

1

INTRODUCTION

Why Asian American Media Matters

Lori Kido Lopez and Vincent N. Pham

2015 marked a banner year for Asian Americans in the media. In early 2015, ABC premiered *Fresh Off the Boat*—the first Asian American sitcom since the legendary failure of Margaret Cho’s *All American Girl* in 1994. The adaptation of celebrity chef Eddie Huang’s memoir was met with excitement from both audiences and critics, and was eventually renewed for additional seasons. In late 2015, ABC did the unthinkable and released a second Asian American sitcom. *Dr Ken* starred Ken Jeong of *The Hangover* fame, and was loosely based on Jeong’s life as a doctor. Along with the prominence of Asian American actors like Aziz Ansari, John Cho, Mindy Kaling, Kal Penn, Ming-Na Wen, Sandra Oh, and many others, it seemed that Asian Americans had finally arrived, particularly within the television landscape.

Yet there was barely time to celebrate these victories before Asian Americans were cut back down to size. At the 2016 Academy Awards, comedian Chris Rock slammed Asian Americans in a distasteful joke featuring three Asian child actors. Rock described the kids as accountants from the firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, stating: “They sent us their most dedicated, accurate, and hard-working representatives. Please welcome Ming Zhu, Bao Ling, and David Moskowitz. If anybody’s upset about that joke, just tweet about it on your phone that was also made by these kids.” The anti-Asian sentiment felt particularly out of place at an event where Hollywood’s racism problem was already on full display. Prior to the event, the Academy had been roundly condemned for failing to nominate people of color in the acting categories. On social media, commenters used the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, originally created by writer April Reign, to call attention to the obvious inequalities. While the ceremony was flooded with Black presenters and Rock addressed the controversy in multiple jokes, it was clear that race was only understood as a Black/White issue. As usual, Asian Americans were left out of the picture.

Although the recent visibility of Asian American concerns with regard to media issues seems novel, it most certainly is not new. For the last 50 years, Asian American artists and storytellers have utilized moving images to share their cultures, histories, and traditions both inside and outside their own communities. Their continued passion for doing so reminds us why Asian American media matters—it gives Asian Americans the ability to document and create representations of themselves, and in doing so, sustain community identities and develop a sense of belonging in the United States, where over 19 million Asian Americans continue to

struggle against racism and cultural exclusion. In the last decade we have begun to see shifts in the symbolic landscape, as a growing number of Asian Americans are being featured as actors, writers, and directors for television and film. From becoming bona fide Hollywood blockbuster directors like Justin Lin (the *Fast and Furious* franchise) and Jennifer Yuh Nelson (*Kung Fu Panda*) to dominating the YouTube scene, Asian Americans have become more prominent in mainstream and niche media and across various media platforms. But this move toward the mainstream does not even begin to describe the complicated pathways that Asian American scholars are now charting as they investigate the meaning behind these shifts. What do Asian Americans bring to mainstream media that reshapes public culture and ideas of race? How does Asian American participation in online and digital media shift notions of media representation? How can we revisit a history of Asian American media in ways that reinvigorate our understanding of the present and future?

Past explorations have yielded a small but important body of work that laid the foundation for understanding Asian American media. An edited anthology called *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts* (Leong 1992) was one of the first collections to explore some of these themes, mixing essays from academics, artists, and filmmakers in their exploration of the early days of Asian American cinema. *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism* (Hamamoto and Liu 2000) and *Screening Asian Americans* (2002) discuss early Asian American film and video with essays on the specific films that shaped the direction of the field in its infancy, while *Identities in Motion* (2002) by Peter X Feng focuses on Asian American filmmakers and their representations of Asian American identity. These seminal texts have been integral in charting the development of Asian American cinema and the contours of its representations. Yet, the category of “Asian American media” expands far beyond film, including a wide range of media, such as television, music, advertising, and mobile and digital media. There is also a need to examine the complex media industries and institutions in which Asian Americans are now playing a key role.

