UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

# There's Something About Lucy:

# On Asian American Cultural Politics, Gendered Racialization, and Neoliberal Critique in *Ally McBeal* and *Elementary*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of

the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts

in Asian American Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

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Professor Kyungwon Hong, Chair

This project explores the cultural politics of Asian American representation on mainstream television through the examination of two characters Chinese American actress Lucy Liu has played – Ling Woo from *Ally McBeal* and Joan Watson from *Elementary.* By employing a reading practice that refuses the conventional language of representation, I instead unpack the work that culture performs affectively, ideologically, and politically. I contend that Ling and Joan both resonate as Asian American racial formations in that they are economically hyperproductive but emotionally damaged and consequently inhuman. In engaging with interdisciplinary scholarship on Asian American cultural studies, critiques of neoliberalism, and theories of affect, I am able to delineate the importance of cultural productions as a site for articulating processes of gendered racialization, exposing neoliberal violence(s) and forming new desires, epistemes, and subjectivities.

This thesis of Derek Vincent Lu is approved.

Victor Bascara

Purnima Mankekar

Kyungwon Hong, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

This project is dedicated to myself at thirteen years old, who dreamed of having superpowers like Clark Kent because I felt different from everyone around me.

And to Mrs. Rani Chandran: I know you're smiling down on me.

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## Introduction: Situating "There's Something About Lucy"

> I'm proud of my heritage, yes, but I think there's always a danger when people put you on a pedestal. Especially when you're just trying to live out your dreams. The intention is not to represent Asian Americans but to be an Asian American who is working as an actress. People often confuse the two.
>
> - Lucy Liu, on being an Asian American star[1]

Lucy Alexis Liu first gained widespread recognition as a series regular on the zeitgeisty serial dramatic comedy *Ally McBeal* (David E. Kelley, 1997-2002). Her breakthrough turn as the cruel, vindictive, eroticized, and exotically sensual lawyer Ling Woo catapulted her to stardom. Due to the incredible ratings and critical success of *Ally McBeal,*[2] Liu would go on to become the most prolific and recognizable Asian American actress of the 1990s and early 2000s. Her bankability and popularity as a bona fide star enabled her to land one of the lead roles in Columbia Pictures' big-screen remake of the 1970s serial crime drama of the same name, *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000), alongside Hollywood A-listers Cameron Diaz and Drew Barrymore. For a while, her star power seemed to be increasingly on the rise, as the blockbuster success of the first installment of *Charlie's Angels* led to the production of a sequel, as well as a starring role in Quentin Tarantino's martial arts film *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* (2003). However, just as rapidly as she climbed the ranks of Hollywood's elite, her career stalled, and Hollywood

[1] Lucy Liu, Interview with CBS News Entertainment, Feb 5, 1999.

[2] *Ally McBeal* averaged 13.8 million viewers per episode in season two and placed within the top 20 of the Nielsen ratings. "TV Winners & Losers," *Entertainment Weekly,* Time Inc., Jun. 4, 1999.

directors and producers started showing a general disinterest in casting her in the hyperstylized action films akin to those that had made her a star. Aside from a short-lived lead role in a *Sex and the City* inspired series about New York power women in 2007 called *Cashmere Mafia* (Kevin Wade, 2007), Liu would not return to primetime until 2012, when she signed on for a supporting role on the critically acclaimed police drama *Southland,* for which she won the Critics' Choice Television Award for Best Drama Guest Actress. And later that year, she was cast as the first female, Chinese American version of Dr. Watson in CBS' modern day retelling of *Sherlock Holmes – Elementary* (Robert Doherty, 2012-present). The show has been generally well-received by critics and has cemented Liu's return to prominence in the public eye. Due to her frequently high-profile roles, Lucy Liu has been the subject of much scrutiny and debate about her impact on the perceptions of Asian American women in America.

What accounts for Liu's popularity during this specific moment in American history and culture? Was her success purely the product of industry trends and consumer demands at the turn of the century, or can it be connected to broader political and cultural shifts in the positionality Asian Americans in American society? What are ways in which we can connect these media representations to larger, sociohistorically specific discourses on race, gender, sexuality, and difference, and what might these juxtapositions reveal? In what ways do actors of color suffer a lack of agency in Hollywood when it comes to their choice of roles? As Liu foregrounds in her aforementioned statement, there is a particular dilemma that befalls her and other marginalized actors and actresses in the entertainment industry. They carry the burden, whether they like it or not, of having to "accurately" represent their ethnic, racial, gender, or sexual group and are thereby often scrutinized over the roles they choose to portray. Lucy Liu attempts to sidestep the imposed expectation of "responsibly" representing Asian Americans by reframing the

conversation around access and her right to pursue her individual dreams and desires, but that does not diminish the fact that culture remains a highly contested, politicized terrain for Asian Americans. For a long time, the Asian American community was invested in "positive" representations of Asians in the media, and Liu, like Anna May Wong and Nancy Kwan before her, has received considerable criticism for accepting roles that do not render Asian women in a flattering light.[3] But this investment in "good" representations assumes that the realm of culture can somehow transparently mediate or even improve the lived realities of Asian Americans, which is a tall order.

As a fan of Lucy Liu's and a scholar-consumer of popular culture, I find debates over authenticity politics to be rather moot, as I do not believe that any single cultural representation can ever be representative of an entire population. Solely focusing on the politics of representation forecloses the other discursive and ideological possibilities that culture enables. For example, how can we theorize the politics of pleasure in Liu's works and how might they shape viewers' subjectivities? Further, how might the characters in these cultural productions reveal the processes of gendered racialization, and in what ways might they expose the violences of neoliberalism on racialized subjects? These are queries that I endeavor to answer in my exploration and analysis of Liu's roles on *Ally McBeal* and *Elementary.* On paper, Ling Woo and Joan Watson appear to be ostensibly different characters: the former is an exceedingly competent Chinese American lawyer who is cruel, domineering, and hypersexual, while the latter is a modern day reimagining of John Watson who is stoic, sympathetic and a formidable counterpart

[3] For of sample of reviews, see Tracey Owens Patton, "*Ally McBeal* and Her Homies: The Reification of White Stereotypes of the Other," *Journal of Black Studies* 32 (2001): 260, doi:10.1177/002193470103200205, and Chisun Lee, "The Ling Thing," http://www.villagevoice.com/news/the-ling-thing-6420272

to Sherlock Holmes. But while these two shows may appear polarizing aesthetically and politically in their representations of Asian American women, they actually engender parallel ideologies about Asian Americans, women of color sexualities, and gendered, racialized labor. That is, they both inhere and explicate a decidedly Asian American racial formation that presents Asian Americans as hyperproductive in their labor contributions but affectively and emotionally damaged. This contradictory racialization of Asian Americans reveals the work that culture performs in representing race, gender, sexuality, love, and family formation. In her portrayal of Ling, Liu's ability to challenge the gendered norms of respectability through her unapologetically crass and unsentimental attitude offer Asian American subjects a lack of restraint from the regulating mechanisms of the model minority myth, while simultaneously providing white subjects with the license to articulate their most politically incorrect thoughts. Meanwhile, Liu's enactment of Joan Watson might appear to be the more multicultural and progressive representation, but her race- and gender-progressive casting belies the fact that she is presented as largely unable to make agentive choices and functions primarily as a subsidiary character constituted by Sherlock. Thus, my project thereby aims to recuperate the scholarship on some of the cultural figures Liu has embodied by adopting alternative reading practices that look for moments of contradiction with or deviation from hegemonic conceptualizations of race, gender, sexuality, and respectability. Drawing upon scholarship from Asian American Studies, cultural studies, African American Studies, and gender studies, I hope to explicate the cultural politics of representation. Before I delve into deconstructing these two shows, I will first provide a quick overview of the history of the moving picture, followed by a brief trajectory of predominant discourses on Asian racialization and finally, how they converged in some of the early twentieth century's foremost feature films.

**Historical Overview and Scope**

Stuart Hall, one of the most seminal cultural studies scholars, famously expounded that images have meaning. The work of cultural and media studies, according to Hall, is to explore the "production of meaning" and the plethora of practices that produce meaning. The processes of meaning making of images in the media must always be linked to discussions of power and how it operates in society.[4] In other words, the realm of culture is not hermetically sealed from society, thus suggesting that cultural representations and social discourses must be considered alongside one another. Asian American representation in American popular culture has long been marked and marred by Orientalist imaginings of the East. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is the Western ideology that imagines and constructs "The Orient," a term that refers loosely to the Middle East, East Asia, South Asia, and Africa, as inherently different from and inferior to the West. Said elaborates that the relationship between the Occident and Orient is one "of power, of domination, and of varying degrees of hegemony," and most importantly, they inform one another.[5] While Said was writing with the Middle East in mind, the Orient in the American imaginary is primarily configured around the region of East Asia. The United States' legacy in Asia is a historically complex one laden with power differentials; it is the story of U.S. imperialist and expansionist policies, cultural and material extrapolation, and racist civilizing projects.[6] One of the primary means through which Western epistemes about the Orient were

[4] Stuart Hall, *Representation and the Media*, directed by Sut Jhally (Northampton, MA: media education foundation, 1997), VHS.

[5] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 5.

[6] In fact, the phrase "the white man's burden" was based on a poem written by American poet Rudyard Kipling justifying U.S. colonization of the Philippines.

disseminated was through the realm of culture and initially materialized primarily in print materials, such as novels, comics and newspapers. Through representations in such mediums, the imagined cultural difference – and inferiority – of the Orient and its inhabitants took shape and was disseminated as proof of Western superiority.

The invention of the moving picture in the 1890s provided a potent site to both further fuel and challenge predominant discourses about marginalized groups. During the first decade of filmmaking, films were under a minute long, and it was not until 1906 that the first feature length film was produced.[7] It was during this premier period that films also started to shift from a novelty to a form of mass scale entertainment, leading to the establishment of the first film studios in 1897 and paving the way for one of the foremost institutions of commodity culture and consumption - Hollywood.[8] Representations of Asians had existed in cultural circuits prior to the invention of cinema, primarily through literary productions and comic strips, but the deployment of the moving image allowed previously static renderings of Asians to materialize in dynamic and visceral ways.

By this time in American history, the Chinese Exclusion Act had effectively curtailed Chinese immigration, and the Gentleman's Agreement with Japan would soon slow Japanese immigration. Of course, these exclusionary laws were the culmination of decades of xenophobic and Orientalist sentiments toward the figure of the Yellow Peril, the ideology that Asian peoples,

[7] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw Hill Company, 2003), 13.

[8] Aristides Gezetas, *An Introduction to World Cinema* (Jefferson: McFarland Company, Inc., 2008), 28.

particularly East Asians, were a threat to the sanctity of Western civilization.[910] Evoking the imminent danger of a nameless, faceless horde of Asians invading the West, the nation's fears and tensions exploded around the figure of the Chinese coolie laborer. According to historian Robert Lee, the Chinese began to immigrate to the U.S. in large numbers in the 1850s and were instrumental to building much of the infrastructure of this country, including the Transcontinental Railroad.[11] However, they frequently replaced the Irish, another group of immigrant laborers performing brute, manual labor, and the Irish thereby became among the most ardent and vocal forces behind anti-Chinese organizing.[12] The logics of the Yellow Peril demonstrated an amalgamation of domestic anxieties over economic unsustainability, as well as the perversion of gendered and sexual mores against miscegenation, particularly between white women and men of color.[13] As cultural theorist Lisa Lowe argues in *Immigrant Acts*, these are the material histories of racialized immigration exclusion and labor exploitation that constitute

[9] Robert Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 106.

[10] The term "yellow peril" actually originated in an iconic painting, depicting heroic but vulnerable female warriors ready to defend European Christiandom against an incoming Yellow Peril, personified by the Gautama Buddha engulfed in flames, and was inspired by a dream of Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany. For more on the origins of the yellow peril, see James Palmer, *The Bloody White Baron* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 31-32.

[11] Lee, *Orientals,* 54-57.

[12] Ibid*.,* 61.

[13] Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 249.

the very conditions, or contradictions, of Asian American racialization, even to this day.[14] The work of culture, then, is to either mediate or reproduce these processes of gendered racialization.

The earliest examples of representations of Asians in U.S. film are from the 1910s, coinciding with the popularization of feature length films, and provided a conduit for simultaneously expressing and managing racial, sexual, and gendered anxieties, desires and power relations. This decade saw the introduction and rise to stardom of Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa, who was considered Hollywood's first male sex symbol due to his "broodingly handsome" features and athletic "physique and agility."[15] On the surface, Hayakawa's popularity among white women might appear to run counter to Yellow Peril logics that actively prescribed Asian men as threats to the sexual and moral purity of white women. However, we see how these discourses converge in Hayakawa's breakthrough film, *The Cheat* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1915), in which he plays a wealthy Japanese businessman who lends the protagonist, portrayed by Fannie Ward, a large sum of money, and then proceeds to attempt to extort her for sex. Film scholar Gina Marchetti contends that a scene in which he (forcibly) kisses her can be read as both potentially marking "a fulfillment of secret, forbidden desires for the pleasures…promised by a love affair with a man of another race" and dissipating "any ambivalence about Tori's villainous character."[16] Clearly, the extent of his sex appeal was constrained by the antimiscegenation laws of the period that were actively enforced in Hollywood. The Hollywood Motion Picture Code

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[14] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics,* (Duke: Duke University Press, 1997), 38.

[15] Rachel Saltz, "Sessue Hayakawa: East and West, When the Twain Met," *New York Times,* September 7, 2007, accessed July 21, 2016, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9907E3DC143BF934A3575AC0A9619C8B63

[16] Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the Yellow Peril: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies of Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 18.

stipulated a list of "don'ts," which included the mixing of races and primarily targeted the depictions of sexual relationships between whites and blacks but in practice applied to all people of color.[17] Cinematic representations of interracial romance then become a mediated site for Hayakawa to embody his status as a sex symbol, whilst simultaneously reinforcing societal mores about the dangers of miscegenation.

Asian American women working in Hollywood were similarly subjected to this policing of their on-screen sexual liaisons. Seventeen-year-old Anna May Wong made her first film appearance in *The Toll of the Sea* (Chester M. Franklin, 1917), playing a young girl named Lotus Flower who rescues and subsequently falls in love with a capsized white male sailor – Allen Carver. Lotus Flower gives birth to a baby boy (though the sexual encounter between the two is not shown) but in the end, she forfeits her child to Carver and his American wife, whom she believes can secure a better future for him. Another moral lesson in the impossible futurity of interracial relationships, Lotus Flower and Carver's budding romance – and her hopes of accompanying him to America – are quickly dashed when he realizes the utter unassimilability of a Chinese girl in America and she ostensibly must pay for their sins. Wong would go on to become the first Chinese American movie star and the first Asian American leading lady/sex symbol in Hollywood. Unfortunately, like Hayakawa, her choice in roles were limited by both the societal standards and sexual proscriptions of the moment; therefore, she was often consigned to playing Orientalist inspired, Dragon Lady-esque caricatures of Asian women that garnered her the title "Hollywood's foremost Oriental villainess." As these early examples demonstrate, since the inception of film as a media and cultural platform, Asian American representation has been refracted by the social and legal conditions of their gendered racialization.

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[17] Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 301-302.

Prior to the invention of the television, the consumption of moving images was a public affair, one that required a trip to the local cinema. However, the introduction of the television set and its rapid integration into the American home in the years following World War II transformed "the primary site of exhibition for spectator amusements from the public space of the movie theater to the private space of the home."[18] According to communications scholar Lynn Spiegel, Americans purchased televisions at record rates: between 1948 and 1955, television sets were installed in nearly two-thirds of the nation's homes, and by 1960, almost 90% of American households had at least one receiver.[19] The seemingly rapid embrace of the television into the familial unit belies the anxieties it elicited, as well as the cultural, political, and ideological roles it performed. On the one hand, American families were concerned about the increasing pervasiveness and invasiveness of technology in their everyday lives and worried that this new medium would lead to devastating, dystopian effects on family relationships. On the other, Spiegel elaborates that during the postwar period, television was depicted as a "panacea for the broken homes and hearts of wartime life"; ideologically, it was shown to "restore faith in family togetherness and the splendors of consumer capitalism."[20] The television, then, was not merely a technological advancement that profoundly changed how Americans consume works of audiovisual media, for it also functioned as a capitalistic conduit through which idealized discourses on family, love, race, gender, and sexuality were circulated.

Asian American representation on television is, like its cinematic counterpart, mediated by the fraught and contentious history of Asian Americans' gendered racialization. Just as early

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[18] Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 3.

cinematic depictions articulated racial and sexual anxieties about Asian American difference and sought to reinforce such boundaries, early portrayals of Asians in television comedies seemed to deploy Asian characters purely for comedic relief, stripping them of their sexuality. The first sitcom with an Asian female lead was *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (James Komack, 1969-1972), in which Oscar winner Miyoshi Umeki played the housekeeper for a widowed magazine publisher and his young son Eddie. Competent, discreet, and doting, Umeki's character often provided comedic relief with her stilted English, frequent malapropisms, and "tidbits of Oriental wisdom."[21] Unlike her character Katsumi from her Oscar winning film *Sayonara* (Joshua Logan, 1958), in which she played the doomed fiancé and lover of a white U.S. Airman, the possibility of a interracial romance is never considered in *Eddie's Father.* Umeki's housekeeper seemingly knows her place within the racial hierarchy of this family – and American society – and will on many occasions even assist Eddie in his shenanigans to find a romantic partner for his father. The show never gestures towards her as a possible candidate, rendering her stuck in the abject position of employee, caretaker, and comic relief. If television programs were a means through which normative discourses about family formation were circulated, then, in the world of *Eddie's Father,* family is understood to be a strictly white, heteropatriarchal entity.

Meanwhile, the discursive role of Asian characters in early televisual dramas is harder to theorize due to the destruction of the original film reels. The first television show with an Asian American series lead was *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* (DuMont, 1951), starring the aforementioned Wong. It was a short-lived series about a Chinese art dealer who owned a very peculiar art gallery and whose work as a detective involved her in a world of magic, mystery, and international intrigue. The role was written specifically for Anna May Wong, providing a

[21] Darrell Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 11.

small measure of vindication after being passed over for the lead role in *The Good Earth* (Sidney Franklin, 1937), a part that was ultimately portrayed by German actress Louisa Rainer in yellowface. However, the production company eventually went bankrupt and they dumped all remaining kinescopes of their series into the Upper New York Bay. While these narratives may seem to deviate from prior filmic representations of Asians, such as those of *The Cheat* and *The Toll of the Sea*, which had explicit didactics about the dangers of miscegenation, the increase in media platforms allowed for multiple and at times contradictory notions of race, gender, sexuality, and family to coexist within the realm of national culture.[22] As the United States emerged victorious from World War II and sought to proclaim itself as the world's foremost superpower, the overt racism of Yellow Peril imagery became harder to reconcile with its supposedly democratic values. Consequently, the U.S. state found itself in need of a more "progressive," racially inoffensive model for incorporating and managing difference. The transition away from the Yellow Peril gave way to a new mode of representing Asian Americans – that of the model minority.

