Making Mainstream Asian America:

Productions and Representations of Asian American Identity in Television and Web Series

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Abstract

The appearance of Asian Americans in leading, dynamic roles on mainstream network and online television in 2015 on the shows *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Dr. Ken*, and *Master of None* was lauded as a historic moment for Asian American media representation, after over a century of racist misrepresentation and marginalization which occurs to this day. The mainstream media progress of the past year cannot be simply attributed to an inevitable trajectory of American society’s racial progress. Instead, factors such as the recognition of Asian Americans as an economically viable “model minority” consumer market, shifting modes of television viewing practices, and the success of Asian American YouTubers came together in this moment for Asian Americans to re-emerge on network television. This thesis seeks to explore the context of productions of current Asian American media series as well as the various representations of Asian American identity found in these current network television and web series. Representations of Asian American identity will be looked at through in-depth individual and comparative analyses of selected episodes and videos from *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Dr. Ken*, *Master of None*, Wong Fu Productions, FungBrosComedy, and Anna Akana. Unpacking these Asian American representations also takes into account gender, sexuality, and racialized performances of Asian American blackness. While current manifestations of Asian American popular media have been able to subvert mainstream white dominance through addressing anti-Asian racism and telling Asian American stories, the most popular works continue to reproduce imagery that is heteropatriarchal, self-orientalizing, and narrow in scope to the reality that is a heterogeneous Asian America.
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Part 1: The New Mainstream of Diversity

Since the 1800s, the Asian American has undergone manifold iterations in media representation, all of which have racialized, essentialized, stereotyped, and conflated the multiplicities of the Asian American experience in order to exclude and erase Asian Americans from dominant white society, yet simultaneously exploit them for their labor and capital. Studies and publicized reports of Asian American consumption have made it clear that an Asian American presence (and "diversity" in general) in the media would indeed be profitable for advertisers and the network television industry. Nielsen’s 2015 Asian-American Consumer Report, titled Asian-Americans: Culturally Connected and Forging the Future constructs Asian Americans as a diverse, multicultural population, who maintain “strong ties to their cultural past” and have significant buying power and social influence in “an increasingly multicultural mainstream” (The Nielsen Company). This multicultural mainstream counters the assumptions that the American mainstream is predominantly white, and calls for the inclusion of desirable segments of marginalized populations as a necessary move for businesses to increase profits. Although 2015 saw greater diversity in network television casts especially for Asian Americans, such decisions to expand racial and ethnic representation on television are actually informed by these constructions of racial and ethnic minority Americans as an economically viable market.

Considering the ways in which media representations are central to shaping the way that marginalized people are perceived and treated, the advent of more three-dimensional, dynamic representations of people of color on mainstream television is something to be celebrated, but also critiqued in terms of network motivations for diversity and inclusion. “Diversity is not to be good, diversity is not to be fair, diversity is not to be liked by different people. Diversity is business. And if you want to conduct business with people, you can’t ignore them,” states
African American marketing advertiser Douglass Alligood in Shalini Shankar’s *Advertising Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers* (15). While this quote pertains to diversity in advertising, the ways in which network television programming and the advertising industry are tied together inform a congruent sentiment driving network executive decisions to broaden their reach. CBS Entertainment chairman Nina Tassler stated that the success of shows like *Empire* and *Black-ish* informed the development of a more diverse 2015-2016 season, as it was “Great for business…These are important steps for all networks, and we just have to keep casting the net wider and wider” (Holloway). Former ABC Entertainment President Paul Lee notes “The changes in the demographics in the U.S. are every bit as important a revolution as the technological changes that we’re all going through,” referencing the shift of television viewing from screens to the web. This rhetoric on diversity as being good for business fail to consider that diversity in production and casting is necessary for reproducing responsible images of non-white people because of the real-life impacts of misrepresentation and erasure.

UCLA’s “2015 Hollywood Diversity Report: Flipping the Script” examined the 2012-2013 season of television and digital shows and films and racial breakdowns of executives, writers, and casts. Television executives are overwhelmingly white, with 96% of CEOs and chairs being white, 93% of senior management corps, and 86% of television industry unit heads (Bunche Center 29). In the 2013-2014 season, minorities held 5.5% of executive producer positions, decreasing from 5.8% in the 2012-2013 season (Hunt 8). Writers of color for broadcast, cable, and digital scripted shows are similarly underrepresented in the writing room, writing 10% or fewer of two thirds of broadcast shows, being credited for writing the majority of only 6% of cable shows, and writing 10% or fewer episodes of more than three quarters of digital scripted shows (Bunche Center 24-25). Diversity behind the screen is considered essential in
creating opportunities for actors of color. In February 2016, ABC: Entertainment president Paul Lee stepped down and will be replaced by ABC’s vice president of drama development, Channing Dungey, who will be the first African American to lead a major broadcast network. Her strong relationship with Shonda Rhimes and work in developing shows led by women of color like *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and *Quantico* follows Paul Lee’s push for more diverse programming. Dungey’s promotion can be an indicator of either further systemic change, or a stopping point for networks to address greater issues of diversity and representation who have felt that they have already “done enough” (Hibberd). Actress Gwendoline Yeo states “We need more DPs, more directors, more writers who are interested in that level of storytelling…If more people of color can write their stories, they’re going to attract an authentic cast” (Fitzpatrick). Of 800 network shows from the 2014 fall season to spring 2015, 6.6% have main cast members of Asian descent and only 3 shows had an Asian lead (Fitzpatrick). While these percentages appear to reflect the population makeup of Asian Americans (5.6%), they actually underrepresent Asian Americans in the locations in which these shows most often occur (New York and California). The perception of increased diversity on network television in recent years, especially for Asian Americans often overshadows the reality of remaining underrepresentation and the continuous overrepresentation of white Americans, especially white men in all levels of network television production.

Neoliberal capitalism has and always will be tied to the production of images which maintain U.S. white supremacy, termed “controlling images” by Patricia Hill Collins in reference to media portrayals of Black women as mammys, matriarchs, welfare queens, and jezebels to justify their continual oppression (Collins). Controlling images of Asians and Asian Americans are various and contradictory, but most notably construct Asian Americans as forever-foreign,
threatening (sexually or intellectually), and hyper-feminine to justify exclusionary federal policies and discriminatory societal treatment (Espiritu). While these new television shows attempt to work against reproducing stereotypes of people of color, they still operate within this system which relies upon white mainstream acceptance and profits from minority audience viewership. This framework of “racialized capitalism” and neoliberalism is one which shapes “not only financial decisions but also how people talk about and represent race” (Shankar 16). The constraints of network television, especially prime-time sitcoms and their supposed appeal to the imaginary universal American audience can often undermine the subversive potential of marginalized experiences and stories on network television and corporatized web series.

**Model Minorities, Model Consumers**

This construction of who the Asian American consumer is also has effects on what representations they are afforded on network television. Nielsen’s messaging towards advertisers reaffirm stereotypes of Asian Americans as model minorities and consumers, reminiscent of news and magazine reports from the 1980s of Asian American success as a model or even super minority (Takaki). While cultural and ethnic diversity are highlighted in this report, the economic diversity of Asian Americans are largely glossed over in favor of a narrative which ascribes the Asian American community as a whole being “the most highly educated of the multicultural segments and highly entrepreneurial” – positive attributes reminiscent of the model minority myth (Takaki). The model minority myth upholds Asian American economic and intellectual achievement as models for “less accomplished” minorities in America, specifically Blacks and Latinxs. Asian American success is supposedly inherent to the Asian race while black and brown disadvantage is similarly attributed to their own racial, ethnic, or cultural failure – while the reality is that socioeconomic conditions of these groups in America are shaped by a
history of settler colonialism, slavery, immigration exclusion, and its pervasive aftereffects. The othering of Asian Americans in the Nielsen report continues to occur through statements which exoticize the role of “Asian culture” in consumption behavior, which claims that “Asian cultural traditions permeate every aspect of Asian-American’ lives, beginning with a person’s mental and spiritual balance…Asian cultures respect and celebrate the interaction and connection between the inner self, personal self and public-social self” (The Nielsen Company). Considering my own experiences as an Asian American and even the discourse surrounding the stigma of Asian American mental health, these statements by Nielsen about Asian culture, various selves, and mental/spiritual balance are unfounded overgeneralizing assumptions made about the multiplicity of the Asian American experience.

The opportunities for networks to reach wider audiences via online streaming present greater possibilities for greenlighting shows with diverse casts, due to data revealing media consumption patterns of Asian Americans. One section of the Nielsen report emphasizes Asian American adoption of new media, and utilize the demographic as an indicator of where the general market is heading in terms of increased streaming of videos and television. 2015 Nielsen data indicates Asian Americans spend less time watching live television than the general population and more time on multimedia streaming devices, and 2013 data shows that Asian Americans also watch YouTube and Hulu more than the total population (The Nielsen Company). Here, Asian Americans are framed as a model for predicting how future media consumption practices will play out for the rest of the American public, without considering the reasons for why certain platforms such as YouTube are more frequented by Asian Americans. This racialization of Asian Americans as forward-thinking model consumers, from the model minority stereotype works as “racial naturalization” which makes “the use of consumerism to
make claims of legitimacy and national belonging” (Shankar 23). This usage of the internet for entertainment purposes, possibly stemming from the lack of relatable or identifiable mainstream entertainment available on live television is instead typified as a phenomenon due to Asian Americans’ ability to predict future trends and stay ahead of the curve. Asian Americans are then praised for these viewing/consumption practices, especially because it signifies a previously untapped market that is ripe for picking and therefore legitimizes Asian American belonging, as they are now proven to be a group economically deserving of producing mainstream content for.

**Screens to Streams**

The changing modes of television distribution in recent years from traditional live-television viewing to increasingly common streaming of television and web series online serve as distinctly different, but interactive sites of Asian American representation. Distribution methods of network television have adapted to the era of widespread personal computer usage, smartphones, and the internet, with streaming options of television episodes available on network sites, cable sites, and services like Hulu and Netflix. The start of internet distribution of television in the mid-2000s “provided revolutionary access to viewers” beyond other non-network forms distribution such as physical copies (DVDs, Blu-rays, etc.) and cable networks and have produced significant shifts in audience viewing behaviors (Lotz 135). Physical copies of television series have set a precedent for binge watching behavior and the normalization of these viewing habits. Binge watching refers to “viewing multiple episodes of a single show over a concentrated period of time” and was revealed in a 2013 poll to be practiced by 67% of American television watchers, and could be possibly higher with more internet streaming options available today (Pena). Television advertising has been a decades-long model relying on live television viewing, which has recently been disrupted by new technologies, the rise of new
media, and new viewing practices. However, the on-demand, digital and online distribution models have amassed larger audiences than traditional live-viewing, and are able to amass user data for advertisers to target them effectively (Lotz 134). These changes in network distribution have even “shifted production economics enough to allow audiences that were too small or specific to be commercially viable for broadcast or cable to be able to support niche content” today in ways that would have failed before (Lotz 124). For a “niche audience” like Asian Americans who are shown to be above-average streamers of entertainment in recent years, mainstream shows distributed online have provided networks incentive for targeting this audience through the creation of shows featuring predominantly Asian American casts.

The premiere of ABC’s Fresh Off the Boat, based off of restaurateur Eddie Huang’s memoir of the same name is the first television show featuring an Asian American cast on network television since the one season of Margaret Cho’s sitcom All-American Girl in 1994. During these two decades of Asian American absence in network television leading roles, Asian Americans have found alternative media platforms for self-representation, and have even dominated video-sharing and creating site YouTube in multiple genres like vlogs, beauty, music, short films, and web series. The success of Asian Americans on YouTube have not gone unnoticed, yet Hollywood and the network television industry continue to limit opportunities for Asian American actors and actresses, while also perpetuating racist stereotypes and at times even performing in yellowface to misrepresent East Asians. Popular depictions of yellowface has recently occurred in the film Cloud Atlas (2012), and on television in CBS’s How I Met Your Mother (2014) which sparked a social media response from Asian Americans hashtagged #HowIMetYourRacism. The announcement of Fresh Off the Boat’s premier was met with celebration and apprehension, as its title evokes the familiar stereotype of Asian Americans as
“FOBs,” or recent unassimilated Asian immigrants, especially because Hollywood and major networks have a longstanding history of racist exclusion and representations of Asians and Asian Americans. Even the historic *All-American Girl* was criticized for being stereotypical in its depiction of a Korean American family, with Margaret Cho revealing in her 1999/2000 live concert, *I’m the One That I Want* that the show’s content was controlled by white executives who were wary of alienating mainstream white audiences – who are always kept in mind by executives when trying to create racially diverse shows with “universal” appeal.

