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Performing Universality in an Asian American Sitcom: An Exploration of “Fresh Off the Boat”

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Abstract

Annie Nguyen started her undergraduate research to meet a requirement of the Campuswide Honors Program. She found a topic about which she was truly curious and approached Professor Wu about conducting a project under her guidance. Through her research, Annie found an intersection between academic analysis and popular media and was able to apply that to a subject relevant in current popular culture. This experience gave her the opportunity to approach a topic that relates to her personal experiences and explore it in a professional way. While at UC Irvine, Annie participated in student government and held an internship at the Public Defender’s office. After graduation, she hopes to attend law school.

Having celebrated its fifth season in 2019, “Fresh Off the Boat” is the first American television series featuring a predominantly Asian cast to have achieved such longstanding success. Through an exploration of genre and humor, I study how “Fresh Off the Boat” works to represent an Asian American family on the small screen. In a study of the series’ journey to production, I identify how “Fresh Off the Boat” relies heavily on the racial makeup of its audience. I argue that this consideration influences the type of Asian American narrative represented. The narrative thus becomes one which capitalizes on the experience of outsidership as humorous. At the same time, the series claims outsidership as an utterly American (and universal) sentiment. This perpetual outsidership the characters of “Fresh Off the Boat” experience is how the series humanizes and makes relatable its Asian American subjects to a predominantly non-Asian audience. In close readings of particular scenes and characters from the series, I analyze how this outsider syndrome is a limited representation of the Asian American experience and identity. Through an analysis of the series’ origin and then the series itself, I argue that “Fresh Off the Boat” attempts to reposition Asian Americans to fit into mainstream television through the genre of the sitcom and the role of humor.

Faculty Mentor



It was a pleasure to mentor Annie Nguyen, whose essay offers a rich analysis about racial humor in the successful Asian American sitcom “Fresh Off the Boat.” Like all works of knowledge creation, Annie worked to understand what she wanted to research and argue. It can be a confusing process that raises doubts about oneself and one’s project. I am proud of Annie for persevering to discover her voice and analysis. Like Annie, I too completed an undergraduate thesis, and I, too, struggled to figure out what I wanted to say. I think this process is so important for transforming into a knowledge creator. I hope all UCI students will undertake research to discover aspects of their own capabilities and to help us understand the world around us in new ways.

Key Terms

- ♦ Asian American
- ♦ Asian American Representation
- ♦ Eddie Huang
- ♦ Fresh Off the Boat
- ♦ Humor
- ♦ Sitcom
- ♦ Situational Comedy
- ♦ Television Series

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Introduction

“Fresh Off the Boat” is a celebrated television series that undeniably represents an aspect of some Asian American experiences.¹ Despite Asian Americans’ long presence in America, the mere production of the 2015 series is a monumental development in the representation of Asian Americans on screen and in their own right. “Fresh Off the Boat” is the longest-running television series claiming to represent Asians in America. So, I chose to explore why “Fresh Off the Boat” achieved the mainstream television success it did and study how this successful series represents Asian American stories. I mostly wanted to explore the question: Why was “Fresh Off the Boat” funny? During this investigation, I also considered how much genre informs what the audience is able to witness of an Asian American experience and whether the series, as an adapted story from a memoir, affects its storytelling? Given the unparalleled success of this series, I wanted to uncover the structures that allow Asian Americans to be represented and widely accepted and how that affects the types of Asian American stories told on the small screen.

“Fresh Off the Boat” is an American sitcom television series loosely inspired by the memoir of celebrity chef, Eddie Huang, titled *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir*. Set in suburban Orlando, Florida, during the 1990s, “Fresh Off the Boat” centers on the life of Eddie Huang and his Taiwanese American family. Episodes circulate between the struggles of Eddie assimilating and encountering racism at school; Eddie’s father, Louis, managing his position as owner of a steakhouse restaurant; Eddie’s mother, Jessica, navigating day-to-day life as a suburban housewife; as well as the endeavors of cultural assimilation of other family members, including Eddie’s two brothers and paternal grandmother. In trailers and promotions, “Fresh Off the Boat” presents the Huang family as “the new kid in school” or “the new family on the block” trying to make compatible the American Dream and their identity.

In the first part of my thesis, I explore how the genre of the situational comedy (sitcom) provides a space for Asian American narratives to play out in “Fresh Off the Boat.” Despite its inception as an adaptation of Eddie Huang’s memoir, “Fresh Off the Boat” rewrites Eddie Huang’s lived experiences into a sanitized narrative to suit the genre and

audience of a family sitcom. I argue that the series negotiates its Asian Americanness to adapt to sitcom conventions, because “Fresh Off the Boat” is fighting to be accepted by the mainstream market at the expense of portraying the full truth of Huang’s memoir. The commodified narrative that “Fresh Off the Boat” becomes is a reflection of its viewership demographic. Consisting of predominantly white viewers, the series caters its storytelling to the white, or universal, audience. I also detail how the series’ creators and industry conflate a universal audience to mean a white or predominantly white audience. The series uses racialized humor to humanize its Asian subjects to a predominantly non-Asian audience. The placement of an Asian American cast where an all-white cast would be positions the Asian American narrative within mainstream television. Sometimes clunky, as assimilation and hyphenated identity experiences tend to be, the series makes a case for Asian Americans belonging in the broader American life, because like all Americans and the audience, the Huang family has experienced being outsiders.