## Literature Review

### The Model Minority Myth

Around this time period succeeding the Second World War, the predominant image of Asian Americans began to shift from that of the Yellow Peril to that of the model minority. Robert Lee theorizes that this myth attributes Asian Americans' perceived economic success to "imaginary Asian traditions" of hard work and self-sufficiency, as well as values closely aligned

[22] This is a trend that would become increasingly relevant/prescient with the continued advent of technology, as the multiplicity of streaming platforms on the market today makes cultural forms more readily accessible to consumers than ever.

with the Protestant work ethic – "obedience, self-control, individualism, and loyalty to the needs of the nuclear family."[23] As such, Asian Americans came to embody the nation-state's hope for a "return to hegemony in the global marketplace" precisely because of their cultural values and differences, wherein America's key to national restoration was believed to be located.[24] Though the model minority is sometimes regarded as a "positive" stereotype given its appraisal of Asian Americans, fears of the Orientalized other in fact never subsided. Instead, they became rearticulated through and intertwined with the rhetoric of the model minority, in an amalgamation of racial ideologies that Robert Lee terms the "model minority as gook." This trope was borne out of the Vietnam War and the American troops' inability to distinguish the North Vietnamese from the South Vietnamese, or ally from enemy, and was subsequently deployed at home to cast doubt as to Asian Americans' loyalties, a symptom of their collective racialization.[25] Thus, at the same time that model minority rhetoric celebrates Asian Americans' so-called accomplishments and assimilation, it holds them at bay in a manner that reinscribes their distance from whiteness.

As scholars in Asian American Studies have noted, the term "model minority" was coined during the context of the Cold War and subsequently trotted out by the state to decry allegations of racism at home as it waged war against Communism and the Soviets abroad.[26] This stereotype is ideologically compelling because it valorizes Asian Americans relative to other minority groups and provides a means for Asian Americans to demonstrate their intrinsic

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[23] Lee, *Orientals,* 182-189.

[24] Ibid., 183.

[25] Ibid., 190.

[26] Ibid., 184.

value to the U.S. vis-à-vis their conformity with normative (read: white) sociocultural mores and respectability politics. As Lee mentioned, the model minority is valued because of his alleged obedience, self-control and loyalty to the needs of heteropatriarchal family formation, among other traits. Further, prominent discourses on the model minority myth often attribute Asian Americans' socioeconomic success to an imagined Asian American family and "an ahistorical and reified Asian 'traditional' culture," ranging from Asian parents' authoritarian, regnant parenting style to the strength and unity of the Asian American household, one that is ostensibly patriarchal.[27] With this outward embrace of diversity, Asian cultural difference comes to be celebrated under the racial project of multiculturalism. As such, the multicultural incorporation of Asian American subjects into the neoliberal state allowed for the deployment of the model minority myth as a disciplining mechanism against other racial minorities who were not performing as well socioeconomically. Accordingly, the model minority served as a figure par excellence for the neoliberal state to affirm and incorporate articulations of racial difference, demonstrating both America's status as a meritocratic society in which racial minorities can succeed and reinforcing its commitment to cultivating diversity and inclusion.

Neoliberal Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a term that has gained ascendancy as the nation's prescription to address the "race problem," a dilemma that has beguiled the U.S. nation state since W.E.B. Du Bois posed his famous, eloquent query: "How does it feel to be a problem?" Employing the metaphor of a color line that figuratively and materially imposes social, economic, political, and cultural walls separating the races, cultural studies scholar James Lee writes that

[27] Ibid.

multiculturalism "imagines anew how to reorganize the heretofore unequal representation of American life" and proposes that the solution was simply to cross the color line. That is, the embrace of difference and diversity within cultural forms can provide a way to bridge the distance between the races and hopefully alleviate racial tensions.[28] Lee, however, forewarns that the rise of multiculturalism as a guiding principle of race relations barely masks its more difficult task, which is to redistribute resources within American communities.[29] In fact, he contends that the work of representing race differently and crossing racial lines has not resulted in a more equitable redistribution of resources, but in many ways, it has instead reinforced the insurmountability of these walls.[30] Thus, multiculturalism's superficial celebration of cultural difference and the corresponding incorporation of people of color into national culture have proven unable to curtail or even address systemic inequalities or violences that befall people of color.

Cultural studies scholar Helen Jun further contends that the official discourse of multiculturalism and its celebration of cultural difference are central to the operating logics of U.S. neoliberalism.[31] Neoliberalism is an ideology that was developed by a group of University of Chicago economists who argued that global capitalist development would lead to human liberation and freedom. Envisioned in contrast to Keynesian economic theory, "the key tenets of neoliberalism are deregulation, privatization, and the dismantling of social services" – in other

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[28] James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2004), xiii.

[29] Ibid., xiv.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Helen Heran Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 125.

words, getting the government out of the way.[32] Under neoliberalism, the elimination of the welfare state is thereby justified because personal responsibility and self-enterprise become the bearers of success, and failure ostensibly indicates a personal deficiency, not an indictment of state or structural inequalities. The model minority myth, as a result, conveniently serves as proof positive that minority subjects can succeed in America without relying upon governmental assistance. Furthermore, Jodi Melamed helpfully articulates the ways in which neoliberal multiculturalism produces "new and stigmatized forms of humanity" and "deploys a normative cultural model of race (which now sometimes displaces conventional racial reference altogether) as a discourse to justify inequality for some as fair and natural."[33] The incorporation of racial, gender, and cultural difference under neoliberal multiculturalism has facilitated the inclusion of previously excluded groups, as well as new criteria of relational valuation. This is evident in the descriptive registers now delineated in previously monolithic racial categories: "the 'patriotic' versus 'terrorist' Muslim, [or] the properly developed black professional versus the pathological black poor."[34] After all, the global operations of capitalism are maximized by the (marginal) inclusion of groups that were excluded under previous forms of capital accumulation, such as settler colonialism or 20th century industrialization, so it befits the state to produce these new forms of value and life making while auspiciously embracing difference.[35]

Nevertheless, while multiculturalism might have displaced white supremacy as a totalizing logic, neoliberal multiculturalism is still governed by normative ideologies that are

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2011), 14.

[34] Jun, *Race for Citizenship,* 127.

[35] Ibid.

raced, classed, and gendered.[36] That is to say, race, class, and gender differences and hierarchies are not erased under a multicultural world order; rather, they become foregrounded in cultural productions and subsequently instrumentalized to support neoliberal epistemes. As Melamed succinctly summarizes, neoliberal multiculturalism has rendered an "ethic of multiculturalism to be the spirit of neoliberalism."[37] This convergence is evident in many of the era's most iconic cultural productions. For example, *The Cosby Show* counters pervasive beliefs about black pathology and demonstrates that it is possible for black Americans to achieve resounding socioeconomic success by working hard and conforming to respectability politics. Meanwhile, *The Joy Luck Club* explores the familiar Asian American themes of family, generational conflict, cultural differences, and overcoming obstacles to illustrate the potency of the model minority myth. These cultural productions facilitate the inclusion of stories about previously excluded groups in national culture – to resounding critical and commercial success – but to what end? Lee offers the following indictment of multiculturalism's celebration of diversity: it assumes that "recognizing and nurturing a racial renaissance in the realm of cultural production could address, even trump, the paucity of attention given to the political and economic poverty of racialized urban communities."[38] To reiterate Jun's point about the creation of categories of valuation in previously monolithic racial categories under neoliberal governmentality, multiculturalism has operated in tandem to facilitate the incorporation of people of color into national culture in a manner that upholds hegemonic ideals about race, gender, sexuality, class and cultural politics.

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Melamed, *Represent and Destroy,* 42.

[38] Lee, *Urban Triage,* xxviii.

While these cultural productions are rife with sociopolitical significance, the consumption of television, as with any other cultural form, also produces pleasure. More broadly speaking, inquiries into the work of culture must also consider the politics of pleasure, and the affective economies that circulate between a cultural production and the viewer. How are these affects produced and how might they shape the subjectivities of audiences? Much has been said, for better or worse, about "the affective turn" in the humanities and cultural studies, but I truly believe that a project that attempts to expound statements on Asian American cultural politics must also be attuned to the work of emotions.

## Theories of Affect

But first, what is affect? Feminist anthropologist and media scholar Purnima Mankekar defined it most succinctly when she described it as "the feeling you get before you can name it."[39] This elementary but instructive definition of affect is one I always return to because I have found it exceedingly helpful in grounding my understanding of affect. Based on this foundational conceptualization of affect lie many of the foundational tenets of affect theory. Firstly, affect is different than feeling and secondly, given that affect precedes spoken discourse, it is consequently precognitive. Yet, these are also some of the most contentiously debated points among affect theorists. For example, Silvan Tomkins, one of the founding affect theorists, argues that affect is the biological manifestation of emotion and starts in the face, not inwardly.[40] As such, he would contend that the affect of shame, for instance, is manifested through blushing.

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[39] Purnima Mankekar, "Week 7 Lecture," (Lecture, Asian American Studies 200C, Los Angeles, CA, May 13, 2015).

[40] J.A. Cuddon, "affect/affect theory/affective criticism," *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory* (Blackwell Reference Online, Blackwell Publishing, 2013), accessed March 17, 2016. http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/book?id=g9781444333275_9781444333275

However, cultural studies scholars such as Sara Ahmed would counter that there is not such a steadfast delineation between the biological and sociocultural formations of affect and insist that they are interrelated and often messy.

Further, Mankekar and Ahmed would advance that affect differs from emotion, as well. Mankekar distinguishes affect from feeling and emotion by denoting them as the domains of individual subjectivity and the linguistic, respectively.[41] Extending Lutz and Abu-Lughod's conception that emotions "cannot be tied to tropes of interiority," Mankekar postulates that affect is also "not tied to tropes of interiority."[42] Consequently, affect cannot be located solely in an individual subject, but at the same time, it cannot be relegated to the realm of the psyche or subjective feelings, either.[43] The relationship between affect, individual agency, and social action is complex and multilayered in that affect produces subjects "through the traces it leaves upon them."[44] In other words, affects are not something innate within us that then manifest outwardly when we come into contact with sensory stimuli. Rather, as Ahmed theorizes, affects take shape through the moments of encounter between subjects with each other and between bodies and particular objects.[45] In fact, she elaborates that these moments of contact not only influence the formation of affects but also shape "the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the

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[41] Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 13.

[42] Ibid., 14.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 4.

repetition of actions over time."[46] Affects, as a result, are socio-politically significant because they not only shape our engagements with culture but also have the ability to influence, interpellate and produce subjects. In other words, through our continued contact with and consumption of cultural productions, we not only inhere as ideological subjects but also take shape physically as material entities.

Alongside critiques of model minority formations and neoliberalism, I deploy theories of affect to configure the sociopolitical effects of representations of Asian Americans within national culture. By being attentive to the work of emotions and the affective economies that circulate within a cultural production, I can better explicate the potency of culture as a site to challenge existing epistemes and produce new discourses, ideologies, and subjectivities. My engagement with affect in this thesis is to theorize what the depiction of emotions in *Ally McBeal* and *Elementary* enables. In what ways does Ling's caustic personality shape and interpellate different ideological subjects? How does Joan's persistent guilt impact her agency as a gendered and racialized character? If we understand culture to be a site through which identities are not only contested but also created, then theories of affect helps us understand how emotions are key to the work of culture.

**Research Questions, Methods, and Stakes**

Given the prolific nature of Liu's career, I have decided to focus my analysis on selected televisual works. This is a choice that is both strategic and personal. Firstly, film and television are vastly different mediums, and a project that encompasses both would simply be too hefty for a single project. Secondly, I am a more avid consumer of television shows than I am of movies

[46] Ibid.

due to the serial format of television storytelling. For me, television is compelling precisely because of the affective and interpersonal bonds that are cultivated between my favorite characters and myself, and these representations contain discourses about race, gender, sexuality, class and lifestyle aspirations that can powerfully resonate with and interpellate subjects. Due to the potency of the medium to disseminate a plethora of ideologies, television programs can thereby be powerful conduits for perpetuating the agendas of the nation state, as well as offering viewing subjects "opportunities to connect imaginatively with larger collectivities," allowing for alternative conceptions of self, love, religion and family.[47] As such, television shows invite us viewers into the lives of our favorite fictional characters every week and not only become an integral part of our everyday lives and our expressions of selves but also embody the potential to profoundly shape our anxieties, dreams, and subjectivities.

My initial foray into researching Asian American representation in popular culture was with my senior honors' thesis, in which I sought to better understand the predominant stereotypes of Asian Americans in film and television. As I continued to ponder the possible directions for and stakes of my project these past two years, I gradually moved away from the politics of representation, finding such an approach limiting in terms of the insights it engendered. Instead, my project evolved into an exploration of the work of culture – in other words, what these works enable affectively, socio-politically, and ideologically. Above all, this thesis is about the cultural politics of consuming Asian American representation on television and how two particular American television programs produce a set of emotional and ideological investments. My personal stakes in this research are derived from both my positionality as a fan of Lucy Liu's and as a budding scholar invested in explicating the cultural politics of

[47] Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 46.

representations of race, gender, sexuality, and power, with the specific aim of rethinking or challenging some the scholarship that has been produced about Liu and her performances. What are methods through which we can reframe conversations on representational politics without reinforcing the binary of "good" versus "bad" representations?

Take, for example, her character on *Ally McBeal*, Ling Woo, a cruel, exotically erotic, domineering, and inhuman(e)ly unsympathetic Chinese American lawyer reminiscent of the Dragon Lady. Given that Ling was the most prominent representation of an Asian American woman on primetime television in the 1990s, she has been the subject of much scrutiny, especially among Asian American scholars who investigate cultural productions. For example, TV and media studies scholar Darrell Hamamoto has provocatively argued that Ling is a "a neo-Orientalist masturbatory fantasy figure concocted by a white man whose job it is to satisfy the blocked needs of other white men who seek temporary escape from their banal and deadening lives."[48] This interpretation, while not necessarily untrue, is overstated and treats Ling as nothing more than a fetishistic creation designed to service the pleasure of heterosexual white men, foreclosing alternative discursive and ideological possibilities for the character. How might Ling mediate other, nonwhite viewers though? Meanwhile, Ethnic Studies scholar Elaine Kim offers, in a more reserved fashion, that Ling is "better than nothing" in terms of Asian American visibility on primetime television.[49] What might a "better" representation of an Asian American woman look like, and to what effect? These readings of Ling speak of her in an ambivalent light at best and condemn her for her deleterious impact on public perceptions of Asian American women.

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[48] Chisun Lee, "The Ling Thing," *Village Voice,* Village Voice, LLC, November 30, 1999, accessed April 24, 2013, http://www.villagevoice.com/news/the-ling-thing-6420272.

[49] Lee, "The Ling Thing."

Ultimately, I found myself deeply unsatisfied with these assessments of her character, particularly in the ways in which they reinscribe the binary between "positive" and "negative" representations and invoke the misguided notion that the creation and incorporation of more multicultural, "progressive" characters in national culture can somehow mediate material violences against people of color. In an effort to move away from the investment in "good" representations within Asian American cultural studies and strive for more nuanced readings of character that illuminate the work that culture performs, I ask, "What else might Ling be doing discursively?" Beyond embodying racist stereotypes of Asian American women and producing identification with the heroine Ally, how can we read Ling against the grain, and in what ways might she be challenging the gendered racialization of Asian Americans as model minorities and the imposition of neoliberal respectability politics upon Asian women's bodies? I argue that while Ling replicates some of the logics of the model minority myth, she simultaneously exposes the violence of neoliberalism on Asian Americans in her characterization as economically hyperproductive but emotionally damaged.

Alternatively, on her current project *Elementary,* Lucy Liu stars as a Chinese American, female incarnation of Dr. John Watson from the Sherlock Holmes mythology. Joan Watson is ostensibly a very different character than Ling Woo, both aesthetically and politically. Joan does not evoke the stereotypical markers of Asian American womanhood in popular imaginaries – she is not exotic, hypersexual, diminutive, or dehumanized. The existing media coverage on Joan can largely be categorized into two camps. On the one hand, there are the Sherlock Holmes purists who were outraged at the utter absurdity of an Asian American woman playing their beloved

Watson.[50] On the other, there are those who praise Joan as a very "progressive" character in that she is playing an Asian woman without replicating conventional racist and sexist stereotypes.[51] Further, there is the fact that Liu is depicting *the* Dr. Watson, a character that had previously always been written as a man.[52] The fact that a woman of color is embodying one of the most beloved figures in Western popular culture has been regarded as a testament to the success of multicultural inclusion in remedying past institutional injustices in the realm of representation. In fact, Alex Heimbach of *Vulture* regards Liu's Joan Watson as "the best version of Watson," and an excellent example of how "changing a character's race and gender can offer new narrative opportunities and character dynamics rather than reinforcing traditions."[53] Indeed, in rewriting Watson as both Asian American and a woman, *Elementary* is able to distinguish itself from the existing iterations of *Sherlock Holmes* not only in terms of its storytelling but also in its constitution of Sherlock and Watson's relationship, as *Elementary* has promised to treat this Asian American, female incarnation of Watson as an equal to the white male Sherlock.

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[50] For example, British actor Benedict Cumberbatch expressed concern for "dynamic of male friendship that you'd lose," while *Guardian* columnist Victoria Coren decried Liu's casting as a "mindlessly trendy piece of feminising" Clearly there is still a strong investment in preserving the heteropatriarchal nature of Holmes and Watson's relationship. See Michael Ausiello, "*Sherlock's* Benedict Cumberbatch Breaks His Silence on CBS' *Elementary: '*I'd be Frightened,'" TVLine.com, TVLine Media, LLC, July 29, 2012, accessed July 27, 2016, http://tvline.com/2012/07/29/benedict-cumberbatch-elementary-cbs, and Victoria Coren, "Lucy Liu Playing Dr. Watson: Put That In Your Pipe and Smoke It," *The Guardian,* October 13, 2012, accessed August 8, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/14/victoria-coren-lucy-liu-sherlock-holmes.