Some of these issues have been taken up within Kent Ono and Vincent Pham’s *Asian Americans in the Media* (2009) and two edited collections: *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture* (2005) and the follow-up *Global Asian American Popular Cultures* (2016), co-edited by Shilpa Davé, Leilani Nishime, and Tasha Oren. Yet the landscape of Asian America is always changing beneath us, and there is an urgent need for producing original scholarship that examines Asian American media issues specifically from a media studies or communication perspective, shedding the constraints of literary theory or sociology that have long provided interdisciplinary lenses of analysis in the field. In this collection we have assembled a wide diversity of scholars who approach the study of Asian American media on its own terms, rigorously historicizing their work from the scholarship that has come before while charting new pathways and innovative approaches. Although we recognize that we cannot possibly explore all the aspects of Asian American media, this book attempts to probe the breadth and depth of its contours—examining both historical and contemporary texts, considering all facets of media production and consumption, and including the often marginalized voices of queer, mixed race, transnational, and diasporic Asian Americans.

Postracial Media Environments, Industries, and the Relocation of Asian America

In posing a response to the contemporary challenges of Asian American media in an evolving mediasphere, a number of common themes began to organically emerge across the

contributions from our authors. First, scholars must contend with the “postracial” context that has come to influence so many conversations about racialized communities, identities, and cultural products. It has become widely accepted that race is a social construction, constituting an insoluble way of living and being in the world. Yet, the postracial context assumes that race is no longer an issue and that treating it as such serves to divide and constrain U.S. society. As a result, media and media makers have responded accordingly to survive in a postracial (and capitalist) media environment by choosing to remain silent on racial issues, avoiding explicit assertions of racial identification, or to highlight race only in terms of ethnic flavor and difference. Across the different chapters in this collection, postraciality emerges as an unavoidable aspect of contemporary life that scholars must account for in understanding how Asian American media attends to this new environment. Responses to postraciality are seen taking place through sounds, accents, coded ways of dealing with identity, commercialization, and more. Yet the evidence of postraciality and the ways Asian American media reify or oppose it remains a challenge to Asian American media going forth.

As the postracial context becomes the norm, another recurring theme for Asian American media scholars is a grappling with contemporary relationships to media industries—including negotiating relations between mainstream and independent, “new” and “old” media forms, and physical versus online spaces. Foundational scholarship on Asian American media often focused within the confines of a single setting—most commonly, film or television. Yet such boundaries and borders have become increasingly porous in response to media convergence, with media makers, organizers, and consumers easily traversing different media platforms in search of content. Asian American media no longer operates as an independent silo or community-driven endeavor, but now additionally helps provide exposure and training for those who are involved. Asian American film festivals utilize digital and social media tools to connect with new audiences or to drive conversations, while online producers call attention to independent films and mainstream media. These complex engagements enrich the scope and impacts of media representations through their interactive and participatory modes, and demand sensitivity in accounting for their possibilities and limitations.

Finally, as we consider the question of why Asian American media matters, we posit relocation as an important theme that reminds us to continually ask where Asian America resides. The concept of relocation operates both physically and metaphorically, particularly in examining relocations via transnational and diasporic flows of bodies, ideas, and technologies. Whether it is through ethnic media, documentary film, or mobile platforms, Asian American media’s purview of the local is no longer confined to the United States, but instead shifts in relation to the locations of its users and their interconnected networks. In the chapters that follow, we can begin to relocate the margins and move participating voices to the center in efforts to show the possibilities for Asian American media in moving forward. Overlooked forms of media and previously unheard stories can then come to the forefront and blaze new paths for the study of Asian American media.

