ASIAN AMERICANS and the Media

KENT A. ONO AND VINCENT N. PHAM

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Introduction

Dᴜʀɪɴɢ the week of January 17, 2005, the *Miss Jones in the Morning Show* (New York City, WQHT, 97.1, "Hot 97") played a song for four days straight called "USA for Indonesia" (later simply known as "The Tsunami Song"). The song used humor to comment on the devastating December 2005 tsunami that ravaged Asia, killing hundreds of thousands. In the form of parody, and against the backdrop of "We are the World,"[1] the song referred to people who died in the tsunami as "chinks," made light of children rendered parentless by the disaster, and referenced Michael Jackson as a possible molester of children orphaned as a result of the tsunami. One segment of the song described what it might have been like to witness the tsunami: "And all at once you could hear the screaming chinks and no one was safe from the wave. There were Africans drowning, little Chinamen swept away. You could hear God laughing, 'Swim you bitches swim.'" The following segment is the song's chorus and comments on what the fate of those affected by the tsunami might be: "So now you're screwed. It's the tsunami. You better run or kiss your ass away. Go find your mommy. I just saw her float by, a tree went through her head, and now your children will be sold in child slavery."

On January 28, a multiracial coalition of activists, including politicians, assembled outside of the Hot 97 studio to protest the station's airing of the song. Later, figures such as iconic hip-hop artist Afrika Bambaataa participated in another rally challenging the station's misuse of hip-hop. As a result of the protests, Hot 97 apologized, and several employees lost their salaries; Emmis Communications, the parent organization for the station, gave $1 million for tsunami relief; and radio personality Miss Jones provided an on-air apology. The rest of the workers on the show, including Miss Jones, were suspended for two weeks. Additionally, one of the morning show hosts, Todd Lynn, and the producer of the show, Rick Delgado, were fired.

This example invites us to ask some serious questions about Asians and Asian Americans and the media, such as: If we are indeed in a

"post-racist" society, how does one explain the presence of this kind of offensive communication targeting Asians and Asian Americans on the airwaves? If Asian Americans had more political power and presence in the media industry, would songs like this be made and aired? Is there something students and professors in universities and the broader public can do to change society so that these kinds of songs are unthinkable, and so that ones that portray Asians and Asian Americans in more respectful ways find their way on air?

Asian Americans and the Media seeks to provide a critical way to approach contemporary media, in part to help us answer such questions about Asian and Asian American representation and presence in the media. Part textbook and part monograph, it surveys work in Asian American studies, communication arts and sciences, and media and film studies, and it provides an overview of representations of Asians and Asian Americans in the media in order to find the various ways in which they are constrained by historical and contemporary dominant representations and also how they challenge the dominant media through protest, the production of creative, independent media, and the creation of independent Asian American organizations. The book surveys the broad media; thus, it examines film, TV, radio, music, the Internet, and the like in an attempt to draw attention to the collective effects of media on Asian Americans. By looking across media contexts, at what Douglas Kellner (1995) calls "media culture," we argue that a critical intervention into media is possible. The book addresses examples such as "The Tsunami Song," but does not devote entire chapters to individual case studies. Instead, by addressing multiple smaller examples in each chapter, it demonstrates that theoretical and critical tools can be used to analyze media and simultaneously to make evident the broad historical and contemporary field of representations in which Asian Americans find themselves.

We argue that historical representations of Asians and Asian Americans have residual effects that continue to this day. While the field of representation has changed, especially after the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, historical representations of Asians and Asian Americans have set the parameters. Until major shifts in the structure of production occur, the residual effects of these historical strategies will continue to shape and structure the representation of Asians and Asian Americans into the future. We also argue that, in order to understand Asian Americans and the media, and in order to understand how changes in the larger representational field occur now and may continue in the future, an examination of independent Asian American media is needed. A wide array of complex anti-racist Asian American media works already exist for analysis. But we

also suggest that, in looking at such independent work, a critical perspective is needed.

This introduction does six things to help readers understand the topics of media and Asian Americans we study in the book: (1) introduce prefatory theoretical assumptions; (2) define terms; (3) state our intellectual and disciplinary perspective; (4) lay out the scope of the book; (5) review relevant literature; and (6) provide a synopsis of the chapters in the book.

Theoretical Assumptions

We make several assumptions right from the start that function to support the way we study Asian Americans and the media throughout the book.