[51] Alex Heimbach, "Why *Elementary's* Joan is the Best Version of Watson," Vulture.com*,* New York Media, LLC, May 6, 2016, accessed July 27, 2016, http://www.vulture.com/2016/05/elementary-joan-is-the-best-version-of-watson.html

[52] Melissa Lee, "Racebending: My Dear Watson," September 25, 2012, accessed April 24, 2013, http://www.racebending.com/v4/featured/elementary-dear-lucy

[53] Heimbach, "Best Version of Watson."

While I do not mean to diminish the precedence for Asian American representational politics of a Chinese American woman embodying the beloved John Watson, I want to push beyond the multicultural, celebratory reading of Joan as "progressive" simply because of the race- and gender-bending elements of her character. What racial and gender power structures might the casting of Liu as Watson replicate and/or subvert? While Joan is purportedly an equal to Sherlock, how is their relationship actually constituted, especially with regards to the division of labor in their investigative work? Further, what affects and pleasures – or lack thereof – are engendered by rendering Watson an Asian American woman? Even though Joan is presented as a character who is sympathetic towards others, why is she unable to confront her own emotions in the wake of tragedy? I believe that, in light of these contradictions, Joan actually resonates as an Asian American racial formation in that she conforms to neoliberal labor ideals but is affectively damaged and unable to achieve emotional catharsis.

To answer these questions, I will be engaging with the shows themselves, as well as secondary sources, such as interviews with Lucy Liu and the writers/producers of both projects and reviews of *Ally McBeal* and *Elementary* by mainstream entertainment publications. Additionally, I will be utilizing the dynamic frameworks formulated by scholars from a plethora of interdisciplinary fields, including cultural studies, Asian American Studies, African American Studies, and Gender Studies, to deconstruct the political and ideological work that these shows perform. In other words, instead of invoking the conventional language of representation and assessing whether Liu's characters are "positive" or "negative" representations of Asian Americans, I look to engender critiques of neoliberal epistemes, model minority formations, and respectability politics and to theorize the sociopolitical consequences of the affective economies within these cultural productions. My reading practice will treat these shows as literary texts and

as such, I will hone in on the dialogic exchanges between characters, as well as narrative and character developments. Given that television is an audiovisual medium, sound, lighting, and aesthetics are undoubtedly central to a show's meaning making; that being said, I am more invested in the discursive and ideological representations of race, gender, and sexuality than I am in the technical aspects of production. Specially, I will be reading for moments of rupture or contradiction within these shows that foreground the failures of multicultural incorporation to erase explicit racialized and gendered difference and subjectivities. As Helen Jun helpfully articulates, reading for contradictions is a critical practice because "every text can be read for the inevitable contradictions it attempts to manage or reconcile," regardless of "intention and impulse."[54] To that point, *Ally McBeal* attempts to position Ling in an allegedly postracial world, while *Elementary* posits Joan within the multicultural hub of New York City, and in both shows, there are moments in which Liu's characters ultimately inevitably resonate as Asian American racial formations.

Because both programs span multiple seasons, I fine-tune my analysis to closely read particular episodes, though I will consider longer character arcs. Of particular interest to me with *Ally McBeal* is season 2 episode 13 – "Angels and Blimps." In this episode, Ling, who notoriously hates children, becomes visibly affected by the death of a young boy with leukemia whom she befriends. What is the effect of haphazardly equipping a character that is notoriously unsympathetic with legible human emotions? I will employ the works of scholars who have contributed integral critiques of neoliberalism, such as Victor Bascara and Helen Jun, to highlight the regulating mechanisms of the model minority discourse on Asian Americans and how Ling is able to interpellate different types of subjects. As for *Elementary*, I will examine

[54] Jun, *Race for Citizenship,* 5.

episodes 13 and 14 from season 3, which deal with the fallout stemming from the tragic death of Joan's boyfriend Andrew. In particular, I am intrigued by Joan's subsequent state of suspended agency due to guilt. What are the social and political effects of Joan's inability to achieve emotional catharsis, despite being characteristically sympathetic towards others? I will engage Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* to engender an inquiry into the cultural politics of representing Joan's "ugly feelings" and the political consequences of this deliberately noncathartic affect.

By seeking to read Ling and Joan against the grain of multicultural rhetoric and instead pay attention to moments of racial contradiction, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which these fictional characters are more than just aesthetic, cultural representations, but rather dynamic figures that can resonate discursively, ideologically, and affectively. After all, as Lowe insists, culture is politically powerful because it provides a means to dispute regulatory modes of government and disrupt normative modes of belonging.[55] She elaborates that where the realm of citizenship and rights fails to address historical inequalities, we can turn to culture to "conceive and enact new subjects and practices in antagonism to the regulatory practice of citizen/subject."[56] My impetus for this project is foundationally informed by Lowe's conception of reading culture for the work it performs and my desire, as a fan, to recuperate or at least rethink some of the extant conversations on Liu's contributions to Asian American representation. In expounding the significance of the black female spectator's oppositional gaze, cultural critic bell hooks articulates that "there is power in looking."[57] I would concur and add

[55] Lisa Lowe, "The Power of Culture," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 1 (1998): 17.

[56] Ibid.

[57] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.

that there is pleasure in looking, too. Hence, consuming television – and culture – is as much a form of entertainment as it is a stolidly political act.

## Chapter One*:* Lingisms and Neoliberal Violence in *Ally McBeal*




*Figure 1: Time Magazine's Ally McBeal Issue*

"Is feminism dead?" That is the startlingly ominous headline that accompanies the now infamous *Time* magazine issue on the gendered politics of the late 1990s legal dramatic comedy *Ally McBeal*. On the cover, star Calista Flockhart's face is juxtaposed against those of feminist icons such as Susan B. Anthony and Gloria Steinem (see figure 1). In the article, Ginie Bellafante scathingly indicts the titular character for undermining feminism as a politic because "Ally ... is in charge of nothing, least of all her emotional life…The problem with Bridget [Jones] and Ally is that they are presented as archetypes of single womanhood even though they

are little more than composites of frivolous neuroses."[58] As the water-cooler show of the moment when it premiered in 1997, the show provocatively questioned the continued utility and necessity of feminism in American society by presenting a heroine whose stance on feminism, according to showrunner David E. Kelley, is as follows: "She's all for women's rights, but she doesn't want to lead the charge at her own emotional expense." Instead, *Ally McBeal* depicts the lives of a group of women at a prestigious law firm in Boston who are largely unencumbered by their gender; instead, feminism manifests as useful only when they need to fight against an overly paternalistic judge for the right to wear short skirts in the courtroom. Indeed, the fictive universe concocted by Kelley is presented as one in which race, gender, and other sources of system oppression are largely incidental. He admits that the world of *Ally McBeal* is "consciously colorblind…In the history of the show, we have never addressed race. The reason is simple. In my naïve dream, I wish the world could be like this."[59]

While this may be Kelley's utopic vision for the world, the show cannot be extricated from the sociopolitical circumstances within which it was airing. The 1990's were a volatile era that demonstrated, if anything, precisely the opposite: race, gender, and sexuality were still as politically salient as ever. California voters passed both Proposition 184 and 209, which proscribed undocumented immigrants from accessing public services, such as healthcare and education, and prohibited the consideration of race, gender, and sexuality in public employment and education, respectively. Both of these propositions operated upon the ideology of protecting California's public institutions and social services from those who are supposedly undeserving.

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[58] Ginie Bellafante, "Feminism: It's All About Me!" *Time,* Time Inc., LLC, June 29, 1998, accessed August 19, 2016, *http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,988616-4,00.html.*

[59] Greg Braxton, "Colorblind or Just Plain Blind?" *Los Angeles Times,* February 9, 1999, accessed August 19, 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1999/feb/09/entertainment/ca-6226/2.

Whether due to their lack of official documentation or their perceived lack of trying, these minority groups were deemed to be encroaching upon the entitlements of truly "deserving" American citizens (read: white, male, straight).

Furthermore, the Wen Ho Lee debacle proved to be a seminal moment of collective racialization for Asian Americans at large and a stark reminder that American society was most assuredly not post-race. Taiwanese American Lee is a scientist who worked at the Los Almos National Laboratory, conducting simulations of nuclear explosions for the purposes of scientific inquiry. In December of 1999, a federal Grand Jury indicted him on charges of stealing secrets about the U.S. nuclear arsenal and selling them to the Chinese government.[60] However, the government was unable to prove these initial charges and ultimately was only able to find evidence of improper handling of restricted data, which he pled guilty to.[6162] Even though Lee ultimately proved not to be a spy for the Chinese government, this case underscores the dialectic of Asian American racialization. Regardless of their degree of assimilation and notoriety as model minorities, Asian Americans, particularly Chinese Americans, will nonetheless be regarded with suspicion as to whether their true national allegiances lie with the United States or *Communist* China. It would seem, then, that American liberalism/multiculturalism had done little in the fifty years that had transpired since Japanese American internment to broaden prevailing understandings of Asian American racialization, as government officials and national culture

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[60] Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York, Basic Books, 2002), 176.

[61] In June 2006, Lee received a $1.6 million settlement from the federal government and five media organizations as part of the settlement of a civil suit he had filed against them for leaking his name to the press before formal charges had been pressed against him. For more on the Wen Ho Lee debacle, see Frank Wu, *Yellow.*

[62] *Ibid.,* 180.

alike both still have trouble reconciling the fact that an individual of Asian descent can also be a patriotic American citizen.

A provocative television show that captured the cultural zeitgeist and captivated national audiences during its five-season run, it is best remembered for the conversations it sparked about gender and sexual politics and the affectively resonant way it reflected the sociopolitical attitudes of the era. As such, many thinkpieces have been dedicated to the impassioned debates over whether or not *Ally McBeal* is a feminist cultural product and by extension, what constitutes feminism in the era of popular feminism? However, considerably less scholarship has systematically engaged the racial politics of the show and how it fundamentally impacted the reception of *Ally McBeal*. Despite Kelley professing that the show operates in a colorblind universe, the characters in *Ally* are not racially unmarked – that is, they are undoubtedly racialized and racially constituted vis-à-vis one another. Throughout its run, it consistently featured two people of color as part of its principal cast. One is Renee Radwick, an African American assistant district attorney who is Ally's best friend and roommate. The other, inarguably one of the most memorable characters on the show, is the Chinese American lawyer and primary antagonist Ling Woo, played by then rising actress Lucy Liu. From the character's inception, the show has very deliberately constructed her as the Orientalist foil to Ally's normative white womanhood. For example, while *Ally McBeal* is known for its liberal, playful application of animal effects, Ling is the most frequent target of such aural and visual distortion. She emits guttural, dragon-like growls to express dissatisfaction and sometimes even morphs into a dragon and breathes actual fire, becoming the literal embodiment of a dragon lady (see figure 2). Furthermore, she consistently instills fear and trepidation, as "the other *Ally* women…scream when she enters a room, accompanied by the Wicked Witch theme from *The*

*Wizard of Oz.*"[63] The discursive function of conflating Ling with these pernicious supernatural entities is to paint her as not just inhumane, but also inhuman.



*Figure 2: Ling literally spits fire on Ally.*

Much of the scholarship on Ling has superficially focused on these aspects of her characterization – the ways in which she is rendered exotic, inscrutable, insatiable, and loathsome. For instance, in 2013, *Salon* magazine included her on a list of the five most offensive Asian characters in TV history, citing her overt sexuality, her mysterious background, and her emotionlessness as derived from common tropes about Asian women.[64] Meanwhile, the reception of Ling among Asian American audiences was mixed at best, with some acknowledging the importance of an Asian American character featured so prominently on primetime television, while others worried about the Orientalist stereotypes that the show trafficked in. For example, historian Robert Lee suggests that the "excessiveness of the

[63] McKenna, Susan E, "Cultural Occupancy, Television Reception, and Multiple Identifications in *Ally McBeal," Searching the Soul of Ally McBeal,* ed. Elwood Watson, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 74.

[64] Aunjana Sreedhar, "Five Most Offensive Characters in History," Salon.com*,* September 22, 2013, accessed August 18, 2016, *http://www.salon.com/2013/09/22/tvs_5_most_offensive_asian_characters_partner.*

stereotype [of Ling] seems to self-subvert," contending that the show is actually seemingly poking fun at mainstream America's anxieties around frank discussions about race.[65] Hamamoto further assesses that Ling "sends a powerful message to white America that Asian American women are not to be trifled with."[66] Meanwhile, Kim is more cautious, opining that Ling needs to be placed within the context of "at least 100 years of the sexualization of Asian women" and wonders if "ordinary viewers" will be able to appreciate that legacy.[67] While these are important observations, my analysis of Ling strives to eschew the value judgments that seem to riddle such cultural analyses grounded in the language of good representation vs. bad representation. Instead, I propose the following questions: what are the inherent pleasures in watching Ling, and what does the act of watching Ling enable, engender, and/or embolden in audiences? Ling, an ostensibly unlikeable character, is unable to produce sympathetic identification; yet, she somehow resonated with audiences. In fact, Liu was initially slated as a guest star for season two, but due to her character's overwhelmingly positive reception, she was upgraded to a series regular halfway through the season. But if not vis-à-vis the politics of identification, then how does she engage audiences? I believe she registers the historically specific racialization of the Asian American subject as economically hyperproductive but affectively damaged and thereby inhuman. Simultaneously embodying the core tenets of neoliberalism and a staunch critique of political correctness, Ling is thus able to interpellate different groups of *Ally McBeal's* viewership in varying ways. That is, she allows white and/or socially conservative viewers license to express their basest, most politically incorrect thoughts, while offering Asian

[65] Lee, "The Ling Thing"

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

American viewers a sort of "freedom," or lack of restraint, from the disciplining technologies of the model minority myth.

The theory of interpellation was first proposed by French philosopher Louis Althusser, who explores the relationship between the State, modes of power, and ideology from a Marxist perspective, defining ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions of their existence."[68] Ideology works to constitute "concrete individuals as subjects," and individuals recognize themselves as subjects through ideology.[69] Althusser provides the now classic example of a police officer shouting, "Hey, you there!" in public. Upon hearing this, an individual, usually the right one, turns around, and "by this mere one-hundred-and eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject."[70] This is because, in acknowledging that he is the one being addressed or hailed, he understands his subjecthood, and simultaneously, he is subjugating himself to the apparatus of the law represented by the police officer. However, Althusser stresses that this is not a temporal succession; rather, these two processes occur simultaneously. Individuals are constantly being constituted as subjects due to the omnipresence of Ideological State Apparatuses, such as the family, the church, and media such as cinema, literature, and television, leading to his final proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*.[71] That is, people as individuals don't preexist ideology; rather, Althusser argues they are constituted as subjects before they are even born, given the multiple forms of family ideology

[68] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 109

[69] Ibid., 116

[70] Ibid., 118.

[71] Ibid.

through which an unborn child is expected.[72] Through viewing and consuming Ling, individuals will recognize themselves as subjects, though that particular subject preexists, due their prior encounters with other ideological formations.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that audiences do have agency as interpellated subjects. As Purnima Mankekar cautions, viewers are not empty vessels; variant elements of a television show, such as point of view, lighting, mise-en-scene, etc. can facilitate interpretations of texts that differ from those solicited by the text through the spectatorial position.[73] In *Ally McBeal*, as with most serial television, the spectatorial position is designed to elicit audience identification with the heroine Ally, as is evident in the plethora of ways in which Ling serves as a foil for Ally. Whereas the titular Ally is insecure, neurotic, empathetic and relatable, Ling is the precise opposite – self-assured, extremely competent, revolting, and decidedly unsympathetic. Ally is the stand-in for audiences, speaking to the collective struggles, anxieties and aspirations of young women working in professionalized fields; Ling is written as the villainess who has it all and yet still wants more, thereby posing a threat to the heroine's pursuit of happiness. It would be easy – though rather shortsighted – to dismiss Ling as a crude throwaway character who simply exists to produce identification with Ally. I believe Ling is much more complicated than that, both discursively and ideologically; that is, Ling's ability to interpellate viewers in different ways is reflexive of the complex and contradictory ideologies about race, gender, sexuality, labor, and cultural politics that imbue and constitute Ling as a character. While Ally is often referred to as "the heart and soul" of her law firm by her colleagues, Ling is frequently

[72] Ibid., 119.

[73] According to Mankekar, the spectatorial position reflects the positionality of the ideal viewer, who is in alignment with the author's intended interpretation of the narrative, ideologies and implications of her text (Purnima Mankekar, conversation with author, Feb 15, 2016).

presented as unintelligible to audiences as a human. At the same time, she is hypervisible as a neoliberal laboring subject, conforming to model minority logics in some aspects but also engendering critiques of its regulation of racialized bodies. The discrepant nature of Ling's characterization highlights the violence of neoliberalism on Asian American bodies: they are valuable in terms of producing labor through self-enterprise, but they are emotionally damaged and fail to register as human.

Needless to say, David E. Kelley's desire to create a postracial, postfeminist universe was nothing more than a sweet fantasy. Even if race is never explicitly invoked in the show, racial difference is still markedly visible. For example, after one of the senior partners announces that the firm is hiring Ling, Campbell, a white male lawyer at Cage and Fish, protests the decision, complaining that "with her as a lawyer, the whole thing will change." One can only assume that he is referring to the existing racial composition of the firm, bemoaning the fact that the addition of a woman of color will extinguish its racial homogeneity and purity. Thus, even within the supposedly colorblind landscape of *Ally McBeal*, Ling's racial difference is apparent and threatens to disrupt the status quo at the firm.

Furthermore, Ling evokes a curious continuity with a long lineage of representations of Asian Americans in Hollywood as the Yellow Peril, including such iconic figures as Dr. Fu Manchu and the Dragon Lady as immortalized by Anna May Wong, that seek to suggest that Asians and Asian Americans are less than human. As seen during the 19th and 20th centuries with the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Yellow Peril logics based on xenophobic fears of alleged Chinese deviance affected not only their access to immigration, employment, and legal protections from violence but also their ability to be recognized as American – and by extension, human. Fast-forward to the era of multiculturalism that characterized the 1990s and beyond.

While the rhetoric may have been reconfigured, the exclusionary logics of white supremacy remain. As such, even within the supposedly postracial fictive universe of the show, when a Chinese American woman is invited to join an all white law firm, the decision is met with concern as to its racial implications. Recalling the logic of the "model minority as gook" trope, Ling embodies an implicit threat to the characters on the show, despite her conformity with model minority epistemologies. This contradictory racialization of Asian Americans allows the nation state to exploit the model minority figure to serve its own ideological and political interests while superficially celebrating their socioeconomic accomplishments as racialized subjects.

