

**GET OUT, HIROKI TANAKA: ASIAN-AMERICAN
CHARACTERS IN BLACK FILMS AND BLACK ACTIVISM**

by

Naomi Yoko Ward

**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

UNIVERSITY HONORS

with a major in

**Communication Studies
in the Department of Language, Philosophy, and Communication Studies**

Approved:

Capstone Mentor
Dr. Jennifer Peeples

Departmental Honors Advisor
Dr. Debra E. Monson

University Honors Program Director
Dr. Kristine Miller

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

Spring 2020

**Get Out, Hiroki Tanaka: Asian-Americans in Black Stories
and Black Activism**

Naomi Yoko Ward

Utah State University

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship Asian-Americans have with black Americans in order to determine how Asian Americans navigate their role in American racial discourse. Additionally, this study considers the causes and effects of Asian-American participation in movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM). This topic is explored through the analysis of Asian-American characters in black stories told through four films: *Fruitvale Station*, *Get Out*, *The Hate U Give*, and *Sorry to Bother You*. To narrow the scope of this research, I placed focus on characters in works that have been published since 2013, when the Black Lives Matter movement was officially formed and founded. Media functions both as a reflection of the society it is made in as well as an influence on how society perceives the world. The pervasiveness and power that media has in the world, particularly concerning social issues and social justice, makes this lens appropriate for studying race relations in the United States over the past several years. Issues concerning racial tension in the United States are often framed in a color-line binary – Black Americans versus White Americans – but Asian-Americans tend to fall in a racial position that is different from, yet relative to these two groups. This unique position gives Asian-Americans a choice to either actively combat systemic racism in solidarity with black activists or embrace the “model minority” role and avoid involvement in what is ultimately a contentious and sometimes dangerous conflict.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, Asian-American, black activism, media representation

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my mentor, Jennifer Peeples, for generously offering her guidance and expertise, for her kind encouragement, and for being patient with me when, after four years, I still have a million questions about APA style. I would also like to thank Debra Monson, my departmental honors advisor, for reassuring me that writing research about films and television is not only worthwhile, but important.

A special thanks to my professors in the Communication Studies, Journalism, and English departments for teaching me the critical thinking and research skills I needed to complete this paper and for teaching me how to be a more thoughtful and engaged writer and person. I'm full of gratitude for all the people I worked with in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Finally, a massive thank you to my family, who have always supported me and my education; to my brother, who recommends the strangest and best movies, including some of the films in this analysis; and my best friends, Zoe Hall and Sam Hendricks, who have listened to my every complaint and loved and empowered me for the last four years – and for all the times they told me to go work on my capstone when I should have been working on my capstone. They make me a better and smarter and funnier person.

Introduction

If race and privilege are considered on a sort of spectrum, white Americans are certainly high on the scale. There are social and economic advantages directly and indirectly associated with having white skin in the United States. Knowing this, and acknowledging the obvious disadvantages that come with having black skin in America, this begs the question: where and how do Asian-Americans fit on this spectrum? It's a complicated question. There are many factors that influence privilege – race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc. Further, the large range of diversity within the Asian-American population (i.e. the United Nations recognizes 48 different countries on the Asian continent) means there is no definite answer. However, while it is clear that Asian-Americans do not fit neatly into any one category, it is also clear that, by American standards, Asian-Americans are not white, nor are they usually considered black. Asian-Americans are then often faced with an ethical dilemma of sorts: is it best to actively work with movements like Black Lives Matter or, if possible, to perpetuate the “model minority” role, accept any advantages that come with it, and take a neutral or even opposing stance on issues like police brutality and racism in the criminal justice system?

This situation is shown in various works in the past several years in Asian-American characters that play roles in black stories, particularly stories dealing with racial tension and conflict. The stories considered in this study deal with issues

concerning racism and are created by black artists primarily for a black audience. While the Asian-American roles in these stories are often small, these characters' interactions and choices in these fictional stories give some indication of how Americans perceive them in everyday interactions and may suggest how they ought to maintain or change that perception. This study seeks to use examples of these characters to more concretely define the perceptions of Asian-Americans in this sphere, allowing a more informed decision on how Asian-Americans may want to proceed as movements like Black Lives Matter grow in the United States and internationally. This analysis primarily focuses on four Asian-American characters in four films created by black filmmakers: *Fruitvale Station*, *Get Out*, *The Hate U Give*, and *Sorry to Bother You*. In each film, I will explore questions such as: How do Asian-American characters engage with issues of race and violence against black characters, if at all? What kind of relationship do Asian-American characters have with the black protagonists? What kind of relationship do they have with the antagonists? How are Asian-American stereotypes presented in their characters' portrayals in black stories, especially compared to stereotypes perpetuated by white storytellers?

