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Revisiting Asian American Representations in Hollywood: Negotiating Identity, Gender, and Sexuality

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ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates representations of the Asian diaspora, gender, and sexuality by comparing two films *Always Be My Maybe* (Khan, 2019) and *The Half of It* (Wu, 2020), representative of a successful Hollywood trend marked by the 2020 (*Parasite*, Bong Joon-ho) and 2021 (*Minari*, Lee Isaac Chung) Oscar wins. The films counter a longstanding history of Orientalist Asian American tropes and stereotypes at a moment when China's booming economy and domestic markets coincide with more creative directors of Asian origin telling their stories in Hollywood. Through close textual analysis of the two films narratives and comparison of their sequences, I examine how these films construct Asian diasporic identity, gender, and sexuality. The analysis demonstrates how racial identity, never fixed, is constantly in the process of construction shaped by larger social forces that respond to and negotiate dominant ideologies supporting certain stereotypes. In *The Half of It* race, gender, and sexuality are to a great extent reframed through subtlety and subversive characterization. *Always Be My Maybe* makes use of Hollywood conventions at least in part to shift the conventional narratives about Asians as it pertains to identity, gender, and sexuality.

Key words: Asian diaspora; Asian American identity; Asian American Gender; Asian American Sexuality; Asian Stereotypes; Orientalism.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

On March 17th, 2021**,** there was a violent attack in the United States on several Asian-owned businesses by a white man who killed 6 Asian women. He claimed he attacked these businesses because they frustrated his sex addiction. Violence against Asians is not the motive behind this study of Asian representation in Hollywood, but the incident points to disturbing ideas about Asians in the popular imagination, which is central to this project. I review how Asian Americans have fought for decades against stereotyping them in films. Significantly, in 2020 and 2021, for two consecutive years films centered on Asian characters, *Parasite* (Bong, 2019) and *Minari* (Chung, 2020), won the best picture Oscars and Chloe Zhao became the first Asian woman to win the best director Oscar in 2021. This success did not happen overnight—it represents a long journey of struggle for change. In this project I take up two contemporary films, *Always Be My Maybe* (Khan, 2019) and *The Half of It* (Wu, 2020), which I argue are symptomatic of a recent trend towards successful Asian-centered films such as, *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018), *Minari* (Chung, 2020), *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019), and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (Johnson, 2018). Admittedly these are not all Hollywood representations of Asian Americans central in this project, but they signal new influences affecting Hollywood: Asian films crossing over in North America, films capturing the Asian cross-cultural experience, and the rise of Asian origin auteurs.

This success is particularly significant as Asian Americans have suffered for most of the 20th century from distorted visual media representation spilling over from a long tradition in print and newspaper cartoons. Asian American stereotypes in films have ranged from the mildly

offensive model minority tropes to the deeply upsetting Orientalist "yellow face" caricatures[1]. Women were depicted as sexual objects available for white male pleasure and Asian men were often cast as either barbarians or eunuchs. Far from grounding these images in the realities of Asian American communities they originate in a Euro-American imaginary that justifies their own fear, domination--and yes, even violence against Asians.

I investigate the trend of Asian Americans featuring in successful mainstream 21st century late teen films and probe why this did not occur earlier despite the 1980s Asian American film and video movement, followed by critically and commercially successful films in the 1990s. I evaluate how identity and sexuality play out in mainstream cinema influenced by different genres and film movements**.** Using Douglas Kellner's critical cultural framework, I examine how mainstream American media has historically affirmed domination based on race, gender, nationality, and sexuality. However, films with different genres, histories, and ideological foundations—Asian American documentary, Asian Diasporic, and fifth or six generation Chinese art films—can also challenge such domination normalized in transnational Hollywood/Chinese mainstream cinema. I pay special attention to contemporary Asian American diasporic films as examples of negotiating the history of Asian representation and recalibrating racialized power through tropes of gender and sexuality. Specifically, I investigate how these films tackle Eurocentric and orientalist mainstream American cinema.

To revisit this history**,** I will review the literature around Asian representation in Hollywood films, specifically as it applies to gender and sexuality. I will elaborate on the idea of

[1] "Yellowface" is a term used to describe the practice of casting white actors in Asian roles by wearing prosthetics to make their faces look more "Asian." Like Blackface, this practice was often accompanied by exaggerated accents and mannerisms which mocked and reduced Asian people; the practice has mostly stopped, but now a more insidious version exists where Asian Americans will play Asians of various ethnicities by affecting similar accents and mannerisms. (Wong, 2020, p.12)

Asian identity, with a focus on Chinese identity, and explore gendered and racial stereotypes embedded in Hollywood representation. I account for the complexity of Chinese and Asian identity in the diaspora, how diaspora communities construct identity while located in non-Asian contexts and its ramification for Asian American representation. I will also illuminate the wider social and cultural shifts that have enabled a change in representation, changes that include China's economic and political rise: Hollywood has responded by pandering to this new superpower through film (Cooke, 2018, pp.299-300). I review how Asian Americans have steadily fought back against demeaning stereotypes and tropes with their own films in recent decades. Against this historical overview I closely examine two films, *Always Be My Maybe* (Khan, 2019) and *The Half of It* (Wu,2020) as symptomatic of a new trend mentioned above that has recently enjoyed greater visibility. I present my findings on the cultural shifts in Asian American representation that these two specific films exemplify.

These contemporary films I analyze are shaped by and respond to a colonial Orientalist imaginary established in codes created in the colonial period, that have been reinforced in 20th century film, television and now the internet. However, despite the bleak history and its tragic effects, there is a new day dawning. As mentioned, films like *Crazy Rich Asians*, *The Farewell*, and the 2021 Oscar winning *Minari* illuminate the real experiences and struggles of Asian Americans while achieving mainstream success. These portrayals mark a shift in representation that allows for a broader understanding of the Asian American diaspora. It is worth noting that the concept of diaspora for Asians is a matter of contestation and construction that needs contextualization. While reviewing the literature on Asian American representation in media I also examine the literature on the ontology of the Asian American and Asian diaspora.

In researching this topic I found references to a fascinating independent film movement focused on Asian-American representation from the 1980s (Okada, 2009, p.31). It has to be asked why this did not start a movement towards mainstream success that Hollywood films achieved much later? In examining the 1980s film movement of Asian-American representation, several features stand out: it made use of some unique aesthetics but did not have the impact of later mainstream movies (Okada, 2009, p.31). A documentary approach dominated in the early days of the movement (Okada, 2009, p.22), giving way to experimental attempts that did not carry over despite critical acclaim (Okada, 2009, p.31). Reading about these earlier films that did not achieve mainstream success made it clear that despite these films being critically successful and artistically engaging (Okada, 2009, p.31) something emerged after the 1980s, particularly in the 2010s that helped propel the success of 21st century films like *Crazy Rich Asians*.

In this research paper I focus on films like *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe* to explore the scope of issues related to Asian American identity, gender, sexuality, and their historical evolution in film. I rely on close textual analysis as a method (discussed in chapter 3) to examine the films narrative, mise-en-scene, sound, and production elements, while keeping in view larger social forces the films emblematize. Film studies and film semiotics allow for a thorough analysis paying attention to specific rules and constraints of the medium. A critical cultural analysis framework grapples with negotiations between ideals of representation and the larger social forces at play. Textual analysis is useful for examining the literal content of the films and productively probing constructions of race, gender and sexuality.

I present my findings through film analysis (in chapter 4) which discusses three aspects: the construction of Asian identity in the diaspora, the construction of gender, and of racialized sexuality. I show how the films make use of their unique aesthetic form, such as editing, sound,

and cinematography, filmic devices that construct a more nuanced representation of Asians in the diaspora compared to the past. Specifically, I will examine how these films navigate stereotypical tropes and images of Asian Americans to ground their own portrayals of Asians as characters. With regards to gender and sexuality, these films can be both resistant and complicit with stereotypes when it comes to representing Asian sexuality.

Chapter 2 Literature Review.

The literature surrounding Asians and Asian Americans on the screen is located within the larger social and political context that shapes these representations. The article "The Changing Face of Chinese and Asian faces in Hollywood", the 2019 documentary *Hollywood and The Yellow Threat* and an article on *Discussingfilm.net* are an excellent introduction to this topic. The themes in these sources include the history of stereotypes which have marred Asian representation in Hollywood (Lee, 2019, para. 4; Kuperberg, 2019) and how those stereotypes are being negotiated as a growing number of Asian origin directors are making films for our screens (Fischer, 2019, para. 7). However, these sources also acknowledge that Hollywood is putting more Asian faces on the screen in part to cater to China (Lee, 2019, para.16) an expanding economy with greater geopolitical significance in the 21st century. I explore these issues under the rubric of transnationalism, soft power, and the internal contradictions within the notions of Asian identity.

