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## Excessively Asian: crying, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and the construction of Asian American audiences

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### ABSTRACT

Amidst the outpouring of conversation surrounding the popular romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), a common response by Asian American audience members centered on the experience of crying at the theater. This article asks what provoked this particular discourse and how it is related to broader issues around Asian American media and representation. It triangulates a complex portrait of meaning surrounding *Crazy Rich Asians*, including the arrival of an Asian American entertainment boom, the targeted marketing of the film, and the activist campaign that accompanied its release. It then analyzes writing from journalists and tweets with gifs, arguing that from assessing this multifaceted portrait we can see how Asian Americans are fighting to exceed and resist the limits of various communication platforms in order to more fully express their frustrations with our current media landscape.



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Following the popularity of Kevin Kwan's 2013 novel, the Warner Brothers film *Crazy Rich Asians* arrived in 2018 with massive fanfare. The romantic comedy starred Constance Wu as an ordinary Chinese American woman who gets swept off her feet by her exorbitantly wealthy boyfriend and must contend with his prying and protective Singaporean family. Not only was the movie financially successful, earning over \$260 million at the global box office, but Asian Americans supported it in droves—celebrating its stars with exuberant fandom, participating in repeat viewings at the movie theater, and contributing to a deafening social media buzz. The excitement about *Crazy Rich Asians* was just one of many landmark accomplishments within what has been called an Asian American entertainment boom (Kang, 2020) that started with the network television show *Fresh Off the Boat* in 2015. In the years since then, there has been an astonishing wealth of Asian American entertainment content—including sitcoms *Dr. Ken*<sup>1</sup>, *Awkwafina is Nora from Queens*, *Pen15*, *I Feel Bad*, *Alex, Inc.*, *Never Have I Ever*, and the Canadian program *Kim's Convenience*; Asian American-centered dramas like *Warrior* and the second season of *The Infamy*; Asian American-led programs like *Killing Eve* and *Quantico*; as well as the movies *Searching*, *The Farewell*, *The Big Sick*, *Always Be My Maybe*, *Tigertail*, *The Half of It*, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, and its sequel *To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You*. This outpouring of Asian American

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representations and cultural productions into mainstream media provides a productive moment for investigating Asian American audiences—a collective that is very rarely acknowledged or examined.

As an enthusiastic participant in the conversations surrounding *Crazy Rich Asians*, I was struck by one response in particular—the flood of first-person narratives describing how Asian Americans cried during the movie. For weeks following the film’s release, it seemed that every media outlet I followed—from entertainment news sites and film reviews to blogs and social media posts—brought more Asian American voices into the fold to discuss how the film did or did not cause them to cry. What is it that provoked so much discourse around Asian American tears in this moment, and what can these conversations tell us about the broader state of Asian American representation and media? Critical cultural studies of media audiences have always recognized the importance of situating individual interpretations within larger cultural and social contexts, as no reading occurs within a vacuum. When conceptualizing a racialized collective such as “Asian American audiences” we must also incorporate the lessons from critical race theory about the dangers of essentializing a heterogeneous community and the importance of broader forces of racialization. With this in mind, this study seeks to triangulate a complex portrait of meaning surrounding *Crazy Rich Asians* and a subset of the affective responses it provoked by analyzing multiple paratexts surrounding the film. Not only does this intervention begin to rectify the dearth of scholarship on Asian American media audiences, but it repositions the performative discursive function of “crying at the movies” within broader understandings of Asian Americans as emotionless and inexpressive. The film cannot be understood as an isolated incident, but as one node within a broader Asian American media landscape with many different forces shaping the conversation that unfolded. While there is no single or unified “Asian American response” to the film, this article identifies some of the efforts to shape racialized interpretations of the film by marketers and activists and makes sense of the role that tears played in Asian American discourse surrounding it.