In the second part of my thesis, I shift to analyze the role of humor of characters who tell the Asian American narrative in “Fresh Off the Boat.” I question why these three characters are funny and discover how the series grapples with its Asian American identity through the humorous exploration of bicultural characters. Louis wholeheartedly believes in white American mythology like cowboys and the Wild West, yet he cannot replicate white Americanness correctly. Jessica attempts to preserve her immigrant Asian culture, which is not completely compatible with her suburban life. Eddie adopts Black music and culture, despite his Asian background, as a form of accepting his outsiderhood. Focusing on the humor of each character’s experiences, I use key scenes from the series to exemplify the ways in which the humor supports the characterization of Asians as outsiders. With an emphasis on how the jokes of each scene interact with the characters’ outsiderhood in their bicultural identities, I detail how such historical and cultural shorthand neglects some marginalized histories of Asian American narratives. Analyzing the series’ genre and the humor, I argue that “Fresh Off the Boat” presents a shallow depiction of Asian American experiences.

Origin Story

Race in the Genre of the Situational Comedy

Sitcoms are a staple of American television. Their popularity arose in the 1950s, with a particular focus on white suburban families. During this era, David Marc (1998) suggests in his book *Comic Visions: Television comedy and*

1. I use the term Asian American to describe an identity group of immigrants and their descendants who arrived to the United States from the continent of Asia. The term refers to a vast and diverse population of individuals, including Chinese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Indian, Korean, and many other ethnic identities.

American culture that “television—especially the sitcom—valorized suburbia as democracy’s utopia realized” (42). Originating during the widespread suburbanization of the country in the 1950s and 1960s, the sitcom became a vehicle to disseminate the narrative of the American Dream, the white picket fence, and the nuclear family. Because of its history emphasizing the social mainstream, the sitcom has historically been a site of social indoctrination. People of color, however, who do not visibly fit into the picture of the suburb, which historically excluded non-white people, or the American Dream, which had limited applicability for those who face structural oppression, and their presence in the sitcom has a more complicated history. While I am primarily interested in the influence of genre conventions on “Fresh Off the Boat’s” Asian American story, my argument requires understanding the history of Asians on television to inform the present-day socio-cultural context of the genre.

Asian Americans first saw their presence manifest on the small screen in Anna May Wong, when she starred in the silent series “The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong” (1951). The series was canceled after one season, setting a precedent for Asian American sitcoms to come. The next notable presence of an Asian American presented on screen came 25 years later, in the 1976 family sitcom, “Mr. T. and Tina.” The series centers on the Takahasi family as they relocate from Tokyo to Chicago. Although the series lead, played by Pat Morita would come to be famous through his portrayal of Mr. Miyagi on *The Karate Kid* (1984), this show too was canceled after one season. Later, Morita had other television ventures and other Asian American stars attempted their hand at television, but “Mr. T and Tina” (1976) was the only sitcom with an Asian American family until “All-American Girl” (1995) depicted a Korean American family 19 years later. The protagonist, played by famed comedian Margaret Cho received unfavorable reviews from Asian and non-Asian critics, resulting in its cancellation after its first season. Thus, the production and ensuing success of “Fresh Off the Boat” (2015) is groundbreaking, considering the failed history of Asian American sitcoms.

As of 2019, “Fresh Off the Boat” is in its fifth season, four seasons longer than either of the earlier Asian family sitcom. On April 5, 2019, “Fresh Off the Boat” celebrated its 100th episode—a traditional hallmark celebration of television series. Randall Park, who plays the father Louis Huang on the series recalls that his expectations were low for the pilot of “Fresh Off the Boat,” “especially considering the fact that it was an Asian American family on TV and at the time, there was nothing like that” (Huang, 2019, para.

2). After 70 years of the popularization of the sitcom, the wide acceptance of an Asian family on television remained unfathomable. Despite the history of repeated failure, “Fresh Off the Boat” surpassed conventional measures of television success in unexpected ways.

Yet the restrictive and family-friendly nature of the sitcom sterilized Huang’s story to the point of being unrecognizable. For Huang, the series is analogous to orange chicken—not at all a Chinese dish, but an American version of Chinese cuisine. As a chef, famous for his bun shop BaoHaus, Huang is particular about interpretations of Chinese culture. His memoir was praised as “Brash...outrageous, courageous, moving, ironic and true” by the *New York Times* Book Review and fittingly, Huang’s memoir is a bold take on his racialized experiences (Huang, 2015). He spared no detail about his father’s physical abuse and is bluntly explicit about the difficulties of his journey. But the series disappoints Huang (2015, January 04) as a portrayal of his lived Asian American story. He considers that the network television show “puts orange chicken on TV for 22 minutes a week instead of Salisbury steak...and [he’ll] eat it; [he’ll] even thank them for it, because if you’re high enough, orange chicken ain’t so bad” (para. 92). Huang’s statements encapsulate the slow progress of racial representation. While Asian Americans are visibly present on America’s television screens now, is “Fresh Off the Boat a made-for-Americans dish?