It makes sense to begin by stating that significant transformations in media technology, in global economic conditions and forces, and in modern and neoliberal environments render it necessary to study media carefully. A fresh examination of media such as we provide in this book is needed, in part because the world has changed. Communication technologies have changed. And these changes may significantly affect the way members of communities interrelate with one another. We now live in a *hyper-information society*. Media play an increasingly significant educational and social networking role and are noteworthy because they help people make sense of themselves and their relationships with others.

Marshall McLuhan imagined media (radio and television for him) would bring us closer and closer together across geographical boundaries to create one, big "global village" (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967, 63). But, as Benedict Anderson (1983) has suggested, media create the *illusion* of proximity, the illusion of being one large "imagined community." Because we can send an e-mail message to someone in another country, and that person's response can be received as if it had just been sent, this gives us the sense that the world is not so big after all, that we are all close together.

While we might imagine we have become closer together because of our increasing ability to communicate quickly and across vast distances worldwide, when our differences in, among other things, belief, religion, and experience emerge, we may suddenly seem further apart rather than closer together. *The illusion of close proximity may mask our actual lack of contextual knowledge and understanding of our material relationships with others.* Communication can, in these cases, hyper-accentuate our differences rather than draw attention to our commonalities. After all, even as we may be able to communicate

quickly in a way that may simulate face-to-face dialogue, we know that even access to "instant messaging" does not replace face-to-face bodily interaction, where we can see, touch, hear, feel, and even smell humans in our presence. Indeed, transnational films, global television, multilingual websites, and cross-cultural exchanges of information via e-mail have the potential to "exoticize" those outside the mainstream United States media, make them appear intriguing, but also curious, strange, and alien to us, and, thus, underscore differences *not* similarities.

Because media provide so much information, and do so quickly – perhaps creating the illusion that we have access to all of the information we could ever possibly want – we may be lured into believing we *know* other people, know what they feel, understand what matters to them, and therefore can imagine how they live. Additionally, because what we see is what we remember, *what we do not see*, the part that is edited out or simply not captured in media, does not become part of our memory. What does not appear on television or on the Internet is equally, if not more important than, what is seen/heard/read. That quirky movement, that unique facial expression, that perfectly phrased comment, that moment of care that is not represented, especially an accumulation of such moments, may make all of the difference in the world; it may be that one image or expression of humanity that would completely alter our evaluation and assessment of a person that is missing. What is made available to us in media may be either a distortion or a highly subjective snapshot of a broader life or experience. In this context, a book like this is needed, in part, to dispel the misconception that media represent Asian Americans accurately, to cut through the misinformation presented daily in mainstream media, and to gesture toward that part of Asian American lives, identities, and experiences that are not available, at least in mainstream media. This book does this by offering complex ways to view Asian and Asian American images, as well as by countering misinformation, and by drawing attention to independent media produced by Asian Americans.

Because media create the illusion of closeness, and because we know that media representations provide us with only a limited snapshot of people, and a subjective one at that, it is important to understand a significant context that influences the way in which media represent people of color. Many societies have experienced colonialism, and, while it is not as often overtly practiced today, institutional structures and remnants of colonial societies (and, as we suggest in this book, the way in which colonial relations continue to be taught regularly in media) as well as belittling media representations, continue to help to justify oppression – oppression that first materialized as a result of

colonialism and colonial expansion. For instance, media representations of the colonizer and the colonized continue to play a significant role in the continuation of colonial rule and colonial relations. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam suggest that "The dominant media constantly devalorize the lives of people of color while regarding Euro-American life as sacrosanct. . . . The same regime that devalorizes life then projects this devalorization on to those whose lives it has devalorized" (1994, 24). Thus, derogatory representations signify a continuing psychological trauma and the perpetuation of past oppressions. The specters of earlier eras of US history continue to haunt our psyche and reside importantly, if not primarily, in our mass-mediated imagery. What does one do with such disparaging images and representations of Asian Americans today as the *Milwaukee Magazine*'s reference to a Filipino child in a restaurant as a "rambunctious little monkey?"[2] Such representations consolidate desires for continued racial, sexual, and gendered power, and perhaps, relatedly, for continued racial, sexual, and gendered oppression, including even violence.