YouTube offers alternative means for Asian American creatives to monetize and make a living off their work, as widely viewed videos provide advertisers and companies opportunities to reach online audiences. YouTube works primarily as an “advertiser-supported business model,” allowing content creators to partner with YouTube to allow ads to play before their videos and generate revenue based on user interactions with the ads (Lotz 175). The late 2000s to early 2010s saw the rise of the Asian American YouTube star – with various Asian American web producers amassing millions of subscribers to billions of views, revealing the existence of a large Asian American audience whose numbers could quantify the need for Asian American targeted content. In 2011, three of the 20 most subscribed channels of YouTube belonged to Asian Americans, and while these channels do not dominate to the same degree today, Asian Americans still have a significant following and presence on YouTube (Considine). The majority of these most visible Asia American YouTubers are of East and sometimes Southeast Asian descent, and network television shows featuring Asian American casts also focus on East Asian American families. These media representations, building on top of the history of Asian immigration exclusion and activism contribute further to mainstream perceptions of Asian Americans as East Asians. However, for Asian Americans whose identities align with these
popular YouTubers, this form of entertainment appeals due to its ability to represent a certain kind of shared Asian American experience, regarding topics such as anti-Asian racism, family, relationships, food, and culture. The popular realm of Asian American beauty gurus also derives its success from providing makeup tutorials for Asian women with similar features like monolid or double eyelid shapes, often i from mainstream, Eurocentric beauty content. For Asian American actors and actresses who are limited in their roles in Hollywood, YouTube provides opportunities to act as dynamic, lead characters in short films, sketches, and web series viewed by millions. Of the few Asian American actors who have appeared in Hollywood films or television shows such as Randall Park, Arden Cho and Ki Hong Lee, they had previously starred in Asian American YouTube short films or series or have had their own YouTube channel. Asian American Studies scholar Darrell Hamamoto has hypothesized that “YouTube has driven the networks and streaming services such as Hulu and Netflix to play catch up because Asian-Americans rule YouTube,” making existing and continuing representations on YouTube significant in shaping what is currently seen on networks and subscription streaming sites (Namkung).

While YouTube hosts a variety of web content including web series, without significant amounts of outside funding, network and cable television quality content is rarely produced and instead exists on other major streaming platforms which have delved into producing high quality original online-exclusive content. Netflix, Hulu Plus, HBO Go, and Amazon Prime are all subscription-based streaming services, with Netflix dominating with over 75 million subscribers and hosting the largest amount of streaming content – yet still face financial issues due to debt and the high costs of licensing content and marketing (Leung). The appeal of Netflix and other streaming sites which have full seasons or series of television shows available point to recent
changes in mainstream television viewing behavior with the rise of binge watching. Netflix’s shift into producing more original programming for that specific audience follows its notice of increasing share of internet traffic in comparison to their competitors, and makes all episodes of each new season of an original series available during its release to appeal to the site’s binge-watching culture. In 2015, two Asian American-led series, *Master of None* and *The Mindy Project* (previously a network television show on Fox) were streamed on Netflix and Hulu, respectively. Both shows were praised for their subversive storytelling which delved into topics of immigration, racism, sexism, and relationship abuse, subjects rarely broached on network television. Independent web series are typically sites of producing content outside the conventions of popular network television, focusing on “maximizing creative value” while networks “value advertising volume and price,” but post-network corporate online and cable television have increasingly pushed “against TV’s homogeneity” and presented another widely visible site of increased, substantive representation of marginalized experiences (Christian 166, 171).

Network television, corporate online streaming services, and YouTube have all been recent sites of growing media representation of Asian Americans in a period of time which recognizes Asian American economic potential in producing these shows, as well as Asian American need for greater media representation. However, the Asian American experience is one that is vast and irreducible to being just seen in a handful of popular mainstream representations – and when such few representations exist, the dangers of further essentializing a heterogeneous racial group occur when these representations of Asian Americans are received in the context of pre-existing, persisting hegemonic stereotypes. The potential for Asian American self-representation on YouTube are also mediated by the complex current context of a well-
established Asian American YouTube creator community, the challenges of sustaining a YouTube career, the kind of content which general and Asian American audiences find entertaining, and the virality of limited kinds of Asian American representations. The current production of Asian American media exist within economic structures which rely upon both the popular appeal of these images and yearning for Asian American counter-narratives to combat misrepresentation and marginalization.

**Part 2: Asian American Media**

The brief history of Asian American-led network television representation have centered on the Asian American family sitcom, from *All-American Girl* to *Fresh Off The Boat* and *Dr. Ken*. The family sitcom is a classic genre of network television, and offers an entrance point of familiarity for a wide range of audiences – especially white audiences. The 1980s introduced black family sitcoms on televisions, with *The Cosby Show* famously providing the black upper middle-class, heteronormative nuclear family-structured antidote to media and societal demonization of black poverty and criminality. *The Cosby Show* did not necessarily act as a counter-narrative to racist media depictions of Black Americans, but rather reinforced the ideology that black upward mobility was possible and not hindered by systemically racist policies of the time (Acham). The show therefore appealed to majority white audiences due to their identification with the Cosby’s class status and ideology of hard work and the bootstraps myth, and acted as a proxy for white racial tolerance, whereas the reality of state policy and news media rhetoric towards Black Americans proved that anything but racial tolerance and progress existed (Acham). Seeking reflection in such representations, especially identifiable genres such as the family sitcom in turns shapes the ways various audiences perceive themselves, other racial and ethnic groups, and larger society. Although network television sometimes provides
opportunities for visible representation of minoritized people, white creative control and multiracial white supremacy behind the camera operates to shape dominant cultural perceptions of the lives of people of color, and the ways in which systemic racism plays, or does not play a role in these fictional lives.

While black family sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* played upon white acceptance of a black family worth empathizing with, Asian American family sitcoms have regularly utilized themes of Asian/Asian American racial or cultural difference from dominant white society as either comedic effect (for non-Asian audiences), or as a point of identification with Asian American audiences with shared experiences. The Asian American network television sitcom has largely evolved in its 20-year hiatus from 1994’s short-lived *All-American Girl* to 2015’s *Fresh Off The Boat* and *Dr. Ken* in terms of how Asian American actors and stories are represented, due in large part to creative control of production and storytelling. *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Dr. Ken*, two ABC prime-time sitcoms will be discussed as current network television representations of Asian Americans which have built off of the legacy of *All-American Girl*, as modern Asian American family sitcoms. While Asian Americans have held lead roles in other network television shows, these two shows feature predominantly Asian Americans casts and often explicitly explore subjects of anti-Asian racism and Asian American identity through the collective ensemble, compared to “colorblind” treatment of individual Asian American cast members in other shows.

**The Asian American Family Sitcom**

*All-American Girl*, being the first Asian American family sitcom was defined by its attempt to create an “authentic” Asian American family and solely “became concerned with supplying the audience with a rendition of an Asian American family that meets stereotypical
expectations” (Cassinelli 132). *All-American Girl* follows the life of young a Korean American woman, Margaret Kim, who rebels against her conservative Korean family. The show starred Margaret Cho as the character based on her own life. However during the production of the show, Cho recalls being forced to crash diet and coached by an “Asian consultant” because she was not considered “Asian” enough, while multiple white cast members were simultaneously added to the show to “appeal to the average American audience” (Cassinelli 141). *All-American Girl* can often be deemed as mainstream misrepresentation of Asian Americans due to the white executive control of Asian American images and the reduction of the multifaceted ways in which one can be “authentically” Asian American down into a stereotype. A prominent theme throughout *All-American Girl* is also the constant clash between the “Americanized” Margaret Kim and her perpetually foreign, Asian family, particularly her mother. This supposedly adversarial, strict binary identity is a theme explored in later Asian American family sitcoms, further complicated by affinities to and performances of Black culture.

Restaurateur Eddie Huang, the author of the memoir *Fresh Off the Boat* similarly criticizes the network television adaptation of his work in its approach “to tell a universal, ambiguous, cornstarch story about Asian-Americans resembling moo goo gai pan written by a Persian-American who cut her teeth on race relations writing for Seth MacFarlane.” referring to Iranian American program creator Nahnatchka Khan (“Bamboo Ceiling-TV”). Set in 1995, *Fresh Off the Boat* follows the Taiwanese-Chinese American Huang family’s move from Washington D.C. Chinatown to predominantly white Orlando, Florida, leaving behind the familiarity of ethnic economic communities and family. Korean American actor Randall Park plays Louis Huang, the husband of Jessica Huang, played by newcomer Taiwanese American actress Constance Wu. Their three children, Eddie, Emery, and Evan are played by Hudson
Yang, Forrest Wheeler, and Ian Chen, respectively. As the first network television show featuring a predominantly Asian American cast since *All-American Girl, Fresh Off the Boat* serves as an important site for Asian American media production and representation, as mediated by current network television conventions which promote “diverse” programming. The network television 22-minute sitcom structure results in storyline changes and dilutions in the nuances of race within Huang’s complex memoir while still presenting itself as an individual family’s story. One example of this, which will further be explored is the character of Eddie Huang’s obsession with hip hop, evident through his manner of dress, speaking, and music preference. In the show, these performances of Black culture by Eddie and other family members are read as comedic (due to the cognitive dissonance of seeing effeminized Asians performing hypermasculine Blackness), whilst Huang’s source material details his affinity to hip hop due to a shared experience of racism and violence that he had experienced (Henderson). These alterations in Huang’s story occur because *Fresh Off the Boat* takes on the burden of supposedly responsible representation of Asian Americans, part of which entails the explicit statement that there is no one Asian American experience meaning that the show is not representative of all Asian Americans, while simultaneously moving away from the source material and incorporating the experiences and knowledge of other Asian Americans writers in order to be acceptable in the network television family sitcom genre.

*Fresh Off the Boat* premiered in February 2015, and has since been renewed for its third season. In October 2015, *Dr. Ken* debuted its 22-episode long first season and has recently been renewed for a second season (Kissell). Ken Jeong, who is the creator, producer, and lead actor of the show has claimed that “if it wasn’t for *Fresh Off the Boat, Dr. Ken* wouldn’t be on the air,” attributing the former show’s success as an indicator that another Asian American family sitcom
would be viable to air on ABC (Feeney). Differing from *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Dr. Ken* focuses on a second and third generation Asian American family in California and the medical workplace of Dr. Ken Park, partially based on Jeong’s former career as a physician. Ken Jeong plays second generation Korean American Ken Park, Suzy Nakamura plays his Japanese American wife, Dr. Allison Park, and Krista Marie Yu and Albert Tsai play their children Molly and Dave. Actors from *Fresh Off the Boat* have guest starred in *Dr. Ken* and vice versa. Margaret Cho also plays Ken Park’s celebrity doctor sister, Wendi and makes a cameo in *Fresh Off the Boat* when the Huangs watch *All-American Girl*. Like *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Dr. Ken* veers away from stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans yet still explores issues of Asian American identity and masculinity but from the second and third generation perspective – with immigrant grandparents appearing in the show only in some episodes. Whilst Dr. Ken has not received the critical acclaim or *Fresh Off the Boat*, and has been negatively compared to *All-American Girl*, Jeong maintains that he has a high level of creative control in the show compared to Cho and explicitly maintains that his show will not make stereotypical Asian jokes (Braxton). However, many episodes have jokes are made which often incorporate stereotypes of Asian Americans – such as constant references to Ken Park’s lack of traditional masculinity, imitating accented English, and an episode in which Dave Park and another Asian American friend (played by *Fresh Off the Boat*’s Ian Chen) traded places to the ignorance of an elderly white babysitter.