Context

Black Lives Matter

Black Americans have faced continuous discrimination and marginalization in the United States, from the early enslavement of African peoples in the early 16th century up to modern day institutionalized racism, taking form in phenomena such as police brutality and disproportionately high incarceration rates. Although the concept of racism in America is not new, Black Lives Matter was founded only six years ago by three co-founders: Patrice Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi. Drawing inspiration from civil rights movements that came before it, the movement began online when the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter began circulating in response to the death of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his shooter, policeman George Zimmerman in July 2013. Over the next year, Black Lives Matter gained momentum after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in Ferguson, Missouri and New York, New York, respectively. When juries in both cases failed to indict the police involved, the protests that followed put BLM at the forefront of national news (Anderson, 2016).

According to the organization's website, as of 2019, there are over forty active BLM chapters around the world. Their mission statement reads:

The Black Lives Matter Global Network is a chapter-based, member-led organization whose mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes ... We affirm our humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation (About Black Lives Matter).

Even as the movement grows, BLM has received criticism from multiple groups for its message and practices. Hashtags created in response to #BlackLivesMatter include #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter, with “blue lives” intended to represent law enforcement. Blue Lives Matter, officially recognized as a nonprofit organization based in New York City, has their own mission statement displayed on their website:

We are Blue Lives Matter NYC, a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization created to help Law Enforcement Officers and their families during their time of need. Members of the organization are both police officers and members from other state and federal agencies that are dedicated to making a difference and demonstrating that "BLUE LIVES MATTER" (Blue Lives Matter NYC).

A national survey conducted in 2015 by PBS NewsHour and the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion reported that black and white Americans had largely different views on Black Lives Matter. The findings showed that 65% of African-Americans indicated that they agreed with BLM, while only 31% of white residents agreed. 42% of white residents said they had no opinion or were unsure. Additionally, 67% of African-Americans compared to 46% of white residents called BLM a movement rather than just a slogan. 59% of white residents saw BLM as a distraction from “the real issues of racial discrimination” while 65% of African-Americans said BLM did focus attention on “the real issues of racial discrimination.” 82% of African-Americans perceived BLM as a mainly a non-violent movement compared to only 43% of white residents. When categorizing the respondents by race, the study did not specify Asian-American identification; options included White, African-American, Latino, and Other (Marist, 2015).

The Model Minority

William Petersen is credited with coining the term “model minority” in his 1966 New York Times Magazine article titled “Success story: Japanese American style.”

Petersen, then a sociology professor at the University of California Berkeley, described a vicious cycle of discrimination called the “principle of cumulation,” in which a combination of factors like health, education, socioeconomic status, etc. was formed by stereotyping and perpetuated the stereotypes that created them. For example, Petersen wrote that white Americans deemed black Americans less intelligent, so restricted their access to education and resourceful schools, which then upheld the false idea that black Americans weren’t intelligent to begin with (Petersen, 1966). He wrote:

By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort. Every attempt to hamper their progress resulted only in enhancing their determination to succeed. Even in a country whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero, there is no parallel to this success story.

The term is used to describe minority groups, especially Asian-Americans, that have overcome discrimination and achieved high levels and rates of success, often measured in educational and financial prestige. A 1998 study published in Sociological Perspectives found that the idea that Asian-Americans are a model minority has been widely accepted across racial groups in America, including white Americans (Wong et al., 1998). The study measured success in three ways: preparedness for college, motivation,

and expectations for future career success. The study was comprised of 704 completed interviews with 119 Asian-American students, 125 African-Americans, 126 Native Americans, 143 Hispanics, 133 white Americans, and 58 respondents that did not specify their ethnicity. The study stated:

Asian Americans perceived themselves as more prepared, motivated, and more likely to have higher career success than whites. In addition, the perceptions that Asian Americans were superior to whites in those three areas were shared by whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, which confirmed the first three hypotheses on the above. This lends empirical support to anecdotal and journalistic accounts about Asian Americans as a model minority.

However, the reality of Asian-American student performance did not reflect these perceptions. The study found GPAs and SAT scores among Asian-Americans were not significantly higher than other minority groups. It is also worth considering whether these statistics would be consistent amongst different Asian-American ethnic groups (i.e. East Asians compared to Southeast Asians), because even while the study acknowledges the diversity in the Asian-American population, no distinction was made between Asian groups in the sample.