The Influence of Sitcom Viewership

While I refer to the universality of the series to include non-Asian audiences, whiteness is considered the universal and cultural norm, considering that white viewers represent an overwhelming population of the “Fresh Off the Boat” and general television audience. A report by the Nielsen Research group shows that the majority of “Fresh Off the Boat’s” viewers are non-Asian, with 59.5% identifying as white (Figure 1). Even Black viewership of “Fresh Off the Boat” outranks Asian American viewership. (Figure 1). Comparably, television viewership has generally followed this pattern. According to a Nielsen report, 75.8% of total viewers were white and the sitcom genre was most proportionately popular in the white and African American demographics (The Nielsen Company, 2011). Jeff Yang, an Asian American media critic, even mentions this statistic in a casual interview with the Youtube personalities, the Fung Bros (Fung & Fung, 2019). These numbers show that while “Fresh Off the Boat” may be praised as an Asian American show, its viewers and thus its messages are not exclusively made for Asian Americans. Only 14.5% of “Fresh Off the Boat” viewers are Asian, which is higher than the national

average of 5.6% (Lopez, Ruiz, & Patten, 2017). But these statistics show 85.5% of the viewership are non-Asian (Figure 1). Racial viewership demographics affect the content of a racialized television series.



Figure 1
Nielsen Research "Fresh Off the Boat" Ratings (2015)

For Iranian American executive producer Nahnatchka Khan, the series is a celebration of outsiders, if only through its racial bodies. In multiple interviews, she emphasizes that her writer's room is filled with "diverse experiences. Whether they're Asian or Indian or gay, hip-hop fans, people with kids, people who felt like an outsider for any reason" (Khan, 2016 as cited in Hill & Villarreal, 2016, para. 15). The series is a collaboration of many different voices, each minimizing the experiences of its source—Eddie Huang. "Fresh Off the Boat" is a story that emphasizes rather than hides its outsidership. Huang (2015, January 04) agrees, stating that "the feeling of being different is universal" and this in itself is reason enough to support the continuation of the show (para. 93). What does universal mean to the series' producers?

After reading Huang's memoir, Nahnatchka Khan immediately had a pitch for a new television show. She recalls:

In the pitch, I remember being like, 'This is the show and the more specific we get the more universal it will be.' An Asian-American kid. In the

mid-90s. With a kid who loves hip-hop. Like you can't get more specific than that. Because of all those levels, you will relate to something in there. At the core of it is being an outsider, and being a first-generation immigrant and where do you [the audience] fit in in that? (Robinson, 2017)

Khan accomplishes this through the vehicle of Eddie Huang's unique coming of age experience. The context of the '90s "was about reinforcing that idea of isolation. You either fit in or you don't" (Nonemaker & Maloney, 2016, para. 17). Yet at a panel event hosted by the Paley Center for Media, Khan was asked by an Asian American audience member how Khan would respond to the audience member's first-generation immigrant mother, who did not find appreciation for "Fresh Off the Boat." Khan responded that the show was not developed for immigrants of that era, but rather for the kids of the '90s. While Asian Americans account for approximately 5% of the American population, first-generation immigrants comprise 25% of the total Asian American population while second generation children represent 12% (Pew Research Center, 2013). What audience is this series created for then, if not the intergenerational Asian American family?

In discussing his journey of adapting the memoir into a network television show, Huang recounts that producer Melvin Mar told him, "White people keep you on the air. They have to feel included. If people understand our perspective, they won't be offended. We gotta hold the viewer's hand through this because they've never been inside an Asian-American home before" (Huang, 2015, January 04, para. 54). "Fresh Off the Boat" is not inverting the sitcom genre, or displacing traditional television in any way, but rather telling stories within the frame. The series makes the point of displaying outsiders, through its Asian American subjects, but ensures that these subjects are relatable to white viewers. "Fresh Off the Boat" exploits the Asian American narrative as a vehicle to display being the outsider. Asians will perpetually exist as the outsider, continuing centuries of stereotypic characterization of Asians as the Yellow Peril: "a vivid metaphor for a flimsy fear that the East Asian race (or Mongoloids) would gradually overwhelm the white American labor force and, moreover, eventually take over America and destroy its Anglo-Saxon civilization" (Chong, 2014).