I begin establishing this broader context through examining the way the film was marketed to Asian American audiences and the activist campaigns that encouraged Asian American support for the film. This includes analysis of the way IW Group and the organization Gold Open engaged in efforts to make sure Asian Americans were aware of the film and its political potential. I then turn to direct expressions of Asian American reactions to the film in an analysis of media coverage of the film and social media posts about *Crazy Rich Asians* on Twitter. I focus on the proliferation of discussion about Asian Americans crying during screenings, and the way that this particular response to the film was captured and shared with wider publics. There is no way in which such a response can be understood as representative; on the contrary, it is clear that Asian Americans responded in multiple ways and many were quite critical of both the film and these campaigns. Yet my assessment of this particular discursive outpouring affirms that Asian American tears and other expressions of emotion are a legitimate vector of analysis within Asian American media scholarship, and audience studies in particular. I argue that *Crazy Rich Asians* and the larger context of the Asian American entertainment boom provided a moment in which Asian Americans fought to exceed and resist the limits of various communication platforms in order to more fully express their frustrations with our current media landscape. Coming from a minoritized

audience with limited opportunities for mediated recognition, Asian American tears became a vehicle for communicating the values, struggles, and intellectual engagements that had been so long silenced. This examination exposes the many contradictory and heterogeneous possibilities for Asian American audiencehood that we are only beginning to recognize.

## Studying Asian American audiences

Amidst the recent outpouring of Asian American representations and cultural productions into the mainstream, media studies researchers are clearly faced with a fertile moment for examining the experiences and responses of Asian American audiences. Such research is particularly important due to the fact that Asian American audiences have routinely been undervalued and understudied, rendered invisible by both scholars and media industries more broadly. Indeed, there is an abundance of harmful industry lore that has served to devalue Asian Americans as a desirable audience commodity—including the belief that Asian American audiences are too small to matter and that it is difficult to deal with multiple language groups, in addition to a general lack of understanding of who Asian Americans are and how they are different from white audiences (Coffey, 2013; Imada, 2007). The invisibility of Asian American audiences has historically been reinforced by the fact that the Nielsen Company did not even attempt to adequately sample Asian Americans in their audience measurements until the mid 2000s, in response to community activism (Lopez, 2016).

As media industries have begun to show some interest in who Asian Americans are as consumers and what role they play in the media marketplace, media studies scholars and Asian Americanists have also evinced only limited interest in investigating Asian American reception, spectatorship, fandom, and audiencehood. The overlooking of Asian Americans is particularly notable given the wealth of research that exists on other non-white audiences. Alongside the rise in critical cultural audience research and film reception studies in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars of race and media contributed important thinking on the many different ways that marginalized audiences were responding to representations. Building from Stuart Hall's (1980) model of encoding/decoding on audience agency over interpretive practices, a wave of research emerged theorizing different forms of oppositional reading practices by Black audiences that could speak back to racist imagery. These works captured the ways that Black viewers were actually responding to representations in movies, tv shows, animated programs, and more—including pointing to the significance of Black fandoms as a particular subset of Black audiences. Scholars have also investigated Latinx audiences both in the U.S. and transnationally, together creating a body of scholarship that serves to amplify the voices of ordinary audience members and highlight the wide range of interpretive practices taken up by people of color.<sup>2</sup>

Investigations of Asian American audiences have been comparatively limited, with most studies relying on psychological modes of film reception. Hye Seung Chung (2006) produces this kind of reading in her theorization of how bilingual and bicultural spectators might understand representations of early Korean American star Philip Ahn, combining her own experiences as a viewer alongside imagined responses of Asian and Asian American spectators from different positionalities. In a similar vein, Jeanette Roan

(2016) builds an understanding of Asian American spectatorship using her own phenomenological and embodied experiences as a provocation for thinking through racialized embodiments and emotions in relation to cinematic texts. Yet when it comes to empirical analyses of actual Asian American audiences that move beyond an author's individual interpretations, there are even fewer examples. David Oh (2012, 2013) has contributed the rare example of this kind of work, using in-depth interviews triangulated with media diaries and ethnographic observations to investigate how Asian Americans construct their ethnic identity in relation to media. Others like Peter X Feng (2000) have acknowledged that “in lieu of an empirical, sociological study of audiences, I ... examine the next best thing” (40) and looks for evidence of spectatorship in the way that Asian American audiences have themselves been constructed in Asian American films. He argues that texts like *Sally's Beauty Spot* and *Slaying the Dragon* can give us access to the perspectives of Asian American women on how they make sense of *The World of Suzie Wong*—notably, that minoritized viewers can simultaneously critique racist imagery while finding pleasure and enjoyment in fleeting moments of tension and recontextualization.