**Asian Americans on the Internet**

While network television has incorporated Asian Americans into their landscape in the familiar genre of the family sitcom, the internet has provided Asian Americans a platform for various kinds of creative media production. Netflix has been the site of Aziz Ansari’s critically acclaimed comedy series *Master of None*, and YouTube has hosted a plethora of Asian American
self-created content. Netflix varies from YouTube in that it is a paid online streaming subscription service, while YouTube allows anyone to create content, although more professionally produced content has achieved greater success in subscription numbers, views, and monetary compensation. Content creators and actors online also tend to be younger, ranging from late teens to their early thirties, reflecting their audience demographic as well. In March 2015, YouTube attracted 31.8 million unique visitors in the 18-24 age range and over 40 million for those 25-34 (Blattberg). In 2015, Netflix was also one of the most popular sites for American internet users aged 16-24 with 65% of them using the service, and 58% in the 25-34 age (Mander). Network television audience demographics have indicated a decline in viewing from 18-24 year olds dropping 8 and a half hours per week between 2011 and 2015, likely due to their move to streaming and online entertainment (MarketingCharts Staff).

Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang’s show, Master of None, starring Ansari in the lead role released its first 10-episode season on Netflix for streaming in November 2015, with its second season set to be released in April 2017 (Sarkar). Set in Brooklyn, it explores the life of struggling Indian American actor Dev Shah, with episodes focusing on love, work, racism, sexism, and cross-generational experiences. While filmed and edited with the same kind of production quality afforded to network and cable television, the streaming platform allowed Ansari and Yang to maintain greater creative control outside the conventions of the typical network television sitcom. Master of None was praised for its subversive creation of a mainstream television show by two Asian Americans in its storytelling ability that could successfully appeal to a general audience of young adults while also maintaining its relatability to second generation Asian Americans (Islam). Criticisms of the show did arise, especially in regards to Dev’s romantic interests as being primarily white women. Network, cable, and online television shows
such as *Selfie, Fresh Off the Boat, The Walking Dead, Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* have made strides in attempting to address the traditional emasculation of Asian American men through portraying them as sexually desirable by white women (Barthwell). However this kind of framing still centers casting white female partners as ultimately desirable not only sexually, but as a problematic antidote to racist emasculation of Asian American men.

In the realm of YouTube, a variety of content produced by Asian Americans exist – and is largely dominated by those of East Asian descent in their numbers of subscribers and video views. The attention that these certain channels have received from mainstream and Asian American news media indicates the construction and reinforcement of Asian American as being associated with a narrow group of people. The channels selected for analysis will reflect this dominance, but also display a range of representations in addressing aspects of Asian American identity. The YouTube channels of Wong Fu Productions, FungBrosComedy, and Anna Akana will be looked at in the ways Asian American identity, culture, and race are represented, and the various intersections of these representations with gender and sexuality.

Popular and successful Asian American vloggers and creative content producers have been largely dominated by Asian American men, with Asian American women primarily creating informational content in the sphere of beauty and fashion, although other Asian Canadian and Asian Australian female YouTubers like Natalie Tran, Lilly Singh, and Linda Dong have also found success in creating similar comedic content on their channels. Another web series of note is the three-season long *Video Game High School (VGHS)*, available for streaming on the YouTube Channel RocketJump and distributed on Netflix, iTunes, Xbox Live, Sony PlayStation 3, DVD and Blu-Ray (Cunningham). *VGHS* stars Asian American male leads and was created by YouTuber Freddie Wong and his production company RocketJump, and
largely achieved funding through record-breaking crowdsourcing (Cunningham). While created by and starring Asian American men, the main emphasis of the show is its visual effects while its largely colorblind universe features a racially ambiguous lead and white female love interests without further commentary.

Wong Fu Productions is an independent Asian American production company based in Los Angeles, releasing its content primarily through YouTube with 2.6 million subscribers and over 400 million views. Started in 2003 in UC San Diego by friends Philip Wang, Wesley Chan, and Ted Fu, the trio made videos together and later moved its content to YouTube in 2007 as the video-sharing platform became more popular. Its earlier popular videos and series include the 2006 comedic viral short “Yellow Fever” which explores the phenomena of increasing interracial couples between white men and Asian women without actually addressing the fetishization of Asian women, and the series “Just a Nice Guy” which laments one college student’s perpetual friendzoning despite being a nice guy. Most of Wong Fu’s short films and series have been centered on heterosexual romantic relationships between Asian American leads, sometimes set in Asian American spaces (such as a boba shop), with roles deliberately casted with Asian American actors and actresses or other popular Asian American YouTubers. The purpose of this kind of casting is to create content which shows that Asian Americans can play roles which they are often not afforded in mainstream media. However, with Wong Fu Productions’ content primarily coming from its team of 3 men, their representations of women often comes across as lacking dimension or voice in their characters. Beyond their channel, Wong Fu had also released its first feature film, *Everything Before Us*, in June 2015 for purchase on Vimeo, which was later made available for purchase or streaming on Netflix, YouTube, iTunes, GooglePlay, and Amazon. Wong Fu has also been producing an original web series, *Single by 30* for the paid
service YouTube Red, which stars Asian American leads, *Glee* actor Harry Shum Jr. and YouTube singer Kina Grannis. (Jarvey).

FungBrosComedy is a YouTube channel duo of comedians and rappers Andrew and David Fung who have 1.4 million subscribers. Now based in New York City, they are known primarily for making comedic videos which largely emphasize its channel’s focus on topics pertaining to Asian Americans such as identity, stereotypes, culture, dating, sports, travel, and food. Some of their more popular videos have titles that emphasize its channel’s focus on Asians, examples being “15 TYPES OF ASIAN GUYS,” “18 TYPES OF ASIAN GIRLS,” “THINGS ASIAN PARENTS DO,” and other similarly titled videos. Their videos which explores Asian American identity or stereotypes often feature an intro and commentary by the Fung Brothers and their guests explaining that the upcoming content stems from their own and their friends’ personal experiences and to not take it too seriously, to prevent criticisms of self-stereotyping and essentializing to maintain their channel as a site for entertainment and not deep social commentary. Their channel is described as platform for "advancing the education and discussion of Asian and Asian-American topics for people around the world," but emphasize that despite considering themselves to have a holistic understanding of “Asian America,” they are only one group and do not act as representatives of Asian Americans (Lee). Outside of YouTube, the Fung Brothers hosted one season of a food and travel reality show on FYI in 2015 called *What the Fung?! Broke Bites*, building upon their incredibly popular food videos (T. Lee).

YouTuber Anna Akana is a filmmaker, actress, producer, and comedian with almost 1.5 million subscribers. Her work ranges from short films and web series to comedic vlogs covering daily aspects of life to critiques of sexism and racism that she has faced. Two of Akana’s most popular videos, each with around 3 million views each address aspects of the Asian American
woman’s experience in different ways. “How to put on your face // Anna Akana” parodies the popular Asian American beauty tutorial genre through comedy and thoughtful life advice, and the video “Why Guys Like Asian Girls // Anna Akana” addresses the racism in fetishizing Asian and Asian American women. Akana has also frequently collaborated with other women on YouTube who focus on creative narrative content production like Melissa Hunter of Adult Wednesday Addams, prominent Asian American YouTubers like Wong Fu Productions, and she had written and starred in the web series Riley Rewind on her former partner Ray William Johnson’s YouTube channel. Her 2014 short film “Miss Earth” will also be adapted into a 12-episode long series called Miss 2059 for digital media platform, New Form Digital for free streaming this summer on the Verizon go90 mobile app (Hamedy). Of the Asian American YouTube channels, Akana’s channel is unique comparatively in that it displays a range of creative content which seldom focuses on race as its main selling point, incorporates various corporate sponsorships at the end of her videos, while still critically addressing her experiences as a mixed-race Asian American woman through vlogs discussing racism, sexism, power, and privilege.

Part 3: Asian American Network Television

The next section will feature several close readings of representative episodes and videos from the network and web series described above. The analysis will focus on the ways in which each show or channel’s actors and content producers construct and represent Asian American racial identity. Both Fresh Off the Boat and Dr. Ken remain on air after recently wrapping up their second and first seasons, respectively. Fresh Off the Boat’s second season averaged 4.44 million viewers a night in its Tuesday evening timeslot, while Dr. Ken’s first season averaged 5.27 million viewers on Friday nights (TV Series Finale). These large audiences remain
significant, especially with white audience members composing almost 60% of *Fresh Off the Boat*’s viewership in 2015 compared to 14.5% of the viewers being Asian (Yang). While both shows have displayed the nuances and relatability found within the Asian American experience, they also show a limited range of what Asian America looks like, in that they are the only two Asian American network family sitcoms starring all East Asian American actors. Network television’s elevation of shows featuring Asian Americans embodying elements of the model minority myth, such as hardworking entrepreneurs trying to fulfill the American dream or upper-middle class doctors, also impacts how these shows construct Asian American identity, and how Asian Americans as a whole are perceived by their majority non-Asian American audiences. As shaped by typical, problematic conventions of network television and the mainstream American entertainment industry, patriarchal, anti-black, and neoliberal messaging is similarly reproduced despite the shows’ work in addressing anti-Asian racism or reconfiguring mainstream Asian American representation.

The premiere of *Fresh Off the Boat* as the first network television Asian American family sitcom in two decades was highly anticipated from Asian Americans nationwide who feared rampant stereotypical representations akin to those in *All-American Girl*. With Huang’s biting “Bamboo Ceiling-TV” republished on *Vulture* prior to the show’s premiere warning that the network adaptation was “a reverse-yellowface show with universal white stories played out by Chinamen,” the pilot episode was a pleasant surprise when viewed with the understanding that the network television family sitcom format could never fully adapt all the nuances in Huang’s complicated work (“Bamboo Ceiling-TV”). The pilot plays up the topic of the Huang family’s race when they move from Washington D.C.’s Chinatown to predominantly white Orlando in 1995 to run Louis Huang’s struggling Golden Corral-esque business, Cattleman’s Ranch.
Steakhouse. Instead of the typical racist trope where Asian Americans are seen as a joke for their racial difference, these jokes are instead flipped to have a distinctly relatable Asian American perspective where the comedy is found in the absurdity in the Huangs encountering Orlando’s whiteness and racism.

The pilot opens with shots of 11-year old Eddie Huang trying on “some ‘fresh as hell’ gear—Orlando Magic Starter jacket, snapback cap, dookie chain,” playing up his love for hip hop to showcase his outsider status as the black sheep of his family (Rahman). There is comedic effect created in the cognitive dissonance of seeing a young Asian American boy donning the clothing of black hip hop culture. His mother Jessica Huang’s subtle anti-blackness shows when she questions “Why do all of your shirts have black men on them?” as opposed to the preferred alternative of Eddie either assimilating to mainstream white American culture or fulfilling ideals of how Asian Americans should act (Henderson). Present-day Eddie Huang’s voiceover introduction to his family emphasizes that they are an American family, as his father Louis Huang loves America and “full-on” buys into the American dream, while his mother Jessica occupies the role of the infamous Asian Tiger Mom. The “Tiger Mom” works as a prevailing stereotype of immigrant, and specifically Chinese matriarchal parenting. Americans perceive tiger moms “to be highly controlling, strict, and severe almost to the point of abuse” in their methods of pushing their children towards educational and economic success (S. Wang). In Huang’s narration, his fictional parents exemplify the model minority myth through emphasizing values of hard work and entrepreneurial spirit to achieve the “American Dream.” The model minority myth perpetuates anti-black racism through erasing the role in which institutionalized racism creates conditions of continuing oppression through touting the “natural” success of highly skilled and educated Asian groups who were given preference in American immigration
policy. Eddie’s rebellion against the model minority stereotype and his parents’ expectations manifests in his adoption of black hip hop culture, described by Eddie as the “anthem of outsiders.” The representation of Eddie’s affinity to black culture as the antithesis to the model minority stereotype is utilized by the show for both problematic comedic effect and the primary vehicle for representing Asian American individuality.