Orientalism and Hollywood

Hollywood is based outside Asian-majority countries, as a result the films made through most of Hollywood history play to Orientalist ideas (Marchetti, 1993, p.6). This means that the Asian and Asian American characters in Hollywood films often do not reflect the experiences of

Asian people, rather they are exoticized ideas about an Eastern "other" (Marchetti, 1993, p.6). Orientalism is a Western construction of an imagined Eastern "other" construed as reflecting values in binary opposition to "the West" i.e., Europe, and later America (Said, 1979, p.38). This concept was developed by Edward Said in his eponymous 1979 work *Orientalism*. A key concept is that these representations are distortions that legitimized the ongoing colonial conquest and valorized the "West" over the "Orient" (Said, 1979, p.39).

This is a concept which most of the literature on Asian representation touches on in one way or another. One such work, Gina Marchetti's *Romance and the "Yellow Peril*," recounts the history of Asian stereotyping in Hollywood film from the 1910s to the mid-1980s (Marchetti, 1993, p.6). She specifically focuses on the relationships between Asian and white characters and the sexual and racial stereotypes embedded in such portrayals (Marchetti, 1993, p.2). She reasons that these depictions serve to reinforce and justify a relationship of dominance of white men over an "Eastern" man or woman (Marchetti, 1993, p.6). However substantial Marchetti's work is, it focuses on one or two cases per decade. For a broader understanding of the topic I turn to two documentaries that add important nuance by drawing on interviews with Asian actors working in the industry, directing our attention beyond the films.

The Slanted Screen is a documentary which addresses the difficulties Asian men have faced in terms of representation[2]: they were often cast as asexual, effeminate, or as abject barbarians, (Adachi, 2006) a trend that Marchetti also acknowledges (Marchetti, 1993, p.2). While this documentary examines the stereotypical portrayal of Asian men on the screen, it also acknowledges its competing opportunities, as when Asian men choose to play the villain over

[2] Alongside books and essays I use this and other documentaries as "literature review" sources to trace the history of gender and sexuality in Hollywood's Asian stereotypes.

being portrayed as subservient (Adachi, 2006). This constrained choice is also illustrated in the documentary *Slaying the Dragon*, which addresses women's on-screen portrayal; many of the actresses interviewed are ambivalent about the stereotypes they portrayed and confess their compliance was a necessary part of getting work in the industry (Gee, 1988). However, *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded* illustrates how Asian women are still cast in and forced to play offensive roles (Kim, 2011) despite Asian men succeeding as directors and rejecting stereotypes as presented in *The Slanted Screen* (Adachi, 2006).

Examining a specific era, in fact, a specific genre**,** "Representations of Chinese People in Hollywood Martial Arts Films", an undergraduate thesis**,** makes excellent use of its sources to study Asian (Chinese) representations in Hollywood's martial arts films (Zhu & Cai, 2013, p.1). The genre is useful to illustrate how representation improved over the years from the offensive subservient or villainous stereotypes mentioned earlier partially because of action stars like Bruce Lee. And while it did lead to more empowered depictions of Asian characters it also fueled a new generic stereotype that tied Chinese people to kung fu (Zhu & Cai, 2013, p.8). Vincent Pham and Kent Ono further expound on the ramifications of this stereotype in *Asian Americans and the Media*[3].

Pham and Ono in *Asian Americans and the Media* go into details about each stereotype, the orientalist origin, and like in *Slaying the Dragon,* they acknowledge that Hollywood's Asian representations also shift based on geopolitical factors—like US political interests and Asian countries with which it might be in conflict (Adachi, 2006). *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded*

[3] Vincent Pham and Kent Ono discuss various stereotypes and concede that while these stereotypes are often generated in response to an Orientalist mindset of representing effete Asian men, Asian creators, too, can capitulate to them in their work, or inadvertently turn kung fu, which Bruce Lee popularized, into yet another stereotype. (Ono & Pham, 2009, p.144)

alludes to the role of new media in giving Asian Americans a chance to explore their identity and express their reality (Kim, 2011). Pham and Ono argue that online content creators and new filmmakers may inadvertently reinforce new stereotypes while rejecting others (Ono & Pham, 2009, p.144). Both works illustrate how Asian Americans negotiate stereotypes. In *The Hypersexuality of Race,* Celine Shimizu proposes a radical alternative (Shimizu, 2007, p.3): where Ono and Pham conclude that there must be a rejection of stereotypes, despite their persistence (Ono & Pham, 2009, pp.78-79), Shimizu argues that there should be an attempt to read some empowering or even pleasurable identification in hypersexual depictions of Asian women by Asians and Asian Americans (Shimizu, 2007, p.38).

Gina Marchetti discusses how various films across the decades have been used to reinforce white supremacy through white women's relations to other races (Marchetti, 1993, p.14). Of particular interest to her is melodrama and the social problem film, which are used to reinforce a racist heteronormative status quo (Marchetti, 1993, p.14). That melodrama is used to reinforce race and gender relations is also attested to by Hillary Radner (Radner, 2018, pp.159). I draw on this literature for the films I take up here: Alice Wu's 2020 *The Half of It* is a contemporary counter example that adheres to the romantic drama formula but presents an interracial lesbian romance as a viable option. Nahnatchka Khan's 2019 *Always Be My Maybe* is less subversive in that it depicts a heterosexual love story, but it is unique in that rather than the typical white man and Asian woman couple both partners are Asian American.

Chinese Identity & Influence

Chinese identity is a complex theme, as the notion of being "Chinese" could vary in different global locations (Chen, 2019, p.35). The discussion in the literature points to part of the problem: the diaspora subsumed under "greater China" has been proposed as an alternative to

mainland China as well as the mark of diasporic Chinese identity (Ang, 2013, p.21). I return to this later but for now turn to "Locating Asianness in the Transnational Field*"* a good primer for examining the interrelation between diaspora and transnationalism. It takes up the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, exploring how the notion of being Chinese is negotiated from location to location based on a variety of factors; one theme that comes up is how the centrality of China plays into different hierarchies of diasporic Chineseness (Chen, 2019, p.35). The article takes this theme and expand it to engage with the unique situation of the Chinese diaspora in transnational cinema.[4]

"Being Essentially Chinese", "No Longer Chinese", and "Can one say no to Chineseness?" are three articles which flesh out the hierarchical understanding of Chinese identity in the diaspora. "Can one Say No to Chineseness?" draws attention to the centrality of China in shaping diasporic identity, namely that in other diaspora cultures there is a focus on creolization, but Chinese diaspora communities are defined by connection to the real or imagined "homeland" (Ang, 1998, p.44). Ien Ang argues that the centrality, or rather the recentering of China in recent years can, at least partially be attributed to its economic "rise" (Ang, 1998, p.28). However, Souchou Yao argues that "performative Chineseness" exhibited by Chinese people in the diaspora to mark their Chinese identity, is too porous and open a concept, as anyone can

[4] It discusses the centrality of China in the "Chinese" diasporic community's identity and more importantly how the notion of being Chinese can be complicated by not being "Chinese" enough, i.e., not speaking the language, eating the food, or appropriately observing "Chinese" religions. In cinema, particularly in *Crazy Rich Asians*, this plays out with Asian American Rachel Chu being dismissed by her future mother-in-law as not being Chinese but Chinese American. It takes satirical aim at this judgemental air, which implies that those closer to the "Homeland," Chinese in Asia, have a degree of superiority.

potentially be included (Yao, 2009, p.256).[5] How these issues are worked out in film is addressed in the works I discuss below.

Cinema offers a lens to view larger social issues, and geopolitical struggles, and in the case of diasporic Chinese identity it allows a glimpse into the complicated web that both enables and entraps people. The earlier articles mostly stay with personal experiences of cultural dislocation, but the next two articles "*Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*: A Diasporic Reading" by Christina Klein and "The Global Return of Wuxia Pian" by Kenneth Chan focus on movies and how they may reflect the sentiments of the diaspora. Klein places Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* in a mesh of theories and concepts like Orientalism, diasporic interpretations, and conceptualizations of modern China (Klein, 2004, p.22). Chan focuses on the global relations of power and the imagined return to the homeland, while Klein reads *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* as both a critique and an ambivalent portrait of China, illustrating a generic shift (Chan, 2004, pp.4-5). In reading these articles one is better able to grasp both the vicissitude of diasporic subjects, and how those dynamics appear on screens and through production, leading to the discussion of an important term: transnationalism.

Transnationalism

Notions of transnational cinema are deeply significant in China's modern Hollywood depictions and native Asian productions (Berry, 2010, p.112). Stephen Crofts notes that a cinema's success is usually proportionate to its nation's global economic strength (Crofts, 1993, pp.62-63) in the case of China this is the ability to subtly exert influence on other nations through

[5] Performative Chineseness includes such activities as speaking a Chinese dialect, eating Chinese food, participating in cultural festivals like the Lunar New Year festivities, or such rituals. It has been argued that this concept is too porous--potentially anyone who does these things can consider themselves Chinese. However, it has also been pointed out that hereditary cultural ties to China ultimately separate Chinese persons performing their identity from a white family having dim sum.

money, attraction, and appeal, called “soft power” (Cooke, 2009, p.1). In this section I address the resonance of the term transnational cinema beginning with China’s power to affect mainstream American filmmakers to make products that cater to Chinese tastes, as China has in recent years become a valuable market for the film industry (Edgecliff-Johnson, 2013, para.2; Plowright, 2015, para.2).