This study builds from these understandings of Asian Americans as active and autonomous subjects in relation to representations on screen, recognizing that any single interpretation of the film cannot stand in for a larger racialized collective. It expands upon the way that Feng forwards Asian American media production as a vehicle for accessing Asian Americans experiences, bodily reactions, emotions, and intellectual perspectives in turning to Asian American-authored journalism and tweets as evidence of spectatorship. Yet it also incorporates understandings of the larger context in which Asian Americans have at last been recognized as targetable consumers, and asks how their emergence as a commodity market frames interpretations of Asian American representations and their relationship to other communities of color.

### **Marketing *Crazy Rich Asians* as Asian American**

One of the primary forces shaping the way that Asian Americans engaged with *Crazy Rich Asians* was its marketing. Over a year in advance of the film's premiere, Warner Brothers hired the Los Angeles-based marketing company IW Group to build excitement and interest in Asian American communities. They worked with popular Asian American YouTube stars to create videos featuring meetups with the cast, visits to the set during production, and vlogs about their own excitement. They also collaborated with stars from the movie to produce “activation events” in Asian American communities—such as having Michelle Yeoh serve as Grand Marshal for the 2018 San Francisco Chinese New Year parade, and getting actors to post social media messages in conjunction with Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. At an early VIP screening event called Fashion Night Out, high-profile Asian American designers, editors, and influencers were invited to a soiree that highlighted fashion elements from the film.

These strategies were designed to promote an understanding that the film was specifically for Asian Americans. In an interview with *Hollywood Reporter*, Warner Brothers marketing executive Terra Potts described their marketing goal:

We wanted to make sure [Asian Americans] had ownership. Once they blessed the film, it made it OK to play for a broader audience and not feel like we were appropriating anything. It let them feel like they were sharing their movie. (Sun, 2019)

This approach is notable because Warner Brothers is one of the few movie studios that dedicates advertising dollars toward specifically targeting Asian American audiences (Lopez, 2016). To distinguish Asian American audiences from the general market and invite feelings of ownership and investment, these efforts became explicitly politicized. For instance, in a Warner Brother-sponsored YouTube video the popular duo known as The Fung Brothers capture their experience serving as background actors on set, and throughout the video they clearly voice their support for the film as a project designed to help Asian Americans (Fung Bros., 2018). In an interview with director John Chu, their first question is: “Is this the first Asian American-funded movie since *Joy Luck Club*?” This question effectively categorizes the movie as Asian American and connects its historical significance to another classic Asian American movie, while also reminding audiences that funding sources are a key determinant of power and identity.

The framing of *Crazy Rich Asians* as particularly meaningful or even “belonging to” Asian Americans was also bolstered by partnerships with activists who organized to buy out movie theaters for opening weekend. These efforts were initiated through a partnership between IW Group and Gold House—a collective started by Asian media and business executives that focuses on using box office influence as a mechanism for supporting Asian American productions. Gold House first focused on the Justin Chon film *Gook* in 2017 before turning their attentions to *Crazy Rich Asians* in 2018. They encouraged Asian American celebrities, media professionals, nonprofits, and community organizations to buy out entire theaters on opening weekend when their dollars meant the most, and used the hashtag #GoldOpen to call attention to their actions. News reports surrounding the release of *Crazy Rich Asians* frequently mentioned this hashtag, and described the Asian American fans who were prepared to spend somewhere between \$1500 and \$5000 to help increase the impact of the film and allow any interested Asian Americans to attend for free. The movement spread, and eventually over 350 theater buyouts occurred across the country (Yang, 2018).

This work of establishing *Crazy Rich Asians* as an Asian American text can be understood as contributing to a sense of “must-see Asianness” that was designed to compel Asian Americans to support the film. In Alfred Martin’s (2019) exploration of Black fandom, he puts forward a theory of “must-see Blackness” that describes the way Black audiences feel a civic duty and a demand to support Black cultural productions because of their political and historical significance. In this case, we can see how the framing of *Crazy Rich Asians* is designed to produce “must-see Asianness,” connecting consumption of Asian American media to civic engagement. Melissa Phruksachart (2020) terms this overinvestment in representation “messianic visibility,” and argues that the hype surrounding *Crazy Rich Asians* “cruelly encouraged the idea that a minoritized group or person achieves full psychic personhood only upon their recognition as a market” (pp. 61-62). She worries that these politicized calls for Asian American audiences to support the movie are short-sighted in hewing to neoliberal understandings of empowerment, and depart from the radical ambitions of Asian American politics. There have also been criticisms of the way that Gold House pressured local community

organizations with limited resources to show financial support for a film that they felt did not align with their political goals (Nishime, 2019). Nonetheless, such efforts seemed to have a substantial impact, as early reports from Warner Brothers revealed that Asian Americans made up 38% of the film's audiences on opening weekend, when they are usually only around 6% of moviegoers (Toy, 2018). Their impact is also evident in the way that Asian American viewers described their experiences of watching the film.