The episode displays the Huangs’ constant tensions between assimilating to white Orlando and holding onto their Chinese-Taiwanese culture as they are confronted with racist microaggressions such as statements from white neighbors and tourists who assume the Huang brothers don’t know English, or white students complaining about the smell and alien grossness of Eddie’s homemade Chinese lunch. These scenes depict experiences that many second generation Asian Americans can relate to in the comedic, but incredibly real attempts to assimilate to the white norm. Eddie demands his mother to buy him “white people lunch” at an American supermarket, represented with exaggerated excitement (Food4All!!!!) and sterility compared to the crowded and chaotic Taiwanese markets of D.C. When Eddie returns to school with a Lunchable, hoping to fit in with the white students that had previously made racist comments about his Chinese food, he is stopped by Walter, a black student and the only other racial minority seen thus far at his school. Walter claims that Eddie is now at the bottom of the school’s racial hierarchy and throws out the c-slur, prompting a visceral reaction from Eddie which lands him in the principal’s office and at risk of suspension. The conflict is ultimately settled when Eddie’s parents are called in and defend Eddie for his actions, questioning why the other student had not received any punishment for his anti-Asian behavior, and then threaten to sue the school because it’s the “American way.”
The B-plot focuses on Louis Huang’s attempt at generating more business for Cattleman’s Ranch Steakhouse through hiring a white host to appeal to white customers, ultimately resulting in a commercial filled with satirical stereotypes of white Americans. The pilot episode pokes fun of whiteness and white racism through various scenes like the commercial, Jessica praising her youngest son Evan’s lactose intolerance as a natural rejection of white culture, and the overly excited American supermarket. However, the Huangs are always displayed as attempting and struggling to assimilate to the white mainstream of Orlando, through Louis hiring a white restaurant host, Eddie buying Lunchables, and Jessica joining the neighborhood women’s rollerblading group. Whilst the show ends with the Huangs finally standing up against anti-Asian racism, Walter’s egregious use of the c-slur is viewed as the tipping point to Eddie’s outrage at his new life in Orlando. Walter’s actions are rather created by the racism in the school that pushed him to covet white acceptance which he believed he would achieve by relegating Eddie into the position as the ultimate outsider. However, such actions are viewed by both the students in the cafeteria and the Huangs as blatant and unacceptable racism, compared to the white students’ unquestioned racism in calling Eddie “Ying Ming” for eating “worms.” Fresh Off the Boat’s status as a mainstream network television show allows it to create wide-reaching commentary on race through its historic representation of Asian Americans, yet prevents the comedy from veering into territory that is too critical of systemic white American racism.

While Hudson Yang portrays Eddie Huang as the main character, Constance Wu as Jessica Huang carries the show as it further develops. Wu has noted herself that Jessica’s character is placed into situations where she falls into the Tiger Mom stereotype, however states “I'm playing them because they are true to her, not because I am exploiting a stereotype. I'm
never doing that. You have to serve the truth of the character and Jessica Huang does what she
digs, whether or not it falls into a stereotype” (Coker). Despite Wu speaking to portraying the
truth of the individual character, such truths are constructed by the writing team, as her character
differs largely from the real Jessica in Huang’s memoir. The Tiger Mom stereotype is
particularly played up in just the second episode “Home Sweet Home-School,” where Jessica
finds that Eddie’s straight-A’s are a sign of him not being challenged enough. Louis also finds
Jessica cynical outlook on human nature to be overbearing in her money-saving methods of
running the restaurant, so he encourages her to homeschool her sons in the fashion of CLC, or
the Chinese Learning Center. The comedic and over-exaggerated actions of Jessica in pushing
the academic success of her children can initially be misinterpreted as representative of Asian
American mothers as Tiger Moms, especially when this episode is only the second of the series.
Another element of relatability to the Asian American experience this episode is the importance
of unspoken love between the family, with Eddie Huang narrating that “My family loved each
other, we just didn't say it. We showed our love through criticism and micromanagement.”
Because of this, the phrase “Love you” is used as a plot device to identify that one is hiding
something, leading to various revelations throughout the episode. The episode ends with Eddie
and Louis understanding that Jessica’s actions in extensively tutoring her sons and stinginess at
the restaurant were for the good of the family, while Jessica finally allows her younger sons to
have a break from CLC when she sees the fun that Eddie and Louis are having together outside.

In the final episode of Season 1, “So Chineez,” the dilemma of the Huangs’ assimilation
into white American society is brought to head when their neighbors Honey and Marvin tell
Jessica and Louis that they sometimes forget the couple is Chinese and have become “just like
regular old Americans.” This remark taking place while Jessica and Louis are considering
joining the country club as the first Asian American members disturbs Jessica. Her literal breaking point comes later in the evening when she realizes she made macaroni and cheese with bacon bits, after Evan asks how to request his grandmother to speak English instead of Chinese, and Eddie walks in wearing a costume Jamaican Rhasta hat with dreads for a class project (without giving is mother context) saying that he’s Jamaican. The next day, Jessica is dressed “like Chun-Li from Street Fighter,” mandates that no shoes are to be worn in the house, enrolls her sons in Chinese school in Tampa so the family speaks more mandarin, has Eddie switch his class project to China, and gives up watching *Melrose Place* to show that the family has to make sacrifices in order to remember their heritage. Jessica also urges Louis to cancel their country club membership so that they are not always surrounded by “white people doing white things,” stating that the opportunities and success the membership would bring is not worth losing themselves. However, Jessica and Louis both find it difficult to give up the country club, *Melrose Place*, and other white American pastimes. While they conclude that they weren’t losing themselves in liking such things, they were worried that their children have no appreciation for their Chinese identity, as indicated by Eddie’s refusal of doing the project on China. When Eddie makes a joke about China to the other students doing the Jamaica project with him, his friends continue making fun of the country, resulting in Eddie defending China, witnessed by his parents. Although he receives an F on the assignment because he spent his time speaking proudly of China instead, his mother puts the grade on the refrigerator and says she is proud of him. The season ends with the family driving the country club, bearing a new license place that says “So Chineez” with the adult Eddie Huang narrating that their mother had nothing to worry about because they were “never gonna leave [their] heritage behind.”
This episode displays the tensions that Asian American families face when dealing with acculturation in America, as they choose to separate, assimilate, or integrate (Leong and Chou). Their efforts at retaining their Chinese heritage are shown to be largely unsuccessful and even backwards. Louis remarks that Jessica hanging up a picture of Buddha is a “White thing,” Jessica trying to serve chicken feet to her sons horrifies them, and the boys’ Chinese teacher in Tampa is shown to be loud and brash (a problematic stereotype of Chinese people) in his methods of teaching. Authenticity in the Huangs’ Chinese American identity is negotiated throughout the episode, as Honey and Marvin’s “colorblind” perception of the family erases their visible and important Chinese heritage. Ultimately, they realize that to be true to themselves is not through attempting to reproduce “authentic” or “traditional” Chinese culture in the home, but to rather live their lives the way they want, knowing that their ethnic and racial identity would always be a part of their lives despite others’ attempts at whitewashing it.

Episodes throughout Fresh Off the Boat incorporate aspects of the Huang family’s ethnic and cultural background and the subject of Asian American raciality either directly as the subject of the episode, or referenced within the family as part of daily life or by other characters. The result of this kind of structuring is that the Huangs as the first visible Asian American family are given mainstream appeal in humanizing them in relatable situations, while also pointing to the fact that their heritage and racialization is still a salient aspect of their lives and identity. Season 1 appears to have more episodes either focused on issues of Asian and Asian American identity due to only having 13 episodes, opposed to Season 2 which will run for 24 episodes. In Season 1, episode 8 “Phillip Goldstein,” introduced another Chinese American student (played by Dr. Ken’s Albert Tsai) who is adopted by a Jewish family. Jessica views him as a “good Chinese boy” for his accomplishments in school and music, however changes her opinion when she
realizes that he is not “good” due to the poor way in which he treats Eddie. Jessica’s conclusion challenges the stereotype that a “good Chinese boy” is one defined by his accomplishments. In episode 11, “Very Superstitious,” Jessica’s superstition of the number 4 being unlucky (due to it sounding like “death” in Mandarin) shapes the plot of the episode. While her superstitious actions are funny, they are not treated as funny simply because they are Chinese, as the show also pokes fun at typical American superstitions. Episode 12, “Dribbling Tiger, Bounce Pass Dragon” features a *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*-esque fantasy sequence in Eddie’s mind about “Taiwanese-style basketball” from his father’s time in the Mystic Tiger League. This sole scene was used in promotions for the episode, constructing the idea that Taiwanese-style basketball (in Eddie’s and possibly the audience’s mind) is infused with martial arts, Chinese music, and Oriental mysticism. In the actual episode, while the fantasy plays out in Eddie’s mind, the reality of Louis’s basketball days in Taipei proved to be very different from fantastical martial arts basketball style of Eddie’s imagination, and values of teamwork are taught instead. The same episode shows Jessica criticizing Emery and Evan’s participation in the school play, with her commenting that two Asian actors would never be on television together and would only be relegated to stereotypical roles. Jessica’s line serves as meta-commentary that both critiques Hollywood’s historic racist casting and erasure of Asian Americans while also nothing the fact that there are multiple Asian American actors who finally get to appear on this visible and historic network television show.

Season 2 differs from Season 1 in that Eddie Huang no longer provides voiceover narration and commentary in the episodes, formally decentering Eddie as the primary character the audience follows, and formats the show as a more typical family sitcom. Seven episodes have focused directly on various Asian and Chinese American subjects that address Chinese/Chinese
American representation (S2E6 “Good Morning Orlando,” S2E10 “The Real Santa,” and S2E14 “Michael Chang Fever”), Chinese New Year (S2E11 “Year of the Rat”), and immigration/adjustment to life in America (S2E20 “Hi, My Name Is…,” S2E23 “The Manchurian Dinner Date,” S2E24 “Bring the Pain”). In “Good Morning Orlando,” Louis is invited onto the local morning talk show after he impresses the hosts with impressions. Jessica sees his appearance on the show as an opportunity for the restaurant, so she encourages Louis to be on the show. While he promotes the restaurant, he also does impressions of Sylvester Stallone and Donald Duck to the horror of Jessica who feels as if he is making a fool of himself, reminiscent of the racist and stereotypical character Long Duk Dong from Sixteen Candles. Louis has flashbacks to his past where he is compared to Long Duk Dong by his non-white friends imitating the character. Jessica explains that when that character had appeared in the movie, he “became what everybody thought all Chinese people were” and that when they as Chinese Americans receive the opportunity to appear in the media, they “need to present [their] best face.” When Louis returns on the show, he becomes angry when the hosts try to get him to do impressions again, not wanting to simply be a source of entertainment, or a joke, and as a result Jessica finds that he appeared too serious to the point where people will believe “Chinese people have no sense of humor.” Jessica believes that they bear the burden of responsible representation of Chinese Americans, but soon realize that it is not only impossible, but that Louis’s impressions were funny without him being perceived as a stereotypical joke. This episode addresses the impact of Asian stereotypes created through popular media on Asian Americans, and asserts the individuality that the characters have outside being boxed into the stereotypes. This also subtly makes commentary itself on the nature of the Fresh Off the Boat,
directing the audience to understand that the show should not be perceived as representative of all Chinese, Taiwanese, or Asian Americans.

Through many of these episodes, the Huangs’ navigate racial issues by forming their own understanding of how to address the issues internally without ever directly confronting racism as they had done before in the pilot. In “Year of the Rat,” the family misses their flight to celebrate Chinese New Year in D.C. with their family, so they seek out a local celebration instead. When they see that the AAAOO (Asian American Association of Orlando) has no Chinese Americans, is run by a white man with an uninformed but pervasive obsession with Asia, and puts on a “dragon dance” (instead of lion dance) featuring a high school mascot, Jessica concludes that no one cares about the holiday and their culture enough to celebrate it correctly. In the end, however, after Louis and his employees perform a lion dance at the restaurant for Jessica and the family, they conclude that it wasn’t that the white people didn’t care, it was that they simply didn’t know. It appears that the burden of educating non-Asians of the holiday fell upon the Huangs themselves, implying that the president of the AAAOO was well-meaning but misguided, rather than racist in his fetishism of Asian culture. Educational moments about Chinese New Year are also built into the episode in conversation with not only the white characters, but its non-Chinese/Lunar New Year-celebrating mainstream audience.

In “Hi, My Name Is…” Jessica and Louis tell the kids the stories of how they adopted their English names after arriving in America. Jessica’s story in particular highlighted the racism she faced when her professor refused to acknowledge her in class because he wouldn’t learn how to pronounce her name. While Jessica was angry at her professor, she concluded that he had a point and changed her name. “Why was I being stubborn and making it harder than it already was in a new country? I wasn't losing my identity. I still had my Chinese name, but by giving
myself a name that was easier for people to pronounce, I was opening the door to more opportunity,” Jessica explains. Her decision presents a pragmatic solution to her dilemma, however still felt unsatisfactory in that her white professor and peers would not learn her name nor respect her contributions until she adopted a pronounceable, American English name. This scene illustrates the unfortunate reality that immigrants are denied respect in America simply for having an “unpronounceable” name, however still shows their agency in choosing to hold onto their identity in the face of structures attempting to force complete assimilation into white American society.