Not only is the model minority concept not necessarily true or accurate, but a term intended to be positive may have negative effects on Asian-American groups. In their 2011 book, *The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity*, Stephen Caliendo and Charlton McIlwain write that the widespread belief that Asian-Americans have achieved success and overcome discrimination may invalidate the real discrimination that they still

experience. The positive perception of Asian-Americans compared to largely negative perceptions of black Americans may also damage relationships between minority groups, hindering their ability to collaborate on issues that one group faces, such as police brutality (Caliendo and McIlwain, 2011).

Media Representation

Asian-Americans have a long and contentious relationship with American media, consisting of decades with very little representation in art, film, television, and literature. Roles available for Asian-American characters were and are often for small roles, supporting characters that are often stereotypical. In her 2016 book, *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship*, Lori Kido Lopez describes the need for improved Asian-American representation in the media, saying:

Battles over representations of Asian America reveal the way that activists seeking to improve the representation of Asian Americans in entertainment media are engaging in a fight for cultural citizenship, or a deeper sense of belonging and acceptance within a nation that has long rejected them ... Americans of Asian descent have historically been excluded from the media in multiple ways—the number of roles rarely reflects the actual percentage of Asian Americans in the United States, actors are forced to repeatedly embody tired and offensive stereotypes, and they are frequently relegated to the role of a sidekick or background character. Asian Americans are rarely shown with families, love interests, or well-developed background stories. Most egregious of all, they are almost never cast in starring roles.

This history of representation, or rather a lack thereof, is serious in a number of ways.

Lopez wrote that invisibility or erasure in the media leads to exclusion in the world

outside of it, where the consequences of racism are more than theoretical. Researcher LeiLani Nishime wrote in 2017 that erasure happens in instances of both yellow-face and white-washing. Historically, white actors have played Asian characters while performing Asian stereotypes and accents, part of a sometimes subconscious effort to emphasize racial differences and the perception of Asians as alien (Nishime, 2017). In the earlier 20th century, this may have been partly due to the fact that the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, forbade interracial love scenes (Mok, 1998).

White-washing is slightly different, taking place when Asian characters are converted into white characters for white actors to play. Though yellow-face has become less common in American films, white-washing is still regularly practiced and became a subject of controversy in the film industry in the 2010s, particularly surrounding films such *Doctor Strange*. When the studio that produced *Doctor Strange* received backlash for casting white actress Tilda Swinton to play a character that was originally a Tibetan man, the studio defended its decision saying the original comic book character, as well as the Tibetan setting, was stereotypical itself (Nishime, 2017). However, Nishime wrote that the white-washing as a response to correct the harms of stereotyping still enables erasure:

While this example might be noteworthy for the way in which Marvel publicly and explicitly defended its actions, the logics of the studio's argument circulates widely in everyday discourses of race. More disturbing still is the persistent and pernicious linking of whitewashing to stories of racial progress so that imagining a nonracist future means imagining a white future.

Even when Asian characters do appear on screen, there is a long history of problematic representation of Asian-Americans in American media, starting as early as the 1920s (Mok, 1998). The few Asian characters that were shown on screen in the early films reflected the image of Asian people that Americans knew as the Yellow Peril, a xenophobic phenomenon in which Asians were seen as a threat to the United States' culture and economy. These characters were often depicted as sneaky or treacherous. During World War II, the Chinese were depicted as humble and poor while the Japanese were portrayed as evil and violent (Mok, 1998). During the Korean War and the Red Scare, portrayal of Asian-Americans shifted to be more negative when depicting the Chinese or North-Koreans, but more positive when depicting South-Koreans or the Japanese. Throughout history, Asian women have often been sexualized in American media (Mok, 1998) while Asian men have mostly been portrayed as un-sexual beings, lacking in stereotypically masculine traits (Nguyen, 2014). Asian characters, particularly Indian and South Asian-Americans, are still depicted with accents to serve as comedic effect, a pattern that is being resisted in projects such as *Master of None* and *The Mindy Project* (Davé, 2017). Lopez wrote that the way Asian-Americans characters are presented may set rigid restrictions on what it means to be Asian-American and what that is supposed to sound and look like, especially since projects with Asian lead roles or all-Asian casts are uncommon. Even while there has been more recent push for Asian creators and characters in television with projects like *The Mindy Project*, *Fresh Off the*

Boat, and *Crazy Rich Asians*, the expectations set on these characters and the actors and writers that create them vary widely amongst audience members (Lopez, 2016).