### Asian American journalism: crying at the theater

Within the journalistic coverage of *Crazy Rich Asians* there were many standard movie reviews weighing the film's artistic achievements and industry reports discussing its box office performance. But opinion and feature articles authored by Asian Americans emerged as a secondary journalism genre that gave voice to specifically racialized perspectives on the film. In these articles, writers frequently set aside their usual objective voice in order to call attention to the way that the film made them feel as Asian audience members—including narratives about how the film connected to their family histories, their embodied experience of sitting in the movie theater, their hopes and expectations for the film, and what they thought of the film as a text.<sup>3</sup> It is within these more personalized narratives that crying emerged as a ubiquitous topic. Reporter Grace Z. Li from the *Harvard Crimson* describes its prevalence:

The most common response I've heard to watching *Crazy Rich Asians* is "I cried": I cried 30 seconds into the film, I cried in the last act, I cried when they played mahjong, I cried during the wedding scene, or I cried on Twitter later that night. There are really no other two words that so succinctly sum up the relief of seeing an Asian character without a threatening onslaught of racist stereotypes, or the marvel of seeing so many Asian characters in one space existing outside of tokenizing tropes as real human beings. (Li, 2018)

In Li's article we start to get a sense for how widespread this specific emotional, bodily reaction to the movie seemed to be. Not only were Asian American viewers eager to report that the film made them cry, but they wanted to dissect this response. Yet rather than poring over any specific scene or character, long-form analyses more often reflected on the emotions that the film evoked as a whole. In this article, Li provides her own attempt to explain the cause of all these tears by describing the feeling of seeing non-stereotypical representations.

In some ways this is an expected response, as crying at the movies is a fairly commonplace occurrence, and the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* was certainly designed to elicit tears in many moments. While the film is decidedly within the genre of "romantic comedy," it has many melodramatic components. In Steve Neale's (1986) explorations of melodrama, he finds that there are many reasons that narratives can move spectators to weep—including temporal dramas such as missed connections and feelings that one is just moments too late for something, as well as romantic narratives that culminate in realizing the fantasy of union or the crushing pain of love lost. In such moments, spectators gain pleasure from both the satisfaction of wish fulfillment and the comfort of identifying with even those wishes that remain unfulfilled. Linda Williams (1991) also argues that women's status under patriarchy has traditionally contributed to the ways in which "weepies" address women and incite involuntary emotional excess. At a basic level,



*Crazy Rich Asians* was certainly designed to provoke crying through these gendered mechanisms—it tells the story of a woman who travels the world with her lover only to be tormented by cruel attackers who uncover depressing truths about her father’s criminal past and her mother’s abuse, and she struggles to make peace with an intimidating mother-in-law who tells her she will never be good enough. As with any good romance, the viewer is sensibly moved to tears when our beloved heroine overcomes her painful struggles and finds love. This emotional response to particular narratives has long been linked to effeminacy itself, with sentimental genres serving as one way of revealing “the structures of feeling that constitute contemporary gendered experience,” according to Robyn Warhol (2003, p. 8).

Yet in making sense of this outpouring of commentary on Asian American tears, we must consider two important factors. First, the tears being analyzed here are not the private experiences of individuals, but the public discourse surrounding those emotions; and second, that they are racialized tears. Indeed, the publication of these articles on *Crazy Rich Asians* within mainstream journalism serves to insert carefully constructed narratives about Asian Americans into publications that rarely discuss Asian Americans at all (Lopez, 2018). In this case, their expressions of emotion exceed the genre of the movie review and necessarily spill over into personal narrative in a move to foreground the politics of emotion. Sara Ahmed (2004) reminds us in her work on affective economies that emotions must always be understood as something that moves between bodies. In focusing on their circulation, we can see how emotions create collectives and shape values about bodies in society. This helps us to consider the racialization of affect and the role of emotion in racialized struggles, as well as the way that these sensorial embodiments have the opportunity to shape Asian American collectives. Asian American affect has often been aligned with a disciplinary function that affirms the subordinate status of Asian immigrants in American society. Indeed, Asian Americans have consistently been framed within U.S. liberal capitalist discourse as happy and optimistic in an effort to contain Asian American racial feelings amidst fears of Asia as an economic threat (Santa Ana, 2015). In her study of Asian American affect, K. Hyoejin Yoon (2008) argues that Asian American women in particular are required to maintain polite and cheerful veneers in order to affirm model minority ideologies. She notes that this cultural labor is connected to the conditional and contradictory status of Asian American citizenship, in which performances of “diligence, self-sacrifice, political passivity, and acquiescence” (p. 298) are what are expected and rewarded even when Asian Americans so often remain excluded from the body politic. Others have commented on the flat affect of the techno-Orientalist imagining of Asian robots (Nishime, 2014), and the way that Asian American anger has been systematically denied and contained (Lopez, 2014). Given these understandings of normative Asian American affect, we can then see how the performance of Asian American tears during screenings of *Crazy Rich Asians* serves to contest and reshape these roles in demonstrating and calling attention to emotional excess.