*Fresh Off the Boat* deviates greatly from Eddie Huang’s source material but makes its home in ABC, utilizing its platform to explore various aspects of the Huang family’s experience with heritage, immigration, racialization, and identity without claiming to be representative of all Asian Americans. While not always focusing the majority of its episodes on these subjects, they act as undercurrents which shape the entire series as one which some Asian Americans and other immigrant communities can distinctly relate to, especially East Asians who are often similarly racialized. However, the Huangs’ heritage of being Taiwanese shifting to being described as primarily Chinese in later episodes presents them as having interchangeable ethnic identities to the audience, muddling the various nuances and complicated political histories behind the two nations and its impact on the Huangs. Cultural subjects unfamiliar to a larger mainstream audience are usually given context throughout the series via characters directly explaining or narrating flashback sequences which provide this background information. The limitations of the network family sitcom format undoubtedly constrains *Fresh Off the Boat* as it must present itself to a broad audience base even as it centers the show on the Asian American experience.
As the only other Asian American family sitcom on network television, *Dr. Ken* reads as a radically different show as a multi-camera sitcom compared to *Fresh Off the Boat*’s single-camera format. The pilot focuses mostly on Ken and Allison Park’s conflict in parenting style as they realize their oldest child, Molly is growing older after she gets her driver’s license. While *Fresh Off the Boat*’s pilot sets up the show to be one to address the race explicitly, *Dr. Ken*’s pilot only displays two brief scenes that address any aspect of the family’s race. In one of the scenes, Allison compares Ken’s overprotectiveness of Molly to his own father, saying that Ken sounds like him. Ken counters saying that his father actually sounds differently, and proceeds to speak Korean and then English with a heavy Korean accent about how he would handle children. The show uses a laugh track cuing the audience to laugh along to Ken’s impression of his strict Korean immigrant father. For the audience it also makes it clear, if it wasn’t before, that this show follows the Asian American Parks, whose immigrant roots are at least a generation behind them. Instances of anti-Asian discrimination are quickly written off and serve as gags. When Ken’s boss Pat threatens to fire Ken’s “tiny Asian ass” soon after he tells Damona the office manager who is black that she’s in the minority for wanting a diversity brunch, he resolves his racist quips by offering everyone in the office two extra vacation days if they don’t report him. Compared to *Fresh Off the Boat*, these two instances marking the main characters as Asian are not central to the pilot and sidelined, with the show rather focusing on Ken’s relationship to his family and his work in the office. This sets the tone for the rest of the season, as a relatively formulaic family sitcom where the family’s race neither drives the series, nor is treated as completely invisible.

Of the 22-episode season, one episode (S1E08, “Thanksgiving Culture Class”) does specifically address Asian identity in what the official show synopsis describes as a “cultural
face-off” between Korean American Ken and Japanese American Allison after Molly gets a
tattoo of a Japanese character. Similar to *Fresh Off the Boat*’s “So Chineez,” the assimilation of
the Parks, and particularly Ken into dominant white American society provokes the primary
conflict between Ken and Allison. After Ken states that Allison has pushed her “Japanese
agenda” on the children, Allison describes Ken as a “lapsed Korean” who culturally has “more in
common with the white teenage girls at the mall.” Various scenes show Ken attempting and
failing to be more “Korean” by speaking the language, preparing food, and dressing in a
traditional hanbok, later revealed to be his mother’s. Ken’s father eventually talks to him and
reassures him that he is plenty Korean despite being the “ whitest guy” he knows, as what defines
Koreanness isn’t what Ken wears or eat, but something inherent within Ken. This episode has
similarities to “So Chineez” through the reactive and over-exaggerated serving of ethnic food and
dress in traditional Asian clothing to prove one’s connection to heritage. However, “So Chineez”
concludes that the family would never forget its roots, proved through Eddie’s unprecedented
defense of China to other students, whilst “Thanksgiving Culture Clash” shows that despite
general cultural assimilation to white American society, one’s ethnic and racial identity isn’t less
valid nor determined by socially constructed ideas of what it means to be Korean.

Unlike *Fresh Off the Boat*, *Dr. Ken* rarely has its Asian American cast confronting issues
of racism, and even shows Ken perpetuating anti-Asian racism himself. In the season finale,
“Ken Tries Stand-Up,” Ken tries out a joke which implies that there are no Asian veterinarians
because they eat their animal patients, to the horror of his non-Asian coworkers who tell him
how offensive the joke is. This creates comedic effect in the irony that the Asian character is the
one that is oblivious to the racist nature of the joke, but also highlights the differences in the
context of which this show occurs. *Fresh Off the Boat* takes place in a predominantly white
community in Orlando in the mid-90s, while *Dr. Ken* is in the present, relatively diverse California with a sizable Asian American population referenced in the previous episode (S1E21 “Korean Men’s Club”). *Fresh Off the Boat*’s reference to Eddie eating worms based on stereotypes of Asians eating inconsumable animals is similarly reproduced, but with the assimilated second generation Asian American making the offensive comment instead.

*Dr. Ken* sets itself up as an incredibly different show, not only to counter comparisons to the only other Asian American network family sitcom, but to showcase another aspect of the Asian American experience, rooted in creator Ken Jeong’s experiences as a doctor prior to his entertainment career. *Dr. Ken* chooses the route of showcasing an Asian American family acting in ways that a mainstream white audience can typically identify with, while also incorporating instances where Asian American identity is salient such as in cultural expression, ethnic organizations, and phenomena of acculturation and assimilation. The show never takes a strong anti-racist stance in the way in which *Fresh Off the Boat* does in key episodes and often uses racist remarks of Asians in comedic ways, not to target Asians as a joke, but to rather make fun of the absurdity in these blatantly offensive comments. Jeong’s goal in *Dr. Ken* in the show’s direction was to rather “normalize the Asian-American experience” as a part of creating progress in mainstream media (Cox). Despite receiving negative criticism which target the show for its lack of originality and humor, as well as the underuse and mismatch of the actors and the family sitcom format, *Dr. Ken* has been renewed for a second season for its relatively strong ratings, which are “the network’s best delivery in three years” (Yahr; Kissell).

**Part 4: Asian American Web Series**

Asian American web series on Netflix and YouTube display a larger variety of genres and representations of Asian Americans compared to network television’s family sitcom focus.
Web series often target a younger audience, featuring millennials as its stars, with its content focusing on subjects like career struggles, interpersonal relationships, and meta-commentary on race and media representation due to the alternative media platforms on which they exist. The web series format gives creators greater control of their messaging, however they face limitations in other ways. While Netflix operates through user subscriptions and grants creators of original series creative control, the wide breadth of content on YouTube makes it increasingly more difficult for YouTubers to yield revenue and sustain a business solely through the Google AdSense partner program (Solovic). For Asian American YouTube channels, they operate through a combination of the partner program and seeking outside funding through sponsorships or crowdfunding. However, specific genres emerge due to their audience’s high interest in the types of videos which become popular, such as Wong Fu Production’s romantic dramas and FungBrosComedy’s “Asian” themed videos. For Anna Akana, her videos are often sponsored by Amazon’s Audible Inc. and Squarespace, meaning she performs a miniature commercial for such companies at the end of her videos – granting her the revenue to create a greater range of material which doesn’t need to subscribe to audience expectations. Independent Asian American web series outside of mainstream media do not necessarily operate in a separate sphere of democratic representation (despite such promises of new media). Instead, revenue largely depends on appeals to their audiences and partnerships with corporations, affecting production which translates into varying performances of Asian American identity. Still, the range of distribution and development processes reflects greater diversity of representations and awareness of the nuances of cultural identity, even as racism and sexism remain present throughout the online landscape.
**Master of None**

Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang’s Netflix Original *Master of None* stands out as one of the most original and nuanced series tackling Asian American identity through two themed episodes, “Parents” and “Indians on TV.” While the show itself overall doesn’t have a predominantly Asian American cast, these two episodes feature the stories of Asian American characters confronting anti-Asian racism. “Parents” is the second episode of the series and highlights Indian American Dev and Taiwanese American Brian’s fathers’ stories of their childhood and immigration to the United States. The fathers’ stories are displayed through flashbacks following conversations with their sons. These flashbacks indicate the ways in which their immigration to the United States for greater opportunity remain on their minds, especially when they find themselves in situations wondering if the unspoken sacrifices for their sons are recognized. After Brian and Dev have a conversation with Dev’s father and his father’s friend, they learn more about Dev’s father’s life and decide to invite their parents out to a dinner to thank them for their sacrifices and to learn more about their stories. Prior to this, Brian notes how little he knows of his father’s life and states that Asian parents don’t have the “emotional reach” to express pride or love for their children. The dinner goes well with their parents enjoying each other’s company greatly, bonding over their shared experiences of immigrating and the racism they encountered just for having strong accents.

The episode ends with Dev gifting his father with the guitar he had wanted as a child and his mother with a photograph of the family, while Brian and his father have a conversation about the previously ignored article his father had sent him. “Parents” features conversations between Brian and Dev that comment on their generational divides as the first generation born in the United States, the need to better understand their parents beyond the widely-known generic
immigration story, and that they should show greater appreciation for them. Such conversations and this episode as a whole likely resonate with many second generation Asian Americans as well as other children of immigrants, and bring to life the untold stories of Asian immigrants into the medium of widely distributed web series.

Episode 4, “Indians on TV” directly challenges the status quo of whitewashing, brown face, and stereotypical portrayals of Indians and Indian Americans in mainstream entertainment. The episode opens with cuts of popular scenes depicting instances of such racism, displaying how pervasive and unquestioned its existence has gone over the years, allowing the images to speak for themselves. Afterwards, the episode is centered on Dev’s struggle in auditioning for roles when he refuses to do an Indian accent, and the conflict which occurs when network executives refuse to cast two Indian American actors (Dev and fellow Indian American actor Ravi) as lead roles in a mainstream comedy in fear of the show being read as an “Indian show.” When Jerry Danvers, a network executive states in an accidentally forwarded private email chain that there can’t be two Indian actors, and makes the racist remark that the actors need to “curry” his favor, Dev supposedly gains the upper hand in his chances of convincing Danvers to get the role. Danvers invites Dev out and tries to prove to him he isn’t the racist that Dev believes him to be, but later casts another Indian American comedian instead of Dev. Dev makes the decision to leak the emails to the public, however Danvers dies unexpectedly so Dev and his agent conclude leaking the emails would be in poor taste. Dev is later invited back by the new network executive, a white woman who believes that it would be progressive to do a show featuring two Indian American actors, but wants to cast Dev as Ravi’s immigrant cousin, forcing Dev to do the Indian accent because Ravi had refused.
Throughout the episode, Dev, Ravi, and other friends in the show discuss the racism persisting in the entertainment industry, addressing stereotypes and brown face, where white actors use brown makeup to appear Indian or South Asian. These discussions are scripted in a way that allows those who are unaware of this racism to easily understand these issues following the characters’ informative discussions and frustrations, especially when the already humanized Indian American characters create empathy and greater reception. *Master of None’s* longer episode length, around 30 minutes, also allows for more nuance in these conversations, such as when Dev considers selling out to get the role, conceding to Danvers’ statement that American audiences are just “not at that point” where two Indian American actors can be seen mainstream and relatable. This prompts Ravi to call Dev an “Uncle Taj,” the Indian American version of an “Uncle Tom,” typically known as a Black person “who is eager to win the approval of white people and willing to cooperate with them” (Merriam-Webster). While the characters in the show don’t gain a victory for progressive mainstream representation of Indian Americans, the episode itself, and the series overall, highlights the potential and reality that Asian American characters can exist in media in ways that are nuanced, identifiable, and have mainstream appeal.

**Wong Fu Productions**

Wong Fu Productions is most known for its emotional videos focusing on relationships starring all Asian American casts, as well as videos relating to the Asian American experience in relation to identity, family, and racism. Wong Fu’s two most popular videos, “Strangers, again” and “Kung Fooled” were both released five years ago in 2011 within a couple weeks of each other and are largely representative of their body of work on YouTube. Popular videos, series, and films centered on relationships include their 2015 film *Everything Before Us*, upcoming YouTube Red series “Single by 30,” the series “Away We Happened” and “When It Counts,”
and short films or videos like “The Last,” “She Has a Boyfriend,” “Just a Nice Guy,” “Friends vs. More Than Friends,” and many others. The choice to intentionally cast majority Asian American actors in Wong Fu’s videos and film was made to counter mainstream media producers’ arguments that “a large cast of Asians was ‘bad business’ for attracting audiences” and to prove the “universality” of Asian American stories (Choi).