In this study, it is important to understand this relationship that exists between Asian-American groups and media to gather context for the focus of the research: considering media representation not necessarily as a problem to be solved, but as a tool to better understand how Asian-Americans are being perceived in the United States. There are several examples of black stories in film that feature an Asian character. By studying these characters and how they are portrayed, we gain a better understanding of the perception of Asian-Americans and their participation in anti-racism movements that have predominantly focused on African-Americans, like Black Lives Matter.

Literature Review

Aggregation and Stereotyping

It is important to consider Asian-Americanness and how it is defined. The Asian continent includes nearly 50 countries, and Asian populations differ in culture, language, and appearance. The aggregation of Asian-American populations in research limits the accuracy of findings, particularly in studying systemic racism, as different groups throughout the United States have very different experiences. Additionally, much of the research conducted on Asian-Americans not only groups together different Asian ethnicities and nationalities, but also often fails to distinguish between 1st generation and 2+ generation immigrants. According to Ebony McGee's 2018 research on stereotype

threats to Asian and Black STEM students, this simplification also makes future research more difficult: “Given the lack of disaggregation of ethnic Asian groups and citizen/international distinction, it is difficult to report on statistics about Asians in STEM without reifying stereotypes” (McGee, 2018).

The model minority stereotype as it is described in the media is more likely to refer to middle-class, East-Asian populations such as Japanese, Chinese, and Korean communities (McGee, 2018). This may further the idea that success is inherent to whiter skin. This grouping of Asian-Americans into one monolithic category then creates a social divide between light-skinned and dark-skinned Asian-Americans – two groups that comedian Ali Wong, born to Chinese and Vietnamese parents, jokingly refers to as “fancy Asians” and “jungle Asians” (Karas and Wong, 2016). This divide is harmful to both groups, as color-based discrimination against Indian or Southeast Asian groups is effectively erased and the limited depiction of the “Asian-American” to the model minority perception “perpetuate[s] the false assumption that race is not relevant to Asian Americans’ mental or physical health because racial discrimination and prejudice do not affect them” (Mcgee, 2018). When comparing poverty rates by nationality specifically, Japanese-Americans have the lowest poverty rate at 3.8% while poverty rates amongst Burmese-Americans, Micronesians-Americans, and Nepalese-Americans, just to name a few, are much higher, at 28.4%, 19.5%, and 17.4%, respectively (Poverty By Detailed Group, 2017).

The racial diversity within the Asian-American group also complicates the relationship between Asian-American and black communities in the US. In her 2018 study on Asian American body politics as they relate to Black Lives Matter, Wen Liu wrote, “The “neither white nor Black” and “near white and Black” racial ambiguity has allowed Asian Americanness to transcend the meanings of race, as a simultaneous victim and success story” (Liu, 2018). The de-legitimization of Asian-American marginalization negatively affects both Asian-American groups and black groups, as black individuals are forced to shoulder the blame for their own oppression when they’re held to the impossibly high standards Asian-Americans have supposedly met. This is illustrated in a comment Heather MacDonald, author and fellow at the Manhattan Institute, made on the Ben Shapiro Show in October 2019:

I've proposed a thought experiment in *The Diversity Delusion*, which is that if Blacks acted like Asians for 10 years in all things related to life success – again in regards to out of wedlock child rearing, a fanatical attention to academic involvement and achievement, an absence of criminal involvement - and we still saw the economic gaps that we do, then I would say it's time to go for the structural racism explanation. But as long as those behavioral disparities are so observable and so large, it's time to work on those.”

McGee’s article, titled “Black Genius, Asian Fail,” analyzes the effects of both stereotype lift and stereotype threat, specifically on Asian and black students in STEM. She found that stereotype lift demonstrates that stereotyped groups may actually perform better in “stereotype-relevant testing situations” or when “downward comparisons are made with a denigrated outgroup” (McGee, 2018). For example,

stereotype lift might occur when Asian students, who are typically expected to do well in STEM, actually do well in STEM. Stereotype threat occurs, however, when a group is aware of a negative stereotype, and the risk of proving the stereotype to be correct harms performance. In short, students are more likely to fail when they know they are expected to fail. McGee acknowledges that seemingly positive stereotypes don't have solely positive effects: "Other research found that Asians' endorsement of the model minority stereotype leads to internalized racism and might contribute to increased psychological distress and more negative attitudes about seeking help" (McGee, 2018).

Racial Stratification and Triangulation

Racialization is framed in a few different ways in literature concerning race relations in the United States.

