Alone population will increase by 69 percent, but the multiracial Asian American population will increase by 104 percent, one and half times faster than Asian Americans Alone (Ong and Ong, 2015). The rapid growth of multiracial Asian Americans will occur among children and young adults and as that population grows and enters the eighteen-to-forty-nine-year-old demographic sweet spot coveted by advertisers, it should become a potent target for content creators. It has been observed that there are advantages these days for print models to be "ethnically ambiguous" so that a wider group of people can identify with the model (La Ferla, 2003). Similarly, I believe that multiracial Asian American actors will be increasingly in demand so that they might appeal to multiracial Asian American viewers as well as audiences of different races.

In many ways and especially on the coasts and in large urban areas, the future is already here for AAPIs. We can see ourselves reflected on television shows, increasingly in lead roles. We can see AAPIs in movies, if not always at the multiplex, then at film festivals or streaming on demand. We may have access to live performances of AAPIs in plays and concert halls. And AAPI content is always only a few mouse clicks, tablet swipes, or mobile phone taps away on YouTube and other social media sites.

Given the demographic trend lines discussed exhaustively elsewhere in this journal, AAPIs increasingly will be a force to be reckoned with, both as content consumers and content creators. The days of spotting the rare, marginalized Asian face in the media are over. Working in coalition with other groups or otherwise, AAPIs can tout our growing numbers and unprecedented buying power, domestically and internationally, to insist upon our inclusion in all media. We can use our dominant position in new technologies to present our own programming and to insist that others' content include us in order to access our media. We can look forward to 2040 as an era of AAPIs flexing our economic might and demanding to take our rightful place in the multimedia landscape as full-fledged Americans. The "new normal" of the future will include AAPIs—both monoracial and multiracial—as central characters telling our own stories and adding new and beautiful layers to what it means to be an American.

Notes

1. Thus, the 1930s gave us evil Fu Manchu and Dragon Lady characters, while the World War II era included propaganda films featuring slit-eyed,

buck-toothed "Jap" soldiers. Even when such blatantly racist depictions ceased being the norm, Asian Americans were often not even allowed to play ourselves but instead were portrayed in movies as gross caricatures by white actors wearing "yellowface" makeup. When Asian Americans were given roles in Hollywood movies through most of the twentieth century, they often appeared as the butt of jokes or stereotyped as experts in the martial arts.

2. The NAACP threatened a viewer boycott and a lawsuit asserting that the absence of people of color on television violated the mandate in the Communications Act of 1934 that broadcasters operate in the public interest. Latino groups announced a two-week "brown-out" encouraging the Latino community to avoid watching network television during that period. Asian American activists in the Los Angeles area held a press conference to endorse the brown-out and encourage the AAPI community to support Asian American artists as an alternative (see MAANA, 2000; NAACP, 2001).
3. Participating on behalf of African Americans was the NAACP. The Latinos formed an umbrella organization called the National Latino Media Council (NLMC). The APAMC is an umbrella organization consisting of AAPI civil rights and media/entertainment groups. The Native American community was represented by American Indians in Film and Television (AIFT).
4. These included commitments to gather and to share with the NAACP, NLMC, APAMC, and AIFT detailed data on the racial/ethnic composition of actors in regular or recurring roles; devise pipeline programs designed to provide more opportunities for diverse writers and directors to be trained, mentored, and employed; create diverse casting showcases in which minority actors would have a chance to demonstrate their talent; and agree to promote and hire more people of color as creative executives and to create a new vice president position to oversee their diversity initiatives.
5. A snapshot of Nielsen data during the fall of 2014 showed that four of the top six television shows watched by AAPIs were those that starred or featured AAPIs in significant roles, including *The Mindy Project*, *Selfie*, and *Marvel: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* After *Fresh Off the Boat* premiered in February 2015, the author received some remarkable Nielsen data showing that that series over-indexed for AAPIs by 168% to 218% (*i.e.*, AAPIs watched the show at a percentage far in excess of their population). *Fresh Off the Boat* also drew new audiences to watch television on Tuesday nights (see Yang, 2015a; Nielson, 2015).
6. ABC: Fresh Off the Boat, Dr. Ken (a second Asian American family sitcom on the same network), Quantico and Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.; CBS: Elementary, Hawaii Five-O, Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders, and Rush Hour; Fox: Lookinglass (featuring two AAPIs) and Cooper Barrett's Guide to Surviving Life. Also notable were Asian American males playing romantic roles in CW's *My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and Netflix's second season

of *The Unbreakable Kimmie Schmidt*; Steven Yuen (playing Glenn Rhee) in the AMC cable network's *Walking Dead*; Maori actor Cliff Curtis in AMC series *Fear the Walking Dead*; Daniel Wu in *Into the Badlands*; Aziz Ansari's new sitcom *Master of None*; and part-Samoan actor Dwayne Johnson in HBO's dramedy *Ballers*.

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