“Strangers, again” is a short film with now over 17 million views, starring Cathy Nguyen and Wong Fu co-founder Philip Wang about the various stages of a romantic relationship which ultimately results in a breakup. Wang, who plays Josh, narrates the stages of their relationship following an opening scene of a fight between the couple. Josh laments that they had never always fought, and that his girlfriend, Marissa, had previously been his “unicorn” – special, unbelievable, and too amazing to have actually existed in real life. Marissa, existing as his fantasy girl fails to live up to his expectations as their relationship progresses to the fatal stage of “tolerance,” due to the fault of both for not trying to grow together in their relationship. This short, like many of the works of Wong Fu focuses primarily on a more relatable theme of heterosexual relationships that appeals to people beyond just an Asian American audience, despite all or most the characters in these shorts being played by Asian Americans. In their shorts, series, and films about relationships, Wong Fu emphasizes that themes of love and heartbreak are universal, but specifically shown through Asian American bodies to increase their media representation and indicate that Asian Americans can tell such stories (L. Wang). However, the universality of the experiences they claim to represent are predominantly told from an East Asian American male’s perspective, often casting women as objects or characters without the same degree of voice and agency as their male protagonists. In such works, Wong Fu also veers
away from the explicit entanglement of racial and ethnic identities in affecting the relationship storyline, reproducing mainstream white love stories where race is treated as invisible.

Alternatively, “Kung Fooled” is a comedic video with over 12 million views that addresses performing, and possibly reclaiming Asian American stereotypes. Freddie Wong (of RocketJump) and Wong Fu co-founder Wesley Chan sit together in the opening scene and watch television, lamenting that the only representation of Asians they see is of them being martial arts masters. They discuss that everyone in America likely thinks of Asians as being good at math, piano, and martial arts due to these representations they see. When Freddie takes the trash out later, he is confronted by a white man trying to mug him. When Freddie swats at a fly, the white mugger perceives Freddie to be doing kung fu moves, which Freddie takes advantage of to scare him away. Soon after Freddie encounters another Asian guy (played by YouTuber Ryan Higa of nigahiga) and they begin to fight but both bluff with fake kung fu moves until they give up, unwilling to engage in actual combat. In the final scene, Freddie attempts to carjack a black man’s car with his “kung fu,” only for the black man to embody the stereotype of the threatening black thug to scare Freddie off. Afterwards, the black man calls his friend in his normal voice and excitedly tells them that he can’t believe he just successfully punked someone. The characters utilize such stereotypes to their own benefit and to comedic and entertaining effect, and the negative implications of the stereotype are not further explored following their performance of it, likely because characters are already aware of its negative implications.

While Wong Fu’s signature romantic drama/comedy work takes on a post-racial tone, their rise to viral fame actually came from addressing aspects of the Asian American experience, which they do continue to do in their work outside of their romantic short comedies/dramas through recent series about Asians in the Star Wars universe, a short called “What Asian Parents
Don’t Say…” which is reminiscent in theme to *Master of None’s* “Parents” and *Fresh Off the Boat’s* “Home Sweet-Homeschool,” and “Yellow Fever 2,” a follow-up to their original viral video, “Yellow Fever.” “Yellow Fever” was their 2006 pre-YouTube viral video originally released on their official website which achieved popular success with millions of views. The trio, then students at UC San Diego realized that the success of this video was the stepping stone for greater opportunities in making videos for their growing following. The official video was re-released in 2010 on their channel, and follows discussion among Asian American men about why white men and Asian women often date, yet couples that are Asian men and white women rarely exist. A white male character describes the methods of which he attracts Asian American women, such as speaking phrases in Chinese. Asian American women are portrayed as lusting after white men, and later black in manners that are incredibly exaggerated, while Asian American men are not seen as potential partners. While attempting to tease out the racism behind such attractions, the actual phenomenon of Yellow Fever, attributed to the racist fetishization of Asian women are not actually discussed as a reasoning for the prevalence of white male-Asian female couples. Asian American men also claim ownership of Asian American women, feeling entitled to date them, as they view white men as taking their women away.

For the 10-year anniversary of “Yellow Fever” in 2016, Wong Fu released “Yellow Fever 2” which revisits the premise of the short where a white male college student is supposedly dating an Asian American female student after he states he is into Asian girls, holds a “Korean for Beginners” textbook, then speaks to her in Chinese to the anger of Phil (the original lead in “Yellow Fever”). However, Phil suddenly encounters various counter arguments to his anger. Among them include a 3rd generation Asian American woman asserting her own agency outside of belonging to Asian men, an Asian American woman indicating that many Asian girls still date
Asian guys, an interracial couple who claims they don’t “see race,” a black woman who states Asian men don’t consider them as options, a white gay man who prefers Asians, and finally a white woman who states that Asian men are fetishizing her whiteness as a trophy to their masculinity. The final argument made by the white woman is one most rooted in a critical analysis of the emasculation of Asian American men and their attempts to rectify it through “interracial dating” that only considers white women as options, however she is quickly cut off by Phil who states that this subject could be a video of its own. The short then cuts to a scene showing the original Indian American character from “Yellow Fever,” Steve, speaking to Phil in an Indian accent (as he did in the original short). Steve tells Phil that finding love is hard enough and to “not worry about what color that love it.” Steve then reverts back to his normal American accent when Phil leaves and asks about why there hasn’t been a video exploring South Asian American men’s struggles. Phil then returns to the original pair that he had met in the video and apologized for his statements, stating that he realizes that people can’t control “who or what they’re attracted to” but he soon learns that they are just friends. The white student is shown to obviously have feelings for the Asian American student who “friendzones” him, as a call back to their 2007 short film “Just A Nice Guy.” The final scene shows Steve talking to the camera, asking why they aren’t exploring the real issues of him being profiled as a terrorist, asking where his women are after listing off his successes, and then hitting on the black woman from earlier, telling her that “once you go brown, you’ve made a sound decision” because they are educated, from a good family, and he will love her forever.

While “Yellow Fever 2” explores a greater range of perspectives than the first and gives more voice to women in their counter arguments, the ultimate message of the new short concludes that one shouldn’t worry so much about the racial dynamics in dating. The video also
presents new issues in its messaging which reaffirms stereotypes, claims reverse racism, states that love is colorblind, literally cuts short the conversation about Asian men’s problematic need to date white women to make up for racist emasculation, and once again ignores the root of how yellow fever affects Asian women. Phil is told by a white man who dates the 3rd generation Asian American woman that he is racist for wearing a shirt with Chinese characters that state “White people can’t read this,” a scene which claims “reverse racism” against white people exists. The white man states that many (white) children are taught mandarin in school, states that he had learned mandarin in college, and that he worked abroad in China at one point – which are taken as reasons to argue against Phil’s unfair “racism” against whites as a whole. The interracial Asian and Latina couple, Bart and Geo, show comically that they are unaware of each other’s races until it’s pointed out by Phil because they are so in love. Steve also homogenizes South Asian men in the last line of the short as all being equally well-educated, from good families, and devoted partners (to the point of desperation).

Phil’s assertion in the end that people can’t control their attraction to a person, or group of people fails to consider the sociohistorical forces of racialized sexualization which shapes white men’s attraction to Asian, and primarily East Asian women. His apology also ignores the problematic premise of the white male student finding all Asian girls attractive and conflating Asian languages when speaking to his friend. The common racist occurrence of non-Asian men speaking to Asian American women in any Asian language is not presented as a problem of fetishizing Asian women. This short is one of many examples which highlights the way in which the experiences and voices of Asian American women are continually marginalized by Wong Fu Productions in favor of their own East Asian male perspective, even when they made a video about a phenomenon (Yellow Fever) which primarily affects Asian and Asian American women
The homogenization of the Asian American experience, or self-stereotyping/self-orientalizing is a phenomenon often played up in the sphere of Asian American YouTube due to its popular appeal (by numbers). “What Asian Parents Don’t Say…” is a short in which Phil explains that Asian parents aren’t as emotional or expressive compared to their white counterparts, and that love is often expressed through unspoken ways. Similar to Master of None’s “Parents” and FungBrosComedy’s popular series “THINGS ASIAN PARENTS DO,” statements which overgeneralize Asian parents are presented as what the Asian American experience is. While Fresh Off the Boat explores the similar theme of unspoken familial love, Eddie Huang’s narration indicates that was an occurrence specific to his own family. In “What Asian Parents Don’t Say…” Phil’s character acts as a proxy for the “universal” second generation Asian American in explaining the dynamics of the Asian American family. Some Asian American audience members can identify with the short and others cannot, however such messages can be perceived as unquestioned fact when presented to outsiders due the relatively few nuanced presentations of Asian American identity in visible media. Wong Fu’s early rise to fame in YouTube has made them a seminal voice in Asian American production and representation but occupy a space along with various other Asian American content producers on

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1 Woan’s article summarizes the history of Western imperialism in Asia in creating stereotypes of Asian women as submissive and hypersexual, and the lasting effects of Asian fetishes on Asian and diasporic Asian women today, including but not limited to the prevalence of Asian women in pornography, the mail-order bride phenomenon, Asian sex tourism, stalking and harassment, and sexual violence.
YouTube and Hollywood as one which privileges the male perspective and lacks nuance in its attempts to explore aspects of the incredibly varied Asian American experience.

**Fung Bros Comedy**

While Wong Fu creates more narrative works, the FungBrosComedy’s work is composed of more vlog-style content which speaks directly to its audience. Their work is divided on their self-made playlists, the largest of which are titled “Food, Food, Food” (147 videos) and “Asian Culture & People” (92 videos). Other playlist categories include “VLOGS” (30 videos), “Lifestyle, Sports, Music” (25 videos), “Music Videos” (20 videos), “Asian Parents” (12 videos), and “Jeremy Lin” (10 videos). “Asian Culture & People” and “Food, Food, Food” overlap in content which focuses on Asian food, but the bulk of “Asian Culture & People” include their most popular videos which are titled in ways that assert their channel’s authority in categorizing the experiences and “types” of Asian Americans.

![Figure 1: FungBrosComedy's 10 Most Popular Videos](image)

FungBrosComedy’s videos are strategically titled and feature eye-popping graphics which draw viewers into watching their material out of curiosity in their subject matters about Asian people. Andrew and David Fung are both Chinese American and specifically make
material regarding the Asian American experience, however title their videos in ways which specifically leave out “American” and opt to describe Americans of Asian descent as “Asian girls” or “Asian guys.” Their most popular videos also display their content in a list video format. “THINGS ASIAN GIRLS HATE” has David, Andrew, and their guest Jessica Lee describing 17 things that all Asian girls supposedly hate. While throughout the video certain things are admitted as possibly stereotypical or applicable to more than just Asian girls, they qualify it through insisting these facts are true or particularly more relatable to Asian girls due to aspects such as their culture, racialization, and experiences with racism. Before introducing the number one item on their list, they say that the audience may have disagreed with everything on the list prior, but that they would agree with the fact that Asian girls hate “Asian pickup lines.” Jessica Lee proceeds to imitate white men hitting on Asian women through various racist statements such as “You look so exotic,” “Where are you from? No really, where are you from?” and “I heard that all Asian girls like white guys.” In the video’s closing, they ask their audience what items on the list they agree or disagree with, but also state that the video is “Asian girl approved” because Jessica Lee herself identified with most parts of the list. Stating that this video is “Asian girl approved” works to remove accusations of stereotyping Asian girls/women from the Fung Brothers because the subject herself was okay with the content. “THINGS ASIAN GIRLS HATE” is particularly interesting in its way of combining elements of self-stereotyping with discussion of shared experiences of sexism, racism, and fetishism that some of their other more popular videos do not.

In a follow-up video to responses on the Things Asian Girls/Guys Like/Hate series titled “THINGS ASIAN GIRLS LIKE – Comments on Comments,” the Fung Brothers address why they make these list-like videos. They state that they “are trying to spark discussion” because
Asian Americans as a group have not “defined themselves in this country” and that they are simply trying to point out common patterns that they have seen so that their Asian American audience will start to think about themselves, even if they do not fit into the categories that the Fung Brothers have defined. Such categorizations of “types” of Asians are further defined in their two videos “18 TYPES OF ASIAN GIRLS” and “15 TYPES OF ASIAN GUYS” which places various types of Asian Americans they have encountered into an almost excessive number of categories applicable to anyone, but include a few categories which are specifically racialized, such as describing Asian Americans as white-washed, FOBs, or those who fulfill or reject the model minority stereotype.