The emotional pressures felt by Asian Americans have also been discussed as contributing what comedian Jenny Yang has termed “Rep Sweats” (Donnelly, 2015). By this she means the all-too common experience of watching Asian American media representations out of a feeling of duty, and then being overwhelmed by anxiety and distress at the weight that is placed on that representation to succeed. This can include the fear



of humiliation or shame if audiences don't like it or if it is a mocking or degrading portrayal, alongside the desperate hope that it ultimately performs well enough to open doors for future Asian American projects. Journalist Kat Chow described the way that she felt herself overwhelmed by fear during her screening that was primarily white. She says:

I worried what this audience would make of the movie. Would they get the jokes? If they laughed a ton, would it mean this movie wasn't meant for me? What would all this suggest about its eventual box office take? (Chow, 2018)

This moment of Asian American double consciousness can help to explain the unexpected bout of tears that accompanies the release of pleasure in the face of expected embarrassment and disappointment.

This excess also mirrors the spilling over of Asian American identifications, as responses to the movie across the globe reflect a failure to contain categories like "Asian American" within the limiting strictures of national boundaries. While there is a contextual specificity to the experiences of Asian immigrants and subsequent generations living in the United States, the project of American global empire affects Asians across the diaspora in connected ways. Articles written by members of the global Asian diaspora illuminate the structuring role of U.S. media in shaping emotional experiences at the multiplex while also calling attention to these connections. Given the global nature of online journalism, many articles blur the distinction between Asian American and diasporic Asians living all over the world and expose the porous boundaries surrounding Asian identities across the diaspora. Michelle Law writes in *The Sydney Morning Herald* about her experiences as an Asian Australian who also cried during a screening:

My reaction took me by surprise. I wasn't expecting to be so affected by seeing a protagonist that looked like me, and locations that felt like home. I wasn't expecting to hear a soundtrack sung in languages from my mother country. I felt seen for the first time in years, well, precisely 25 years, which is when *The Joy Luck Club*, the last major studio film to feature an all-Asian cast was made. (Law, 2018)

In her response, she attributes her emotional responses to a lifetime of frustration as a consumer of mainstream media—but does not distinguish between Australian and U.S. products. It is clear that both her frustration with histories of underrepresentation and her feelings of recognition, familiarity, and nostalgia link the experiences of Asian Americans and hyphenated or diasporic Asians across the world. In this way, tears are connected to the historical injustices of Asian American representation, as she was surrounded by a media landscape where she rarely sees Asian American experiences reflected on screen. These are politically powerful tears that claim a broader Asian diasporic experience and refuse to acquiesce to the expectation of the self-effacing model minority. We can also see this deployment of identity excess in Rene Wang, who identifies as Asian-Canadian, and similarly reflects on the difference between crying alone and crying amongst other patrons in a crowded movie theater. She writes:

The deep emotional, tear-inducing moments are perfectly orchestrated. At least four of us cried, multiple times. And this time, I was no longer the young girl crying alone in an empty living room watching *Better Luck Tomorrow*, but in a large theatre surrounded by hundreds

of people of all colors and backgrounds, who were moved by and resonated with characters who look like me. And they were laughing with me, and they were crying with me. (Wang, 2018)

Wang describes the significance of being surrounded by her diverse companions, but they are all enjoying the same Asian story. If we are interested in the circulation of emotion between bodies and the way that such emotions constitute collectivities, this shared experience of crying can be understood as further drawing Asian Americans and diasporic Asians into a collective. While each individual calls attention to a personalized viewing experiences, this experience cannot be extricated from the knowledge that this movie's audience extended far beyond.