Asian American Studies scholar Victor Bascara accordingly observes that the rise of the model minority myth shares an uncanny temporal alignment with the global proliferation of neoliberal economics and neoconservative politics.[74] In fact, the dismantling of social welfare programs under neoconservatism coincides with the domestic deployment of the model minority myth, with Asian Americans being "trotted out as 'synthetic white people.'"[75] Jun further demonstrates that the discourse of Asian American self-enterprise is symptomatic of the deployment of neoliberal ideologies that strive to discipline "bad" racial minorities, which is one of the inherent functions of the model minority myth.[76] For example, in Justin Lin's debut feature film, *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Justin Lin, 2002), Ben and his group of friends are high-achieving high school students who become the masterminds of a criminal empire that engulfs

[74] Victor Bascara, "Cultural Politics of Redress: Reassessing the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 After 9/11," *Asian American Law Journal* 10 (2003): 107.

[75] Ibid., 108.

[76] Helen Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 132.

their school simply because they possess the ability to do so. Wholly lacking a compelling reason or explanation for their turn towards delinquent crimes, Ben muses, "It just felt good to do things I couldn't put on my college application." Jun interprets this as an example of Asian Americans' ability for self-cultivation and self-enterprise, which renders them perfectly aligned with the tenets of neoliberalism and thus the ideal neoliberal subjects. Even though she only utilizes heterosexual Asian American men to prove her point, I believe her model of Asian American neoliberalism can be extended to Asian American women as well, with Ling as the perfect case study.

In *Ally McBeal*, Ling juggles three occupations, despite being upper middle class. In addition to practicing law at Cage & Fish, she is also the manager at a construction site and the owner of a mud-wrestling club. She extends her labor into these multiple arenas not out of a recognizable economic need or to feed her passions but simply because she has the capacity to do so. In fact, this is the premise of season two episode eight, "Just Looking," in which a neighborhood association is trying to shut down Ling's mudwrestling club, which operates out of a nearby home. The prosecution, representing a group of white, presumably middle class, suburban soccer moms, claims that the club objectifies and degrades women, is an ostensibly bad influence on children, and "demeans the [value of the] neighborhood." When Ling is called by the defense to take the stand, she launches into a tirade, decrying institutional sexism and arguing that "sex is a weapon" that "all women use to their advantage." She further rationalizes: "People should be happy to have my club because we exploit men! They're pigs!" In this staunchly sex-positive, liberal feminist rallying cry against the omnipresent social institutions that degrade women, she is advocating for the continued existence of her club as a fantasy space of sorts in which women can, however ephemerally, exercise the opportunity to exploit men for a change.

However, her embrace of empowering feminist rhetoric turns out to be an opportunistic ploy, for immediately after the judge rules in her favor, she reveals that she actually finds the place "disgusting." Ling's entire spiel, in fact, turns out to be disingenuous; the fervor with which she delivered her monologue is not rooted in her desire to provide a safe, sex-positive space for women. Rather, she is purely interested in exploiting the presumably carnal nature of men (and their wallets) to further her own capital accumulation. In her appropriation of liberal feminist discourse to call for the freedom of sexual expression, she reveals her own stance on the utility of feminism and gendered respectability politics. That is, in Ling's purview, feminist rhetoric becomes just another tool to instrumentalize in order to facilitate social mobility and economic gain. Further, she directs her labor towards these multiple ventures not out of economic necessity but precisely because she possesses the competency and productivity to do so. And that is precisely why Asian American women (and men) are the ideal neoliberal subjects: they have the innate penchant for self-enterprise and accountability that propel their personal successes and do not allow their race or gender to handicap them.

Therefore, just as Asian Americans were, in the hands of conservatives, "a demonstration of how the system can correct itself without radical [racial] change,"[77] Ling is proof positive that antiracist social welfare programs are unnecessary, for a racial minority can demonstrably succeed and even outperform her white peers as long as she works hard enough. A decade earlier, *The Cosby Show* (Ed Weinberger, et al., 1984-1992) engaged in a similar ideological project that sought to counter pervasive notions of African Americans as deviant and pathological by instead cultivating the image of an immaculate black middle class family of white-collar professionals who neatly coalesced with neoliberal mandates and respectability

[77] Bascara, "Cultural Politics of Redress," 132.

politics. *The Cosby Show* was so ideologically powerful that it was cited by legislators as proof positive that African Americans can succeed on their own, affirmative action programs are unnecessary expenditures, and social welfare programs should be dismantled.[78] If the Huxtables proved to be the exception to the rule of perceived black degeneracy, then Ling can perhaps be understood as the rule itself of Asian American success – the pinnacle of Asian Americans' valuation as model minorities and the standard by which other people of color are subsequently judged and rendered valuable (or not). The Huxtables and Ling operate along parallel discursive logics in that they both narrate paths to success that emphasize meritocracy, personal responsibility, and respectability and consequently deem those who cry racism and rely on government support "bad" minorities.

For people of color, aspiring towards respectability is frequently a double-edged sword. On the one hand, respectability discourses allow a marginalized group to attain social value by demonstrating belonging in and compatibility with white hegemonic society. Simultaneously, on the other hand, respectability politics entail the policing of one's own community and the disciplining of those from both within and without the community who fail to conform to socially mandated notions of respectability. In other words, legibility as a respectable individual or group requires the production of others as illegible. For Asian Americans, inherent within their status as model minorities is the expectation that they are respectable. Historically, black

[78] For instance, Gary Bauer, the Education Undersecretary and Chair of the Working Group on Family in Reagan's administration, believed that "the Bill Cosby show and the values it promotes may ultimately be more important to black children's success than a bevy of new federal programs…The set of character traits, which we refer to as the Protestant work ethic, has been ridiculed and debunked by self-proclaimed intellectuals. But the facts clearly show that it works for minorities and poor children as well as the children of the suburbs." Christine Acham, "The Cosby Show: Representing Race," *How to Watch Television,* ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 108.

women were the first to deploy respectability politics in order to combat the pervasive beliefs about black pathology.

As African American Studies scholar Candice Jenkins relays, the struggle for respectability among African Americans is a phenomenon that operated in tandem with uplift ideology. In what she terms the *salvific wish*, "gestures toward communal uplift through the adoption of bourgeois values are the beginning of the pattern of black female and middle-class desire."[79] A term with deliberately Christian connotations, the salvation alluded to depends upon voluntary social and political sacrifice, and the sacrificial lamb is black women themselves.[80] According to the logic of the salvific wish, black women could pay with "the concealment of their bodies, for the ultimate 'safety' of the black community as a whole" from the narratives of familial and sexual pathology "through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity."[81] For these black, mostly middle class women, respectability discourses were a means through which they could counter the pervasive narratives of black sexual deviance and pathology, one that required careful attention to the ways in which their bodies and sexualities were presented. By regulating their allegedly excess sexualities, they could improve the perception of their community, and aspire towards normative (read: white) bourgeois values. Through her analysis of Nella Larsen's novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Jenkins contends that the black female characters in these works are almost denied sexual expression; instead, sexual freedom and sexual exoticism are displaced onto the figure of the mulatta for the purpose of demonstrating black women's conformity with proper patterns of

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[79] Candice Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2007), 13.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid., 13-14.

bourgeois behavior.[82] At the core of respectability discourses, then, is a regulation of black women's sexualities, intimate expressions, and family formations in order to attempt to ascribe to white gender and sexual norms.

Similarly, a closer examination of the model minority myth reveals the multiply insidious ways in which it subjects Asian American bodies to its governing apparatuses. In addition to regulating acceptable behaviors by producing the notion of Asian Americans as acquiescent, disciplined, and high achieving, it also controls Asian Americans' sexual and intimate expressions and formations of family. To reiterate Lee's point, Asian America was the site through which the nation articulated its desires to return to global dominance,[83] as well as the return to so-called "family values."[84] As legal scholar Dorothy Roberts elucidates, the stigmatization of black families operates on a complex nexus of prevailing racist and sexist logics that paints a picture of black women as not only recklessly fertile but also deliberately exploiting the welfare system for material gain.[85] If black families are derided as deviant aberrations from white societal norms because they seem to be disproportionately headed by single mothers, then Asian families, as exemplary model minority formations, are presumably the opposite – in other words, heteropatriarchal.

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[82] Ibid., 28.

[83] In the post World War II era, the United States witnessed its international hegemony beginning to wane, as it faced a plethora of issues precipitated by domestic deindustrialization, the rise of Communism, and the ascendancy of Asian economic powers.

[84] Robert Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 182-183.

[85] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1997), 17.

As a testament to the proven superiority of a male-led, nuclear family structure, Asian Americans are often quoted as having the highest median incomes among *all* racial groups,[86] as well as disproportionately high rates of college education attainment. These are both popular, if misleading, statistics frequently cited as signifiers of the Asian American success story.[87] The predominant narrative circulated within the cultural lexicon about the model minority is that these immigrants are able to achieve resounding financial and educational success in America because their culturally derived, superior values and their still intact, patriarchal households allow them to properly raise and provide for their children.[88] The model minority myth, then, can be recognized as a racial project that constitutes Asian American subjects vis-à-vis their capitalistic labor and reproductive labor. If neoliberal respectability mandates the instrumentalization of Asian American bodies toward the accumulation of capital and the formation of nuclear families, then Ling can be read as posing a challenge to the governing logics of the model minority myth. That is, she is an Asian American woman who perfectly embodies the tenets of neoliberalism but fails to conform to those of bourgeois respectability. Furthermore, she is presented as sexually predatory but actively counters the gendered expectations of the model minority subject to engage in procreative sexual intercourse. Through

[86] These numbers actually become discredited when accounting for the number of wage earners in each family, as Asian households tend to include extended family members.

[87] See Lee, *Orientals,* 132; Pew Center Research 2010

[88] Such rhetoric is still salient today and has been deployed by conservative thinktanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute, and conservative pundits like Bill O'Reilly to coopt Asian Americans as model minorities to replicate neoliberal violences against African Americans and Latinos. See Charles Murray, "Why Aren't Asians Republicans," AEI.com, American Enterprise Institution, last modified November 22, 2012, https://www.aei.org/publication/why-arent-asians-republicans, and Pamela Engel, "Fox News Host Calls White Privilege 'A Big Lie,'" BusinessInsider.com, Business Insider, Inc., last modified August 28, 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/fox-news-host-bill-oreilly-says-white-privilege-is-a-big-lie-2014-8

these very contradictions in Ling's racialization, she is able to interpellate Asian American viewers by offering them a freedom of sorts from the regulating apparatuses of the model minority myth. Recall that these individual viewers are always-already subjects prior to the viewing, as Ling is just one of many ideological apparatuses that register Asian Americans as an ideological and racial construction. Ling does, however, constitute a new or, at the very least, different subject in her deviation from normative model minority logics. Specifically, she poses a challenge to the conflation of model minority discourse with respectability politics and of financial and professional success with sexual regulation. In the moment that Asian American viewers recognize themselves as subjects through watching her, an alternate Asian American racial formation is produced.

However, simultaneously, these very traits that resonate with Asian American viewers engage white, socially conservative viewers in a very different manner. Ling, as the ideal neoliberal subject, is the epitome of self-sufficiency and thereby also embodies some of the show's most vociferous articulations of postfeminist and postracial politics. On the surface, Ling is characterized as a woman of color who does not need feminism to prove her (hyper)competence as a female lawyer in a male dominated profession, nor does she require affirmative action programs to get hired at an all-white firm. That is not to say that she is above exploiting her race, gender, or sexuality to get what she wants, though. In fact, the reason she is hired at Cage & Fish is not because of her impressive legal credentials; instead, she seductively licks senior partner Richard Fish's finger, leaving him desperately yearning to learn more about the sexual secrets of the Orient she claims to possess. Needless to say, he immediately offers her a position at the firm, even though they are not hiring. Ling treats her racial identity in a similarly passé manner. In one courtroom scene, as she is delivering her closing arguments to the jury,

Ling begins to speak in Chinese. The subtitles read: "It doesn't really matter what I say here, because none of you speak Chinese. But you can see from my sad face I'm sympathetic. You can hear from my tone it's appropriate to feel sorry for me… I'm going to finish now and pretend to cry," which she does as she promptly walks off.[89]

Here, we see Ling shamelessly exploiting her ethnicity in order to manipulate the jury's affect and help her win her case. She certainly does not need to do this, given that she is an intelligent and quick-witted litigator in her own right. Yet, this is part of the show's commentary on the lack of salience socially constructed identity categories hold in *Ally McBeal's* postracial, postfeminist universe. Race, gender and sexuality carry none of their socially and historically specific, oppressive baggage and instead manifest as cultural capital to further one's self-enterprise and success. While women of color are often stigmatized and disciplined for their perceived excess sexualities in real life, Ling is able to cavalierly use the promise of sex in order to accrue material and social gain, without any fear of reprisal in the form of shame or sexual violence. Meanwhile, being Chinese is no longer the source of xenophobia scorn that justified their wholesale exclusion from this country; it is now a dehistoricized, aesthetic identity that can be utilized to manipulate affects and engender sympathy. The broader implication of Kelley's "utopia" is a world order in which race and gender are no longer sources of social and political oppression but rather sources of cultural capital that have the potential to enrich one's social value. And that is precisely how Ling tackles both her all-white, male-led workplace and the world (of the show): she is wholly unencumbered by both her race and gender. Her demonstrated success through individual hard work, determination, and cultivation enables her to interpellate conservative white viewers as well by serving as a proxy for the expression of racist, sexist, and

[89] Greg Smith, *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argumentation of Ally McBeal* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 79.

ableist ideologies. The moment they recognize themselves as subjects is when they view Ling articulating these problematic, politically incorrect thoughts, though the conservative subject as an ideological and social category exists prior to the consumption of Ling, given the omnipresence of ideological apparatuses producing similarly constituted subjects.

Another way in which she affectively resonates with socio-politically conservative viewers is the fact that she is unconstrained by social norms, having no qualms about saying whatever she wants, tact or niceties be damned. No marginalized group is safe from her infamously snarky, biting "Lingisms," not even sick children or the disabled and elderly. Therefore, she can be read as a figure that rallies against political correctness and the overall culture of sensitivity in America and, through her articulation of these "Lingisms," interpellates sociopolitically conservative viewers by giving them license to express their basest, most offensive thoughts. Ling, as the show's resident villainess, is perpetually irritated, particularly by petty annoyances that inconvenience her, and as such, a frequent target of her scornful rage is the disabled. In one episode, a man in a wheelchair inadvertently bumps into her, provoking her to yell: "Watch where you are going! It's bad enough that you people get all the parking spots!" In another instance, a blind man accidentally taps her with his cane, causing her to retort: "Ow! They're not weapons…I so prefer the deaf to the blind." Social propriety and basic human decency mandate respect and deference towards the disabled and other folks with accessibility issues. However, Ling completely ignores such social prescriptions and vocally expresses her distaste for and disapproval of the presumption that we need to accommodate these individuals.

Ling, however, does not limit her abuses to verbal assaults; she will even take it one step further and mockingly impersonate the blind just to get her way. In one episode, she dons sunglasses, extends a white cane, and walks across a busy street, causing cars to come to a

screeching halt, simply because the pedestrian crosswalk is taking too long. When a coworker reprimands her for these affronts to real blind people in the world, she retorts, "It's not like any of them saw me." What you do not know cannot hurt you, right? As per Ling's narcissistic worldview, disabled people receive undeserved special treatment and privileges such as access to prime parking spots and the right to cross the street on a whim and stop traffic. Ling's animosity towards the disabled is conditioned by her embrace of neoliberal ontologies. Given the show's colorblind and postfeminist politics, it is not hard to read such special accommodations for the disabled as unearned entitlements, a la the backlash against affirmative action. That is, Ling's scorn towards the disabled is a product of the fact that they are capitalistically unproductive, nonlaboring citizens. As the ideal neoliberal subject who seemingly instrumentalizes every fiber of her being toward the generation of wealth and status, Ling is juxtaposed with the disabled, who are shown to be doing nothing more than mulling around and getting in her way; no wonder, then, they are the targets of her insufferable wrath.

While having a body that can work or be utilized towards work is seen as completely natural to human beings, disability studies scholar Robert McRuer strives to underscore the ways in which ability and able-bodiedness are not natural entities but actually culturally produced as well.[90] Critically engaging Adrienne Rich's seminal essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence" to draw parallels between sexuality and ability, McRuer shows how the ways of being an able-bodied individual are, like being heterosexual, culturally variable and learned.[91] As such, under neoliberal governmentality, our ways of being rendered legible as able-bodied

[90] Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Diabled Existence," in *The Disability Studies Reader,* ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 372.

[91] In the essay, Rich argues that patriarchal social and political institutions that impel compulsory heterosexuality in women result in an erasure of lesbian identities.

humans is coterminous with our production of labor. Using the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of able-bodied as an analytical foundation, McRuer reveals how a sense of normality is imbued within our understandings of able-bodiedness in that being able-bodied means "being capable of the *normal physical exertions required* in a particular system of labor (emphasis mine)."[92] It is no surprise, then, that the definition of able-bodied traces its origin to the nineteenth century and the rise of industrial capitalism. That is, under industrial capitalism and its corresponding system of valuation, being able-bodied was intrinsically tied to having the capacity to work in a factory (i.e. the "normal physical exertions" required at the time), while contrastingly, dis-ability entails the inability to work and as a result, the lack of a register of one's value. McRuer elaborates that in the emergent industrial capitalist system, being "free to sell one's labor but not free to do anything else effectively meant free to have an able body but not particularly free to have anything else."[93] That is, having an able body essentially entails possessing the freedom, perhaps even the necessity, to sell one's labor but not much otherwise. After all, in a neoliberal capitalistic world order, it is through labor that the normative human subject is constituted and rendered legible and valuable.

Consequently, it is hard not to draw parallels between such rhetoric and the "culture wars" brewing over affirmative action policies and political correctness in the 1990s.[94] These programs were roundly attacked by politicians on the right (and many on the left, as well) as going too far in terms of attempting to correct past injustices and amounted to providing

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[92] McRuer, 372.

[93] McRuer, 372.