Our overall theory about how media operate with regard to Asian Americans is that, because of a lack of systemic power within mainstream media production, they typically appear in ways that comport with colonial representations and thus do not represent a true lived experience. Within the media, Asian Americans are often at the sidelines, feeling the effects of dominant media representation but hardly ever appearing in the spotlight. The subjugation, invalidation, and persecution on screen of those without power should be taken seriously. Such images (e.g., the woeful representation of Mickey Rooney's character in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), and the equally problematic representation of character Tracey Tzu in *Year of the Dragon* (1985), both of which we discuss in more detail later in the book) are not only incendiary but also have a mass psychosocial effect within US society; more importantly, these images are part of a history of image-making and story-production linked to historical and continuing systems of oppression.

Because these images are remnants of colonial times and exist as part of earlier ideologies, remaining institutions, and continuing social and cultural relations, derogatory representations of Asians and Asian Americans are pervasive and exist both historically and contemporarily. The fact that such representations occur frequently, if unpredictably, and across wide-ranging and varied media contexts, suggests that there continues to exist a lack of information, perhaps a willful ignorance, about, and a (sometimes) unspoken hostility toward, Asians and Asian Americans.

The airing of "The Tsunami Song" on a popular big city radio station, and the response by protestors, is only one example, but it suggests a

pattern of disturbing discourse about Asians and Asian Americans that is expressed publicly but then is also protested by Asian Americans and allied groups and organizations. Examples such as this do not generally make the national news, and news flashes do not alert people that similar incidents are commonplace – a normative condition in media; thus, it makes sense that many might not recognize just how common they actually are. Part of the goal of this book is to show that offensive and troubling representations of Asians and Asian Americans are replete throughout media contexts and that, through careful study and theoretical analysis, we can see that these sometimes haphazard but incessant media spectacles are part of a much larger social logic, one that should lead us to speak out in protest as caring and thoughtful people. Such a social logic manifests in habitual representations of Asian Americans throughout media history and across media formats.

One reason it is important to study Asian Americans and the media is because Asian American productions of images on TV, film, and other mainstream media have historically been, and continue today to be, extremely limited. Thus, the ability of Asian Americans to create and distribute self-representations to counter those produced early in US history as part of colonial relationships is limited.[3] The majority of images in the dominant media have been produced by those with little first-hand knowledge of the Asian American experience. And these images and representations can have a long-term psychosocial impact on both Asians and Asian Americans and non-Asians and non-Asian Americans. It is therefore important to analyze the images about Asian Americans created and distributed by those outside of the community. Seeing media products with a veneer of underlying racial resentment toward people of Asian heritage illustrates that Asian Americans are still not in control of their own image and therefore requires a scholarly approach (such as the one we provide here) to the study of Asian Americans and the media. In part, we need such a book to note recurring patterns in media representation as well as changes that have occurred. The fact that there is an archive of media projections of Asians and Asian Americans allows for sustained analysis and critique, moving us beyond simple critiques of "bad/good" and "racist/not racist" representations and into a broader understanding of the logics behind them and their rhetorical salience.

Representations of Asian Americans in the media also affect non-Asians and non-Asian Americans, as they sometimes play a pedagogical role in (mis)educating people about Asians and Asian Americans. For instance, it is possible to imagine that problematic media representations helped play a part in one legislator's use of a loaded racist term during his 2000 presidential bid. During that campaign season, Senator John McCain said, "I hated the gooks. I will hate them as long as I live"

– seemingly unaware that "gook" is a racist term often used indiscriminately to malign Asians and Asian Americans from all backgrounds. Despite McCain's caveat that he used the term to refer specifically only to his captors, who tortured him when he was a prisoner of war during the US war against Vietnam, the fact that he professed to be unaware that it is commonly used to refer to Asians and Asian Americans as a racial group suggests an ignorance of particularity. This insensitivity toward the differences among Asian American groups and lack of awareness of particularities is commonplace in dominant mainstream media. Thus, it is crucial to understand the larger racial structure, the logics of race, racism, and racial representation, and the media's relationship to the production and reproduction of race, racism, and racial discourses. As a result, one question we seek to answer, a question that structures the approach we take to the study of Asian Americans and the media in this book, is: Do TV, film, and other media systems play an important role in maintaining a racialized social order and, if so, how do we explain the particular role that media culture plays in the case of Asian Americans?

As one example of this racial social ordering, we briefly mention here our argument that the image of Asian Americans as model minorities (discussed in detail in chapter 5) is key to that ordering. Media representations of Asian Americans as model minorities function to draw distinctions between Asian Americans and other racialized communities. Such representations figure them as a "minority" (hence not on the same level as dominant white Americans) that is contrasted to, pitted against, or put in competition with, African Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans. This is not a contrast, a contest, or a competition that Asian Americans create, control, or seek themselves but rather one that is created, produced, and often amplified by the dominant media. Hence, with this example we can see that media play a significant role in establishing a racial order within a social hierarchy of power.