Race in the Genre of Sitcom

To understand the compromises the series made on Huang's story, we can turn to the genre of sitcom. Genre is a form of teaching and reinforcing particular structures of society. Thus, genre delineates specific expectations of

its subject, shaping the audience it attracts. “Fresh Off the Boat,” as a family sitcom, is expected to attract those it depicts—families. As Peter Feng (2017) argues, the genre of sitcom is used by the mainstream audience as a tool to view the show. Feng’s reference of legibility through the lens of television genres questions whether there is a risk of making Asian American narratives too universal. Accommodating to a white audience through following the generic formula of the sitcom comes at the expense of developing more nuanced conversations about and expressions of racial experiences. Asian American shows “must be racialized (and thus situated firmly within identity politics) without being formally illegible” (Feng, 2017, para. 3). Feng argues that the cost of only depicting Asian Americans in this specific narrative contributes to the “limited range of popular media representations for Asian-Americans” (Feng, 2017, para. 6). Because the series makes such compromises, it “softens racial commentary by locating it in a less enlightened but still familiar time” of the 1990s, thereby making the show accessible to the universal audience member (Feng, 2017, para. 2). In a white suburb of Orlando during the 1990s, “Fresh Off the Boat” carves out spaces that require explaining what being Asian is, since not many in this environment understand it. “Fresh Off the Boat” has the work of explaining itself first and in the process of that, the series universalizes and minimizes the authenticity of the Asian American narrative. Its success comes at the price of being painstakingly universal.

Funny People

Biculturalism in “Fresh Off the Boat”

The beginning of “Fresh Off the Boat” finds the Huang family navigating their relocation to the suburbs of Orlando, which results in a significant cultural shift the family must acclimate and ultimately assimilate to. Their assimilation and cultural encounters provide space for humor. For the characters, and the Asian experiences they each represent, their struggles are real and difficult, but the series puts these intimate challenges on display for the audience to laugh at or, sometimes, with. Each of the characters I examine attempts to find space between a binary of two cultures. Louis, the father of the Huang family, depicts the most expected assimilation story and one that caters to white expectations of the Asian immigrant. Louis adopts to white culture as closely as possible but remains influenced by his Asian background, which often betrays his attempts to maneuver into whiteness. Jessica, the matriarch of the Huang family, is portrayed as perhaps the funniest character but provides more resistance to white assimilation than Louis. She grapples with maintaining as many of her cultural traditions

while simultaneously attempting to be included in white suburbia. The series pokes fun not only at her staunch grip on her Asian practices, but also at her embodiment of white housewifery. Eddie, the eldest son and the self-proclaimed outsider of the Huang family, is an 11-year-old, who develops a taste for hip-hop music and Black culture more broadly during their move from Chinatown D.C. to the suburbs of Orlando. Eddie chooses to be associated with Blackness to accentuate his outsider and misunderstood identity, a controversial choice. Each of these characters chooses to adapt to Orlando, and by extension American identity, in their own ways. I identify how each character is used by the series to create humor out of being an outsider and how this complicates the series’ Asian depiction.

Character Study 1: Louis, All-American Dream

Much of Louis Huang’s identity is intertwined with his business at the Cattleman’s Ranch Steakhouse restaurant. The series uses the restaurant as an image of Louis’ attempt at assimilation into white American society. His relationship with his business is comparable to the history of other Asian owned small businesses in the United States which have been used for economic survival by immigrants in a new country. According to Sociology Lecturer at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, C.N. Le’s (2001) research, Asian Americans, and some European immigrants are the most likely to own their own small business. Le accounts that there are numerous theories as to why. The Labor Market Discrimination theory explains how the choice to own a small business is often the only choice for new immigrants because “the immigrant is not very fluent in English, her educational or occupational credentials from her home country are not recognized by U.S. companies, and simple discrimination by the employer based on race” (Le, 2001, Why Do So Many Asians Own Their Own Businesses? section para. 5). Thus, “Fresh Off the Boat’s” central setting of the restaurant, Cattleman’s Ranch Steakhouse, represents Louis’ attempts of economic assimilation into America and it serves as an analogy for his cultural assimilation.

Unlike the Louis of “Fresh Off the Boat,” the real-life Louis struggled for economic survival and experienced recurring fears about his venture into the restaurant industry (Huang, 2015, p. 31). The Huang family’s move to Orlando was not spawned solely from the pursuit of a dream, as was depicted in the “Pilot” episode. The abrupt relocation was a product of necessity and savvy. Yet the series romanticizes Louis’ desire to open an American West steakhouse. In the “Pilot” episode, Jessica, Louis’ wife states begrudgingly, “This is why we left everything we know to come to a place where we know nothing and the humidity is not good for my hair.

Right, okay and for what? So your father can own a cowboy restaurant” (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). Jessica’s simplification of Louis’ choice erases the real struggle that Huang and other Asian businesspeople experienced in order to survive economically. In this way, “Fresh Off the Boat” contributes to the model minority representation of Louis by focusing only on his entrepreneur dreams as a desire to align with the American Dream rather than including Louis’ honest attempt to survive economically.