Transnational cinema is a term used to describe a wide variety of cinemas. It includes Hollywood’s propensity to alter the narratives of films it exports to China with an eye on pleasing audiences and ensuring the industry’s profits. On the other hand, mainstream Chinese cinema since the mid-1980s has produced its own films using transnational production--using financial, talent, and technical resources from various regions, and then distributes the films across national boundaries--hence the term transnational. Transnational cinema can embody imbalances of power. For example, independent productions and fifth generation Chinese cinema, which have a niche audience, address problems within mainstream Chinese cinema’s nationalist imaginary using transnational funding, but these transnational productions may reinforce other inequalities: such as, they only feature stars comfortable with speaking English in Anglophone dominated transnational cinema. Furthermore, Hollywood is inattentive to sub-regional differences in the world, particularly in Asia. All this will be discussed in detail later.

Numerous newspaper articles identify the trend of Hollywood studios altering their films to make money in the Chinese market (Homewood, 2014, para. 3). This leads to problems for local filmmakers who struggle to compete with foreign films while working around government censorship (Berra, 2013, p.182). I mention this to account for how Hollywood caters to China, always mindful of the consequences for its transnational film distribution.

The Chinese film market is enormous, in fact, even when an economic crisis overtook China in the mid 2010s they remained a valuable market for Hollywood (Carroll & Phillips, 2015, para.3). There are famous examples like *Transformers 4* (Bay, 2014) and *2012* (Emmerich, 2009), which place the Chinese government as the ultimate hero preventing the end of the world revealing Hollywood's attempt to pander to the Chinese market (Zhou, 2015, p.244). My interest is in another dimension of this transnationalism, like the presence of Hong-Kong's Chow Yun-Fat in the third *Pirates of The Caribbean* film (Zhou, 2015, p.244). These films project a false narrative about "real" Asians being "fine" with white-washed Hollywood films like *The Great Wall* [6] (Zhang, 2016) (Huey Chong, 2017, p.134). I argue that this kind of transnational film, the Hollywood film made for China, does not offer much hope for better representation.

Transnationalism is also key to understanding the filmic "rise" of China, illustrating a globalized Chinese film industry that is deliberately multinational. The chapter "Transnational Cinema: Mapping a field of study" acknowledges that transnational Chinese films were once contrasted with Hollywood[7], but multinational collaboration in production, distribution, and financing are now a more routine part of the mainstream Chinese film industries (Shaw, 2018, p.295). Another essay that explores the contradictions exacerbated by transnational cinema is Stephen Crofts' "Reconceptualizing National Cinemas." He argues that in the more fluid transnational landscape the national film has not disappeared, but that we must question how films can erase regional and ethnic differences within nations (Crofts, 1993, pp.60-61).

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[6] Asians in Asia, the dominant race that does not struggle for representation, are dismissive of Asian Americans demanding mainstream representation. Films like *The Great Wall*, *Ghost in The Shell* (Sanders, 2017), and other transnational successes that center a white lead in an Asian setting reinforce the idea that "Real" Asians i.e., not members of the Asian American diaspora, embrace these films and therefore disregard Asian American representation in film.

[7] Hollywood, however, has always been multinational in terms of distribution and exporting products to foreign markets, so much so that it is rarely considered a national American cinema.

Conversely in "The Global Return of the Wuxia Pian" Chan argues, that the film *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* highlights the fact that a Han majority flattens differences within China's national cinema narratives, which transnational funding may work around by refusing to play into the dominant national narrative (Chan, 2004, p.10). In this way transnational Chinese cinema can employ the strategies of ethnic cinema which invokes empathy beyond a nationalist sentiment, underscored in the Rob Stone's essay "Cinemas of Citizens, Cinemas of Sentiment" (Stone, 2016, p.275). Transnational Chinese cinema can point to biases, demonstrating the dominance of certain ethnic groups and challenge who legitimately represents the nation's image (Chan, 2004, p.10).

In "What is Transnational Cinema? Thinking from the Chinese situation" the capitalist nature of transnationalism is placed front and center to explain the growth of transnational production in China (Berry, 2010, p.112). "Signs of Angst and Hope" tackles how fifth-generation film makers in China used transnational funding to explore some China specific problems, which they may not have been able to do under the old national system [8](Ma, 2006, p.183). For some more examples of the effects of globalization and Chinese cinema I turn to Gina Marchetti's *Tiananmen to Times Square*, wherein she highlights how the international recognition of the Tiananmen protests reinforced China's image as an evil empire in Western cinema (Marchetti, 2006, p.16). Internally, Chinese films themselves acknowledged the displacement caused by capitalism and globalization, for instance in the manner it affected women in China (Marchetti, 2006, pp.88-89).

[8] Such China-specific problems include the adverse effects of policies made by the party, particularly the economic reforms set out by Deng Xiaoping. The use of transnational funding from Taiwan and Hong Kong allowed fifth generation filmmakers to tell stories that countered the dominant state hegemony through subtlety and direct intervention, as these films were made for an international market with profit in mind, not to appease state censors.

Fifth generation cinema was considered more authentic than the earlier Chinese national cinema, partially because of this ability to speak to the realities of Chinese life (Stone, 2018, p.275). Though this movement was funded and produced transnationally, it is more often associated with "World cinema." A key concept of World cinema, as Stone argues in "Cinemas of Citizens and Cinemas of Sentiment," is that it allows for representing communities outside the national imaginary (Stone, 2018, p.268). However, World cinema also has a Eurocentric connotation (Nagib, 2018, p.310) as the term describes alternatives to spectacle-driven commercial Hollywood, much like Italian Neorealism with its realism aesthetic (Nagib, 2018, p.310). Lúcia Nagib argues that World cinema's realist vision, placed in opposition to all things popular neglects understanding of how transnational funding and realism also limits the distribution and exhibition of these films.

The differences between popular transnational cinema and more "authentic" world cinemas belie persistent Western biases and neglect how transnational funding and distribution effect films. While *Crouching Tiger* and fifth generation cinema allowed for an alternative reading of Chinese history and identity, transnational funding and productions more generally flatten intra-regional differences within Asia. There is no better example of how Hollywood transnationalism flattens differences[9] than in the 2018 film *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Terrie Wong's 2020 article "Crazy Rich When Asian" notes that the film was funded in part by Singapore institutions with the explicit goal of encouraging ultra-rich tourism (Wong, 2020, p.2). The problem is the film is more concerned with showcasing the physical region than Singapore's ethnic diversity, thus neglecting the Malay natives of Singapore (Wong, 2020, pp.6-

[9] In this instance, differences within Asia broadly, but other films may limit the understanding of intra-regional differences in China.

7). Hollywood films represent American interests**,** its domination, hence the problem is in depicting Asian characters using an orientalist lens**,** which can**,** even if unintentionally**,** reflect American values as Douglas Kellner argues. However, it is clear films with funding from Asia have problems as well. In "What Was Asian American Cinema?" by Silvia Shin Huey Chong, she notes that local Asian American film festivals showcase films from Asia as a possible alternative to Hollywood. However, this may include whitewashed Hollywood films (the aforementioned white protagonists in Asian settings), widely accepted in China by "real" Asians, i.e., Mainland Chinese, and passing for representing Asians[10] (Huey Chong, 2017, p.134).

Transnational funding and production of films also causes problems by reinforcing old stereotypes, as in the case of *Crazy Rich Asians*. Here the orientalist frame is reconstructed with Asian Americans from the "occident" (Vijay, 2019, p.2). This is partially to distance Asian Americans from the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype, done by caricaturing Asians in Asia for contrast (Wong, 2020, p.13). The production while transnational, is still centered in Hollywood and is subject to two key forces: Asian American calls for representation and a corporate desire for Chinese money; hence the emphasis on Chinese Singaporeans over Malay natives (Zhao, 2019, pp.2-4).

There are many layers within transnational cinema and another issue that surfaces in "Stars Across Borders" is an extension of concerns raised in "Transnational Cinema: Mapping a field of Study" that emphasizes an English-speaking bias alluded to earlier (Shaw, 2018, p.296).

[10] The issue with this inclusion of Hollywood exports to China is that the inclusion of these films in Asian American film festivals can lead to a blurred conception of what constitutes Asian-American identity, as expressed in "What Was Asian American Cinema?" These films are often included to gain funding from overseas cultural organizations, and they may not be as politically motivated as diasporic Asian American cinema (Huey Chong, 2017, p.134). This is compounded by Hollywood exports that make use of Asian settings but still center white characters like *The Great Wall*.