The identity “Asian” itself is presented as primarily applying to East Asian Americans and sometimes Southeast Asian Americans, seen through the images and guests the Fung Brothers bring into their most highly-viewed videos. Discussions of Asian identities outside what is typically thought of as “Asian” are relegated to more casual, vlog style videos covering Indian, Vietnamese, Chiu Chow, Filipino American, Cambodian, and Singaporean identities while set in their respective ethnic spaces such as grocery stores or restaurants. While the Fung Brothers do ask their audience to think about, discuss, and even disagree over the subjects of Asian American identity in the “Comments on Comments” follow-up video, their most popular list videos ultimately produce more stereotypes of Asian Americans by reaggregating individual experiences and personalities of Asian Americans with into limited sets of overarching racialized characteristics. The Fung Brothers’ production of more stereotypes is at odds with their goals of promoting conversations that have the potential to simultaneously incorporate discussion of shared racialization with understanding that Asian Americans don’t need to be placed into categories.
Anna Akana

Anna Akana’s work ranges in style and content from creative short films and web series to addressing various aspects of her young adult life, and within that, her experiences with racism, sexism, and the dual experience of racist sexualization. While Wong Fu and the Fung Brothers focus on normalizing Asian Americans in media, exploring culture and identity, and the subject of anti-Asian racism, Akana further addresses the concepts of privilege, whitewashing, and gender in a handful of sketches such as “Why Guys Like Asian Girls,” “Am I White Washed?,” “Check Your Privilege,” and “Racist Sexist Improv Class.” All the videos except “Racist Sexist Improv Class” are ones that star Akana by herself usually in her home, taking on multiple characters of people she has encountered in her life and speaking to the camera candidly. “Racist Sexist Improv Class” is a scripted sketch, starring Akana and several Asian American actresses, including Dr. Ken’s Suzy Nakamura, and one sole white actor, Akana’s partner Brad Gage.

The title of the video “Racist Sexist Improv Class” already invokes audience expectations of potentially offensive content possibly directed at Asian women, like Akana, who is the featured thumbnail image for this video. What occurs instead is a short 3-minute satirical video showing an alternate universe where Asian American women dominate acting classes and the media and direct racist and sexist comments towards white men instead. When Brad enters the improvisational acting class led by Suzy Nakamura, Anna immediately asks Brad what kind of white he is, then states that he looks Irish – flipping the script on the common practice of white people asking and then guessing the Asian ethnicity someone may be. The Asian American women in the class then go on to portray various media stereotypes of white men, such as Nazis, embezzlers, pedophile priests, and frat bros. Brad brings up concerns of the class being racist and
when getting hostile reactions, he states they may be unconsciously biased against white men as Asian women dominate improv and the stage. What results afterwards is the dismissal of his concerns by the instructor and other class members who tell him that “funny is funny” and that politics should be kept out of the class. Anna tells Brad that she can’t be racist because her boyfriend is white and after Brad leaves the class in frustration after another stereotypical scene, she objectifies him and says “I’d still do him,” then high-fives another student who agrees.

Akana’s sketch critiques the usually racist and sexist dynamics that occur in acting communities dominated by white men who often dismiss the concerns of people of color when such issues are brought up. This video portrays “reverse racism” against white men, but does so in a way which actually flips the power dynamic between white men and Asian women so that Asian women hold power and privilege in both their race and gender. The sketch isn’t meant to advocate a message that stereotypes of white men are as bad as stereotypes of Asian women or that prejudiced comments and treatment against white men are okay, but rather put white men in the shoes of various marginalized people who are reduced into stereotypes by white men who do actually hold dominant power in the field of arts and entertainment. The sketch also links the ties between stereotypical media portrayals of marginalized groups to the resulting subsequent negative interpersonal treatment of members of such groups. Similar to Master of None’s “Indians on TV,” Akana reveals the barriers of racism that Asian actors and actresses face within their industry, preventing responsible representation of themselves in visible media.

YouTube set the grounds for hosting an online collaborative Asian American content creator community with a sizeable audience, producing a variety of content addressing Asian American identity, either directly or indirectly. Within this creator community however, intra-community criticism rarely occurs, such as the case of Ryan Higa’s anti-Black Lives Matter
video, “A World Without Police?!” which reached nearly 6 million views (Walker). Asian American YouTubers’ audience of younger Asian American teenagers often limits producers’ discussions of anti-Asian racism and solidarity with racial justice movements from an anti-oppression standpoint that acknowledges the complexity of American and Asian American history and the role of structural racism. Akana’s attempts at addressing specifically gendered racism towards Asian women have also been met with racist, sexist comments which are derailing and perpetuating the very issues she addresses. Web series prove to be a site of incredibly subversive and popular counter-narratives, through Asian Americans cast in lead roles and representations of pertinent issues of anti-Asian racism, but also regressive sites of self-stereotyping and patriarchal hegemony. Asian American identity production online remains significant due the high usage of streaming platforms by Asian Americans, and web series creators unfortunately bare weight in considering the influence their platforms hold in being the original and ongoing platform of modern popular Asian American self-representation.

**Part 5: Gender, Sexuality, and Performing Asian American Blackness**

While the portrayal of Asian American identity and anti-Asian racism were discussed in the analysis of key episodes and videos from these network television shows and web series, other distinct patterns emerged regarding which gendered and racialized representations are most visible or recurring in these relatively new self-constructions of the Asian Americans in popular media. The majority of these popular series have featured primarily East Asian American casts and center the stories of men, except for Anna Akana’s YouTube channel and *Fresh Off the Boat* when episodes focus on Jessica Huang. Asian American masculinities and sexualities in these

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2 A popular Japanese American YouTuber known as nigahiga, with over 17 million subscribers. Ironically, or not so ironically, his anti-black sentiment is coupled with the fact that he rose to YouTube fame from videos like “How To Be Gangster” which enacted “black gangbanger stereotypes” (Gao).
shows are constructed in various ways which seek to counter prevailing stereotypes of emasculated, asexual Asian men. In network television and Netflix, a particular pattern emerges where Asian American boys or men are shown to be only desiring relationships with white female love interests. Asian American males are also shown to be emulating or appropriating the language, dress, and attitudes from black hip hop, seen in shows like *Fresh Off the Boat, Dr. Ken*, and FungBrosComedy, which is also part of a larger trajectory of the mainstream, non-black adoption of black popular culture. The dual racial and gendered mainstream performances of Asian men taking on the qualities of stereotypical black masculinity coupled with the greater valuation of white women as a measure of sexual desirability reproduces mainstream, rather than subversive, representations of race, gender, and sexuality despite its anti-racist goals.

The celebration of 2015 as the year of historic Asian American representation, in terms of two network television shows having majority Asian American casts, also displays the ways in which Asian American women who have starred as the leads in various television shows are almost deracialized by not only the mainstream television industry but also the broader Asian American community that discounts their presence as visible and identifiable Asian American stories. Shows such as *Quantico, The Mindy Project, Elementary, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, and other ongoing television shows with Asian American female leads were not included in the purview of Asian American network and online television for my analysis due to the limited or non-existent ways in which aspects of Asian American race and identity were addressed. When considering the current norm of interracial relationships between Asian women and white men (as informed by structures of war, racist fetishization, and assimilation to whiteness), the casting of Asian American women leads does little to threaten the dominant position of white men as their co-leads, affording them visibility yet simultaneous invisibility as Asian American bodies.
While *The Mindy Project* was written off from the space of Asian American television that *Fresh Off the Boat, Dr. Ken,* and even *Master of None* occupy, some valid reasons included the fact that Mindy repeatedly dates white men in the show and never address the racial dynamics within those relationships (Jung). Conversely, Asian American men’s relationships with white women on popular television were either lauded as revolutionary, completely ignored, or justified by showrunners as a matter of casting the best person for the role of the love interest – a familiar argument used to justify whitewashing roles meant for people of color.

*Master of None, Fresh Off the Boat,* and *Dr. Ken* have all portrayed the romantic interests of their Asian American male characters as white women or white girls, as well as the now-cancelled 2014 ABC sitcom *Selfie,* Netflix’s *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,* and The CW’s *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend.* Co-ethnic or same race relationships are primarily portrayed as pre-existing and occurring among only parents in all of these shows. Dev in *Master of None* has all of his former and current intimate relationships on the show occurring with white women, save for one East Asian American woman he goes on a casual date with where she was actually using him for food. This pattern in Dev’s dating is noted as part of a larger societal preference for white partners because they are racially constructed as more sexually attractive, which in turn validates “a point of view that white partners are more desirable” (Barthwell). While Ansari acknowledges this criticism, and counters that the show did not specifically seek to cast his primary love interest Rachel as white, actress Noël Wells, who is of Latina and Tunisian descent was still specifically written as a white character (Barthwell). As the show works to normalize the experiences of Asian American men being able to pursue romantic relationships without racial barriers, it reinforces whiteness as not only the default option in romantic relationships, but the very measure of Asian American men’s sexual desirability.
In Dr. Ken, Asian American males also face few racial barriers to dating. Ken’s son Dave in the 14th episode “Dave’s Valentine” is shown to have a crush on the white daughter of Ken’s enemy lawyer (played by Jeong’s Community co-star Joel McHale), and the only thing in the way between them is their fathers’ mutual dislike of one another. Community’s Indian/Polish American actor Danny Pudi also guest stars as Dr. Julie Dobbs’ on and off-again boyfriend, Topher, and is disliked by many not for his race, but his poor treatment of Julie. Dr. Ken’s fourth episode, “Kevin O’Connell” also introduces Allison’s ex-boyfriend, Korean American adoptee Kevin O’Connell, played by Will Yun Lee, who Ken describes as “hot Korean Channing Tatum.” Kevin O’Connell is shown to be incredibly masculine and “perfect” in comparison to the much smaller Ken (a characteristic mentioned in various episodes), and also universally attractive to the point of exaggeration to everyone in Ken’s office. Kevin’s unexpected appearance works as a point of contention between Ken and Allison because he is a masculine – and therefore more attractive Korean American man than Ken, rather than the unthreatening white man who Ken had previously thought Kevin was. While Kevin’s attractiveness can be read in a deracialized context, it actually seems to be heightened in this episode simply because he is an almost anomalous hypermasculine Asian American male, to the point of being described by Ken as “the hottest Korean guy in the world.” Nevertheless, Kevin O’Connell’s character was praised by Asian American Pacific Islander entertainment organization Kollaboration for being a normal, “masculine Asian dude” outside of stereotypes like a “triad member or henchman” (Yueh).

In the Fresh Off the Boat’s third episode “The Shunning,” when Eddie is unable to afford Air Jordans and is made fun of by his white peers for not being cool (marked by “blackness”), he sees his white adult neighbor Honey as “the ultimate status symbol” for approval and proceeds to
misogynistically objectify her throughout the episode to prove, imitating rap videos by throwing paper money at her and eventually getting a “sensuous hug” from her. Eddie’s mistreatment of Honey is somewhat attributed to his naivety about women, but more so to the misogyny that he had absorbed from the music he consumed, linking black masculinity in hip hop to misogyny. This problematic and limited representation of hip hop in the show removes the context of “the sexist, misogynistic, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap” from “the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 116). “The Shunning’s” misogynistic moments were also likely the “byproduct of trying to clumsily infuse Eddie Huang’s personal brand into the show,” that brand being an “unapologetically misogynistic, black-culture appropriator jockeying for cultural cachet by throwing women of color under the bus” (Fang; Ting).3 The show itself loses nuance in presenting Eddie Huang’s complicated identification with black culture beyond purely aesthetic appropriation, however very much still embodies other elements of Huang’s politics which favors reclaiming lost Asian American masculinity via misogyny, and racialized misogyny that deems women of color, especially black women, as undesirable and unworthy of respect (Ting).