Deviating from the Atlantic Bay Seafood mentioned in *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir*, Cattleman’s Ranch Steakhouse plays a different role in “Fresh Off the Boat.” The hyper-Americanization of the restaurant in the series pokes fun at the journey of assimilation for the Asian immigrant, specifically for Louis who is unable to fully assimilate despite his utmost desire to do so. Eddie introduces his father in the “Pilot” episode as having “full-on bought into the American dream.” Consequently, the series aligns with this characterization, consistently depicting Louis as someone overwhelmingly indoctrinated by American mythology, such as his obsession with the western frontier. For his restaurant, Louis notes in the “Pilot” episode explicitly that he “wanted it to be authentic, like the wild west” (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). Louis’ embrace of the American Western aesthetic illustrates his cultural assimilation, but also becomes shorthand for his acceptance of American ideals such as the American Dream and conquest that are associated with the American West. He derives inspiration from these grand imaginations of America, believing America to be like the cowboy movies. During his first visit to the restaurant, Eddie points out a bear statue in the restaurant then questions his father, asking “Are there bears in the wild west?” As an immigrant with limited American cultural exposure, Louis’ knowledge of the Wild West and American culture is likely gleaned from inaccurate popular culture dispersed through films and media. With details such as the misplaced bear, the audience is witness to how Louis attempts to exhibit the American spirit but cannot do so completely, because he is still visibly Asian. He remains on the outskirts of American culture and identity despite his dutiful attempts. His expression of the Wild West is only a shadow of what America truly is, which is part of the humor of Louis’ character.

Character Study 2: Jessica, Model Minority Non-Myth

As the matriarch of the Huang family, Jessica is tasked with the responsibility to maintain cultural practices and raise the family’s three sons. Throughout the series, Jessica struggles with how to best uphold the household, oscillating between her immigrant Asian mothering and her white suburban

housewifery. In the “Pilot” episode, Eddie Huang introduces his family as “an American family, the Huangs” (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). But when he introduces his mother, he says, “Moms was always hard on me, way before all that ‘tiger mom’ stuff” (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). Jessica, at the start of the series, is immediately labeled—the tiger mom. This phrase often refers to the strict, disciplinarian type of parenting Amy Chua identified in her book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). The act of labeling Jessica so early in the series limits her identity to a stereotype. But, the label was poised to explain “Asian” parenting and Jessica’s strictness to a white audience. If labeled as a “tiger mom,” Jessica’s strictness and shocking actions become reasonable to the audience. Yet it is these cultural clashes that create ripe space for the series’ joke-telling.

In the “Pilot” episode, Eddie recruits his mother for a journey to the American supermarkets, but Jessica admits to Eddie, “This is not how I like to shop. This place look like a hospital. I miss the Taiwanese markets back in D.C. They make me feel so calm” (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). The scene of Eddie and Jessica walking through a brightly lit, spacious, and neatly lined American grocery store abruptly shifts to a shot of Jessica holding a variety of fruits in her hand, fending off any prospective bargainers, and shouting amidst a crowd of other Asian people in Chinese. Although bargaining is part of the culture in some ethnic spaces, the series repeatedly points out these differentiations against American norms to tell a joke. This juxtaposition exposes how Jessica is positioned on the outside. She clings to the familiarity of ethnic spaces. The series repeatedly makes a joke of ethnic environments and their crowdedness and noisiness. It fails to deviate from the hidden narrative of Chinatowns as a tool used to perpetuate otherness. According to the article, “Public Health and the Mapping of Chinatown” by Nayan Shah (2010), “The idea of [San Francisco’s] Chinatown as a self-contained and alien society, in turn, justified ‘recurring rounds’ of policing, investigation, and statistical surveys that ‘scientifically’ corroborated the racial classification” (p. 168). This image was pervasive and arose in media findings as well. Shah (2010) recounts that a San Francisco publication, “The Daily Alta had characterized the spaces inhabited by the Chinese as ‘dirty, filthy dens’ where ‘sickly’ Chinese were ‘piled together like pigs in a pen’” (p. 171). Comparatively in the series, the shouting, and crowdedness of Asian spaces contributes to the image of ethnic environments as congested and uncouth, the antithesis of suburbia. “Fresh Off the Boat” forgets this history of Chinese othering through space and only further accentuates the stereotyped expectation of Chinatowns and Chinese people. Why must a series touting its representation

of the Asian experience rely on old and harmful stereotypes to bring truth to its story?

Even when the series attempts to give the audience context for Jessica and invites them to understand her as an insider, this effort is made through a joke. In an episode titled, “Boy II Man,” Eddie builds up the courage to say no to his mother’s insistence that he play the piccolo in order to be more eligible for unclaimed scholarships. Jessica is shocked and angered at his defiance. She recalls to him, “The closest I ever came to defying my mother was when I wanted to pick out my own shoes” (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). The scene then cuts to a black and white shot of young Jessica and her mother next to an open coffin of a child. Her mother then states in Chinese, “That little girl tried to pick out her own shoes, too” (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). This joke is quite ironic, because real-life Jessica Huang’s mother’s feet were bound, and she was incapacitated from it for all of her life (Huang, 2015, p 12). What this scene fails to do is create the context for Jessica’s tiger mom characteristics. Instead, the scene posits that the extreme controlling nature of Asian mothers is implicit to Asian culture. The black and white gradient of the memory connotes Jessica’s experience with her mother as not only a memory but also old and outdated. Her mother’s lesson on absolute obedience during the funeral of a child shows little tact in timing and a detached emotionality to the event at hand. The priority of obedience over emotion plays into the stereotype of Asians as robotic and dutiful. Furthermore, the use of Chinese, although plausible, distances the Asian mothering methods and American norms. The scene, quite untrue and exaggerated for comedic effect, differentiates Jessica’s Asian background and Eddie’s background for a joke.