Transnational stars face enormous difficulty achieving success if they do not speak English, which applies to actors from Asian countries (Vincendau, 2016, p.359). It should also be stated that to be a transnational star is not the same as being an international star, as transnational stars physically cross national cinema lines whereas international stars may remain in their own national cinema but are internationally recognized (Vincendau, 2016, p.359). Transnationalism allows more Asian creators to work in Hollywood because of their ability to address sizeable markets like China. These filmmakers' films, however, often reinforce American domination through this Anglophone bias.

It should be clear by now that transnationalism is a multidimensional concept, a difficult label to pin down, and some theorists have even proposed other terms such as polylocality to explain the international, locale-shifting movement in cinema. Yingjin Zhang explains polylocality in modern transnational films as a unique sense of place and locality, polylocal, meaning that it exhibits multiple spaces at once (Zhang, 2010, p.9). Zhang uses this unique social phenomenon to examine the role of globalized capitalism and film processes in constructing space across transnational boundaries (Zhang, 2010, p. 41). An example of this could be found in *Crazy Rich Asians* with its tourism focused funding, but characters made to comfort American audiences (Wong, 2020, pp.2-6). Significantly, it papers over Asian sub-regional differences and manages to always keep China's presence front and center despite the film's narrative unfolding in Singapore (Zhao, 2019, pp.2-4).

Despite the opportunities opened by the Chinese market to mainstream Hollywood exports and for Chinese collaboration through transnational production it remains predominantly biased and unrepresentative. Chinese transnational cinema may allow for renegotiating Chinese nationalist narrative, but more often it flattens the diversity of representing Asian experiences.

On the other hand, Hollywood's productions betray a desire for Chinese money and markets by pivoting toward Asia with a focus on China. Despite claims of equal opportunity associated with capitalism, these films betray an American preference for English-speaking stars over a desire to properly represent Asians. It must be said that Asian American films like *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe*, which do the work of representing a diverse Asian and Asian American community, have at least in this aspect made a breakthrough in the film industry.

Asian American Cinema

Having examined the problems in Asian representation in Hollywood and the multidimensionality of transnational cinema, I will now examine how the Asian American diaspora represents itself through the movement mentioned above, referred to as Asian American Film and Video that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. This movement was supported by many institutions that aimed to help them achieve the goal of redressing their representations (Okada, 2009, p.20). In part because Asian Americans have long been viewed through Hollywood's Orientalist lens, they sought representation that countered this (Okada, 2009, p.20). It meant representations that would allow people to see themselves as actors and agents, capable of enacting change (Ding, 1991, p.47; Fischer, 2019, para.7). A good introductory text about this movement is "Noble, Uplifting, and Boring as Hell" by Jun Okada.

The article establishes a few key features of the movement. It was publicly funded, with the goals of educating people about the real Asian American experience (Okada, 2009, p.20). This led to many allegedly bland documentaries (Okada, 2009, p.22) earning them the eponymous label of this article (Okada, 2009, p.29). Okada expands on this more in her book *Making Asian American Film and Video*, which covers the history, institutions, and trends that have shaped the movement. In the fifth chapter of her work, she notes how *Better Luck*

Tomorrow (Lin, 2002) breaks with this documentary tradition, utilizing Hollywood and Hong Kong film conventions (Okada, 2015, p.118).[11]

This film problematizes race and representation through its characters, but it is also a reflection of the new generation of Asian American filmmakers (Okada, 2015, p.122), a group characterized by a more ambiguous attitude to Asian American identity, cut off from their film "roots," but also open to new aesthetic possibilities (Okada, 2015, p.122). The film borrows Hollywood conventions and places Asian characters in narrative arcs such as "getting the girl," rather than preaching to the audience (Hillenbrand, 2008, p.51). An important turning point in the movement was the film *Chan is Missing* (Wang, 1982), which employs the generic Hollywood tropes of mystery to explore the Asian American experience (Wang, 1982)[12].

Margaret Hillenbrand argues that the success of *Better Luck Tomorrow* is because director Justin Lin was willing to speak the language of Hollywood cinema, rather than the typical independent film style (Hillenbrand, 2008, p.55). The fear of "selling out," she argues, is what has kept the films of the movement from artistic innovation and success (Hillenbrand, 2008, p.55). The original goal, she says, was to counteract stereotypes (Hillenbrand, 2008, p.53). This singular goal and the general discussion about it assume a monolithic movement (Okada, 2005, p.51), whereas the definition and filmic representation of Asian Americans is in fact multifaceted and shifting (Okada, 2005, p.51).

[11] This film's narrative uses Hollywood and Hong Kong film genre conventions to construct Asian American characters who subvert stereotypes. The deliberately noble counter stereotypes subtly critique stereotypical portrayals.

[12] *Chan is Missing* uses the story beats of a Hollywood mystery film but recast it with Asian American characters. This was unusual at the time and attracted mainstream critical praise. It disseminated the Asian American experience more widely, while also critiquing Hollywood's stereotypes.

In “Strategies of an Asian American Film maker” Ding argues that Asians in Asia are the dominant race and have not had to fight to be represented (Ding, 1991, p.54). This is not the case for Asian Americans in North America (Ding, 1991, p.54). “Crazy Rich When Asian” describes other problems with representation in transnational films like *Crazy Rich Asians,* funded by both Hollywood studios and Singaporean companies, which engaged in “implicit yellowface” by casting different ethnicities of Asians to play Singaporean Chinese, implying that diverse Asians are all interchangeable (Wong, 2020, p.12). Asian identity has been conceived as a monolith in orientalist sketches and must be countered by displays of diversity and opportunity for ethnically varied Asians, rather than erase the diversity of Asian experiences in favour of Orientalist simplification. The Asian American film *Always Be My Maybe,* which I take up later is a step forward in this regard: the Korean and Vietnamese characters are played by actors of their respective races to acknowledging this diversity.[13]

Chapter 3 Methodology

Research question and method

This paper will speculate about the trend of successful mainstream films in the 21st century’s late teens, films like *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Always Be My Maybe*, *Minari*, *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* and *The Half of It* and as to why this did not occur in the early 1990s despite the Asian American film and video movement that was followed by critically and commercially successful films like the 1993 movie *The Joy Luck Club* (Hillenbrand, 2008, p.54; Wang, 1993) and the 2002 film *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Hillenbrand, 2008, p.51).

[13] The issue here is that these depictions which practice implicit yellowface are robbing diverse populations of the chance to represent themselves, in addition to reinforcing an Orientalist simplification.

Textual analysis: Theoretical lens

Exploring this question requires accounting for racial representation that went before the trend in the 21st century teens and examining the genres to which these films belong. Stuart Hall defined stereotypes as the broad application of characteristics to a group of people in such a way that it naturalizes their oppression (Hall,1997, p.257). In Hollywood films since its very beginning Asian characters were often stereotypical, rendering them buffoonish at best and dangerous "foreigners" at worst. As such, it needs to be considered how *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe* and the characters in them push back against a very long history of stereotypes or capitulate to them. In other words, how do they reject or support the dominant ideology informing Asian American representation? While I initially planned to scrutinize stereotypes and how to resist them, I found that these films also raise questions about identity. Stereotypes are certainly a factor, but the construction of identity through filmic representation is also a concern.

As I see it, Asian American representation most prominently features in drama and romantic comedy. Both films, *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe* are centered on romance, albeit the former is a drama and the latter a comedy, and as Gina Marchetti notes, the romance genre is often a space where social and sexual taboos are played out and the dominant social view is reinforced. I will analyze the generic subversions and adherences to determine the progressive values in each of these narratives and to what degree their stories fall back on old genre conventions which reinforce heterosexist and patriarchal ideals.

I aim to explore how and why a perceptible change is visible in films like *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe* by analyzing them in the context of mainstream films noted for Asian American representation. A critical cultural studies framework is most appropriate to study

issues of representation as it is "…a critique of domination and of the ways that media culture engages in reproducing relationships of domination and oppression" (Kellner, 1995, p.4). Douglas Kellner outlines critical cultural studies as a framework that seeks to further democracy, by highlighting a "media culture" system that can reinforce old ideas about subordinating groups on grounds such as race, gender, nationality and sexual orientation (Kellner, 1995, pp.3-4). However, he also notes that media culture can help oppressed groups articulate their worldview through progressive narratives (Kellner, 1995, pp.3-4).

Kellner argues that no matter how progressive a work may be, it is still part of the money-driven system, but that does not mean it cannot be read for the progressive messages it produces (Kellner, 1995, p. 93). Inversely, just because a text is conservative, does not mean that there is no room for progressive interpretation (Kellner, 1995, p. 93). This framework pays heed to larger structural forces, such as economic pressures and progressive social movements, and explores their influence on texts (Kellner, 1995, p. 93).