Jun Xu and Jennifer Lee wrote in 2013 that racial stratification has historically viewed in a black-white binary. However, as Asian-American and Hispanic populations increased, so did the push to consider a dichotomy as oversimplified and inadequate. Therefore, scholars began to develop a sort of racial hierarchy, ranking different ethnic groups on a theoretical "color line." Even then, there was disagreement over whether the line should divide white from non-white people or black from non-black people. Believing that these divides failed to recognize differences in the experiences of different non-white groups, Bonilla Silva began research in 2004 that proposed a tri-racial stratification system, dividing people into three groups: "whites," "honorary whites," and

“collective blacks.” (Silva, 2004). This measures racialization by superiority and inferiority. On another hand, Michael Omi and Howard Winant developed the racial formation theory in 1994, presenting the experiences of every ethnic group as having their own unique history and trajectory (Omi and Winant, 1994). However, this theory ignores the fact that racialization also occurs in groups interacting with and affecting each other as their histories inevitably intertwine. (Xu and Lee, 2013).

Considering the strengths and weaknesses of other race stratification theories, Xu and Lee utilize Claire Kim’s theory of racial triangulation, a combination of racial formation and racial hierarchy approaches that measures where racial groups fall along two dimensions: racial valorization, which considers superiority and inferiority, and civic ostracism, which considers a group’s ability to assimilate and be perceived an insider rather than a foreigner. Xu and Lee write that the purpose of their study is to use racial triangulation theory to analyze differences in how black Americans and white Americans perceive Asian-Americans, explaining that “although the black-white binary is not powerful enough to fully delineate the mosaic of color lines, race discourse is largely dependent upon black-white dynamics” (Xu and Lee, 2013). Analyzing data collected over a timespan of 16 years, they found that valorization of Asian-Americans overall was consistent with model minority stereotypes, with Asians rated higher in family commitment, nonviolence, wealth, and work ethic. Ostracism was measured in

neighborhood, marriage, feeling thermometer, and patriotism, with Asians rated relatively low in each. In fact, 48% of all respondents rated Asians low on patriotism.

Xu and Lee write that the contrast between Asians rating high on valorization and low on ostracism emphasizes the importance of moving to a triangular perspective:

These results indicate the need to focus on multiple dimensions of racial inequality, as suggested by racial triangulation theory. Asian Americans do not fall “closer” to, or in between, whites or blacks on a single racial hierarchy; instead, they occupy a unique position in a field of racial positions. On one dimension, they may fall “closer” to whites, but on another, they fall “closer” to blacks. In fact, supplementary descriptive statistics (available upon request) also show that to great extent, the American public rates Asians and blacks equally when it comes to indicators of civic acceptance.

In examining the differences between the perceptions of Asian-Americans held by black and white Americans, Xu and Lee found that white Americans were more likely to valorize Asian-Americans on traits including family commitment, nonviolence, and wealth, confirming their perception of Asian-Americans to be fairly consistent with model minority stereotypes. Their results suggest that economic competition may contribute to lower valorization amongst black Americans. Differences in civic ostracism were smaller. White Americans responded that they were more likely to accept living in the same community as Asian-Americans but also least likely to rate Asian-Americans as patriotic. The only significant difference in perceptions of Asian-American ostracism were in how likely they were to accept a close family member marrying an Asian-American: “Blacks are less

likely than whites to rate Asians in the middle as opposed to low for marriage. It should be noted, however, that blacks are more likely than whites to rate all racial groups equal for marriage as opposed to rating Asians low” (Xu and Lee, 2013).

1992 LA Riots and Peter Liang

The 1992 LA riots and the trial of Peter Liang are two major examples in American history of tension concerning Asian-American involvement in racial conflicts concerning violence against black Americans.

In April of 2016, NPR reporter Hansi Lo Wang reported on two separate groups protesting outside the courthouse where Peter Liang was on trial for shooting an unarmed black man named Akai Gurley. The reporter observed one group of Asian-Americans protesting Liang’s conviction and another group made up of multiple races including Asian-Americans holding up “Black Lives Matter” signs, written in English and Chinese (Wang, 2016). These groups signified a divide in the Asian-American community between those demanding justice for a man who was not given the same lenience as many white officers in similar cases (Phippen, 2016) and those demanding justice for the man who was killed in the growing issue of police brutality against black men in America (Phippen, 2016).