[94] The term culture wars was popularized by James Hunter in the 1990s, referring to the proliferation of issues such as immigration, gun laws, homosexuality, and abortion rights that sought to divide and realign American politics and culture. See James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

undeserved "special treatment" for African Americans, women and other minority groups. According to television studies scholar Greg Smith, one of *Ally McBeal's* central proclamations about victimhood is that "to assume the position of a victim is a *choice*."[95] Read alongside the show's postracial and postfeminist oeuvre, one can logically extend his statement to argue that those who claim to suffer from discrimination, whether due to race, gender, or ability, *choose* to be victims. In other words, they allow these social constructs to burden or impede their success in life when in reality, or at least in the show's reality, these identity markers function to enhance one's social and cultural capital. Thereby, in juxtaposing them with Ling, the epitome of neoliberal hyperproductivity, disabled folks are rendered particularly nonproductive members of society and perhaps even exposed as impediments to a capitalistic economic system predicated upon the ability to produce labor. Thus, in this light, disabled people are shown to be deliberate victims, and their so-called privileges, such as being able to access the best parking spots and cross the street at leisure, are presented as unearned and unwarranted.

Given that America purports to be a fair and meritocratic society, special treatment based on race, gender, sexuality, or ability ostensibly constitutes a form of "reverse discrimination." It makes sense, then, that the model minority myth became one of the primary ideological and regulatory tools of conservative politics. Embedded within model minority discourses is a culturally essentializing narrative of Asian American success that is intrinsically intertwined with the production of respectability. That is, Asian Americans are said to be able to achieve their vaunted socioeconomic status because of their hard work and perseverance, unlike African Americans, Latinos, who purportedly lack any semblance of a work ethic and instead rely on governmental assistance for survival – ostensibly unrespectable behaviors. In that sense, Asian

[95] Ibid., 93.

Americans' steps to success can be understood as inherently respectable because they shoulder the responsibility for their outcomes in life, ostensibly instrumentalizing every opportunity provided them by America's meritocratic society, while keeping their heads down politically instead of inciting racial tension. If Asian Americans are legible as respectable model minorities, then what does it mean for an Asian American woman like Ling to so openly flaunt a challenge to political correctness à la her assaults on the disabled? Recall Jenkins' argument that in Nella Larsen's novels, sexual deviance is displaced onto the mixed race body in order to illuminate black women's conformity with bourgeois respectability. What if, on *Ally McBeal,* the social stigma of difference is shifted from the Asian American body to the disabled body? How might this discursive reframing be imagined as a way to normalize or rescript Asian American difference? Perhaps Asian Americans' racialized difference, instead of being the source of stigma and ostracization, can be interpreted as the very conditions that allow them to embody the neoliberal mandates of self-enterprise and personal responsibility and serve as the ideal neoliberal subjects.

The model minority myth, through its conscription of conformity with social mores and bourgeois respectability, constitutes subjects vis-à-vis the control it imposes upon them. It is hardly a coincidence that Ling is the perpetrator of these vicious verbal assaults upon the disabled. After all, who better to discipline the disabled for being unproductive, nonlaboring citizens than the ideal neoliberal subject herself? Through Ling, Asian Americans are able to register their value as citizens of the neoliberal state precisely because their racial difference facilitates their alignment with the neoliberal principles of meritocracy, self-enterprise and personal accountability. As Helen Jun proposes, we might understand the rise of this discourse on Asian American self-enterprise as symptomatic of the "proliferation of neoliberal ideologies

that not only discipline "bad" racial minorities but also constitute a neoliberal episteme."[96] She elaborates that Asian American cultural production engages these neoliberal "ways of knowing," through which "economistic mandates of self-cultivation, self-enterprise and privatization resonate as an Asian American racial formation."[97] Accordingly, Asian Americans as the model minority have been incorporated into the scripts of neoliberal ideology and subsequently deployed by the state to exercise control over "bad" minorities. And embedded within Ling, as a model minority subject who espouses neoliberal epistemes, are demands for Asian Americans' inclusion in national culture, access to desired workplaces, pursuit of affective bonds, and recognition as intrinsically valuable members of American society. But to what end?

Needless to say, Ling's caustic personality certainly does not make her very popular with her coworkers, but despite her outwardly unaffected demeanor, she is nevertheless at times genuinely confused and impacted by others' dislike of her. For example, after she becomes a judge, she confesses to Richard: "It's lonely on the bench. I thought I'd like a place where people can't get to you but once in a while…you need to have somebody who can get to you."[98] In this stark moment of vulnerability, Ling exposes the violence of neoliberal formations on Asian American subjects. That is, while Asian Americans are deemed valuable in a capitalistic society for their high skilled, in demand labor and conformity to neoliberal ideals, this apparatus of

[96] Jun, *Race for Citizenship*, 132.

[97] Ibid.

[98] At the end of the series, Ling becomes a superior court judge in Massachusetts; hence, the reference to the bench.

valuation is predicated upon the simultaneous production of Asian Americans as inhuman, inhumane and emotionally deficient.[99]

Ling is also rendered legible through this precise dialectic, with her status as an ideal neoliberal subject coterminous with the fact of her gendered racialization. Ironically, her difference as an Asian American, which is what renders her valuable as a neoliberal laboring subject, is also what places her at odds with the core tenets of humanity – sympathy, empathy, and emotionality. In her ruthless drive to accumulate power and human capital, Ling is wholly consumed by the neoliberal mentality that nothing is worth pursuing unless it can improve one's social and economic capital. The show's frequent application of animatronics to Ling to transform her into nonhuman entities is telling; after all, what are human emotions but a hindrance to neoliberal rationality and self-enterprise? As such, she can easily manipulate her own emotions, as well as other people's affective responses to her performances of emotionality, for the purposes of material gain (i.e. when she cons the jury into siding with her by speaking in Mandarin), but she is shown to have trouble emoting during times of genuine grief. That is why, for instance, she instinctively adopts a biting veneer when she hears about a young boy's death: neoliberal formations have conditioned her to suppress all emotions unless they can be exploited for personal gain and consequently, she is only able to mourn the loss of this child once she escapes the purview of others. Thus, though her racial difference might provide the conditions that enable her to convey her social value under neoliberal regimes, it simultaneously results in her dehumanization.

[99] This is presumably why Ling never registers the normative emotional response to stimuli. Even though she is deeply affected by Eric's death, she has to chastise Ally before grieving in private.

Consequently, Ling embodies the multiple fractures of Asian American racialization both on the show and in American society. At once hypercompetent, wealthy, and powerful, Ling is regarded as the ideal neoliberal subject due to her ability to adhere to the tenets of self-enterprise and personal responsibility. Simultaneously, she is fearlessly brash and unapologetic and openly flaunts a challenge to the stereotypical notion of Asian American women as meek, obedient, and respectful model minorities. That is why even Ally, Ling's antithesis, willingly admits that Ling is "my hero," even though "she's vicious, I disagree with almost everything she says, and she treats me like dirt." In a profession dominated by white men, Ling demonstrably instills fear and commands respect from her colleagues and opponents alike. To reiterate Hamamoto's prior observation, she powerfully warns white America that Asian American women "are not to be trifled with."[100] Through her particular characterization, she renders legible the intrinsic value of Asian Americans as model minority citizens who actively contribute to neoliberal capitalism without reproducing the stereotypes of Asians as respectful, passive and apolitical. Simultaneously, Ling's stance on sexual politics also engenders a challenge to the conflation of socioeconomic success with marriage and sexual reproduction.

Ling's relationship with Richard is the subject of much scrutiny, due to the graphic and eccentric nature of its portrayal. From the very inception of their relationship, she is presented as an aggressive sexual predator who embodies mysterious sexual secrets that beget Western comprehension. As their relationship develops, she serves up a bevy of Orient-infused sexual practices, including sucking his fingers, dripping hot on his bare chest, and performing a "hair-tickling" massage on him. Cultural critic Jeff Yang muses, "What she offered was not too far off from an Oriental massage – hair splayed across his chest, his stricken face, the whole interracial

[100] Lee, "The Ling Thing."

thing. It's clearly something that plays off so many deep-seated fantasies about Asian American women."[101] While these foreplay tactics might be fetishistic, it is important to distinguish them from actual sexual intercourse. The fact of the matter is, despite her sexually aggressive provocations, she actually dislikes conventional sex. She claims that sex is "messy and overrated," much to Richard's chagrin, given that sex is one of his primary sources of gratification. When she finally agrees to have sexual intercourse with him, it is on her terms, demanding that he sign a safety waiver and a confidentiality agreement to protect her sexual secrets.[102] Apparently, even though she does not like sex, she is as hypercompetent in the bedroom as she is in the courtroom. According to Ling, the reason she has been delaying having sexual intercourse with Richard is because she was in actuality trying to protect him from the magnitude of her sexual prowess. She warns Richard: "If I made love to you, you'd go blind…I'm amazing in bed. It's not something I'm proud of, but I have ruined lives, and I cannot take another man saying there's no other after me."[103] Thus, as it turns out, Ling's excellence extends into the bedroom as well, thereby demonstrating the extent of her ability to self-enterprise and achieve mastery of all her endeavors, even that which she does not like. Ling's hypersexualization, as well as her eccentric sexual practices, are ultimately symptomatic of sociohistorical discourses on the deviant sexual excesses of Asian women, which manifested in

[101] Annie Nakao, "Asian 'Ally' Character Puts Stereotypes to Test," last modified March 3, 1999, http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Asian-Ally-character-puts-stereotypes-to-test-3095093.php

[102] Smith, *Beautiful TV,* 95.

[103] Ibid.

the racialized immigration exclusion of Asian women from America à la the Page Act.[104] Thus, the postracial framing of the show has once again been proven false; nevertheless, it is worth noting that Ling is presented as agentive in her sexual choices, having the ability to decide whether or not she wants to sleep with Richard and the terms of their sexual engagement. Moreover, Ling is presented as vehemently against having children, thereby deviating from the gendered expectations of the model minority myth in another significant way.

Recall Robert Lee's contention that the U.S. nation-state had hoped to utilize Asian Americans to revive itself to its prewar market hegemony, a national recovery project predicated in part upon the "return to family values."[105] Asian Americans, according to Lee, share similar values as Protestants, including a robust work ethic and sexual self-regulation, factors that were favorable toward the production of nuclear families.[106] Unlike African Americans and Latinos, who are discursively marked by hypersexuality, sexual deviancy, and rampant reproduction rates, Asian Americans are seen as responsible in their reproductive practices in that they ostensibly do not have children they cannot care for and do not rely on welfare to support their families.[107] Ling, however, eschews the gendered expectations of the model minority myth by remaining staunchly unwed and childless throughout the series. This is a trait she shares with her closest friend on the show, Nelle, who is regarded as the ice queen of the firm. In fact, Nelle, when defending a corporation accused of passing up a recent mom as a full partner, delivers an

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[104] Siobhan Somerville, "Sexual Aliens and the Racialized State: A Queer Reading of the 1952 U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act," in *Queer Migrations*, ed. Eithne Luibheid and Lionel Cantu (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 78.

[105] Lee, *Orientals,* 182.

[106] Ibid., 189.

[107] Murray, "Why Aren't Asians Republicans."

impassioned diatribe as to why the corporation was justified: the woman chose to be a mother. Nelle states:

> Women have it all these days, but when you look at men who have risen to the top, they've sacrificed a little on the family side…Where the gender bias lies is in the assumption that every woman wants to be a mother. Not all of us want to be pregnant. That's the bigotry. What about those women who choose 14-hour days? Should they cede advantage to those colleagues who chose motherhood? She's not asking for equal treatment; she's asking for *special consideration* (emphasis mine).[108]

Nelle's spiel, particularly the first and last lines, underscores the show's postfeminist politics. In the utopic universe of *Ally McBeal,* women have it all, possessing the unobstructed agency – some might say luxury - to work or get pregnant. As Nelle rationally reminds us, motherhood is a choice; a woman *chooses* pregnancy, despite knowing that it may very well impact her job performance. And thus, since the choice is ultimately in the hands of the individual, if a woman decides that she does want to have it all (i.e. have children and work), she should not expect special accommodations from her workplace just because she also wanted to be a mother. Ignoring the fact that women cannot agentively choose to get pregnant and that financial necessity premeditates some women to juggle work and motherhood simultaneously, among other glaring issues, the playing field in the world of *Ally McBeal* is ostensibly even, and it would not be fair to the women (and men) who have dedicated their lives and labor to their

[108] Smith, *Beautiful TV,* 103.

careers to lose promotions and other opportunities for upward mobility to those who wanted to be moms. She concedes that they will "know joys that [she'll] never imagine" but she "chose to focus on work, not family". And thus, as egregiously decontextualized as her argument is, Nelle is positing an important and valid intervention here against the patriarchal expectation that all women necessarily want to experience childbirth and motherhood.

If the iconic dancing CGI baby was the embodiment of Ally's visceral fears of being a professional, working woman who may miss out on the chance of motherhood,[109] Ling and Nelle are presented as the antithesis to that dilemma: single, career-driven women who are happily unmarried and childless. After all, Ling is unapologetically self-centered and individualistic; she derives fulfillment in life from bullying others, excelling at work and in the bedroom in equal measures, and engaging in nonprocreative sexual practices. Her drive to accumulate wealth and power over her colleagues is, as with everything else she does, for her own personal gain and pleasure. If the United States' deployment of the model minority figure as the secret weapon for national restoration relied upon a false correlation between presumed Asian American heterosexuality and the tenacity of the Asian nuclear family, then Ling is demonstrating the absurdity of U.S. racial logics. After all, according to the scripts of neoliberalism and meritocracy, one is only accountable for herself, and marriage and motherhood should have no bearing on her hard-fought socioeconomic success. And through this contradiction, she delivers an impactful message to Asian American viewers: the accumulation of wealth and success as model minorities is not coterminous with sexual regulation and procreative heterosexuality. This deregulation from the disciplining apparatuses of the model minority myth, in hailing or interpellating Asian American viewers, constitutes a new subject entirely.

[109] A 3D-rendered animated representation of a dancing baby that recurred throughout the series and in Ally's dreams. It is also noteworthy as one of the first viral videos.

So where does that leave us? I have illustrated that Ling is a character that, despite being written as a crude villainess, actually embodies a complex amalgamation of ideologies that registers the historically specific racialization of Asian Americans, particularly Asian American women. She challenges the assumption that the model minority is also inherently respectable through her boisterous critiques of social propriety and political correctness and through that grants the socially conservative viewer license to articulate sexist, ablest, and racist thoughts. Simultaneously, she exposes the disciplining technologies of the model minority myth's regulation of Asian American sexuality and the family unit and through this is able to give Asian American viewers a slight reprieve from the totality of the regulating mechanisms of the model minority myth, neoliberalism, and respectability politics.

Ultimately, however, in spite of all this, the most damning discursive function of Ling is that she exposes the dehumanizing violence of neoliberalism on Asian Americans. In addition to the show's frequent playful distortions of Ling's physical features that serve to question her humanity, she also demonstrates a seeming inability to perform normative emotional responses to stimuli such as sympathy and empathy. This characterization of Ling exposes the For example, in episode thirteen of season two, "Angels and Blimps," Ling agrees to help a little boy named Eric who is dying of leukemia sue God for giving him the disease. Even though he has cancer, he is not precluded from her mean spirited "Ling-isms;" in one instance, she says to the boy's mother, "I bet he would be cute if he had hair." Nevertheless, Ling grows quite fond of Eric, and at one point, he even calls her his angel, much to Ally's surprise. However, the boy ultimately succumbs to his illness, and when Ally begins doubting the existence of God due to the occurrence of this tragedy, Ling viciously retorts: "The boy had leukemia. It isn't the world's

biggest shock [that he died]. Get over it!!" The camera pans to Ally's face, stunned and speechless, and then back to Ling, who proceeds to leave the room.

The stark contrast in their respective reactions to the news is telling of their discursive functions within the show. Ally, as the heroine and anchor for audiences, responds the way a normatively empathetic human being would under such tragic circumstances, decrying the utter unjustness of Eric's death as a telltale sign of the godless world in which they live. Meanwhile, Ling, as her antithesis, embodies a nearly robotic lack of sympathetic understanding and although she might not be wrong in her prognosis, she is certainly breaking social prescriptions regarding propriety and tact during times of mourning. Her brutally levelheaded response not only renders it difficult to like or care for Ling as a character but also instinctively garners positive identification with Ally.



*Figure 3: Ling is unable to contain her tears over Eric's death.*

But this cold-hearted veneer might actually be a façade, for immediately after delivering that diatribe, the viewer witnesses Ling running down the hallway of the hospital, barely able to contain her tears. She manages to make it outside before completely breaking down in an

uncharacteristically genuine display of grief (see figure 3). Ling is, as it turns out, as deeply devastated by Eric's death as Ally is, so why does she initially react so viciously? The answer, it would appear, is that this is the consequence of neoliberal formations on Asian American subjects. Ling, in spite of her tough and impenetrable exterior, is emotionally damaged. Her steadfast pursuit and unquestioning embrace of neoliberal mandates may have engendered "rewards" in the form of respect and fear at work, not to mention vast economic wealth, but in the end, she is shown to be empty, hollow, and broken inside. She is so wholly consumed by neoliberal epistemes that the very categories that constitute humans as such (i.e. emotions, morality, etc.) become rendered moot and depicted as nothing more than tools to further her self-enterprise. In fact, Ling admits as much to Nelle: "Neither of us wants a man to go spelunking to our emotional core. The echo would kill him."[110] In this moment, Ling seems complacent, perhaps even resigned, to the fact that she is emotionally defunct and cannot affectively register as human. Juxtaposed against the prevailing images of Ling as a supremely confident individual whom everyone aspires to be, these cracks in her armor underscore the contradictory racialization of Asian Americans as model minority laborers who are hyperproductive but irreparably broken and affectively inhuman. Through this reading, I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which Ling embodies and circulates a racially specific critique of the violences of neoliberalism on Asian Americans on a show that was purportedly postracial. She might appear to be overtly stereotypical but Ling, as it turns out, produces significant political and ideological commentary on the positionality of Asian Americans in the late 1990s and the ability of a cultural figure to impact and interpellate subjects differently.

[110] Smith, *Beautiful TV,* 97.