Kellner's framework aims to expose racism, sexism, and other forms of domination embedded in texts with nuance (Kellner, 1995, p. 60). The framework that Kellner proposes assumes society to be a site of various struggles, and those struggles are played out on the screens and in texts (Kellner, 1995, p.58). Similarly, Stuart Hall proposes that identity is discursively constructed (Hall, 1990, p.222), and critical cultural studies enables examining representations as spaces where identity is contested (Kellner, 1995, p.58).

Like Kellner, I emphasize representation as an aspect of ideology, a concept whereby dominant ideas are normalized through popular texts, like films (Kellner,1995, p.61). To quote Bill Nichols, representations are about: "mediating the relationship between symbolic form of communication and the social historical context in which they occur and to which they refer, the

term always involves an externalization of inner experience and thought" (Nichols, 2000. p.36). In line with Kellner and Nichols I argue, the representations in *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe* may imply liberal or even progressive ideology in Hollywood, while bearing in mind they also mediate political and economic factors (Kellner, 1995, p. 93). Hollywood is an industry and China is big and immensely lucrative market to consider (Cooke, 2018, pp.299-300). Perhaps these films are a sign of things changing for the better, but they may also be part of Hollywood's attempt to pander to a significant audience segment--the growing demographic of Chinese with wealth.

Film is a unique medium, combining spoken dialogue, music, and even written text, that are all open to polysemic readings. The method used to analyse these films will be close textual analysis with attention to the formal conventions of film. Meaning in textual analysis of film, derives from the medium-specific elements like cinematography, editing, sound design, and the mise-en scene. Elfriede Fürisch defines textual analysis as "a type of qualitative analysis that, beyond the manifest content of media, focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text" (2009, p.240). I will make use of approaches in film studies, specifically semiotics--best understood as: "an attempt to elucidate a structural coherence to cinema" (Nichols, 2000, p.36). It is the study of language and meaning and in the model Christian Metz presents films can be broken down into their constitutive elements, much like language, in what are called "syntagmas" (Metz, 1992, pp.105-6) commonly referred to as sequences (Hartman, 1977, p.17). These syntagmas are the basic unit of filmic language, and this paper will examine such sequences.

Textual analysis has been critiqued for potential pitfalls. One such criticism is that the method runs the risk of relying too heavily on the text and ignoring the context (Fürisch, 2009,

p.248). At the opposite end of the spectrum, an analysis can be too focused on context; both camps can lead to underwhelming analyses (Fürisch, 2009, p.248). The goal of textual analysis is ultimately to assess the ideological potential in texts; as such one must employ a critical cultural framework that incorporates theoretical flexibility (Fürisch, 2009, pp.249-50) in the hopes of avoiding exclusive focus on the text by also considering the context.

As to why there needs to be a method and framework within which we negotiate meaning it must be said that films, at least mainstream Hollywood films, are made to appeal to as wide a demographic as possible (Kellner, 1995, p. 93). As such they cannot hold a singular meaning for all people (Kellner, 1995, p. 93). To quote Robert Kolker on the matter: "the film text often lies at a nexus of expectation and response, of cultural belief and individual resistance" (2000, p.11). Textual analysis enables us to analyze this negotiation (Fürisch, 2009, p.240), and critical cultural studies allows for understanding the dynamics of this negotiation (Kellner, 1995, p. 93).

To conclude this section, I reiterate that I employ a constructivist framework within critical cultural studies to investigate recent trends in Asian American representation. I take up two recent films *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe* for close textual analysis to reveal how meaning is shaped, which responds to larger social and political forces that influence representations (Fürisch,2009, p.240). The method relates to the framework in that constructivism does not assume identity to be fixed but rather that it is always in the process of being constructed by representational strategies and larger forces (Hall, 1997, p.25). The ultimate purpose is to evaluate how these recent texts reiterate dominant ideologies or how they may be read as challenging them by acknowledging the potential for a multivalent reading.

Chapter 4 Film Analysis.

Always Be My Maybe and *The Half of It* represent a perceived shift towards mainstream films which tell stories about Asian American characters (Zarachek, 2020, para.1; 2019, para.1). One productive approach to analyze shifts in Asian American representations in mainstream Hollywood could be to compare the successful 2018 film *Crazy Rich Asians* to an earlier equally successful 1989 film *The Joy Luck Club*, to see what has changed. However, in this project I use earlier films as a background against which to make sense of modern film representations. A mainstream blockbuster film like *Crazy Rich Asians* while centered on the experiences of Asian-American Rachel Chu, is mostly concerned with Asians in Asia (Hu, 2020, p.470); *The Joy Luck Club* is primarily about Asian Americans (Jin, 2019, p.65) and centers the construction of Asian American identity. Analysing those two films would involve comparing different national constructions of Asian identity, not the construction of Asian American identity. The means by which Asian American identity is constructed, and the specific terms this paper will make use of, will be discussed later, but first I briefly outline the plots of *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe*.

The Half of It is a romantic drama centered on Chinese American high-schooler Ellie Chu, who lives with her widowed father Edwin in an apartment by the train station: Edwin is chronically depressed and Ellie makes most of the money in the house by writing her classmates' assignments. Ellie writes a love letter for a classmate Paul to fellow student Aster. As the two work together to help Paul talk to Aster, Ellie slowly realizes that she loves Aster, comes out of her shell, and comes to see Paul as a friend. Paul bonds with Ellie, mistaking their relationship for romance. She rejects him, exposes their lie but they ultimately make peace before Ellie leaves for college.

The Half of It has a muted color palette, marking characters frustrated by their existence in a rural setting, in sharp contrast with *Always Be My Maybe*, a bright and colorful romantic comedy set in San Francisco. It is the story of Sasha Tran and Marcus Kim, two childhood sweethearts, who go their separate ways after the death of Marcus's mother Judy. Marcus never leaves home while Sasha establishes herself as an international celebrity chef who spends all her time travelling. The two reunite when Sasha opens a restaurant in their hometown, San Francisco. Marcus is initially attached to a free-spirited woman named Jenny and Sasha finds herself dating Keanu Reeves, but the two wind up falling in love again.

The two films I analyse are selected for their sequences which directly address the narrative of hypersexual Asian women being available to white men, and the general nature of Asian identity in the diaspora. In *The Half of It* these are scenes where the protagonist Ellie Chu rejects the advances of the white men in her life. In the scenes revolving around diasporic representations Ellie and her father engage in Chinese cultural activities, which involve Ellie's Caucasian friend Paul, who attempts to understand and participate in them. This shows the limits of what Souchou Yao calls "performative Chineseness," which is how Chinese people in the diaspora will do "Chinese" things to maintain connection to their "homeland"--the alleged source of Chinese identity (Yao, 2009, p.256).

Much like *The Half of It*, Nahnatchka Khan's 2019 film *Always Be My Maybe* features scenes of "performative Chineseness," namely the scenes where a Korean, Marcus Kim engages with the Chinese diaspora. The scenes with Keanu Reeves, as a fictionalized version of himself, both capitulate to and critique the dominant figuration of Asian women as always available to white men. Equally relevant to this are the scenes involving Marcus's ex-girlfriend who is a total rejection of the model minority stereotype, yet oddly reinforces other stereotypes. Analyzing and

comparing these sequences will highlight how the films differ in the terrain of Asian American diasporic representation. I turn now to examine these sequences in greater detail.

Central to this paper is examining how these two films depart from stereotypical constructions of Asian characters' gender and sexuality in American films, that historically have been caricatures. The two films selected also demonstrate the limits of the diasporic reality, but they each do so in different ways. *Always Be My Maybe* is a lighthearted romantic comedy with a few dramatic moments, which has more in common with the consumerism driven "chick flicks" that Hillary Radner describes, whereas *The Half of It* is a romantic drama with mostly situational and subtle humor representative of what Radner calls "smart chick flicks" [14] (Radner, 2018, p.166). Their approaches to the diaspora and sexuality are vastly different. This manifests in four sequences from the two films.

Two of these sequences deal with the performative aspects and limits of diaspora, particularly the Chinese diaspora, even though between the four main characters only Ellie Chu is ethnically Chinese. The other two sequences deal with the construction of Asian women's sexuality and gender in relation to white men and to Asian men. The first of these two I discuss is a sequence from *Always Be My Maybe* that takes place in San Francisco's Chinatown, which I compare to a similar sequence from *The Half of It*--both demonstrating the limits of the diasporic imagination.

[14] These "Smart chick flicks" are considered a response to consumerist women-centric films that came out in the 2000s. Films directed by women, with women at the center of their stories, much like the Hollywood women's picture, are often independent critically successful and rely on small-screen distribution, as *The Half of It* does. The earlier consumerism driven films were deliberate comedies like *The Devil Wears Prada* that emphasized empowerment through a neoliberal understanding of buying power.