Wang interviewed Erika Lee, history professor at the University of Minnesota and author of *The Making of Asian America*:

“Lee says Liang's case has mobilized a level of Asian-American activism not seen since the 1992 Los Angeles riots and the 1982 killing of Vincent Chin in a Detroit suburb. The

debate about Liang's case comes from a long history of different kinds of activism by the Asian-American community, Lee argues. 'There are these two traditions of Asian-Americans both acting for ethnic-specific causes and issues as well as joining others, especially since the 1960s,' she says. ... Lee says there's a 'troubling ebb and flow' to activism by Asian-Americans, who are positioned in the U.S. racial hierarchy as 'both victims and also protected from some of the harshest types of racial discrimination.'"

Liang's case demonstrated how the model minority stereotype might affect the degree to which Asian-Americans are willing to participate in activism that is not specific to their own ethnic group. Lee suggests that Asian-Americans are caught between sources of both privilege and oppression, one of which might persuade Asian-Americans to keep their heads down and take what they can get, while the other might urge them to fight for their rights. However, cases like Liang's seem to bring about a similar divisiveness, between committing to one's own fight for civil rights and committing to other group's fights for those same rights.

In 1992, five days of rioting in Los Angeles stemmed from two inciting events: the beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers and the death of Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old unarmed black girl shot to death by a Korean store owner wrongly accused her of stealing some orange juice (Sastry and Bates, 2017).

In the riots, over 50 people died and thousands were injured or arrested. The 1992 Los Angeles riots were an important example of Black and Asian-American relations falling apart in places – on the 25th anniversary of the riots, NPR reporters Anjali Sastry and Karen Bates reported that 36% of those arrested were African-American and about

2,000 Korean-run businesses were destroyed. South Los Angeles, including its black and Korean-American populations, was a largely impoverished area. Soo-Kwang Oh and Justin Hudson suggest in their 2017 study of the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the riots that news coverage that paired King's beating with Harlin's death contributed to Black-Korean conflict and coverage of Koreans involved in the riots was much more sympathetic, possibly due to the model minority perception of Korean-Americans compared to African-Americans.

But in instances like Lee points out, cases like the 1992 riots can also work to mobilize Asian-American activists in ways that other cases not directly involving Asian-Americans may not. How that activism plays out and how long it lasts may be influenced by our perceptions of the groups involved, shaped in part by the media that conveys those relationships, whether it be news coverage or the films analyzed in this paper.

Why Hiroki Matters

The aim of this study is to look at Black and Asian-American relations through a media lens to determine the role Asian-Americans play in black activism.

Most of the characters analyzed throughout this study play fairly minor roles in the stories they are part of. However, their impact is important when we consider the public

perception of Asian-Americans and what is expected of them when they're confronted the decision of how to engage with racial conflict concerning African-Americans, if at all. By analyzing films created by black filmmakers and how Asian-American characters are portrayed in them, we gain a better understanding of how they're perceived in the status quo. Considering events such as the 1992 LA riots and the trial of Peter Liang, it's clear that rifts exist both within the Asian-American community and between Asian-Americans and African-Americans. The characters analyzed in this paper offer information to understand how black communities perceive Asian-Americans, an understanding that is required to begin to consider the ethical obligations associated with being an effective ally and standing in solidarity against white supremacy.

Method and Materials

This project is a textual analysis, as it focuses on interpreting the messages communicated in texts, specifically selected films and television.

This paper builds on research done on black and Asian-American relations by analyzing the issue through the lens of media representation in film. Specifically, I chose four films that tell stories of black characters facing oppression in the US and include at least one Asian-American supporting character. Films were selected from lists of black films found on Google and Letterboxd. The list was narrowed to films released after 2013,

the year Black Lives Matter was officially founded, and films that included at least one Asian-American character. Each either had a black writer and/or *director*.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the Asian-American characters in these selections and note how they engage with racial tension and violence against black bodies in these stories, as well as how they navigate relationships with black characters or with the antagonists in the story that represent white supremacy in America. As many Asian-American characters represented in media created by white writers and directors have been depicted in reductive stereotypes, I also chose to consider whether those same stereotypes are present in stories written and directed by black storytellers. These depictions are used to learn more about the relationship between Asian-American and black communities and how they perceive this relationship, hence only using stories produced by black creators. The movies are all available to a wide audience, including white viewers. Therefore, in understanding how Asian-American and black communities view each other and their relationships with each other, we understand what is being communicated to all audience members and how that might change, if it ought to.