Later in the episode, Eddie develops his first crush on Honey’s stepdaughter Nicole, whose race is unmentioned but is shown to be of least of half-white descent, and his Season 2 girlfriend Alison is explicitly identified as white. While both of Eddie’s crushes develop or are enhanced due to the girls’ interest in hip hop, they were also the only students shown to be attractive to Eddie. In S02E23, “The Manchurian Dinner Date,” Louis indicates that Eddie’s dating options are limited to primarily white girls because of their location, and Jessica is
initially delighted when the Chinese American Audrey is introduced as Eddie’s girlfriend, a plan formulated by Alison due to her anxiety of Jessica’s disapproval. Ultimately, Jessica dislikes Audrey due to her bland personality and accepts Alison not only because she is a better match for Eddie, but because Alison possesses qualities considered “Chinese” internally, such as her hard work ethic and dedication to being first chair piccolo. Throughout the episode, Audrey and Eddie’s younger brother Emery come to like each other, but Jessica remarks that Audrey should aspire to be more like Alison. This is the first episode of the show which introduces an Asian American girl, and in that she is portrayed negatively to Eddie’s white girlfriend – making a point that Jessica’s lifelong desire for Eddie to have a Chinese girlfriend is ultimately misguided and even prejudiced. The real Eddie Huang comes into play again when considering his memoir’s devotion to an entire chapter titled “Pink Nipples” on his adolescent desire for white girls and rejection of Asian girls with brown nipples due to their resemblance to his mother (Fresh Off the Boat 119-133). Moments of Huang being sexually or romantically involved with white girls are celebrated in the memoir, and the television show reproduces this, relegating Emery’s girlfriends of color as incredibly minor characters or less desirable to their white counterparts.

Historically, Asian American men and black men have been “positioned along binary axes…in symmetrical contrast to each other,” such as the racialized binaries of brain/body, hardworking/lazy, nerd/criminal, submissive/aggressive, student/convict, feminization/hypermasculinization and solution/problem (Chon-Smith 3-4). Despite such contrasting positionalities, black men and Asian men have always been constructed as direct sexual threats to the purity of white womanhood, resulting in anti-miscegenation laws preventing intermarriage between black men and white women, later applied towards outlawing
intermarriage between white women and Asian men. While Asian men had been seen as asexual, effeminate, and even homosexual due to the domestic nature of their work and the bachelor societies in which they resided (due to the outlawing of migration of Asian women), the motion picture industry also simultaneously constructed Asian men as doubly undesirable for being dangerous sexual deviants “lusting after the White Woman” (Espiritu 92). The portrayal of Asian American men in modern media as masculine, desirable agents who can attract the affection of previously untouchable white women works at face to counter such historical misrepresentations, but only if one views the attainment of white sexual approval and desire as the ultimate end goal of such representations. Asian American feminist blogger Jenn Fang defines this reactionary toxic masculinity in the mainstream Asian American fight against emasculation as “misogynilinity” which “defines masculinity by the objectified ownership of female sexuality, and in so doing commodifies [women] as tokens for the purposes of keeping masculine score. Furthermore, misogynilinity is distinctly racist…the sliding scale of female attractiveness posits White women as the pinnacle” (“Masculinity vs. ‘Misogynilinity’”). Critical examinations of these “empowering” Asian American masculinities in mainstream media must occur when they reproduce sexist entitlement and racism primarily towards women of color.

As noted earlier, the Huangs in *Fresh Off the Boat* often use phrases and aesthetics from Black culture, incorporated into the show based from Huang’s memoir, but largely detached from the real affinities that they were based on. On the show, hip hop and black culture transitioned from being an anthem of outsiders in the first episode to the way in which Eddie had to fit in with white students by the third. Various family members dress up in hip hop attire, or as black characters for comedic effect on the show. When elements of popular culture that do make commentary on race in *Fresh Off the Boat*, such as Chris Rock’s 1996 *Bring the Pain* (in the
Season 2 finale of the same name), Jessica refers to the work as causing “race riots,” with other discussions of the special cut short. However, this whole plotline of Eddie wanting to watch *Bring the Pain* was a setup to call out Chris Rock’s racist Asian joke at the 2016 Oscars, with Evan commenting that at least Rock “doesn’t make lame Asian jokes” after the brothers all watch *Bring the Pain*. In *Dr. Ken*, Ken Park frequently uses language which he justifies to his black coworker Damona as “playfully [drawing] upon each other's stereotypes for emphasis” when he believes she is protesting him saying “fo’ sho.” However, further discussion on this subject ends when she tells him she was merely protesting the fact that he had spit on her when saying “fo’ sho.” In a flashback scene of Ken’s medical school days, he not only raps on his show “Yo! K-MD Raps” but switches back and forth between speaking in his normal voice and imitating African American Vernacular English.

*Figure 2: Promotional photo of actor Hudson Yang as Eddie Huang*

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4 Chris Rock was the host of the 2016 Academy Awards, and in one bit, he had brought out three children of Asian descent dressed as bankers, introducing them as “the most dedicated, accurate and hard working representatives.” After pointing out that this joke may have been offensive, he calls for the audience to tweet their complaints utilizing the smartphones made by the same children – doubly stereotyping the unwitting participants as both model minorities and sweatshop laborers (Moyer).
Figure 3: Randall Park as Louis Huang, costumed as Mr. T in Season 2's Halloween episode "Miracle on Dead Street"

Figure 4: A flashback scene from "Dr. Wendi: Coming to LA!" of Ken Park on his medical school show "Yo! K-MD Raps"

Figure 5: FungBrosComedy's 3rd video in the "ASIAN GUYS TALK ABOUT RAP" series
FungBrosComedy’s channel may reveal some of the current context of mainstream representations of Asian Americans and Black culture. In addition to being YouTubers, both David and Andrew Fung are also rappers, and their channel features a series of videos which compare similarities and differences between blacks and Asians (sometimes satirically), Black-Asian interracial dating, discussions of their favorite rap songs and artists, as well as an examination of themselves as “ghetto” or “hood.” A 2011 video titled “ARE WE GHETTO?!?” brings in a Latina guest from Inglewood, California who quizzes the brothers about if they possess stereotypical qualities which would qualify them as “hood.” This was filmed in a way similar to their later series on Asian girls, in that they have a guest of this identity to qualify or rather justify the stereotypical material presented in the video. Even after this video’s determination that neither of the bothers are “hood,” their channel remains dedicated to exploring and discussing rap in a series called “ASIAN GUYS TALK ABOUT RAP.” They state that their engagement in rap is not an attempt to be black, but rather done because it important to them personally in that they grew up listening to rap because of its popularity in the context of American culture. Considering the ways in which the rise of Asian American new media factored into the reemergence of Asian American network family sitcoms, similar modes of representing Asian American cultural relations with hip hop and Black culture are reproduced. There are various nuances in examining the spectrum of Asian-Black relations and Asian Americans’ aversion, appropriation, and affinities to blackness, especially through the medium of hip hop that are explored in various academic works, however current popular Asian American popular web series and network television do not engage in this discourse.
Conclusion: Movements for Visibility and Visibility for Movements

If 2015 marked a historical year for increased Asian American representation in mainstream media, 2016 quickly re-established the status quo through Hollywood’s repeated whitewashing and borderline yellowface in the upcoming films *Ghost in Shell*, *Dr. Strange*, and *Power Rangers* (Chow). The upcoming Netflix Marvel Defenders installment, *Iron Fist*, also cast a white lead after calls for an Asian actor to be cast with the hashtag #AAIronFist were rejected, despite the fact that Marvel’s *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* lead Daisy Johnson (played by Chloe Bennet, née Wang) exists as a canonically Asian American character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Wheeler). While Asian American consumers were constructed as a viable market for network television representation, the film industry has yet to consider neither the business potential nor the actual necessity of casting actors of Asian descent as Asian characters. Asian Americans in Hollywood such as George Takei had publicly spoken out, and Margaret Cho, writer Ellen Oh, and Nerds of Colors started the Twitter conversation hashtag #whitewashedOUT in May, prompting many responses, including some from actresses Ming Na and Constance Wu, writer Marjorie Liu, and Anna Akana (The Nerds of Color, Andrews). Other creative hashtag Photoshop movements like #StarringJohnCho and #StarringConstanceWu highlighted the possibilities of Asian Americans recast as Hollywood leads (Kim). These online movements against whitewashing Asian roles garnered media attention about the need for greater Asian American representation in mainstream media. While the initial #whitewashedOUT conversation spoke to a larger range of creatives in the Asian American diaspora, #StarringJohnCho and #StarringConstanceWu showcased the limitations of East Asian American representative hegemony as the faces of Asian America leading the movement for Asian American mainstream media inclusivity.
Due to the limited opportunities for Asian American actors to achieve mainstream media presence, Asian Americans who are involved in the production and representation of their own identities are placed in a tricky position of seeking to responsibly represent their racial group while still asserting the individuality of the Asian American experience, all while needing to appeal to a broad audience. However, truly “post-racial” representations of Asian Americans do not occur in both television and web series, as Asian American racial identity is acknowledged, either directly in the plot or through the deliberate centrality of Asian American casts. Network television shows have represented Asian American identity through episodes which explicitly explore themes of culture, racism, and assimilation while also broadcasting episodes where characters’ “Asian-ness” has little effect in the plot, normalizing the presence of Asian American casts in media as identifiable subjects for a non-Asian, mainstream audience. Asian American identity is constructed as something that is complicated and not truly definable, yet producers rely upon their shows’ relatability to certain groups of Asian Americans. Specificity, relatability, and “universality” of the Asian American experience are all represented in media, speaking to the nuanced existence of Asian Americans, even when considering current limitations and shortcomings in popular representations.

Movements for Asian American media visibility cannot and should not view its primary end goal as parity with their white counterparts in terms of attaining roles that perpetuate various oppressions. While it is unfair to place the burden of representation upon the few existing Asian American series online and on television, these mainstream platforms remain influential in shaping ideas about Asian American identity and community in America, not just in the imaginations of white America, but among Asian Americans themselves. Asian American media figures who have been outspoken about representation have also recently come together in a
recent public service announcement from APIAVote and Asian Americans Advancing Justice which encouraged Asian American and Pacific Islanders to vote in this election year, emphasizing AAPI contributions to America as well as historic Asian American struggles against institutional racism in exclusion, exploitation, and internment. Throughout the analysis of various media texts, “Asian American” as a political identity is never spoken of, which is ironic considering both the continuous string of anti-Asian racism which binds these representations together and the roots of the term “Asian American” as a radical political identity emerging from the Asian American Movement of the 60s and 70s, coined in 1968 by Asian American Studies pioneer Yuji Ichioka (G. Lee). 5 The anti-racist movements for Asian American visibility in the media cannot be removed from utilizing that visibility on mainstream platforms to further such politics, and small steps are currently being taken towards translating media representation into pushes for political action.

Current Asian American media shows have already shown their capacity to succeed commercially while also displaying subversive potential, but critical issues must be addressed in terms of the shows’ marginalization of various identities, perpetuation anti-blackness, and reproduction of stereotypes. The re-emergence of growing nationwide critical consciousness of anti-black oppression in the United States, coupled with visible oppositional Asian American movements in such as anti-affirmative action suits or pro-Peter Liang rallies make this a critical time to engage Asian Americans politically, through the entry point of Asian American media representation.6 While network television shows are undoubtedly constrained in their messaging,

5 “Political Asian Americans” as a group are spoken of by the Fung Brothers, but they are treated as a subcategory of Asian Americans rather than foundational, as Asian Americans are understood today as a racial category.
6 Chinese American NYPD cop Peter Liang shot and killed an unarmed black man, Akai Gurley in 2014 when Liang’s gun went off in a dark staircase and the bullet ricocheted, hitting Gurley in the chest. Liang refused to seek immediate help for Gurley, resulting in his death. When convicted of manslaughter, the media reported on thousands of Chinese Americans rallying in support of Liang, bearing signs stating “One Tragedy, Two Victims.” Despite Liang’s conviction, the charge was reduced and he was ultimately sentenced to only probation and community service – achieving the outcome that the Chinese American
some shows on Netflix and YouTube have shown the capacity for greater creator independence and the ability to critically examine racism and white supremacy from a structural standpoint. The importance of increasing and improving responsible media production and representation is not only to reflect a large and diverse range of experiences within the ever-growing community that is Asian America, but to potentially subvert the institutionally racist structures which had long kept us out of Hollywood and the nation itself since the inception of Asian American history.

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protesters had wanted in Liang getting equal treatment as the many white cops who have repeatedly been cleared in countless numbers of extrajudicial killings of black people. Asian Americans supporting #Justice4AkaiGurley were largely ignored by mainstream media, continuing the longstanding rhetoric of Asian/Black tensions (Fuchs).
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