## Chapter Two*:* Guilty Feelings and Suspended Agency in *Elementary*

Twelve years after she left *Ally McBeal* for Hollywood stardom, Lucy Liu would find herself returning to the small screen, trading Ling's signature snark to play a famously sincere character – Dr. John Watson from the *Sherlock Holmes* stories. The initial news regarding her casting as Dr. *Joan* Watson drew much ire from Sherlock purists, who decried the casting decision as destroying the very essence of the *Sherlock Holmes* mythology, which they claimed is supposed to be about the relationship between two straight white men. Even Benedict Cumberbatch himself, who plays Sherlock on the BBC series *Sherlock* (Mark Gatiss, et al., 2012-present), felt compelled to speak out, opining that he would be "frightened of the dynamic of male friendship that you'd lose" by casting Watson as a woman because "that is obviously the bedrock of the books as well."[111] Fans of *Sherlock Holmes* seemed to presume that a female Watson and a male Holmes cannot be friends and partners without becoming sexually or romantically involved.[112] In fact, that seems to be precisely what a writer for *The Guardian* is insinuating when she furiously criticized the casting of Liu as Watson as "not just a mindlessly trendy piece of feminising [*sic*], but a kneejerk 'Will they, won't they?' angle" that threatens to turn the entire series into a remake of *When Harry Met Sally*.[113] What commentator Victoria

[111] Michael Ausiello, "*Sherlock's* Benedict Cumberbatch Break His Silence on CBS' *Elementary: '*I'd be Frightened,'" *TVLine.com*, TVLine Media, LLC, last modified July 29, 2012, http://tvline.com/2012/07/29/benedict-cumberbatch-elementary-cbs.

[112] Conversely, there is a contingent of *Elementary* fans who are very invested in seeing Joan and Sherlock become a couple, and knowing that that is unlikely to happen, they have taken matters into their own hands, actively producing fan fiction depicting the two as such.

[113] Victoria Coren, "Lucy Liu Playing Dr. Watson: Put That In Your Pipe and Smoke It," *The Guardian,* October 13, 2012, accessed August 1, 2016,

Coren seems to be suggesting is that with a male and a female as the leads, *Elementary* will undoubtedly amount to nothing more than a romantic comedy, as if a man and a woman cannot be anything other than lovers. However, if Coren had bothered to do her research, she would have known that *Elementary* showrunner Rob Doherty has promised from the onset that the romantic angle is "completely off the table," and the goal of his show will be to "honor the original relationship between partners in crimesolving."[114] Perhaps what infuriated Arthur Conan Doyle loyalists most was the utter incredulity of an Asian American woman embodying their beloved Watson, a casting move that Coren bluntly describes as "such an appalling and offensive racial change."[115]

Conversely, many praised the casting of the Chinese American Liu as Watson as unprecedented in any adaptation of *Sherlock Holmes.* In a recently published article by *Vulture*, contributor Alex Heimbach went as far as to propose that Joan Watson is among the best adaptations of Watson in televisual and filmic history. He argues that casting Watson as an Asian American woman serves as a "refreshing" example of racebending – a practice in Hollywood that is usually used to erase people of color from roles and rewrite them as white. Heimbach juxtaposes Liu as a "positive" casting choice in light of the recent controversy over the casting of Tilda Swinton as The Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* and Scarlett Johansson as Major Motoko

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https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/14/victoria-coren-lucy-liu-sherlock-holmes

[114] Matt Webb Mitovich, "*Elementary* Boss: Playing Up Sherlock/Watson Sexual Tension is 'Completely Off the Table,'" TVLine.com, TVLine Media, LLC, last modified July 29, 2012, http://tvline.com/2012/07/29/cbs-elementary-sherlock-watson-sexual-tension.

[115] Coren, "Lucy Liu Playing Dr. Watson."

Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell.*[116] He further elaborates that the characterization of Watson as "a hapless follower would read as regressive and sexist if applied to a woman, especially a woman of color," which is probably why the writers smartly decided to draw from the original literature for inspiration, wherein Holmes and Watson are more evenly matched in wits.[117] [118] Further praise has been bestowed upon the dynamic between Jonny Lee Miller and Lucy Liu, with *The Guardian's* Phelim O'Neill opining that they "make it a double act to rival *Sherlock*." Subsequent seasons of *Elementary* received praise for elevating Watson's character into "someone with loftier aspirations" than merely being "a friend, medic, and put-upon backup."[119] It would follow, then, that *Elementary's* characterization of Joan can be regarded as "progressive" because it presents her as a formidable *partner* to Holmes without reproducing the usual configurations of their relationship that position Watson as tangential.

Admittedly, Rob Doherty's decision to cast Lucy Liu as Watson is a bold move. In an era of television predating the current "diversity trend,"[120] *Elementary* was entering a televisual

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[116] His comparison is temporally disjointed, though, since Liu was cast as Watson more than four years ago and Swinton and Johansson's castings are examples from this past year. Was this news not "refreshing" back in 2012? If anything, Liu's race and gender-bending casting was the rare exception to the trend of Hollywood "racebending" – more commonly known as "whitewashing."

[117] There is a long-standing trope in Hollywood of imagining Asian women as wholly subservient and loyal to white men, known as the Lotus Blossom stereotype.

[118] Alex Heimbach, "Why *Elementary's* Joan is the Best Version of Watson," *Vulture.com,* New York Media, LLC, last modified May 6, 2016, http://www.vulture.com/2016/05/elementary-joan-is-the-best-version-of-watson.html.

[119] Matt Fowler, "Enough Nemesis to Go Around," *IGN.com*, Ziff Davis, LLC, last modified Oct 14, 2014, http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/10/31/elementary-enough-nemesis-to-go-around-review

[120] In a widely-panned survey of fall 2015's TV pilots, *Deadline* Editor in Chief Nellie Andreeva concluded that the predominant trend that season was the "huge spike in the numbers and

landscape in which the ratings-challenged action thriller *Nikita* (Craig Silverstein, 2010-2013) starring Maggie Q was the only primetime show on network television with an Asian American lead, and *Scandal,* one of the few dramas with a woman of color lead, had yet to register as a bona fide hit.[121] In other words, CBS did take a speculative risk in casting a woman of color as the female lead in this hotly contested adaptation of *Sherlock Holmes,* especially considering the fact that Liu's bankability as a star at this point was surely in question. In that sense, Liu's embodiment of Watson can be read as a triumph of multicultural inclusion, engendering a celebration of difference that enables such a retelling. Nevertheless, with that being said, my aim in this chapter is to push beyond the race and gender-bending elements of the character that has been the focus of most analyses of Joan, and the foregone conclusion that Liu's Watson is "positive representation" and instead think critically about the political and discursive effects of casting Watson as an Asian American woman. What racial and gender hierarchies might the casting of Liu as Watson simultaneously replicate and/or subvert? What affective and/or interpersonal bonds are generated by this reimagining of Watson, and what bonds might be severed?

I believe that although Joan appears to be an ostensibly "progressive," nonstereotypical Asian American female character, her relationship with Sherlock, as well as her individual

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prominence of roles that went to minority actors," seemingly to the point where a significant number of roles are becoming off limit to whites. This so-called trend marked the culmination of a year of ratings successes for black and people of color led shows such as *Empire, How to Get Away with Murder,* and *Fresh off the Boat,* among others. Nellie Andreeva, "Pilots 2015: The Year of Ethnic Casting," Deadline.com*,* Penske Business Media, March 24, 2015, accessed March 25, 2015, http://deadline.com/2015/03/tv-pilots-ethnic-casting-trend-backlash-1201386511

[121] *Scandal's* viewership grew during seasons two and three and proved that a network drama starring a woman of color can indeed be a ratings and critical success. In fact, *Scandal* star Kerry Washington became the first black woman nominated for a Leading Actress in a Drama Series Primetime Emmy in eighteen years.

characterization, are actually constituted in a manner that replicates racial power relations. Throughout the series, Joan becomes consumed by an "ugly feeling" – that of guilt – that conditions her normative response to tragedy; instead of going through the stages of grief and achieving emotional catharsis, Joan is driven toward the production of more labor. Through this state of suspended agency, the result of these noncathartic feelings, Joan resonates as an explicitly Asian American racial formation. That is, she is hyperproductive as a laboring subject but seemingly emotionally damaged as a human. In that regard, though Joan and Ling appear to be very different characters on the surface, the discourses they generate about Asian American racialization are starkly similarly. Through Joan's abstention of cathartic release and her rejection of heterosexual love and romance, she produces an important critique of normative womanhood, demonstrating that there are manifestations of love other than those between heterosexual couples, such as those between friends and partners, that are just as affectively charged and influential in shaping subjects.

This reimagining of Watson opens up new and exciting possibilities in terms of storytelling and character development and raises dynamic areas of exploration in terms of Holmes and Watson's relationship. The most obvious is the interracial romance angle, which was the source of much of the animosity towards *Elementary* when the premise of the show was first announced; detractors posited that with a male Holmes and a female Watson, the show would certainly devolve into a senseless romantic drama and destroy the purity of their friendship. Doherty countered these naysayers by contending that to his knowledge, Watson never slept with Holmes, and there is no reason that should change just because Watson is now a woman.[122] As such, the producers have sworn not to pursue this narrative, and as of the end of

[122] Mitovich, "*Elementary* Boss."

season four, they have stayed true to this promise. In establishing that principle, the writers can then proceed to fully explore what it means for a man and a woman to work together intimately as friends and partners but not become romantically or sexually entangled. This is a move that is especially appreciated in light of recent procedural television programs in which a man and a woman who are coworkers for many years eventually end up falling in love, despite their initial incompatibility with and dislike for one another – à la *Elementary's* contemporaries *Bones* (Hart Hanson, 2005-present) and *Castle* (Andrew Marlowe, 2009-present).[123] What pleasures, if not romantic, are generated by casting Watson as a woman and to what effect?

In the original literature, Watson is a successful physician who is characterized as an astute gentleman, while Holmes is a world-renowned detective with incomparable deductive skills, deplorable social skills, and a raging opium addiction. While Doyle envisioned them as relatively evenly matched intellectually, the image of Watson that has been immortalized in the popular imaginary - as a naïve and bumbling sidekick to the brilliant Holmes – dates back to the 1940s series of movies starring Basil Rathbone as Sherlock and Nigel Bruce as the "indelible" Watson.[124] As such, Watson and Holmes are intended to be foils for one another, and neither could exist without the other, but their relationship is usually not rendered as one predicated upon an even exchange of wits or power. In this contemporary iteration, Joan Watson is introduced as a former surgeon who quits her practice due to the sobering death of a patient and instead becomes a sober companion, subsequently hired by Sherlock's father to look after him following his stint in rehab. Her interest in detective work is piqued when she accompanies

[123] That is not to say, however, that there is not a fair share of *Elementary* fans who want Joan and Sherlock to become romantically involved, given the preponderance of fan fiction online depicting them as a couple.

[124] Lynn Porter, *Sherlock Holmes for the 21st Century: Essays on New Adaptations* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 48.

Sherlock on an investigation and actually helps him solve the case. This is when the viewer is first witness to the fact that this Watson endeavors to be more than a "put-upon backup," picking up on cues that even Sherlock is oblivious to.[125] Another significant difference is that in most adaptations of *Sherlock Holmes,* Watson is written as a Victorian-era gentleman who gets married.[126][127] Meanwhile, throughout the four seasons of *Elementary*, Joan has largely found her romantic and sexual relationships unfulfilling. This rewriting of Watson not only facilitates new possibilities in terms of storytelling but also destabilizes many of the inherent power dynamics within Holmes and Watson's relationship, while simultaneously creating new ones.

While Doherty and Liu promise to present audiences with a version of Watson who would be much more than a sidekick to Sherlock, the characterization of Watson during season one seemingly contradicts their steadfast declaration otherwise. After all, Liu's Joan Watson is a Chinese American woman hired to look after Sherlock Holmes, a wealthy white man, and ensure that he does not relapse or die. As such, their relationship highlights the nexus of race, class, gender, and power coming to a head. Furthermore, even after her tenure as his sober companion ends, she deliberately stays on as Sherlock's caretaker in order to continue learning the art of investigation from him, so he subsequently offers her an apprenticeship. This is significant because she transitions from being a paid laborer under Sherlock's father's employ to being dependent upon Sherlock for her next paycheck. As such, their relationship is marked by an imbalance of power: Joan is now living under his roof, with no other source of income and

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[125] Zeba Blay, "Elementary: Season One," SlantMagazine.com, accessed September 18, 2012, http://www.slantmagazine.com/tv/review/elementary-season-one

[126] See Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Man With the Twisted Lip* (1890)*, The Sign of Four* (1890)*, Sherlock Holmes* (2009), and *Sherlock* (2010-present)

[127] Heimbach, "The Best Version of Watson."

resigned to the mercy of Sherlock's intrusive antics, sharp tongue and incessant idiosyncrasies. Clearly, during the initial stages, their relationship is less of a "partnership" or friendship than strictly an employer-employee configuration.

In an early promotional interview for *Elementary,* Lucy Liu admits that her Watson might start out as "someone who is on the sideline" since "she's engaged in *him,* not the mystery (emphasis original)" but stresses that narratively, the show will not be pursuing the conventional, "foot in the bucket" type Watson.[128] Liu's Watson thereby eschews "the most feminizing aspect of Watson's character" by refusing to be a cheerleader for Holmes.[129] Nevertheless, her narrative function is largely to support Sherlock's well-being and deductive processes, and it is not until well into the first season that the writers begin to flesh out Joan's character and provide the backstory on her family, her previous career as a surgeon, including the fallout from that, and her personal life. And over the course of *Elementary's* four seasons, Watson proves to be a formidable match for Holmes, becoming in many ways his equal, but also surpassing him in some respects, especially when it comes to enacting emotional labor and finesse during interactions with clients.

In fact, *Elementary* gestures to Joan's ability to hold her own against Sherlock's abuses in the very first episode. When Sherlock meets Joan in the pilot, he is curious why she quit her practice to become an "addict-sitter" and incorrectly deduces that she had lost a close friend. Later, Joan returns to this subject to tease Sherlock about his mistake and is about to disclose why she stopped practicing medicine when he interrupts her and reveals that he has known all

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[128] Lesley Goldberg, "TCA 2012: 'Elementary' Showrunner Says Most Shows Have a Sherlock," THR.com, Penske Business Media, LLC, last modified July 29, 2012, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/tca-2012-elementary-sherlock-holmes-watson-jonny-lee-miller-lucy-liu-355692.

[129] Heimbach, "Best Version of Watson."

along: she quit due to the death of a patient. At first, Joan is stunned by this revelation and tries to counter by questioning how he knows her patient actually died, and that is when Sherlock exasperatedly explains to her how he arrived at that conclusion.[130] Joan is deeply hurt by his vicious retort, all seemingly to prove that nothing escapes his deductive purview. This causes her to furiously storm out, but not before delivering the following comeback: "It's so incredible the way you can solve a person just by looking at them. I noticed you don't have any mirrors in here…It means that you know a lost cause when you see one." This exchange demonstrates that in CBS's retelling, Watson is not going to be a "slower-witted, almost buffoonish Watson" but an intuitive, intellectually formidable sparring partner for Holmes.[131] Instead of being defeated, as other, more hapless versions of Watson might have been, Joan in return offers a damning condemnation of Sherlock and his psyche: he fixates on fixing other people because he knows he is irreparably broken. Sherlock is equally stunned by Joan's response, and as she exits the scene, the camera pivots to provide a profile shot of Sherlock, standing there silently and rather solemnly, biting his lips as if regretting the venom he just spewed. This scene is dramatically compelling because the two of them effectively build off each other's anger, culminating an affectively charged, heat of the moment exchange.

Thus, *Elementary's* Dr. Watson is presented as an acutely competent individual who aims to be more than a foolish, blindly loyal sidekick to Sherlock Holmes. Liu's Joan Watson averts the most perfunctory and underappreciated aspects of Watson's characterization, rendering her an ostensibly "progressive" representation of an Asian American woman. Combined with the

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[130] According to Sherlock, he figured it out based on a parking ticket in her purse that she must have acquired after visiting a "poor man's cemetery" that neither her parents nor her siblings would be interred at based on their presumed class background.

[131] Porter, *Sherlock Holmes for the 21st Century,* 48.

fact that her casting is unprecedented in the 100+ year trajectory of the *Sherlock Holmes* canon and that her ethnic identity is neither erased nor stereotyped, Joan appears to inhere as a solid victory for multiculturalism's celebration of diversity. However, what discourses about race, gender, sexuality, and nationality are actually engendered by this representation? What does a Chinese American woman's embodiment of Watson enable narratively and ideologically? I argue that while Joan appears to be an empowered Asian American female character, she actually replicates historically specific racial and gendered power structures. Meanwhile, her relationship with Sherlock might be labeled a partnership, but it is constituted by her performance of labor – that is, gendered, emotional labor.

Although Joan may not be as hyperbolically intelligent as Sherlock, she is still valuable; her primary contribution to their partnership is the emotional labor that she performs - a key element of Holmes and Watson's success in solving cases. This is where *Elementary* poses an important intervention to the classic iterations of Sherlock Holmes. In previous adaptations, solving cases is largely constructed as a purely deductive process, undertaken by a white male consulting detective and a white male physician whose achievements as a team are dependent upon their juxtaposition with and relational valuation vis-à-vis one another. For example, while he is by no means unintelligent, Watson is frequently characterized as a tad slower in his mental capacities in comparison to Holmes, a point that Watson himself readily acknowledges. In "The Adventure of the Creeping Man" (Arthur Doyle, 1927), Watson professes: "If I irritated him by a certain methodological slowness in my mentality, that irritation only served to make his own flame like intuitions and impressions flash up all the more swiftly and vividly. Such was my

humble role in our alliance."[132] It would appear that Watson's primary function, as conceptualized by Doyle, is to accentuate Holmes' mental agility, as Holmes feeds off Watson's intellectual deficiencies and instrumentalizes them to spur his own deductive processes. But rarely foregrounded in these stories is the centrality of emotional labor in their success as a crime-solving duo, for their investigatory adventures are narrated as tests of and testaments to their wits and rationality. As such, this is one major narrative difference that is facilitated by *Elementary's* reconfiguring Watson as a Chinese American woman.

That being said, it is no coincidence that the sudden attention to emotional labor coincides with the introduction of a female Watson, given that women have long been assigned responsibility for and associated with the realm of emotional labor. According to Arlie Hochschild, this type of labor mandates that one "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."[133] In other words, this kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling to produce a particular emotional response in someone else. As the global market shifts from a manufacturing to a service-based economy, more and more jobs require the performance of emotional labor, including but not limited to flight attendants, social workers, and sales associates.[134] Emotional labor is constructed as gendered, classed, intangible, and invisible and as such falls upon the shoulders of women, often socioeconomically disadvantaged women of color, to fulfill.

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[132] Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Creeping Man," *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes,* 1927, Reprint (London: MacMillan Publishing, 2009), 189.

[133] Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 7.