Character Study 3: Eddie, “Downward Assimilation”

Eddie, the firstborn son and the rebel of the family, purposely deviates from his parents’ cultural struggle and chooses to adapt Black culture instead of white American culture. In the series, Eddie’s unique cultural choice is expressed almost exclusively by his affinity for hip-hop, which the series conflates to Black 1990’s culture more broadly. The author, Eddie explains a more nuanced relationship to Black history and figures, although his cultural affiliation still is a controversial choice. I analyze how the series problematically uses the music of hip-hop to depict Eddie’s cultural assimilation struggles and examine how such cultural clash provides space for humor.

The series promptly establishes the struggle Eddie has with cultural identity. In his introductory sequence and the very first scene of the series, close-up shots of 11-year-old Eddie

trying on a crown ring, an iced out watch, a silver basketball chain atop a gold chain, an Orlando Magic jersey jacket, a flat-capped Orlando Magic hat sets the tone of Eddie’s persona to the sound of DFC & M.C. Breed’s “Ain’t No Future In Yo’ Frontin’” playing during his close-ups. Music and occasionally costuming become an essential shorthand the series uses to associate Eddie with Black cultural practices. To complete his look, Eddie dons a pair of gold sepia aviator sunglasses and a too-cool-for-school attitude. There is a deviation from expectation here. As a young Asian boy with no prior relationship to the Black community, Eddie’s interest in hip-hop is unconventional. His introduction as a character adopting the culture of hip-hop complicates his racial status. He deviates from Asian norms but also from white American norms. He does not fit into the Asian model minority stereotype of being academic-focused and quietly obedient, a mold his brothers contrastingly adhere to well. He also does not belong in the white American suburb and often dreams about living the rapper lifestyle. From its inception, the series uses music and costumes to make clear the statement that Eddie does not fit in, and his outsider status is attributed overwhelmingly to his identification with hip-hop and Blackness, rather than his own racial identity. While music is powerful, the use of music and aesthetic exclusively become harmful and wrong representations of Black culture.

Eddie Huang (2015), the author of *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir*, explains how he developed his interest in hip-hop from early childhood experience. His relationship with Black culture was inextricably tied to his experience as a physically and mentally abused child along with his physical outsidership as an Asian student. In Huang’s (2015) memoir, he explained, “There wasn’t a section in the library titled, “Books for Abused Kids” but there was black history, and somehow, some way, it made sense to me. I listened to 2pac” (p. 72). Hip-hop, along with the stories of Charles Barkley and Jackie Robinson, were Eddie’s vehicles to understanding his experiences with oppression. He began gravitating towards Black stories and figures when his parents were fighting extensively after their move to Orlando and when their emotional abuse of him became extensive. Huang (2015) claims to have used hip-hop to cope with his trauma from home and his exclusion from society, and continues to describe:

People in Orlando never understood why two Asian kids were rocking Polo, Girbauds, and listening to hip-hop. We didn’t do it because it was cool. At private school, teachers, parents, and other kids looked down on us for listening to hip hop. It was

a 'black thing.' Downward assimilation. They didn't understand why we had flat tops and racing stripes on our heads, but we did. [...] We listened to hip-hop because there was nothing else that let us in, that made us feel at home. I could see why Milli wanted to pull a pistol on Santa, or why B.I.G. was ready to die. My parents, Confucius, the model-minority bullshit, and kung fu-style discipline were what set us off. But Pac held us down. (p. 72)

Listening to hip-hop and adopting its Black aesthetic were not matters of fitting into social or cultural fashion for Huang. In the suburb of Orlando during the 90s, hip-hop styles were not a trend. Rather, it was as Huang described, a form of "downward assimilation." For Eddie Huang, the author, hip-hop represented a form of expression and identity outside of his parents' Asian expectations and outside of white American social exclusion at school. There was a significant sense of emotional connection to 2Pac's lyrics, and to hip-hop songs as well as Black history, during times of immense instability in Eddie's life.

Yet, in the adaptation of Huang's story to a family sitcom, the abusive parents were a factor completely removed from his original narrative. "Fresh Off the Boat's" version of the parents—Jessica and Louis—did not provide the same circumstances that led Huang to develop his exploration and controversial embodiment of hip-hop culture. Through this erasure of Huang's narrative, the character of Eddie in "Fresh Off the Boat" is softened and simplified into a misunderstood child who gravitates toward hip-hop to be different. As he introduces his family in the "Pilot" episode of the series, Eddie explains, Mom "didn't understand. If you were an outsider, hip-hop was your anthem" (Khan, 2015). For "Fresh Off the Boat's" Eddie, hip-hop was his way of deviating from the norm as a rebellious, albeit well-adjusted child. The television portrayal of Eddie uses hip-hop to define his outsider identity, not as a coping mechanism. Missing from this characterization are the true conditions of abuse that resulted in his deeper connection to the stories presented in hip-hop. Such simplification of a more nuanced narrative changes the stakes of the relationship Eddie has with hip-hop and Black role models.