The Limits of Diaspora: Performative Chineseness

Always Be My Maybe is set in San Francisco and the sequence takes place in the city's Chinatown. Before proceeding any further, it is important to note that neither of the main characters are Chinese: Marcus is Korean, and Sasha a Vietnamese, are portrayed by Randal Park and Ali Wong, respectively. In contrast with transnational films like *Crazy Rich Asians* that practice an implicit "yellowface" by having ethnically different Asians play Chinese Singaporeans (Wong, 2020, p.12), this film has Korean and Vietnamese actors portray characters of their own ethnicity. It subverts the generalized aggregation which comes from racial miscasting in transnational films and is mindful of Hollywood's monolithic conception of "Asian" identity, which prevents a full and grounded appreciation of Asian American diversity (Huey Chong, 2017, p.134). This idea is also problematized in Asian American Cinema, a film movement that attempted to break up the monolithic imaginary by showing diverse Asian ethnicities in film (Okada, 2005, p.51).

Asian American cinema is unique and could also be classified as ethnic cinema, as it challenges the dominant national narrative that America is a white nation (Stone, 2016, p.275). This alternative to nationalist hegemony is visible in transnational films such as in *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* that counters the national "Han" rhetoric in China by depicting the country's different ethnic groups (Chan, 2004, p.10). Modern transnational productions like *Crazy Rich Asians* flatten intra-regional differences under the simplified Asian label, while maintaining its focus on China (Zhao, 2019, pp.2-4), whereas Asian American Cinema problematizes monolithic ideas about diverse Asian culture. *Always Be My Maybe* shows the complexities of inter-Asian diaspora, as does *The Half of It*. The sequence I discuss touches on the ramification of being "the Asian" in the diaspora.

Specifically, this sequence embodies the problem with so-called performative Chineseness for people in the diaspora (Yao, 2009, p.256): Marcus, who as mentioned, is Korean, takes Sasha to a restaurant where they get dim sum. Sasha learns to appreciate the food but remarks that the Chinese women who serve them still stare at them disappointedly because neither of them speak Cantonese. When Marcus speaks in Cantonese it receives a joyous response from the servers and cooks of the restaurant and gets him an extra serving of Shu mai. Pointedly *he* gets the extra serving, made explicit when a staff member sees Sasha attempting to grab one, comes back over, and pushes the dish to his side of the table. It is worth noting that earlier on Sasha said the food in the restaurant was always "terrible" among other remarks that mark her as attempting to break free from her Asian heritage. She is in sharp contrast to Marcus who manages to assimilate within the Chinese diaspora despite being Korean.

The scene described above ties into both the concepts of performative Chineseness and the discourse around understanding diaspora as an issue of Creolization as opposed to the Chinese film narratives about returning or belonging to a homeland (Ang, 2001, p.44). Marcus is an example of the limits of performative Chineseness: merely doing "Chinese" things like speaking the language and having dim sum is too tenuous, a porous boundary, which could potentially allow anyone to be considered Chinese (Yao, 2009, p.256). In Marcus's case, based on the treatment he receives from the restaurant workers, he is rewarded for performing the diasporic role of speaking Cantonese, and his assertion later in the sequence that they are "his people" which I return to later. In contrast, Sasha demonstrates a desire to break free from the constraints of China: she does not speak the language, initially dismisses the dim sum and as a character places far more emphasis on being a mobile restaurateur.

It is worth noting the dichotomy between these two characters as it pertains to their relationship to mobility within the diaspora. Sasha, as mentioned, is a mobile restaurateur, an Asian American who launches restaurants that cater to white people. Her emphasis is on travel, the routes taken to get where she is, not where she came from, or China, which does not factor into who she is other than as an oppositional force to her own heritage. This is potentially the ideal described in "Can One Say No to Chineseness?". Sasha is a diasporic Asian subject who is defined by hybridization, creolization, and the new locales she occupies (Ang, 1998, p.44). Here Sasha's character resonates with *Crazy Rich Asians*, which keeps China in focus even though it is set outside China and ties Asian Americans to occidental values (Vijay, 2019, p.2). She comments colloquially: "Chinese people are hella gangsta" --referring to every car parked in Chinatown using handicapped stickers but without a single handicapped passenger. She is meant to exemplify creolized American identity.

As part of her hybrid identity Sasha learns to love cooking from Marcus's Korean mother Judy, with whom she engages in a kind of Korea-centric performative Asianness. It manifests in how she prepares food and the restaurant she establishes by the end of the film using all of Judy's recipes and aesthetic taste. Marcus seems almost entirely defined by his origins, his hometown of San Francisco, specifically a small block in San Francisco's Chinatown, which he refers to as his block and the denizens as "his" people. In this way, he too takes part in a creolization process. Unlike Sasha who emphasizes route and travel, he emphasizes the destination as a Korean man who has learned the Chinese dialect and generally accepts Chinatown as his preferred locale (Ang, 1998, p.44). In another sequence the two engage in a conversation about setting their goals, hers to move and travel and become, his to remain, and support, and be. He has found his place by assimilating within the Chinese diaspora while Sasha

has made a space for herself in modernist houses and restaurants where she offers Asian-inspired food to white people.

This is something that Marcus directly confronts her with later, demonstrating that he believes that her food is inauthentic and made to appeal to non-Asians. Sasha herself admits this when she is planning a menu and suggests having it printed on rice paper, because it will appeal to white people, which her white assistant gleefully admits. This is also brought up through their relationship with one another: Marcus, despite seeming more grounded and loved is actually stuck in the past while surrounded by a community, which Sasha with all her success lacks. Many theorists think of the Chinese diaspora as the new center of Chinese identity, through community, the same force which rewards Marcus' performative Chineseness (Ang, 2013, p.21). This communal aspect of marking identity is somewhat absent in *The Half of It* for reasons that will soon become clear.

The Half of It takes place in a fictional rural town called Squahamish where majority of the citizens are white and attend the same church, high school, and most likely college too. In this regard the lead character Ellie Chu stands out like a sore thumb. A Chinese girl who makes up half of the Chinese diaspora in her town, the other half being her father, she plays the organ at church but is not Christian and is often unable to attend social functions either due to local prejudice or her own work schedule. As one of the only two members of the diaspora, she lacks the community option available to Sasha and Marcus, but that does not stop her from performing some activities which mark her as being Chinese. This includes the food she consumes; her home indicates that her family prefers a decidedly East Asian palate (with soy sauce in the background shots of her kitchen). In the sequence analysed below her food habits are a subject of interrogation, eliciting curiosity from her white classmate.

In this sequence we see Ellie opening up to her classmate Paul, initially over a game of ping pong. He asks her what her favourite food is when she supplies braised pork on white rice, and he asks if there is five spice powder in the dish. This catches her off guard--perplexed as to how he knows about a Chinese seasoning. He admits to looking at the spices in her kitchen as he is a sausage maker always looking for new flavours and spices. This leads them to discussing his taco sausages which are not appreciated in his own family, and her speaking about her deceased mother, who would have been the third member of the diaspora in this small American town. This serious scene is followed by two scenes, one showing Ellie and Paul running/riding a bike down a country road, and another of Ellie texting Aster in the engineers' booth. This scene seems irrelevant to the issues of diaspora but emphasizes the intimacy and separation both girls experience.

In the scene Ellie shares a text conversation with Aster. The conversation is snarky, quippy, and flirtatious, and shot in medium close ups to emphasize the intimacy on display. While Aster is herself Hispanic as opposed to Chinese, the two are both outliers in the town: Ellie is invisible or mocked, while Aster is either sought after or spat upon by their white counterparts. Aster is not aware of whom she is truly texting, and both girls are isolated. They are framed against empty windows at night emphasizing their isolation, separation, but also their common connection.

In the next scene Ellie and Paul discuss Aster, Paul is unable to articulate his feelings or grasp that Ellie is herself in love with Aster and thinks she is just waxing poetic because she is smarter than him. Ellie assures him that she gets that he loves Aster for other than her father who became clinically depressed after her mother's death, she has never seen anyone care this much for someone. This comparison between a white man and her father is important. While

seemingly having nothing to do with diaspora it serves to tie her identity to Squahamish and her hybrid identity.

The next scene is where several strands come together: Paul makes the taco sausages, which his family will not accept or taste, and serves them instead to Ellie and her father Edwin. They are hesitant, but quickly devour them. The initial medium close-up shot panning between Edwin and Ellie is significant as it shows both parties' initial hesitation to eat this new food, and then enjoying it; this is followed by a wide shot showing Paul grinning as the family eats his speciality. The shot is also significant as it has been used throughout the film to signal Ellie and her father's unity as a family. Including Paul symbolically introduces a Euro-American element in their diasporic world, much like his international "taco sausages" have been added to their diet. Acknowledging this loosening of the influence of China is recommended in "Can One Say No to Chineseness?" as its focus is on hybridization (Ang, 1998, p.44). The final shot of the scene involves Ellie and Paul, now in medium close-up, in contrast to Edwin, who is in full shot as both teens drink Yakult, a Japanese probiotic, which Paul supplies. This borrowing of Chinese and Asian elements by Paul is significant for a few reasons.