[134] "Growth of the Service Sector," The World Bank*,* accessed August 18, 2016, http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/beyond/beyondco/beg_09.pdf



*Figure 4: Joan managing Sherlock's temper tantrum*

This is true, too, in the world of *Elementary,* as the multiple manifestations of labor Joan engages in cultivating and sustaining her personal and professional relationship with Sherlock are decidedly affective, intellectual, and immaterial. Joan's contributions by way of emotional labor are underscored from the outset. In the series premiere, when a witness is not forthcoming with information, Sherlock throws a tantrum and accuses her of lying to protect the identity of her attacker. Joan becomes increasingly infuriated and snaps, commanding him to "go wait in the car" (see figure 4). Her ability to take control of the situation and decisively disarm an abusive Sherlock is especially shocking, as even on her first day meeting him, she is able to hold her own against Sherlock. Though she has no prior training in detective work, she possesses a skill that Sherlock sorely lacks: the ability to empathize, as Joan is clearly far superior to Sherlock when it comes to detecting social cues and reading people. Her emotional labor in adopting a sympathetic countenance in order to visibly demonstrate compassion, as well as her expressing outrage towards Sherlock's petulant antics, ultimately prove to be fruitful, as the witness divulges information to Joan. When she reports back to Sherlock, he is surprised that she was

able to obtain information that he was not and begrudgingly admits: "I could have gotten the information some other way…but you got me there faster." As their relationship progresses throughout the seasons, the viewer witnesses that Watson's emotional and affective labors are just as fundamental to solving cases as Holmes' sheer intellect.

In addition to their work, Joan's emotional labor is equally foundational to Sherlock's personal well-being and development. Recall that she is initially hired as his sober companion and is responsible for managing his sobriety to ensure that he does not relapse and die. While he at first views her presence in his life as an intrusion and petulantly tries to push her away, she eventually gains his confidence and becomes his only trusted partner, confidante, and friend. Sherlock comes to realize just how much he values and depends on Joan cognitively, physiologically, and affectively, and when she decides that she needs to get her own place, he delivers a passionate plea in an attempt to convince her to stay. He begs, with lips quivering: "When I look back upon the last 18 months I often categorize it as a kind of grand experiment. The results of which demonstrated to me, much to my surprise, that I am capable of change. So I will…change. For you. For the sake of our partnership. For the sake of our work. Stay." In as close to an expression of unadulterated love as one will ever witness coming out of Sherlock's mouth, he reveals the unequivocal impact Joan has had in his journey towards recovery from addiction and personal growth, and in a surprisingly moment of vulnerability demonstrates a sharp self-awareness of his flaws. We can see that Joan's various manifestations of emotional labor in attending to his sobriety, accentuating his mental capacities, and keeping Sherlock's vitriol at bay with clients has been instrumental in their continued success as a crime solving duo. However, instead of returning the sentiment, Joan eloquently states: "You have this kind of pull, like gravity. I'm so lucky I fell into your orbit. But if we live together that's how it will

always be, me orbiting you." And with that, she proceeds to move out of the brownstone, establish her own consulting practice, and enter a new (romantic) partnership, thus demonstrating the show's commitment to the vision that Liu's Watson will not be a mere sidekick who is wholly defined vis-à-vis Sherlock, at least temporarily. This is ostensibly a version of Watson who is presented as having her own individual ambitions and desires in life and refuses to continue to make sacrifices in order to support Sherlock.

In the wake of their separation, Sherlock struggles to find meaning in his life. Having come to depend on Joan's physical and intellectual presence to stimulate his deductive processes, he decides to take on a new protégé – a young white woman by the name of Kitty Winters. However, she was unpopular with viewers and was subsequently written out of the series halfway through season three.[135] Meanwhile Joan is seemingly thriving, with a luxurious apartment, a successful enterprise, and a charming boyfriend in tow. However, underneath this blissful façade, Joan is actually quite unsatisfied. Prior to her partner Andrew's imminent return to the States, Joan confesses to Sherlock that she is having qualms about their relationship. Though they had only been dating a few months at this point, Joan is already beginning to feel constricted by this burgeoning relationship, though she is yet unable to pinpoint the precise cause of her discomfort. When Andrew returns from setting up his business ventures in Copenhagen and announces that he is here to stay for the foreseeable future, Sherlock teases Joan, "Now you can be a full-time couple…you must be thrilled," to which Joan unconvincingly replies, "Absolutely. Sure."

[135] While perusing fan forums, I discovered many viewers who felt that she was an unnecessary impediment to Joan and Sherlock's reunion. During the first half of season three, Joan and Sherlock did not share much screen time, and understandably so, given that they were supposed to be in the process of mending fences. As such, Joan often took on cases individually, while Sherlock and Kitty worked together. It would appear that the rather premature conclusion of Kitty's storyline demonstrates the producers' capitulation to the audience's demands.

Shortly thereafter, Andrew invites Joan to dinner with his father, which she hesitantly agrees to. The dinner proceeds perfectly smoothly and Joan makes quite the impression upon Andrew's father, who is discernibly elated that she is dating his son. Yet, when she returns to the brownstone, she furiously admits to Sherlock: "It was totally a *Meet the Parents* thing! It went as well as you could possibly imagine. And yet…I didn't want any of it! I just didn't feel comfortable. What is wrong with me? I'm not feeling anything I'm *supposed* to be feeling." As Sherlock had already correctly deduced, Joan is unfulfilled by her relationship with Andrew, though she finds herself unable to rationalize her feelings. After all, Andrew is "smart, kind, and doesn't dress like a high school student who just got expelled." So why is she not more excited about their prospective future together?

This narrative development marks an important deviation from the usual characterization of Watson as somewhat of a hopeless romantic. Whereas John Watson usually gets married in the original literature and other subsequent adaptations, Joan Watson is shown to be inexplicably unsatisfied by her romantic pursuits, even when they appear to be perfect on paper. Sherlock offers the following assessment: "Your romantic inclinations are not a flaw to be corrected; they're a trait to be accepted. I know you'll never be happy within the confines of a 'traditional' relationship." Although the casting of Watson as a woman initially incited fears that this iteration of *Sherlock Holmes* would devolve into romantic melodrama, *Elementary* in fact seems to be gesturing towards a critique of normative coupling. In what could be read as a potential corrective to heteronormative gender norms that expect women to want to get married and have children, Joan demonstrates that there are other sources of pleasure and fulfillment in life, such as discovering a second career calling and finding a platonic life partner. And through this maneuver, she eschews the sexist logic that one's femininity is only rendered legible through the

performance of gendered stereotypes that presume that all heterosexual women derive happiness from grand romantic gestures and picture-perfect husbands and families. Simultaneously, Joan's embrace of labor over sex or romance signals an uncanny alignment with neoliberal ideologies, a point that culminates in her response to moments of personal crisis.

Having come to terms with the fact that her relationship with Andrew is not providing pleasure, Joan decides to break up with him. However, as she is about to announce the news to him over coffee, Andrew collapses to the ground and falls unconscious. In the next episode, it is revealed that Andrew died from hemlock poisoning at the hands of Elana March, a crime boss that Joan and Sherlock had put away, who orchestrates a hit on her from inside prison. Nevertheless, due to happenstance, Joan inadvertently switches their drinks, which results in Andrew consuming the latte laced with hemlock. As Joan grieves Andrew's death, we see that her grief does not manifest in the stereotypically gendered ways that women are expected to mourn the people they care about, à la through talking about their feelings and an outpouring of grief, both of which are ostensibly supposed to lead to emotional catharsis. This is presumably the assumption Sherlock makes when he denotes: "It's been almost a week since Andrew died and you've said almost nothing about it. I'm here to offer my services." He assumes that Joan would need someone to console her as she grapples with Andrew's murder and awkwardly attempts to act as a normatively socialized friend might. Instead, Joan deadpans, "Andrew died because he knew me. I'm not sure what else there is to say." Despite Sherlock's good intentions, Joan does not see any reason to belabor the point; Andrew died because he knew her, which makes her responsible. In her mind, that is the only logical explanation and therefore the only one she will entertain. By favoring blunt rationality over emotional release, Joan becomes enveloped in a decidedly noncathartic affect: guilt.



*Figure 5 Joan accepting her fate as inevitably part of Sherlock's world.*

After Andrew's murder is solved and avenged,[136] Joan reaches an epiphany: "I feel…ok. I feel clear about something. Our work, what we do…it's not just a job now. It's who I am. I'm a detective." Joan, in the wake of tragedy, realizes that she cannot separate her work from her personal life and thus wholly commits herself to being a detective, at the expense of her personal life. She elaborates: "It's ridiculous for me to think that I can have a normal life. I'm not going to do that anymore… I'm saying that what I need to do is commit myself to this work completely." For Joan, Andrew's death proves the apparent incompatibility of deriving both romantic and professional fulfillment and of keeping her work life and personal life separate. In becoming resigned to the possibility experiencing a "normal life," Joan decides to forgo dating and relationships and devote herself to her occupation completely. And since Andrew's demise in the

[136] Elana is actually killed by Jaime Moriarty, Sherlock's arch nemesis, who likewise puts out a hit from inside prison. In a letter addressed to Joan, she claims responsibility, professing great displeasure at the attempt on Joan's life because she foresees "an unfolding game between Sherlock and [herself]," in which Joan is a key player.

middle of season three, the writers have yet to introduce another partner, romantic or sexual, for Joan.[137]

I believe this stay in emotional release can be read for its political implications in constituting subjects. In Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, she explores what she terms "ugly feelings," or negative affects, such as envy, paranoia, and irritation, that simmer and persist but never reach a state of release and catharsis, unlike more powerful emotions like anger or grief. Specifically, she is interested in reading these negative affects for the "predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social."[138] Structurally, the dilemmas posed by these affects can be read as registers for the suspended agency of art in an affirmative economy that merely tolerates works of art because they are perceived as politically nonthreatening. Ngai's intervention, then, is to illuminate the ways in which ugly feelings foreground a noncathartic aesthetic, through which art generates a failure of emotional release as a kind of politics.[139] As Ngai postulates, negative affects inscribe a suspended agency by producing immobility towards action and inscribing dilemmas in terms of subject formation. For example, in her reading of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, the heroine Helga is shown to suffer from a lack of agency due to her constant physical and psychic irritation, which manifests as a result of the physical acts of racist violence she witnesses, as well as the essentializing logics of racism.

Though not discussed in *Ugly Feelings,* guilt can also be theorized as a decidedly noncathartic, negative affect that lingers within a subject and blocks agentive action. If, as Ngai

[137] The show just completed its fourth season in May of 2016.

[138] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.

[139] Ibid., 9.

suggests, the abstention of cathartic release within a cultural production can be understood as an intentional choice by the author to demonstrate the ways in which ugly feelings constrain agency and impose dilemmas upon subjects, then perhaps Joan's inability to achieve emotional catharsis due to guilt can be investigated for the ways in which it affects Joan's subjectivity. Recall that the reason Joan quit her surgical practice was because of the death of a patient, after which she became so racked with guilt that she could not bring herself to operate again. Thus, guilt has long been depicted as a constitutive force in Joan's character development. After all, it is her inability to forgive herself for killing her patient that drives her to become a sober companion in the first place, which is how she comes to meet Sherlock and learn about the craft of deduction. After Andrew's murder, Joan is once again brought to a career crossroads. This time around, however, Joan does not quit her job; instead, she reinforces her commitment to her work and seemingly dismisses other pleasures in life, such as sex and romance.

As a result of the persistence of her guilt, Joan is depicted as unable to act agentively, becoming resigned to the fact that she is helplessly a part of Sherlock's world. Joan's attempt to extricate herself from the totality of his influence in order to articulate her subjectivity on her own terms ends in failure and ultimately seals her fate, as well as Andrew's. Her foray into a "normal life," marked by her moving into a modern apartment, establishing her own consulting firm, and entering a traditional, heterosexual relationship, is shown to be both unrewarding compared to and inextricable from her work with Sherlock. The tragedy of Andrew's murder underscores for Joan the futility of trying to lead an independent, "normal" life, a lesson that comes at much too high a cost. In her inability to reconcile her guilt over her complicity, she gravitates back into Sherlock's orbit and becomes consumed by her work; in other words, *it becomes her*. This illustrates the way in which ugly feelings not only obstruct Joan's agency but

also evoke the model minority myth in rendering her an Asian American subject who feels compelled to denounce love and recouple her energies towards the production of labor.

To reiterate, as Helen Jun proposes in *Race for Citizenship*, Asian Americans are the ideal neoliberal subjects due to their ability to conform to the neoliberal mandates of personal responsibility and self-enterprise. Similarly, in *Elementary,* Joan's ugly feelings reproduce neoliberal epistemes regarding the centrality of labor and productivity in constituting subjects. After her boyfriend is inadvertently killed, Joan, instead of succumbing to grief and allowing for emotional release, stays her emotions, which galvanizes her towards work. This can be interpreted as a distinctly Asian American neoliberal formation, as she swiftly excises aspects of her life that do not contribute to her social capital (e.g. love, romance) in a move that finds her in alignment with the neoliberal mandate of self-enterprise. As Doyle once wrote about Sherlock, "all things emotional are opposed to cold true reason," and reason is what the doctor ordered.[140] After all, deductive reasoning is what will help her avenge Andrew's murder, not an outpouring of emotions, so she abstains from public expressions of her grief. Her actions in the wake of Andrew's death due to the persistence of guilt demonstrate an uncanny conformity with neoliberal ideologies. She is compelled to claim responsibility for a murder that was logically not her fault and spurred towards the increased production of intellectual labor.

Ugly feelings not only have the potential to obstruct agency in subjects but also can be coopted as disciplining tools of the hegemonic economic system. As Ngai astutely observes, the rise of the wage system reconfigured "capitalism's classic affects of disaffection (and thus the sources of potential social conflict and political antagonism) and reconfigured them into

[140] Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four,* 1890, Reprint (Seattle: Create Space On Demand Publishing, LLC, 2016), 90.

professional ideals."[141] For example, everyday fears at the workplace, such as "insecurity about one's place during periodic innovation…and anxiety over being 'left behind' translate into flexibility…and a readiness to reconfigure oneself," respectively.[142] These attitudes and dispositions have become "the very lubricants of the economic system which they originally came into being to oppose," thereby demonstrating how "central and perversely functional they have become" under late capitalism.[143] Under the present day neoliberal economic order, negative affects similarly become economically functional in conditioning and spurring subjects toward the generation of more labor, and as such, guilt becomes not a path toward emotional catharsis but rather a testament to one's work ethic. For our heroine Joan, guilt is what induces t an epiphany: romantic and sexual pursuits do not provide pleasure the way her investigative work does, so why bother pursuing them? Consequently, she swears them off and endeavors to re-center her partnership with Sherlock so that she can best utilize her deductive reasoning skills in a self-enterprising and self-fulfilling manner – in other words, towards assisting the NYPD in solving cases and helping others.

Though Joan Watson is ostensibly supposed to be an "equal" to Sherlock Holmes, she ultimately inheres as another version of Watson who is constituted by her relationship with Holmes. While Doyle's Watson is ever the faithful friend to Sherlock, he still values his personal life - apart from Sherlock - with his wife Mary Watson. Contrarily, Joan Watson is denied this separation: she lives and works with Sherlock and eschews other partners and pleasures in life. Her contributions to their partnership might not be produced vis-à-vis her devaluation, as with

[141] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 4.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

other iterations of Watson, but she nonetheless professes that she is part of Sherlock's world and derives meaning and fulfillment in life through her work with him. And thus, even in "empowering" Joan with skills that even Sherlock has not mastered, such as performing sympathy and emotional labor, she is nonetheless constituted by her relationship with Sherlock. Her lack of agency as a character is a dilemma that manifests as a consequence of the lingering traces that guilt leaves on her.

In addition to reproducing the traditional dyadic relationship between Holmes and Watson, the effects stemming from Joan's inability to engender cathartic release might also gesture towards the vexed status of Asian Americans in American society – exalted as the model minorities but still ostensibly inferior to whites. As historian Robert Lee contends, the "model minority can operate as the paragon of conservative virtues that all Americans should emulate only if Asian Americans remain *like* 'us' but utterly are *not* us (emphasis original)."[144] In other words, Asian Americans are valued as the model minority because they emulate whites in terms of socioeconomic performance, but at the end of the day, they are still not white and thus will never be granted access to the benefits of whiteness.[145] That is, after all, how the model minority myth gains discursive and ideological salience: by placing one group (in this case, Asian Americans) on a pedestal and enticing them with superficial praise while simultaneously disciplining other racial minorities for their supposed transgressions, thereby absolving

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[144] Robert Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 30.

[145] According to American Studies scholar George Lipsitz, this is how the racialized state ensures the continuance of white supremacy: by "manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another…to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves." For more information on the possessive investment in whiteness, see George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1998).

institutional and structural forces of their complicity in creating social inequalities. At the same time, the nation state nonetheless reinscribes the minoritized subject's racial and sociocultural distance from whiteness vis-à-vis their exclusion from the realm of white national culture.

In that vein, we can see how Joan and the model minority myth operate on parallel ideological trajectories. If Asian Americans are the model minorities because they are like whites but not quite, then Joan is similarly like Holmes but not quite. Regardless of how closely Watson comes to emulating Holmes' wits and intellect, she still comes up slightly short in her mental acuity. And despite the fact that she far outperforms Sherlock in her attention to emotional labor, it is shown to be secondary to reason – an intermediary function that advances them to the next logical step in their deductive processes. The nature of their mutually constitutive relationship is as follows: they are both hypercompetent, intelligent individuals who feed off one another cognitively and need each other to thrive, but this is ultimately Sherlock's world, and Joan orbits him, not the other way around. As such, even though Joan may be "empowered" relative to other more hapless versions of Watsons, as a character, she is still defined vis-à-vis *the* Sherlock Holmes, mirroring the way in which the model minority is constituted through whiteness.

Consequently, re-envisioning Watson as a Chinese American woman generates conflicting narratives regarding the stakes of Asian American representation. On the one hand, it marks a moment of Asian American ascendancy within national culture, a realm in which Asian Americans have long been categorically excluded, at worst, and marginally represented, at best. In *Elementary,* Joan Watson is neither a Dragon Lady nor a Lotus Blossom, instead materializing as an Asian American female character whose race and gender are not incidental but are not stereotypically deployed, either (i.e. Ling Woo). Coupled with the race- and gender-bending elements of Rob Doherty's careful conceptualization of *the* Dr. John Watson as an Asian

American woman, this makes her, by the standards of neoliberal multiculturalism, a very progressive character in the history of Asian American representation on primetime television, indeed. On the other hand, the discourses that are enabled by this representation replicate racial and gender power structures. That is, *Elementary* presents us with an incarnation of Watson who resonates as an Asian American racial formation in her ascription to the neoliberal mandates of self-cultivation and personal responsibility in the wake of a deeply personal loss. Furthermore, Watson performs the bulk of the affective, emotional, and immaterial labor on the show, which underscores her historically specific status as a gendered, racialized subject. But despite being a demonstrably sympathetic character, she is unable to generate emotional release for herself, a condition symptomatic of her embrace of neoliberal rationality. The deliberately noncathartic affect of guilt that engulfs her after Andrew's death demonstrably delimits her ability to act agentively and predetermines the "choices" she is able to make. In this state of suspended agency, Joan finds herself gravitating back to Sherlock and, through her reentrenched commitment to their partnership, is subjected to defining herself and deriving pleasure through him. That is to say, the model minority subject is rendered legible vis-à-vis whiteness (and blackness), thereby demonstrating that Joan's world revolves around Sherlock.