These responses and the way they are described help to reveal the nuances of a distinctly racialized experience of watching this movie—an act that connects backward to a lifetime of consuming hegemonic images that both underrepresent and misrepresent. These expressions of feeling nervous, sad, surprised, and relieved help to call attention to the very existence of Asian American and Asian diasporic emotional responses; they are also constitutive of the larger racialized collective audience hailed by these writings.

### Asian American Twitter: gif responses

Beyond these narrative descriptions of racialized spectatorship, we can also learn more about emotional responses to *Crazy Rich Asians* through the proliferation of Twitter posts following the film's premiere. There were hundreds of tweets by Asian users<sup>4</sup> that described crying in similar ways to these long-form articles, noting the moments that caused tears to flow and thoughts about what caused this reaction. But a particular response that is common within the platform of Twitter is to accompany brief statements with a gif or image that serve “to creatively and playfully convey gesture—they substitute the embodiment of the speaker” (Kuo, 2019). Because of this, such posts can help to supplement textual commentary with emotional imagery that can further complicate our understanding of Asian American audiences and their experience of watching the movie—and in particular, can help to expand upon the discussion about crying and emotional excess.

Amongst the corpus of images that conveyed emotional responses to the film, there were many different possibilities. Many included popular gifs of celebrities bawling, such as Anne Hathaway, Donald Glover, Steve Colbert, Andy Samberg, Oprah, Britney Spears, Emma Stone, Rashida Jones, Jenna Fischer and Michael Scott from in *The Office*, Anthony Anderson from *black-ish*, David Cross from *Arrested Development*, and animated figures like Peter Griffin from *Family Guy*, Pikachu from *Pokemon*, and Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. Of the celebrity gifs, the only Asian figures were Sandra Oh playing the role of Cristina Yang on *Grey's Anatomy*, and gifs of actors from *Crazy Rich Asians*. There were also some non-celebrity gifs, many of which contained African American faces, as well as images that Asian American theatergoers took of their own faces after seeing the movie. The array of theater selfies displayed faces with tears dripping down their cheeks, smudged makeup, swollen eyes, red skin, or smiling through their tears.

These images help us to consider the place of Asian American emotions in relation to other racialized emotions more broadly—in particular, in relation to Black emotion.

Lauren Michelle Jackson (2017) argues that Black celebrities, reality stars, athletes, and anonymous faces dominate gif culture, using the term “digital blackface” to describe the extremely common practice of non-Black people using Black reaction gifs to stand in for their own reactions. She connects this phenomenon to insidious beliefs associating Blackness with emotional excess, the history of Black faces and bodies being called upon to entertain white audiences, and the desire of white people to try on Black identities and mannerisms. We can see that is happening among Asian audiences too; that in moments of emotional excess they turn to Black gifs and digital blackface as an emotional outlet.

But these images also must generally be understood within the context of Asian American media representation, as gifs are themselves a form of representation. If we are lacking in Asian American media representation, the corpus of available gifs will similarly provide limited Asian American options. The white gifs mentioned include beloved sitcom moments, cartoons, talk show hosts, comedians, awards recipients, pop stars, animated Disney characters, and movie stars—all of the areas in which Asian Americans remain distinctly absent. Sandra Oh is one of the few Asian American actors who has had the opportunity to play rich, emotionally resonant roles that might end up in the pantheon of gifs, making her face one of the few that can be used in this manner. It makes sense that Asian Americans have then chosen to communicate their emotional response to the movie by simply documenting their own faces. A teary selfie may not have the same comedic cache as a familiar celebrity gif, but Asian American audiences still crave the opportunity to document and share their emotional responses—and in the absence of more fitting options, they will decisively insert themselves into the frame.

As we have seen here, Asian American tears indicate far more than merely feelings of sadness or romance; these tears reflect a wide diversity of responses within Asian American audiences in relation to the personal and political histories that this single film evoked. When Nancy Yuen Wang (2016) wrote about how a casting director called Asian American actors a “challenge to cast” because “they’re not very expressive,” Asian American author Maureen Goo started the hashtag campaign #ExpressiveAsians. Dozens of Asian Twitter users started posting images of Asian American faces in response, collectively working to challenge the assumptions this obviously racist industry lore (Krishna, 2017). As Asian Americans took photos of their own teary faces after viewing *Crazy Rich Asians* and proudly posted them, they continued to participate in this project of claiming a place for Asian Americans within the affective economy of Twitter and its gif culture by resisting its formerly exclusionary logics.