Firstly, it shows the limits of the diaspora as performed, for while Paul often partakes in Chinese, Japanese, or other ethnic groups food practices, he does not become these ethnicities, thus demonstrating the limits of such porous conceptions of identity (Yao, 2009, p.256). Second, he either finds these elements on his own or picks them up from Ellie and her father. There is one scene where he is mixing sausage meat with Ellie's father while she is on a mountain trip with Aster. Edwin and he mix the meat differently and Paul begins imitating Edwin's particular manner of doing it. But it goes much deeper, for there is a scene near the end where Edwin attempts to express his concerns for Ellie in English, but failing, he switches to Mandarin, and it

appears that Paul understands him, which has been a notable problem for Edwin throughout the film: his difficulty with English. Thus, while demonstrating the limits of diasporic performativity, Paul manages to absorb in his Squahamish surrounding an understanding of the two diasporic citizens' Mandarin.

"I Punched Keanu Reeves": Gender and Race

These films feature Asian characters who do not fit into the historically stereotypical roles Hollywood has engendered. There is a century of film in existence and in that century mainstream films often relegated Asian men and women to roles that justified their domination, both physical and sexual, by white men (Marchetti, 1993, p.6). But there is also a half century of independent cinema that tries to correct these stereotypes by providing alternative representations that are not model minorities or racist caricatures (Okada, 2009, p.20). The problem with the latter is that in an effort to create positive representations they created a film movement that came across as pretentious and boring, which later directors rejected (Okada, 2009, p.22).

Always Be My Maybe and *The Half of It* owe something to this long history and each speaks to it in a different manner. *Always Be My Maybe* features a sequence of a party gone wrong that begins when Marcus and his date for the evening, Jenny, enter Keanu Reeves's apartment. While of Chinese descent Reeves is most known for playing decidedly white characters like John Wick and Neo from *The Matrix*. Thus, combined with his status, physique and possession of a spacious apartment, his relationship with Sasha seems solid. However, the sequence, which involves a drunken party game gone wrong, subverts the domineering white masculinity trope.

In the sequence Reeve's dominance over Marcus is established early: he has a spacious apartment, and he has Sasha wrapped around his arm. However, once he suggests a version of truth or dare that he himself describes as "apocalyptic," things take a turn: Sasha confesses to having had an eighteen-year long crush on Marcus, and as they ponder what could have been and why they never acted on such feelings they are framed in two to three seconds medium close ups. The cinematographic framing emphasizes their intimacy--their genuine emotions. The game plays on with Jenny and Marcus becoming increasingly dishevelled, as has Reeves, until things escalate, and Reeves asserts his dominance by angrily barking the names of Chinese diplomats at Marcus. This escalation continues until Reeves and Marcus literally threaten to kill one another and Reeves, having broken a vase on his head, challenges Marcus to punch him. The scene plays out with Marcus and Reeves fighting, or rather, Reeves gets punched in the face and Marcus gets put in a chokehold. Sasha intervenes, calls Reeves out, and leaves with Marcus in tow.

Jenny, surprisingly enough, does not leave, she stays, visibly excited by the gratuitous violence that just transpired, although claiming to want to talk to Reeves about her community center. Jenny is depicted as a bit of an odd duck, an Asian woman with dreadlocks who runs slam poetry sessions, steals dishes, and basically avoids playing into any model minority stereotypes (Ono & Pham, 2009, p.80). And yet she ditches Marcus after he loses the fight to Reeves, one could argue because both she and Reeves are equally pretentious and mildly unbalanced, although it does fit into the old pattern of coupling the Asian woman with a white man[15]. Gina Marchetti has pointed out that historically the Asian woman has always been

[15] As mentioned, Reeves is of mixed heritage--he is part Chinese American. Widely known for playing Caucasian characters in films like *The Matrix* and *John Wick* amongst others, he has played characters of partial Asian heritage before but rarely plays explicitly Asian characters. However, he occupies a unique liminal space, in that a niche Chinese-American audience familiar with his mixed ethnicity would recognize here that he is playing the stereotypical white male who "wins" Jenny, which the film might be mocking.

depicted as subservient and quiet (Marchetti, 1993, p.6). Jenny, however, is neither of these things. In fact, an earlier scene points out she is not terribly domestic: Jenny and her domestic abilities are framed as being off-putting in a way that present her going against conventional representations of Asian women.

After leaving Marcus and Sasha get an Uber. The shots in the car are initially wide shots to demonstrate the distance between them, but these are followed by medium shots as their argument escalates and medium close-ups as they hit verbal soft spots. The scene takes a turn--after Sasha tells Marcus that his mediocre life is the result of his fear, and that he never goes for what he wants--he kisses her. While initially a medium shot, the shot becomes a wide one as Sasha pushes him off. When they resume kissing, they are framed in medium shots and eventually a wide shot.

The wide shot here demonstrates the space that separates them, which they eventually cross, not when Marcus goes to kiss her initially, but after a moment of genuine emotional intimacy. The sequence leading up to their romantic union is a complete inversion of the classic Hollywood narrative as described by Gina Marchetti in *Romance and the "Yellow Peril*." In that scenario the Asian woman will often go off with a white man and reject the Asian man who is depicted as either more brutish or outright malicious, and sometimes the affection of a woman is secured through violence enacted on the other man (Marchetti, 1993, p.6). Not here. The violence that Reeves demonstrates disgusts and upsets Sasha, and she even calls out Marcus for partaking in it, and it is ultimately the reason she leaves the apartment. As mentioned, this display of machismo is taken to an absurd degree when Reeves attempts to intimidate Marcus by shouting the names of all the Chinese dignitaries he is familiar with, literally wielding Asian

culture as a weapon to fight an Asian man, [16] but to no avail; what brings Sasha and Marcus together is his genuine affection and vulnerability.

While this sequence does not figure the white male's triumphal narrative arc of getting the Asian woman typical in classic Hollywood, it does not necessarily leave the Asian man in a much better light. Sasha is freed from her role of going to the victor of a fight like a trophy, but Marcus still loses a fight to a white man in a competition for dominance over a woman. And while the film clearly shows that this sort of masculine contest is not the way to build a relationship unless one is like Jenny or Reeves, i.e., shallow, it still emasculates Marcus. Although one could argue that since Marcus was almost killed in a chokehold the focus here ought to be on the monstrous violence a white man enacts to mark his territory, the fact remains that Marcus loses his date. However, this in a roundabout way corrects another, less discussed Hollywood stereotype that has been around since at least the 1960s.

Bruce Lee instigated a spike in the popularity of martial arts films in the United States, which were mostly from Hong Kong, leading to American imitators (Cai & Zhu, 2013, p.8). Some have discussed how these films could lead to positive portrayals of Asian people as noble fighters, and how Hong Kong genre conventions would influence Justin Lin while making *Better Luck Tomorrow*, discussed below, but it also created the stereotype that all people of Asian descent know something about martial arts (Cai & Zhu, 2013, p.55)--which this fight with Reeves helpfully subverts. Marcus is horribly outmatched; he throws one sloppy punch before

[16] This is a unique instance of violence against an Asian man for domination of an Asian woman enacted in a verbal fight where the white man attempts to invoke powerful Asian political figures to assert dominance. Marchetti notes in *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"* that typically the white protagonist will establish himself as different and superior to this Eastern other to assert dominance (Marchetti, 1993, p.204) but here Reeves attempts to intimidate an Asian man by wielding a heritage he lays claim to. While Reeves is of Chinese descent, he is, as mentioned, more famous for playing white characters. However, if one were to consider him an Asian man, then that makes this fight even more significant as this is the rare instance of an Asian man trying to fight an Asian man for an Asian woman using knowledge of Asia, a bold-faced refusal of the old Hollywood formula if there ever was one.

being expertly placed in a chokehold by a white man who has spent his life doing martial arts tricks in front of a camera. And truth be told, none of the Asian characters in this movie prove to be terribly good fighters, because like in real life, there is rarely cause and occasion to prove oneself as a good fighter.

Better Luck Tomorrow mentioned above is an important experiment in Asian American Cinema as it used mainstream techniques to critique Asian stereotypes and achieved critical success.[17] The problem that early films in the movement were not entertaining (Okada, 2015, p.64) led to a new generation of Asian American filmmakers who would try to create films addressing issues of representation in more subtle ways than before (Okada, 2015, p.122). There are two methods of doing this: providing an abject negative image, to allow for alternative readings and critique of stereotypes or using the language of Hollywood to create more rounded characters[18] (Okada, 2015, p.122). *Always Be My Maybe* seems to fall into the latter category, creating a glossy romantic comedy with Asian leads, but it also dabbles in the abject with Jenny, and to a certain extent Marcus. In this way the film walks the line between abject imagery and Hollywood.