Outline of Chapters

This book is organized into five parts, although there is significant thematic overlap between and among them. The first section, “Theorizing Representation: Visions and Voices of Asian America,” contains chapters that lay a theoretical groundwork for the analysis of Asian Americans and media. They ask: how has Asian American media been studied in the past, and what kind of research has been missing? What belongs to the category of “Asian American media,” and more importantly, what is its social and political significance? The collection

opens with two pieces exploring the important role of sound, which is often overlooked in favor of focusing on visuality and representation in Asian American media. Ming-Yuen S. Ma takes us back to the early days of Asian American cinema and examines the relationship between mediated sound and the much-heralded creation of an “Asian American voice.” Ma asks whose voices are audible and whose are silenced in early Asian American independent films, positing the power of what he calls the “negative voice” to more accurately represent the struggles and experiences of Asian American communities. Grace Wang continues this investigation of sound in “Diasporic Soundscapes of Belonging: Mediating Chineseness with Shanghai Restoration Project.” Her analysis moves into our current era, where she argues that one way of addressing questions about Asian America and its global relationship to Asia is through music. She particularly focuses on David Liang’s Shanghai Restoration Project, whose blending of Chinese traditional instruments and electronic hip-hop beats creates a sonic landscape that reflects the transnational sensibilities and search for belonging that are familiar to many Asian Americans today.

These questions about what constitutes fluid and shifting categories such as “Asian American music” are also at the heart of Jun Okada’s chapter, which examines who belongs to the category of the “Asian American artist.” In her exploration of the biracial artist and filmmaker Laurel Nakadate, Okada asks if it is possible for an Asian American to disavow race when collective identification has so long defined Asian American politics. Her examination of the way that Nakadate’s media works express feelings of loneliness and alienation helps to explode these categories and make room for a new and politically productive form of postraciality. While the categories of Asian American music, sound, and art are shifting, so is the role of Asian American media organizations that attempt to coordinate these media. In Vincent N. Pham’s chapter, he returns to the Center for Asian American Media, one of the oldest and most recognizable Asian American media organizations in the nation, and examines the discourse at its Present/Future Summit event, which sought to assess the state of Asian American media. His analysis of the public discussion reveals the particular anxieties and concerns of Asian American media makers and organizations as they deal with the paradigm-shifting presence of digital media, examining both its complications and potential for creating a financially stable yet apolitical system of storytelling.

Many scholars who are interested in the field of Asian American media studies are also drawn to the artistic and professional media world, where their hands-on participation as practitioners can result in a very different kind of intervention than in traditional academia. Ma, Okada, and Pham remind us in their chapters that Asian American media has always been a deeply political practice, premised on the ability of media to promote social justice and impact communities on the ground. As such, it is not uncommon to see Asian American media studies professors and graduate students taking up parallel careers as directors of film festivals, filmmakers, or media arts organizers. We are excited to highlight the writing and unique perspectives of four “scholar-practitioners” in this collection. Their insights are grounded in a productive blend of academic literature and personal experience, as each has spent significant time immersed in the world of Asian American filmmaking and film festivals. Brian Hu is the artistic director of Pacific Arts Movement and the presenter of the San Diego Asian Film Festival, while Vanessa Au is the director of the Seattle Asian American Film Festival. Both are interested in the evolution of the Asian American film festival from its earliest iterations to today. Hu examines the contentious rise of the feature film and the way that Asian American film festivals have both celebrated and maligned this particular form. While some believe that the feature film represents mainstream acceptance and financial viability, others see it as capitulating to market forces that negate the political impact of alternative

media. Au similarly recognizes the difficulties of programming Asian American content in an increasingly diversified media landscape and worries about the continued relevance of Asian American film festivals. Yet in drawing on her own experiences, she is able to put forward a powerful set of strategies for adapting to the digital environment so that Asian American film festivals can continue to survive and thrive.

Elaine H. Kim and Valerie Soe both explore what they believe must be recognized as important contributions to the Asian American film canon—Kim examines feature films made by women directors, while Soe examines contemporary documentary films and their political messages. Kim is the co-founder of Asian Women United of California and director of documentaries such as *Slaying the Dragon: Asian Women in U.S. Television and Film* (1988) and *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded* (2010). Her chapter calls attention to the works of Asian American female filmmakers, assessing films by Bertha Bay-Sa Pan, Alice Wu, and Jennifer Phang. Her analysis is based on interpretations of the way that their films deal with issues of race, gender, and culture, alongside observations based on her own conversations with the filmmakers themselves. Soe is an award-winning experimental videomaker whose productions include *The Chinese Gardens*, *The Oak Park Story*, “*All Orientals Look The Same*,” *Mixed Blood*, *Picturing Oriental Girls: A (Re) Educational Videotape*, and many others. Her examination of recent documentary films reminds us that there are still important nonfiction stories being told about Asian Americans today, but points out that their focus has shifted from examining community struggles to focusing on the rise of individual Asian American celebrities.