## Conclusion

This study has reflected on some of the dominant ways that Asian Americans have asserted their responses to *Crazy Rich Asians*—as well as the difficulty in drawing clear-cut boundaries around that identity group. We must also consider the wide range of responses to the movie that were not discussed, including anger, laughter, annoyance, boredom, disinterest, and countless others. These responses were made visible through these same platforms of journalistic reportage, tweets, and other forms of digital media. As Rebecca Wanzo (2015) reminds us, the tradition of antiracist media critique must be recognized as an important component of the way that people

of color engage with media, as Black audiences have needed to be diligent and attentive consumers to even those texts that are problematic, stereotypical, or injurious. This can lead to expressions of frustration and criticism, as well as ambivalent feelings of loving and hating something at the same time.

This has been true for *Crazy Rich Asians*—amidst the promotion and celebration and tear-filled love, there was also substantial criticism from Asian audiences. Some of the criticisms have included: that it perpetuates the stereotype of the model minority; that dark-skinned Southeast Asians are minimized or relegated to service positions; that actress Awkwafina deploys an appropriative African American vocal performance; and generally that it presents a one-dimensional and exoticizing portrait of Singapore and its culture. The movie left some Asian American viewers cold, feeling nothing, and they expressed frustration that there were so many other more important Asian American texts and social issues that we should be talking about instead. The outpouring of these kinds of responses affirms the frustration that many Asian Americans felt at being expected to love the film, as if all Asian Americans were supposed to have a unified response of joyous support simply at the prospect of seeing Asian faces represented. Of course it is the case that no single film could ever connect with all of the individuals encompassed within the extremely diverse category of Asian America, and this film provided an ideal moment for pointing to this reality.

Each of these different kinds of responses builds upon one another to create a network of meaning within the larger context of Asian American marginalization and underrepresentation. That is, Facebook posts about hating the film must be understood in relation to the outpouring of teary celebration, and the outpouring of teary celebrations must be understood in relation to the political framework of must-see Asianness that was created by activists, and of course the activism of buying out theaters must be understood in relation to the professional mission of Asian American advertising agencies. Moreover, in considering the expectations of genre and the cultural norms of each platform or medium, we can see how Asian American audiences are seizing upon this opportunity for excess and spillage beyond these norms, and resistance to these expectations. It is my hope that this outpouring of discourse continues to provide opportunities for further analysis of other Asian American responses to media—both the kinds of products that fall into the category of Asian American media, and far beyond. Through all of these different outlets we can see that Asian Americans are seeing, feeling, and speaking, and this is a productive moment for listening and reflecting on the conversation that is emerging.

## Notes

1. *Dr. Ken* and *Quantico* premiered in 2015 in the same season as *Fresh Off the Boat*.
2. For work on Black audiences, see: hooks (1992), Bobo (1995), Diawara (1993), Jhally and Lewis (1992), Squires (2002), Coleman (1998), Haggins (1999), and Smith-Shonade (2012). For work on Black fans, see: Warner (2015), Chatman (2017), Wanzo (2015), Martin (2019). Research on Latinx audiences includes: Baez (2018), Amaya (2008), Goin (2017), Rivero (2003), and Rojas (2004).
3. For examples of these, see reporting by the following Asian-identified journalists and writers: Ahmad Coe, Jiayang Fang, Stephanie Foo, Angie Han, Vivian Huynh, Janaki Jitchotvisut, R. O. Kwon, Ying-Ju Lai, Clif Lee, Jane Mo, Steven Nguyen Scaife, and Jeff Yang; as

well as Anisa Purbasari Horton, Pavithra Mohan, and Cia Bernales; and Lenika Cruz, Emily Jan, Ashley Fetters, and Rosa Inocencio Smith.

4. The tweets analyzed here are authored by users who can likely be understood as Asian through their name, image, and/or direct discussion of their Asian identity. But I also acknowledge that there is no way to definitively ascertain racial affiliation outside of directly asking users, and further that it is dangerous to make assumptions about anyone's racial identity. For that reason, discussions of tweets merely point to larger observable trends that emerged from the experience of reading hundreds of tweets about the film.

## Notes on contributor

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