Thus, an attentive reading of Joan Watson reveals that she is not as "progressive" as she initially seems. In her takeover of John Watson, Liu's race and gender figure prominently into the constitution of the character. After her boyfriend is tragically murdered, Joan is encompassed by the noncathartic affect of guilt, which obstructs her agency and pushes her towards the neoliberal mandates of self-enterprise and personal responsibility for comfort, instead of endeavoring towards emotional release. How ironic that the woman who is always tending to the emotions of others around her when it is instrumental – when it helps them solve a case – is

unable to cathartically engage or confront her own emotions. As such, Joan Watson registers as an explicitly Asian American racial formation: she is hyperproductive as a laborer but emotionally damaged as a human. If Joan is an outwardly progressive character whom actually reproduces racial and gender hierarchies, is there any way to imagine alternate possibilities for her character? I believe that while the depiction of Joan's guilt reinforces neoliberal ideals about labor, it also manifests a disruption to Asian Americans' gendered racialization.

As Sianne Ngai notes, ugly feelings can not only constrain agency in subjects but also powerfully unsettle hegemonic social systems and beliefs. For example, in Larsen's *Quicksand*, Ngai contends that Helga's persistent, visceral irritation destabilizes the notion that in order for irritation to be politically or aesthetically significant, it must operate beneath the surface of the skin.[146] In *Elementary*, Joan's ugly feeling of guilt may reproduce neoliberal epistemes, but it also engenders a critique of heteronormative gender norms. Recall Robert Lee's contention that part of the U.S. nation state's initial investment in the model minority figure was the production of more nuclear families.[147] Thus, intrinsically tied to the discourse of the model minority – and part of the reason Asian Americans were valued – was the expectation that they reproduce in order to create future generations of desirable laboring subjects. Joan might inhere as a model minority in her adherence to neoliberal epistemes following Andrew's death, but her guilt simultaneously undermines capitalism by pushing her to extricate love and romance from her life, foreclosing the possibility of procreation (for the time being). In other words, by denouncing romance and recommitting her energies to her platonic partnership with Sherlock, she is unable to reproduce biologically and thereby cannot create additional neoliberal laborers.

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[146] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 208.

[147] Lee, *Orientals,* 182-183.

Aside from disrupting nuclear family formation, *Elementary's* challenge to gender norms further demonstrates that alternative forms love and pleasure are possible. For our protagonists, traditional heteronormative relationships are presented as less satisfying intellectually and affectively than their mutual companionship in each other. Sherlock is shown to dabble in the occasional sexual dalliance, while Joan's romantic and sexual pursuits both eventually give way to her partnership with Sherlock. This critique of normative coupling inheres because so rarely is platonic love explored on mainstream serial television, especially between a heterosexual man and woman. As previously mentioned, *Elementary's* peers, namely the police procedurals *Bones* and *Castle,* similarly feature a straight man and a straight woman who are co-workers but polar opposites in their personalities and interests; yet romance eventually brews between the two and is used as a device to propel the narratives of the shows. Further, unlike other recent adaptations of *Sherlock Holmes, Elementary* is in a unique position to simultaneously explore the rich canon of Doyle's literature and envision new interpretations of the texts precisely because of Watson's racial and gender change. That is, with romance off the table, the show has the opportunity to explore the nature of the storied relationship between Holmes and Watson, and the ways in which their deep affective bond is reconfigured with Watson as a woman. Keeping in mind the long history of fraught depictions of interracial romances between white men and Asian women that are laden with racist, sexist, and Orientalist tropes,[148] it is refreshing to see a show invested in exploring a strictly platonic friendship between a heterosexual white man and a heterosexual Asian woman.

[148] The interracial romance between a white man and an Asian woman has long been a site of spectacle and negotiating difference and power within Hollywood movies. See *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (Henry King, 1955), *The World of Suzie Wong* (Richard Quine, 1960), and *Miss Saigon* (Claude-Michel Schöenberg and Alain Boublil, et al., 1989).

And above all, the show demonstrates that such an aromantic relationship is not only pleasurable to watch but also politically potent. In positing a critique of normative coupling that takes shape after Andrew's death, the show offers Joan and Sherlock a freedom of sorts from the demands of compulsory heterosexuality. If a "normal life" entails such expectations as entering a monogamous, heterosexual romantic relationship, maintaining a "healthy" work life balance and prioritizing one's biological family, then Joan and Sherlock are shown to trenchantly disregard such tendencies associated with normality. On the contrary, they are presented as two somewhat eccentric individuals invested in their investigative work and in each other as coworkers, roommates and lifelong friends. We might even read this as a form of queerness given that the protagonists eschew the imperative of heteronormative coupling, as well as the appendages of procreative heterosexuality and nuclear family formation, and instead commit to each other as platonic partners for life. Given that in the *Sherlock Holmes* canon, Watson is usually characterized as a romantic gentleman who gets married, there is something rather deviant about *Elementary's* refusal to pair Joan and Sherlock romantically and reinscribe heteropatriarchal gender roles. Through the dedicated attention to their friendship in the storytelling, the writers invite us viewers to witness the love that manifests between them – organically, platonically, and affectively. And through the critiques of normality, heteronormative coupling, and nuclear family formation that are embedded in Joan's friendship with Sherlock, viewers are presented with alternative conceptions of family, love and pleasure that offer them a lack of restraint from the regulations that normative discourses impose.

Nevertheless, while Joan's characterization as more invested in platonic love opens up room for negotiating her gendered racialization, it ultimately does not subvert the inherent power dynamics between them. As per the legacy of *Sherlock Holmes*, Sherlock Holmes is the primary

protagonist, and while Joan Watson may be a competent detective in her own right, the viewer inevitably discovers, as does Joan, that she is unquestionably part of Sherlock's world. After all, it is through meeting Sherlock, learning from him and working with him that she discovers her passion for investigative work. Her contributions to their partnership are not inconsequential, given the centrality of emotional labor to both their investigations and their interpersonal relationship, but the work of managing emotions is nevertheless shown to be an intermediary tool that helps them reach the next step in their reasoning. To reiterate Arlie Hochschild's definition of emotional labor, it entails the suppression or manipulation of feelings in order to produce the desired emotional states in others. Joan may be adept at instrumentalizing emotional labor to engender beneficial relations with clients, as well as to attend to Sherlock's sobriety and manage his occasional tantrums, but that leaves me with the unsettling notion that her working relationship with Sherlock is largely predicated upon the exploitation of her gendered and racialized labor. What constitutes Joan without Sherlock? The arc in season three with Andrew demonstrates that Joan can be just as successful without Sherlock and can possibly even lead a "normal" life, but she does not want any of that. What she desires, as it turns out, is to be with Sherlock, as roommates, crime-solving detectives, and platonic life partners. The guilt that overtakes her following Andrew's death may have delimited her agency and consigned her to a life with Sherlock, but this is a tendency that the writers had alluded to earlier when she confesses to Sherlock that she is not satisfied with her seemingly idyllic relationship with Andrew. What that moment reveals is that she does not derive pleasure or fulfillment from normative coupling or even from being a detective per se, but specifically from her dyadic relationship with Sherlock. And for that reason, I believe that Joan, despite her interventions in challenging heteronormative gender relations and desires, cannot be fully recuperated. That is,

contrary to Ling, Joan's ability to counter hegemonic notions of race, gender, and power and generate alternate possibilities for configuring Asian Americans' gendered racialization is much more limited.

## Conclusion: The Point of Cultural Studies

Through this project's analysis of the cultural productions *Ally McBeal* and *Elementary*, I have showcased the complex and fractured cultural politics of Asian American representation in mainstream television. In pivoting past the paradigm of "progressive" versus "problematic" representations, I am able to uncover the work that culture performs and the at times contradictory ways in which culture refracts and signifies multiple ideological, social and political systems. By adopting a reading practice attentive to moments of contradiction within the texts, I have demonstrated how even though Ling and Joan might appear to be very different representations of Asian American women on the surface, they converge in revealing the historically specific racialization of Asian Americans as economically hyperproductive but affectively damaged and therefore inhuman. However, what I have also endeavored to do in this thesis is to attempt to envision alternate possibilities for these characters beyond the manner through which neoliberal violence constitutes Ling and Joan as gendered and racialized subjects – a goal that stems from my positionality as a fan of Lucy Liu. Through reading cultural production in this manner, I have demonstrated that the investment in the politics of representation as a framework provides limited insights into the discursive and ideological effects of cultural representations, and that is why it is important to read for contradiction. As such, Ling may be characterized as overtly stereotypical and problematic, but she is actually recuperable in that she can differentially interpellate various types of viewers. She interpellates the racialized Asian American subject by offering them a lack of regulation from the governing mechanisms of the model minority myth, while she provides the socially conservative subject with a proxy through which to articulate antifeminist, ablest thoughts. Meanwhile, Joan might

seem progressive and multicultural with the race- and gender-bending elements of her character, but she is largely unrecuperable due to the codependent nature of her relationship with Sherlock. That is, although the show does succeed in its promise to "empower" Joan, her lack of individual agency as a character manifests in the ways in which she is consistently constituted through Sherlock. This is a conclusion that I was not necessarily expecting to reach, but rather one that inhered through my sustained viewing and writing about these texts. The intertwined processes of interpellation, identification, meaning making, and negotiation that emerge from our engagement with works of culture demonstrate that culture is not merely a site of pleasure and consumption but a deeply rich and highly contested terrain. Thus, there is a greater need within media studies, as well as Asian American Studies, to strive to read cultural productions beyond the conventional language of representational politics and to consider the racial and gender hierarchies they may reproduce and/or subvert, the historical contradictions they attempt to reconcile, and their affective, ideological, and political resonance with audiences.

For a long time, folks in Asian American cultural studies was staunchly invested in notions of "positive" representations and authenticity politics, and these tensions came to a head with the heated debates over the mainstream success of Asian American female writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. For example, Chinese American playwright Frank Chin and Ethnic Studies scholar Sau Ling Cynthia Wong have infamously accused them of misrepresenting Chinese culture and folklore and perpetuating crude stereotypes of the Chinese to make their works more palatable to white audiences,[149] and Chin has additionally

[149] Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Ethnic Subject, Ethnic Sign, and the Difficult Rehabilitative Representation: Chinatown in Some Works of Chinese American Fiction," *Yearbook of English Studies* 24 (1994): 257.

demonstrated extreme discomfort with their purported emasculation of Asian American men.[150] But while the focus on authenticity is understandably important for some, what is the desired outcome of such preservation endeavors? What would "accurate" depictions of Chinese culture and "masculine" Asian men achieve? What I am trying to say is that cultural analysis should be centered on what culture enables and not simply on signification itself. That is, while many of the characters Liu has embodied, Ling in particular, might not be wholly "accurate" portrayals of Asian American women, they are ideologically and politically salient nonetheless.

Consequently, my readings of Ling Woo and Joan Watson in "There's Something About Lucy" intervene to expose the disciplining technologies and the inherent violences of neoliberal formations on Asian American subjects. To reiterate, Ling resonates as the ideal neoliberal subject in her ability to skillfully enterprise her labor into multiple arenas and account for her own successes in life, trenchantly disavowing feminist and racially progressive politics, but this conformity with neoliberal ideals has rendered her emotionally damaged and unable to emote during times of genuine grief. Alternatively, Joan is emotionally intelligent, but in the wake of her boyfriend's death, she is unable to achieve emotional catharsis, which I argue is a symptom of her "ugly feeling" of grief, and in this state of obstructed agency, she gravitates towards neoliberal epistemes on labor and personal responsibility. These two characters both inhere as explicit Asian American racial formations – model minorities in their ascription to neoliberal mandates regarding labor but inhuman in their inability to confront their emotions. To reiterate Helen Jun's belief, "we can read culture not merely to identify ideological shortcomings…but to understand that…every text can be read for the inevitable contradictions it attempts to manage or

[150] Elaine H Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 198.

reconcile."[151] If we were to rely solely on multicultural logics, we would likely assess that they are both victories of Asian American inclusion in national culture, given that Ling became one of the series' most memorable characters, despite being intended as a guest star, and Joan was cast as a beloved white man in a seemingly race blind move. By reconfiguring our prevailing modes of analyzing culture, we can shift the focus from Ling and Joan's ideological offenses, or moments of resistance, to better understand the inherent contradictions of Asian American racialization historically and today.

Yet, while Ling and Joan may mark major moments of Asian American inclusion in national culture, these representations must be placed within their respective sociocultural contexts. If multiculturalism is regarded as the antidote to America's persistent "race problem" and encourages "crossing the color line" as the solution, then, as James Lee astutely observes, the successful incorporation of some racialized subjects into national culture has failed to ameliorate or even address the dearth of attention paid to poverty in racialized urban communities.[152] Indeed, the late cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall takes it one step further by proposing:

> Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies? … At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able

[151] Helen Heran Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 5.

[152] James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2004), xxviii.

> to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don't feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook.[153]

Hall offered these gripping, stark comments more than thirty years ago, during the reign of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the entrenched rightward turn in British politics, and it is one that has proven to be prescient. In the contemporary context of Black Lives Matter and the nationwide protests against the murder of black and brown folks by the police with impunity, studying cultural productions seems utterly inconsequential. Hall contends that for those who regard cultural studies as a serious intellectual practice, they are bound to face an ethical quandary about how to reconcile the import of their work in the face of literal death. This is certainly an inherent tension that I have grappled with in formulating and justifying my project over the course of the past two years. What is the significance of my writing about Lucy Liu when the struggles to effectively curtail police brutality and preserve black life have reached national saturation?

Although my anxieties about engaging cultural production are constantly in negotiation, as Lowe helpfully reminds us,

> The state governs through the political terrain, dictating in that process the forms and sites of contestation. Where the political terrain can neither resolve nor suppress inequality, it erupts in culture. Because culture is the contemporary

[153] Gary Younge, "Stuart Hall: a class warrior and a class act," *The Guardian,* February 11, 2014, accessed September 17, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/feb/11/stuart-hall-work-inspiration-gary-younge.

> repository of memory, of history, it is through culture, rather than government, that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and practice are imagined.[154]

And through the formation and representation of these alternate imaginaries, culture provides a means through which to question regulatory modes of government and dispute normative modes of belonging. Lowe further elaborates that it is through culture that we "conceive and enact new subjects and practices in antagonism to the regulatory practice of citizen/subject."[155] That is, when political enfranchisement proves inadequate, culture serves as a counter site for contestations over neoliberal modes of government, hegemonic systems of valuation, processes of gendered racialization, and the politics of identification. Thus, in Hall's own words, the political imperative of cultural studies is to constantly want "new kinds of knowledges to be produced in the world, new kinds of subjectivities to be explored, and new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operation."[156] In other words, cultural studies is important precisely because of what culture enables - it offers not only a means of challenging hegemonic systems of discourse and power but also a way to imagine, engender, and embrace new desires, knowledges, and subjectivities.

As I continue to develop this project on the cultural politics of Asian American representation on television, I wish to strive to find ways to bridge conversations on culture with those on anti-blackness. Recently, I have been thinking a lot about the "diversity trend" on network television, with a seemingly unprecedented number of people of color, particularly

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[154] Lisa Lowe, "The Power of Culture," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 1 (1998): 17.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Stuart Hall, *Representation and the Media*, directed by Sut Jhally (1997; Northampton, MA: media education foundation), VHS.

African Americans, getting cast in lead roles on scripted primetime series. Many of these shows, such as *Empire* (Lee Daniels, 2015-present)*, How to Get Away with Murder* (Peter Nowalk, 2014-present)*,* and *Quantico* (Joshua Safran, 2015-present) have proceeded to become tremendous ratings and critical successes. The embrace of diversity and people of color on the small screen has presented television as seemingly the antidote to Hollywood's old white boys' club, as the film industry is currently mired in a plethora of diversity issues, from the lack of people of color nominees in acting categories at the Academy Awards to the perpetual headlines about "whitewashing" practices that have deprived Asian American and other actors and actresses of roles.[157] Yet, while this is ostensibly progress, at least under the logics of multiculturalism, these "victories" also raise a whole new set of questions. What are the institutional factors that facilitate the increased opportunities for people of color on television compared to film? Further, what is the relationship between race, genre, and audience reception? Based on my observations of the current roster of shows on the big four networks, Asian Americans are predominantly represented in comedies or as law enforcement on procedurals.[158] Finally, in returning to Hall's warning about the ethical and ideological tensions of doing cultural studies work, how might we link conversations on neoliberal diversity, capitalism, and anti-black

[157] This is a point that the producers of the Emmy's were quick to capitalize on. At the 2016 show, comedians Aziz Ansari and Jimmy Kimmel both made swipes at the Academy Awards. Ansari joked: "I decided I'm going with Trump, which is why I'm recommending we get rid of all Muslim and Hispanic nominees from the ceremony immediately. Wow…this would be so much easier if we were at the Oscars." Meanwhile, Kimmel opined, "The Emmys are so diverse this year the Oscars are now telling people we're one of their closest friends." Clearly, television is reveling in its multicultural incorporation and celebration of difference and giving itself a proverbial "pat on the back."

[158] In recent years, Asian Americans have appeared on the comedies *Big Bang Theory* (2007-present)*, Fresh off the Boat* (2014-present)*, Selfie* (2014), *Master of None* (2015-present) and *Dr. Ken* (2015-present) and on the procedurals *Law & Order: SVU, Hawaii Five-O* (2010-present), *Elementary* (2012-present)*,* and *Stalker* (2015)*.*

violence? That is, what is the significance of the success of black-led primetime television shows in the face of police killing black folks at alarmingly precipitous rates? How do we make sense of these multicultural celebrations of progress in national culture with omnipresent formations of anti-blackness and the continued devaluation of black life? These are the critical questions that will drive and shape my engagements with television as I continue my work in uncovering the cultural politics of Lucy Liu, television, popular culture and beyond.

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