The series also fails to address criticisms against Eddie Huang, the author, for cultural appropriation of Black culture. Instead, the series seemingly plays into such criticisms by creating a character that capitalizes on his expression of hip-hop culture at times of convenience for him instead of intentionally interacting with hip-hop culture. In an episode titled, "Where Are the Giggles?," Eddie chooses

to celebrate Kwanzaa after reading an article in which the rapper, Nas discussed the holiday which celebrates the African diaspora. Eddie explains to his brother, "Christmas is the tool of the white capitalist establishment. That's why this year, I'm celebrating Kwanzaa" (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). While it is funny how young Eddie is able to express poignant thoughts, the fact that Eddie can engage with and express opinions against white American sentiments in a radical way but embraces black American culture blindly is troublesome. He navigates a black-white cultural spectrum without thoughtful consideration of his consumption of each culture. Perhaps this shallow movement between racial statuses is a commentary on the privilege with which Asian Americans have been able to move in the American social hierarchy, seemingly with the option to choose to identify as white or a minority. Similarly, Eddie chooses to celebrate the Pan-African holiday because a rapper he idolizes celebrates the holiday.

Emery accuses him of not knowing what Kwanzaa is. The scene pauses for a moment, gathering laughter from the audience, then moves on without addressing Eddie's limited understanding. Yet later in the episode, Eddie appears in ghost form, donning traditional African attire without showing what or how he learned about Kwanzaa. As someone without prior knowledge of the holiday, does Eddie truly understand the cultural value of wearing such garments? For Eddie, as an Asian who exists in between, he cannot exist as white but cannot exist as Black. Eddie as Asian American is outside of these cultural practices. The use of hip-hop culture creates a fictional, seemingly utopian multicultural environment in "Fresh Off the Boat" which fails to address the history and pattern of Asian Americans' shallow consumption of Black culture. Rather, the series uses hip-hop songs and rapper culture as a tool for jokes for a white audience at the expense of the laughed off Black culture and Asian bodies.

As the series progresses, Eddie's affiliation with hip hop and Blackness become even more diluted. By removing the narrator from the second season onwards, the series develops into a more voyeuristic encounter into the Huang's life. So, later in the series, much of Eddie's character throughout the series relies on the use of hip-hop songs as a cue into his personal feelings and insights. Without the knowledge of adult Eddie, the audience is left to learn about Eddie and his family's lifestyle without the assistance of a first person narrator. This void enhances the shallow characterizations of the family and of Eddie particularly. The episode titled "Boy II Man" lacks the narrator's insight, thus relying more heavily on the tone of the hip-hop song in Eddie's daydream to

inform the audience of Eddie's emotional state. The scene with the song "End of the Road" begins by fading into a blue filtered shot of Eddie lying in his bed, emoting pain over Nicole flirting with another boy. Without the savvy of the narrator, the audience is left to assume that Eddie is acquiring the emotions of the song. The somber scene is then interrupted again by Jessica, who stops the tape, saying "Enough little man boys!" (Khan, Kasdan & Mar, 2015). The humor draws upon Jessica's misunderstanding of hip-hop but also from Eddie, who as an 11-year-old is out of place in a deeply emotional love song. The use of hip-hop songs to punctuate specific expectations from viewers followed by the series' deviation from those expectations diminishes the complexities of Eddie's relationship with hip-hop culture, because it is used as a prop to augment jokes rather than as a space of identity exploration for Eddie. Rather, the joke further emphasizes that something does not fit, and it is both Eddie and his immigrant mother. Hip-hop and Eddie's affiliation with it serve as a tool the series uses to create an outsider of Eddie, making space for humanizing the "outsider" or Asian experience and a space to simultaneously laugh at it.

Humor as a Racial Tool

Through the humor of its characters, the series posits that the characters' outsider experiences are universal difficulties. "Fresh Off the Boat" manipulates the outsider struggles and experiences of Louis, Jessica, and Eddie into subjects of humor. With Louis, the series explores the impossibility and laughability of his assimilation into whiteness; the series makes fun of Jessica's blind embrace of Chineseness; and the series laughs at Eddie's inability to acculturate into Blackness. These often intimate challenges are displayed by the series in a humorous way. The series invites the viewer to laugh at situations without fear of racial or political correctness. Humor creates a safe space for the audience by giving us the "license to violate the rules of conventional morality," according to Leon Rappoport (2005) in his book *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic and Gender Humor* (p. xii). Different audience members will find different aspects of the joke funny at different times. Humor is subjective, personal, and evocative of safety. The comedy genre enables the Asian American experience to be voiced, but also creates a shared object to laugh about. The genre of the series determines what the series is free to discuss racially. In comedy, it is not much.