Definition of Terms

Having laid out several theoretical assumptions, we provide definitions of four key terms used throughout the book – representations, media constructions, Asian Americans, and media racial hegemony. Additional definitions of important terms we use appear in the glossary near the end of the book. We define these four concepts here in order to render unfamiliar terms more familiar from the outset but also in order to continue to frame the way we view the subject of this book.

When we say *representations* of Asians and Asian Americans, we mean the complex range of strategies used by the media, sometimes arbitrarily, to characterize Asians and Asian Americans. These representations have effects, both immediate and deferred. While they register on the senses and in the mind, the collective and often repeated images, narratives, and narrative structures become part of memory, both individual and social. We also mean to suggest that early representations of Asians and Asian Americans, through their repetition and power to educate audiences, may be reproduced across time unwittingly, since new templates may not be available.

For example, actors may be typecast in particular kinds of roles, such as the medical professional – for example, Sendhil Ramamurthy as Dr Mohinder Suresh on NBC's television show *Heroes*. Or, despite speaking English flawlessly, actors such as Daniel Dae Kim on *Lost* may be asked to play characters who do not speak English. Additionally, Japanese American actors Masi Oka and George Takei play Japanese characters on the contemporary television show *Heroes*. In their case, the characters speak Japanese, but we hear their Japanese in English, and sometimes they learn enough English to speak it to other characters. Thus, those who produce the media make particular kinds of choices about whom to hire as actors, what narratives it makes sense for those characters to appear in, how characters represent race and ethnicity, how audiences are invited to respond to characters, which audiences might watch their productions, and what particular meanings might be created through all these choices.

It is important to suggest that media representations are in fact *media constructions*, a concept which emphasizes that they are created, produced, and manufactured and hence are not forever set in stone. They are not there for all times and hence are changeable. The concept helps us understand that film, television, radio, music, the Internet, newspapers, magazines, and advertising representations are the effects of production choices, whose meanings, importance, and effects can, once recognized as constructions, be discussed, debated, and challenged. Specifically, as we discuss stereotypes and media activism, we align ourselves with Stuart Hall's[4] theoretical stance that representation cannot be simplistically "positive" or "negative," because there is always a cultural context in which representations are produced and audience evaluations and assessments are given. Just because they have no innate positivity or negativity, however, does not mean those images do not have powerful and/or problematic effects. Thus, in this book, we address both stereotypical and more complex representations of Asian Americans, fully aware that individual representations may be interpreted and acted upon quite differently and that audiences may in fact do something quite unexpected with them. It is important to say that,

despite the potential and actual alternative readings and interpretations of media, there often exist dominant readings and interpretations that may have widespread effects. Thus, while stereotypes and dominant interpretations of representations are not determinative, they may still have a controlling social power.

By *Asian Americans*, we mean the loose concatenation of people who claim this moniker to represent themselves. "Asian American" signifies both the history and the present of Asians and Asian Americans in the Americas, their struggle against oppression, and the collective and collaborative organizing efforts to fight such oppression by people across racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities, and across other collectivities. Asian American studies, the field out of which research, teaching, and community service relating to Asian Americans emerges, is said to be by, for, and about Asian Americans.

Asian American is a term first said to have been coined by Yuji Ichioka at the San Francisco State University Third World Strike in 1968 (R. Kim, 2002). It is and continues to be a political term of identification that people choose as a self-descriptor – not a racial or biological term of identification, but rather a term descriptive of a particular epistemology that challenges racism and seeks empowerment and democratic power relations. Ichioka used the term to articulate the kinds of concerns Asian American students had about the political position of people of Asian heritage living in the United States. Out of this history, the term has become one of political and panethnic identification,[5] but it also connotes a desire for a different and better world where Asian American contributions are recognized; where solidarity among people across racialized communities is realized; and where racial, gender, class, and sexual oppression, among other forms of oppression such as language discrimination and discrimination against both documented and undocumented immigrants, is not tolerated and is actively discouraged, challenged, and resisted.