The borders of what constitutes “Asian America” itself are always in need of revising. In our third section, “Hybrid Asian Americans: Media at the Margins,” four authors examine populations whose experiences are often marginalized or even negated: queer, transracially adopted, and mixed race Asian Americans. Eve Oishi looks at the doubly marginalized category of queer experimental Asian American film, a category that she argues needs new methodological approaches in order to make sense of its development. Kimberly D. McKee’s exploration of documentaries made by Korean adoptees reminds us that when we open our lens to include such perspectives, the works that emerge have the potential to shatter previous discourses and mythologies about adoption. The adoptee-authored documentaries *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010) and *Resilience* (2009) recast adoption and family reunification as lifelong processes that impact birth families, not just adoptees and the families who “save” them.

Leilani Nishime and Myra Washington both examine mediated representations of mixed race Asian Americans—a population that has long been thrust into the spotlight as an object of visual fixation. Nishime analyzes the ideologies espoused within the supposedly celebratory *Mixed Blood* photographic exhibition and compares it to a collaborative digital project called *We Are the 15%*. She argues that the genre of the family portrait offers a productive lens for interrogating the relationship between mixed race families and narratives of nation, globalization, and the idealized national family. Washington similarly asks about the way that global racial politics intersect with the bodies of mixed race individuals in her analysis of Blasian performers on reality television. Her analysis of *The Voice* performers Tessanne Chin and Judith Hill broadens the analysis of Asian American identities beyond serving to disrupt the Black/White binary; mixed race Black and Asian individuals stem from a long history of global relations and are interpreted in multiple ways by viewers and themselves. As a result, Washington sees representations of Blasians as a productive site for challenging essentialist notions of identity and racial paradigms altogether.

As Nishime’s work reminds us, the digital landscape itself deserves examination for its unique affordances as an interactive, participatory way for Asian Americans to directly engage with media. Chapters from the fourth section, “Asian American New Media: Digital Artifacts,

Networks, and Lives,” focus specifically on Asian American engagements with new media technologies and the possibilities that they open up. Lori Kido Lopez sets the stage by pointing to the highly visible successes of Asian Americans on YouTube, where a small set of vloggers have dominated for so long that digitally native youth are growing up in a world where Asian American representations have always been accessible. She asks how “the next generation” of Asian American YouTubers are now building from these successes by opening up spaces for ethnically specific forms of discourse that heavily rely upon the communicative properties of memes. L. S. Kim builds on the strengths of Asian Americans in the online arena to ask how we can use digital media to intervene in larger conversations about race and representation, like those that have long centered around Asian Americans on television. She posits her theorization of the “matrix stage” as one possibility, arguing that the space between the margin and the mainstream and its interrelated elements is where Asian Americans are gaining power. Her example of the interplay between television’s *Fresh Off the Boat* and YouTube’s *Fresh Off the Show* demonstrates the way that Asian Americans are using multiple forms of media and multiple forms of participation to voice their demands. In her chapter “Reflections on #Solidarity: Intersectional Movements in AAPI Communities,” Rachel Kuo moves beyond entertainment media to explore the political potential for Asian American activists who are using online media. She is able to historicize recent hashtag campaigns by comparing their rhetoric to the arguments deployed by Asian American activists in the 1970s and 1980s, including Asian Women United (AWU), the Asian American Legal Defense Fund, and Asian Cinevision. Her deep dive into these archival materials reminds us that digital discourses may open new possibilities for participation, but that the fight for intersectional solidarity is both longstanding and ongoing.