Movies selected included *Get Out*, directed by Jordan Peele in 2016; *Sorry to Bother You*, directed by Boots Riley in 2018; *Fruitvale Station*, directed by Ryan Coogler in 2013; and *The Hate U Give*, directed by George Tillman Jr. in 2018. During viewing, I kept notes about each of the characters, particularly the Asian-American characters, so that I could analyze patterns to answer my research questions. I framed my findings

within the context of racial triangulation, first theorized by Claire Kim in 1999, examining how these character relationships can be examined on two dimensions: civic ostracism and relative valorization.

Findings

Research Question 1: How do Asian-American characters engage with issues of race and violence against black characters, if at all?

In the four films that make up this analysis, there are varying degrees of engagement between Asian-American characters and the racially charged conflicts that take place in each story.

In *Fruitvale Station*, based on the real shooting of Oscar Grant in 2009, there is one Asian-American character with a speaking part named Marcus and two unnamed extras, both on the train right before the incident takes place on the platform. Marcus is introduced to the audience only briefly, getting a couple minutes of screen time total. When they meet, Marcus sits in Oscar's car, learns Oscar doesn't have the marijuana he was going to sell to him, and accepts a small bag and a blunt for free. Marcus offers some to Oscar, who declines, and Marcus leaves. Marcus and the two other even more minor characters don't directly engage in race issues in any evident way. Marcus isn't present in the station, so we don't know how his character reacts to police brutality. The two Asian men that are seen for mere seconds on the train are not involved and are not even seen with the several other witnesses watching the violence take place through the

train windows or standing by the doors and filming with their phones. It is not clear in the film why flashback scenes show Oscar in prison, though the real Oscar Grant had once been convicted for illegal possession of a handgun. There is some implication that Oscar's involvement with dealing marijuana, then illegal in the state of California, had been some source of trouble for him, as he dumps his stash into the ocean to signify a shift in his own life as he attempts to start over. If this implication is intentional, Marcus's role as Oscar's customer may signify a difference in consequences for Asian and black men in the criminal justice system. After all, Marcus drives away smoking a blunt while, earlier in the film, Oscar had taken precautions not to talk on the phone while driving and had taken several cautionary glances at a passing police car on the road. However, while Marcus's character is presented as a part of Oscar's life, he does not directly interact with any of the main racial issues that the film presents, such as police brutality, intergenerational poverty, or criminal justice.

In *The Hate U Give*, main character Starr Carter lives in Garden Heights, a predominantly black neighborhood, but attends a majority-white prep school. This is where we see most of her interactions with Maya Yang, one of her two friends at Williamson Prep and the sole Asian-American character in the film.

We see Maya in only a few scenes throughout the film, usually as an onlooker in Starr's interactions with their friend Hailey. First, the three are at basketball practice when Hailey urges Starr to pretend the ball is fried chicken. During their tense but brief

confrontation, Starr looks at Maya and Maya stares back without saying anything. Later in the film, students at Williamson stage a walk-out to protest Khalil's death, a friend Starr witnessed being shot and killed by police. Maya is the first person Starr sees when students start rushing down the halls, and when Starr asks what is going on, Maya says, smiling, "School's out. Protesting is in. And I was so ready for that history test this morning." When Hailey joins the group, she suggests that the students are using Khalil's death as an excuse to skip class, which Maya laughs at. Again, when the three watch a news report about the officer that killed Khalil, Hailey remarks that she feels bad for the officer and his family and the criticism he's received for "only trying to do his job and protect himself." This begins another argument between Starr and Hailey in which Maya responds saying, "Whoa, you guys haven't figured this out yet?" Maya initially tries to keep Starr from leaving and asks them to stop arguing. Both Starr and Hailey look to Maya as a sort of mediator in their conflicts, with Hailey telling Starr, "Okay Maya, now she's calling me a racist." Maya doesn't say anything, even when Hailey leaves and her and Starr are left alone in the house. The only time Maya speaks against Hailey's racism is when Hailey makes a comment about Khalil's involvement with drugs and Maya says, "Are you serious, Hailey?" But when Starr yells at Hailey and leaves Hailey on the ground crying, Maya chooses not to follow Starr, but to kneel down with Hailey.

Maya's character tries to remain neutral in the film's racial conflicts, but in doing so, seems to show complicity in Hailey's racist behavior.

While Marcus and Maya tend to avoid direct involvement in racial conflict, the Asian-American characters in the 2017 film *Get Out* and 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You* are active participants, albeit in two very different ways.