The book takes Asian Americans, including broader categories such as South Asian Americans, Filipino Americans, Southeast Asian Americans, Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, and Japanese Americans, seriously in terms of the way media represent them. While the book focuses on one racial group, diversity within that group is of fundamental importance. Within these broader categories are a tremendous diversity of smaller ethnic groups, such as Thai Americans, Hmong Americans, Mien Americans, Indonesian Americans, Sri Lankan Americans, Pakistani Americans, Okinawan Americans, Indonesian Americans, Malaysian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and many, many, many other groups. Because of the sheer number that may identify themselves or be identified by others as Asian Americans, this book does not aim to represent all groups

equally. What we do is highlight the diversity within the community and provide examples that cross a number of groups so as to suggest the larger ambit of Asian America.

We define *media racial hegemony* for the purposes of this study as the media's role in both continuing and contesting racial and colonial power relations. Media racial hegemony helps us demonstrate how the ways people think about race, the things people do that are racialized, and people's racial identities are represented through media and that media representations help guide and regulate beliefs and actions of those within society, primarily in unforeseen ways. It is not surprising that such images are highly intimate with regard to viewers' own sense of self. How is it that someone comes to identify with images of violence against people of color, women of color, and queers of color? Do we close our eyes, turn a cheek, overcome our fear of seeing, feel disgust, let our stomachs churn, fight back, feel resecured in who we are, feel a sense of excitement or exhilaration, or do emotions of violence surge within us? By studying the representations, it becomes clear that there is in existence a kind of racial hegemony – that is the existing power dynamic and forces that, through negotiation, regulate it – and that such a hegemony is communicated to us through media.

Intellectual and Disciplinary Perspective

Our goal in writing this book is to theorize, study, and, by doing so, center the Asian American media experience, as well as to understand what media do with and to Asian Americans. Our aim is to construct theoretical observations directly relevant to Asian Americans, which at times may be informed by and correspondingly may inform studies of media and African Americans, Latinas/os, Native Americans, Arab Americans, and whites. In addition to analyzing dominant representations, we also look at how Asian American activists, media makers, and artists, themselves, have addressed stereotypes, images, and representations. Alternative media frameworks such as independent media formats and new media offer spaces for the creative construction and active production of representations more in concert with Asian American experiences and concerns, even as they may sometimes borrow from and even replicate dominant representational patterns.

To address the Asian American experience in relation to media adequately requires a positioning of our work within the field of Asian American studies. We center Asian American experiences through our analysis and theorization; thus, our approach requires an understanding of Asian American studies, including an understanding of media representations within a system and history of Asian American

media representation, theoretical context, and finally social, historical, economic, and political contextualization. Specifically, this book aims to construct a theoretical platform that addresses Asian American representation and media presence from several different angles. We do this by setting up a dialogue between scholarship produced about media and Asian American representation and scholarship in communication studies and cultural studies. While social scientific scholarship informs our analyses, this book takes primarily a critical and cultural studies approach to the study of Asian Americans and the media and thus centers Asian Americans within the analyses.[6] The critical framework, theory, and base assumptions regarding representation employed here have not, as yet, been fully developed when applied to Asian Americans. Our approach requires analysis of what representations of Asians and Asian Americans exist, who created them, for whom they were created, and their ultimate impact. We take this approach in order to develop theoretical grounding for our claims and to investigate ways in which media affect and influence culture.

Central to this approach is an interdisciplinary understanding of Asian American history, sociology, communication, politics, culture, and arts. The specific contribution we make in this book, however, has not been in any of these individual fields and thus must be taken on as an interdisciplinary project, one that cuts across fields in order to address its subject fully.[7] Thus, in addition to addressing cultural studies and the humanities, our work here has the potential to inform social scientific and empirical research and may help to produce useful questions and concerns that could be taken up in scientific experiments.

We do not intend to cast our net too far, however, attempting to understand and treat each discipline equally and fairly. For instance, although the political economy of media play a role in media production and media industries, our focus is not primarily upon the media industry, and it is also not from the production side. Thus, we will not conduct an industry analysis. Part of the purpose in uniting literature in communication and Asian American studies is not to let academic boundaries prevent us from addressing the challenges of analyzing and critiquing visual culture and narratives about Asian Americans. The methodology for each media event/discourse/text studied often requires us to cut across disciplinary boundaries, and we adapt our method to each case for explanatory power. In crossing interdisciplinary boundaries, we employ methods and theories that best equip us with the abilities and faculties to explore, analyze, and understand Asian American media representations, while gleaning new ideas from thinking through various perspectives from the concepts and research of other fields.