On the other hand, while Sasha is not portrayed as any of the stereotypes applied to Asian women on the screen, she does challenge some gendered conventions. She is not submissive, she does not exist to satisfy either Marcus or Reeves, and her character arc is about accepting her place in the diaspora and the role of her childhood's environment in shaping her. There is an

[17] The film's significance lies in it using Hollywood tropes and crime thriller conventions to tell the story of Asian Americans. It opened new possibilities for Asian Americans who were confined to either degrading stereotypes or noble and uplifting stories typical to the Asian American film and video movement.

[18] Abject imagery is exemplified by Jon Moritsugu in his film *Terminal USA*, which has a deliberately ugly, violent, and unpleasant aesthetic, characters, and narrative to point out the absurdity of model minority stereotypes (Okada, 2015, p.72). Those filmmakers who use Hollywood conventions are less radical in their vision, but often more successful, as they create characters within the dominant style who happen to be Asian, allowing for a broader understanding of what it means to be part of the Asian American diaspora.

oppositional reading to be found here, for while she is Vietnamese, she learns to cook from Marcus's Korean mother, Judy. Thus, her source of independence as a celebrity chef comes from a place other than her own heritage, indeed it comes from her love interest's family; and her trajectory draws a full circle when she recreates Judy's kitchen as a restaurant acknowledging the value in Marcus's homelife. In this way it could be argued, she capitulates to a man's culture, whereas before she was doing what she wanted to do even if it was ultra-modern and more about distancing herself from her roots.

There is a sequence in *The Half of It* which plays out very differently but reflects similar stereotypes. The sequence follows Paul when he approaches Ellie at the vending machine after a football game; her arms are full of bottles, and she asks him to help her drink one. He does so and then suddenly tries to kiss Ellie who rejects his advances. This leads to him confessing that he may be in love with her and he thought she was in love with him. She reveals she is not by trying to desperately tell Aster, who walked in on this, that it is not what it appears. He responds to this by inferring that Ellie is in love with Aster, and saying she is going to hell. Alone, Ellie walks home, when Trig, Aster's boyfriend, approaches her; Ellie thinks Trig knows that she has been flirting with Aster--until he says what may be the funniest line in the film--that he knows Ellie is in love with him. He also attempts to kiss her, but Edwin sprays him with a hose and Ellie returns to her room.

This sequence addresses a common trope that white men assume Asian women are always interested in them and while there is no Asian man for Ellie to be romantically linked to like in *Always Be My Maybe*, her character still represents a subversion of the formula. Here it is crucial to note that Ellie, pursued by both men, reflects the larger cultural narrative, which sustains such assumptions. Granted, Paul merely projects how he feels after spending so much

time with Ellie, but Trig is egotistical to a comic degree. Edwin's involvement in the sequence is minimal, but important as he assumes the role of protective father keeping his daughter safe from a man's unwanted advances, reversing the Hollywood formula (Marchetti, 1993, p.5). Here the Asian patriarch protects his daughter from the assailing white man but the larger narrative inversion is in Ellie's characterization.

In terms of the strategies of Asian American filmmaking to counter stereotypes Alice Wu seems to walk the fine line, presenting her characters as flawed individuals, who live in reduced circumstances but not abject ones. The Chus do not fit into the model minority image, living as they do in an apartment by the railroad, with Edwin in a low-level job due to his inability to speak English (going against the myth that Asian Americans do not need social programs to succeed) (Ono & Pham, 2009, p.80). Ellie makes money by cheating for other students and deceives a girl who sees her as a friend. While not abject, it does bear similarities with the Asian American Cinema movement that went from documentaries rejecting stereotypes to using Hollywood strategies that create characters implicitly rejecting stereotypes (Okada, 2015, p.122). In a way Ellie Chu has more in common with the star students in *Better Luck Tomorrow,* who use their model minority brains to commit crime (Hillenbrand, 2008, p.59).

Hillary Radner and Gina Marchetti explain romance films and their silent era predecessors were where social and sexual taboos were enacted and ultimately punished, reinforcing a status quo of white man and white woman or woman of color with a white man in matrimony (Radner, 2018, pp.159; Marchetti, 1993, p.6). Ellie subverts this as she does not go with the white man, or any man, negating longstanding imagery of her as the hypersexual Asian woman available for the white man's pleasure. While such a bold interpretation marks Ellie as a figure making a radical break from previous representations, it may also relegate her to what Celine Shimizu

cautions against, an almost puritanical image of an Asian woman (Shimizu, 2007, p.38). There is another scene where she and Aster take a swim in a mountain spring and Ellie is revealed to be wearing layers of clothes even in the water, referring to herself as a "Russian nesting doll of clothes." She is a sharp contrast to a figure like Jenny.

Jenny, as has been discussed, is a wild character who goes off with Keanu Reeves by the end of the film, capitulating to the narrative convention of pairing the Asian woman with a white man. Yet it is still a subversion as she is hypersexual but not in a manner that caters to white male desire. This character allows for a reading of Asian female sexuality not often encountered, one which Celine Shimizu recommends reappraising rather than outright rejecting for fear of stereotypes (Shimizu, 2007, p.38); and in this way she is arguably more progressive than Ellie, who while being a lesbian is not sexualized. This arguably is because *The Half of It* is about longing and separation whereas *Always Be My Maybe* is about coming together.

All said and done, Sasha is a heterosexual subversion of Asian stereotypes, depicted in an active relationship with Marcus, while also considering having a child on her own if necessary. As for the depiction of Ellie, since the film is largely about teenagers pining after one another and communicating in isolation, it does not make sense to narratively explore her sexuality in anything but the awkward quirky flirting she has with Aster. And in a way Ellie's mere romantic thoughts about Aster are subversive, defying heteronormativity and one could argue that *Always Be My Maybe* is somewhat less subversive as it is, at the end of the day a more typical heterosexual love story, in line with *Better Luck Tomorrow* which played into Hollywood conventions.

Conclusion

The construction of identity is a process, it is a matter of contestation, never complete. It is done through representations in media like film and television, but historically the representations of Asians have been created by outsiders projecting their own imaginative constructs. As a result, these representations often reflect an Orientalist imaginary, an Asian identity informed by and reflective of the outsiders who create them. In recent years there has been an attempt to reimagine the representation of Asians, particularly in Hollywood films like *Crazy Rich Asians*. However, Hollywood films reveal biases that belie the complexity of and diversity within Asian identity.

The Half of It and *Always Be My Maybe* are part of this successful trend in reimagining Asian representations in film, tackling established tropes used to represent Asian American identity. These are two films that actively reject and negotiate stereotypes to provide a fuller and richer construction of Asian American identity and the diaspora. In *The Half of It* the narrative of Asian American sexuality is flipped on its head through subtle characterization and *Always Be My Maybe* uses genre conventions to create characters that move beyond orientalist constructions. *Always Be My Maybe* shows Asian-Americans can be actors and protagonists in a romantic comedy without building relationships on violence, an old convention in depicting Asian American romance. *Always Be My Maybe* and *The Half of It* also demonstrate how diasporic identity can be the subject of creolization, hybridization, and adaptation in contrast to some ideas about fixed identity in the Asian diaspora.

Both films reject Orientalist constructions, but also capitulate to them in other ways: Asian men do not win duels against white men in *Always Be My Maybe* and in *The Half of It* an Asian woman is not sexually objectified while still given room to explore her sexuality. Marcus

losing a physical fight is a subversion of a more recent stereotype--all Asians know kung fu--and Marcus's romance with Sasha after losing a fight is a direct inversion of the classic Hollywood formula. In *The Half of It* Ellie while not depicted as sexual is still portrayed as a lesbian who has to fend off white men, challenging heterosexist genre tropes. The films play out the consequences of the cultural scripts about Asian Americans, such as Keanu Reeves attempting to fight for dominance over an Asian woman, only for her to leave, or Ellie's white male classmates concluding that she is attracted to them.

The Half of It and *Always Be My Maybe* negotiate and interrogate stereotypes and represent a refreshing change from older representational conventions, though it is not the first time this has happened. The difference now is that the films are achieving mainstream success and can be lucrative at the box office. In recent years China has become a profitable market for exporting films, and there are noticeable attempts by major Hollywood studios to appeal to its audience. Films like *Crazy Rich Asians* are part of the Hollywood effort to pander to the expanded Chinese audience with disposable income. However, *Always Be My Maybe* and *The Half of It* owe more to the Asian American Cinema movement than to Hollywood or Chinese transnational cinema. *The Half of It* and *Always be My Maybe* strive to represent a broader cross-section of Asian Americans experiences in the diaspora.

These films are mindful of the history of Asian American cinema and draw on mainstream conventions to communicate their message. In this way *The Half of It* and *Always Be My Maybe* are a welcome change in Hollywood's formula while responding to the past. And these films are part of the mosaic where *Minari* and *Parasite*, two films centered on Asian characters won Oscars for two consecutive years. In addition to what these films signify they are

part of a trend of successful Asian filmmakers, and I will stay attuned to what comes next from these creative directors and this community.

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