Race is precisely what makes the Huang's story universal. It seems as though race is something so cognizant to the minority experience that it informs all other aspects of living, even those depicted on television. The humor of

the show is explicit while simultaneously nuanced. Some of the jokes are expected, while others are funny because they betray convention (the betrayal being Asian bodies in non-Asian spaces). The series uses racialized humor as a way to educate and describe Asian American experiences to a predominantly non-Asian audience. "Fresh Off the Boat" is not being marketed only for being relatable to Asian Americans. The essential component to much of the series' humor is race. It attempts to use the humor of stereotypes by bringing truth to them yet does so in a laughable and arguably humanizing way. But the series fails to regard the long history Asians in America have of being the outsider. Yellow Peril began as the threat of East Asian peoples presenting a danger to the West and its civilizations, the notion of exoticized fear of Asians persists today. Asian Americans have been perpetually othered for centuries. "Fresh Off the Boat" continues this history of othering, by creating an outsider of its Asian subjects.

The sitcom is thus a strategic platform for Asian Americans to be represented and accepted on television. The model minority representation depends on the hyper normative family. To adhere to white standards of success, Asian Americans must present a life of normality that can be identified by white standards—the nuclear family. The show became a voice of all individuals who make up the family unit, proving how the nuclear family is a necessity to the Asian American story. But since Asian families are differently presenting in their racial makeup, they must not deviate from white expectations of normality. They are in an impossible position—attempting to mimic whiteness is funny, but not doing so is also laughable. In the context of the family, the (white) American audience cannot be threatened. Disarmed by comedy, the audience's reception to the greater visibility and presence of Asian Americans in media is solidified.

Conclusion

In creating "Fresh Off the Boat," producers and writers were overtly concerned with universality. Throughout the history of the sitcom, there has been an emphasis on normality and whiteness, in which Asians were not previously welcome. With a chance to produce another Asian American family sitcom, producers had to be careful. Considering that the television audience is primarily white, "Fresh Off the Boat" creators created a series palatable and marketable to the widest audience, prioritizing white viewers. Recalling a quote of Nahnatchka Khan, executive producer of the series: "This is the show [An Asian-American kid. In the mid-90s. With a kid who loves hip-hop.] and the more spe-

cific we get the more universal it will be” (Robinson, 2017). Viewership does matter. Because most viewers are non-Asian, the adaptation of Eddie Huang’s memoir became a mistranslation of his life into something made to be more palatable for a non-Asian audience. “Fresh Off the Boat” took on the task of explaining the Asian American experience for the audience, inviting them to be an insider within the Huang family’s life. As the audience watches the Huang family navigate through the bicultural experience, the series creates space for humor in its exploration of their identities.

Essentially, what makes the characters funny is their perpetual outsidership and their never-ending struggle of attempted assimilation. Racializing the humor trivializes the experience of those who are othered. Despite the series’ creation process involving Asians and its characters being portrayed by Asian actors, the story is still sanitized for the audience’s enjoyment. This alters the authenticity of the on-screen Asian American narrative by oversimplifying it.

This project was an exploration of the structures of Asian American storytelling through humor and I discovered the influences behind a racialized story that is not constructed for Asians. Storytelling becomes complex when involving racialized subjects. While the actors and some producers of “Fresh Off the Boat” are Asian, their depictions of Asian American narratives are still shallow representations. Yet, “Fresh Off the Boat” undeniably opened a door for greater Asian representation not just on television, but also in media of all scopes. Constance Wu, the breakout star of “Fresh Off the Boat” also starred in the 2018 romantic comedy, “Crazy Rich Asians.” With other films, such as Netflix’s 2018 teen romance “To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before” and 2019 romantic comedy “Always Be My Maybe” as well as the television dramedy “Master of None” (2015) and television political comedy “Patriot Act” (2018) along with Disney Pixar animated short, “Bao” (2018), comedy seems to be a dominant genre of Asian American media. Are Asian Americans situating themselves in comedies? What is particularly intriguing is that the romantic comedy has experienced a decline in popularity since the late 2000s. But Asian women, such as Constance Wu are positioning themselves to be the young romantic interest and are entering a role they have rarely been invited into. Although Constance Wu often plays the obstructionist in “Fresh Off the Boat,” the mother who refuses to live in their present American world, she plays a differently empowered woman in “Crazy Rich Asians” who is emboldened by her American roots. Teetering between Asian and American in her roles, is resistance possible for Constance Wu and other Asian American

actors and producers? Or are these roles perpetuating more of the same tropes about Asian Americans?

In reconciling the requirement of Asian Americans to enter mainstream media first through conventional means, I find that the production of “Fresh Off the Boat” has established the conditions for the future of Asian Americans in sitcoms and, more broadly, comedy. What I hope “Fresh Off the Boat” has accomplished is to create space for conventional and unconventional narratives of Asian Americans alike. I see much of this content occupying the genre of comedy as an equalizing and freeing space; but, perhaps in the future, Asian American content producers will be able to create narratives that explore Asianness without requiring a laugh.

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