The interactivity and potential for engagement via new media technologies are intensified in Takeo Rivera’s exploration of the video game *World of Warcraft*—the world’s highest-grossing video game, played by millions of people every day. While there are countless video games that problematically rely upon negative stereotypes and characterizations of racial minorities, Rivera is interested in what it means when *World of Warcraft* adds an expansion with a distinctly Oriental twist—it takes place on “Pandaria” and is inhabited by panda people. He analyzes its gameplay through the Foucauldian lens of biopower, asking how its racial logics are connected to the need to control populations, and what it means to “play” with racial identification in this way.

In the final section, scholars work to relocate and expand the borders of “Asian America” in their examinations of diasporic and transnational communities. The history of Asian American community formations has long had a troubled relationship with the global. While there have been many attempts to emphasize national citizenship and belonging in the United States, the reality is that many who identify as Asian American are immigrants themselves, possess dual citizenship, or otherwise maintain vital pathways between Asia and the United States. These chapters examine the role that media play in reifying the complicated connections between Asia and the United States, examining film, television, print magazines, websites, and mobile phone technologies. It opens with Tony Tran’s investigation of two films made in the Vietnamese diaspora, *Owl and the Sparrow* [*Cú và Chim Se Sẻ*] and *The Rebel* [*Dòng Máu Anh Hùng*]. He conducts two different readings of the films with regard to themes of family, considering the potentially different audiences in Vietnam and the United States. In doing so, he points to the consequences of hybridity in shaping reception, particularly for films that are transnational in both production and distribution. David C. Oh looks at the now-defunct magazine *KoreAm Journal* and its website as an example of media targeted to a second-generation diasporic audience. Like Tran, he sees hybridity as a key analytic framework for making sense of the way that the transnational

INTRODUCTION

diasporas are addressed and constituted. Oh puts forward a hybrid diasporic approach as a way of making sense of the complex dynamics of ethnicity, race, nation, and cultural identities that shape discourses in ethnic media outlets such as *KoreAm Journal*.

Shilpa Davé specifically focuses on the issue of accent in negotiating diasporic identities, assessing the depiction of call center workers on NBC's 2010–2011 series *Outsourced*. Like Ma's and Wang's chapters early in the collection, Davé emphasizes aural analysis over the visual mode that often dominates in media studies. She finds that even in a show set in India, the Indian accent is still homogenized and marked as less desirable. Yet, the show also uses its nuanced, multiple characterizations to challenge these hierarchies and the way that they uphold the dominance of the United States and its cultural values. In the final chapter, Cecilia S. Uy-Tioco moves beyond the way that Asian Americans are represented by media producers to examine the polymedia environment in which professional, "elite" Filipino immigrants exist. She asks what communication platforms are used and why, looking in particular at the social media sites, digital apps, and Voice over Internet Protocols that facilitate connections between transnational Filipino families. Beyond considering the impact of emotion on which technologies are used to communicate with loved ones, she also considers the role that communication technologies play in facilitating emotional relationships and connections to the homeland for those who live overseas. This kind of scholarship reminds us that media provide a vessel not only for sounds and images, but also for the production and maintenance of emotions, identities, political affiliations, cultures and values, and so much more. In centering scholarly inquiries on Asian Americans and their specific relationships to media, this collection more broadly serves to widen our understanding of how the ever-changing media landscape continues to impact the lives of Asian American communities.

References

- Davé, Shilpa, Leilani Nishime, and Tasha Oren (eds). 2005. *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*. New York: NYU Press.
- Davé, Shilpa, Leilani Nishime, and Tasha Oren (eds). 2016. *Global Asian American Popular Cultures*. New York: NYU Press.
- Feng, Peter X. (ed). 2002. *Screening Asian Americans*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Feng, Peter X. 2002. *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hamamoto, Darrell Y. and Sandra Liu (eds). 2000. *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Leong, Russell. 1991. *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, Southern California Asian American Studies Central.
- Ono, Kent A. and Vincent N. Pham. 2009. *Asian Americans and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.