Get Out focuses on the story of Chris, a black man visiting his white girlfriend Rose's family for the first time. In the film, there is a single Asian-American character, appearing for only a few minutes in and leading up to the auction scene, where we see several white, older guests bid on a picture of Chris, reminiscent of a slave auction. We first meet Hiroki Tanaka when the different partygoers are asking Chris questions, gauging whether he would be a good body to bid on. During this questioning, Tanaka delivers his only line in the film: "Do you find the African-American experience in America to be an advantage or a disadvantage?" It's revealed later in the film that Rose's family kidnaps black people and sells their bodies as hosts to white people that desire to live on in younger, more physically fit bodies. This commodification of black bodies represents a pattern in America's white supremacy: non-black Americans pick and choose specific parts of black culture to praise and desire while disregarding the rest, maintaining a sense of ownership over black bodies – in this case, literally removing the person's mind and forcefully taking the rest of the body for their own. Tanaka's line raises the question of how privilege is distributed amongst black, white, and Asian characters. This scene is followed by the auction scene, in which we see Tanaka sitting with white characters, albeit in the back row of the audience, bidding on Chris' picture. Tanaka's

active participation in white supremacy suggests that the high valorization placed on Asian-Americans that allows them to sit at the table with white Americans also allows them to oppress other groups to avoid marginalization themselves, however conditional their privileges may be. While *Get Out* stimulated national dialogue on benevolent racism, Tanaka's character created a smaller, but equally important national conversation on Asian-Americans and how they ought to engage in racial conflict concerning black bodies.

Sorry to Bother You goes in a different direction, the only film of the four in which the primary Asian character appears regularly throughout the movie and plays a major part in the story's plot. The film tells the story of Cassius "Cash" Green, a black protagonist that quickly climbs the socioeconomic ladder by using his "white voice" to close sales as a telemarketer. Cash's coworker, played by Steven Yeun, goes by the name of Squeeze. When they first meet, Squeeze commends Cash for asking about pay in a work meeting and invites him to join a union he's organizing for workers to demand better pay and benefits. Throughout the film, while Cash falls away from the movement to accept a promotion at RegalView, Squeeze remains a leader of the revolution. While the main conflict in *Sorry To Bother You* seems to revolve around the issue of class, there is a strong connection to race that links whiteness to wealth. When Cash attends a party thrown by Steve Lift, CEO of a company called WorryFree and the film's primary antagonist, almost all the attendees are white. Cash's artist girlfriend, a black woman

named Detroit, explains that she chose to depict Africa in her art installation because she “wanted to talk about a life shaped by exploitation, about fighting for a say in our own lives. Capitalism basically started by stealing labor from Africans.” Not all workers in the union are black – at the rallies that take place on the street in front of the RegalView building, protesters appear to be a mix of all different races, including white, black, and Asian characters. However, Cash only achieves financial success when he speaks in his “white voice” over the phone. This is not just a change in grammar, slang, or even pitch. The man that teaches Cash which voice to use explains that white voice is “sounding like you don’t have a care. Got your bills paid. You’re happy about your future.” When Cash switches into this voice, his lines are dubbed by actor David Cross. Squeeze attempts a kind of code-switching when he first meets Cash, saying, “a player gotta mob up with us for some scrill and bennies,” but stops when Cash reacts with confusion. While at a bar with Cash and his friends, all of whom are black, Squeeze agrees that Italians are white, at least “since the last sixty years.” When Cash demonstrates his white voice, Squeeze looks shocked with the rest of the group and says, “Man, your white voice, man. It’s fucking scary. Yeah, I’ve never seen that shit before.” This seems to suggest that while Squeeze doesn’t claim color blindness and is at least somewhat familiar with the idea of code-switching, he doesn’t fully understand or support Cash’s decision use of white voice to feed into the system he wants to rebel against.

Squeeze's main focus is on unity against powers like Steve Lift and companies like WorryFree and RegalView that exploit workers for cheap labor. In the first organized gathering, Squeeze tells the group, "Today is the warning shot telling them that we stand united." When a violent protest is playing out near the end of the movie and creatures – half-horse-half-man creatures that Steve Lift created to use for labor – rescue Cash from a truck, Squeeze says to the creatures, "Same struggle, same fight." This emphasis on unity contributes to the framing of race in this story as white vs. non-white, although not always in a literal sense. Although our knowledge of Squeeze's background is limited, it's implied that he didn't form the union because he needed to in order to survive, in the way Cash and his coworkers did. Rather, Squeeze sought out people that needed help and joined them. Though Squeeze demonstrates stronger solidarity with black characters than the Asian-American characters in the other three films, this piece of information regarding Squeeze's backstory connects Squeeze to the other characters and how they engage with issues of race – voluntarily or not at all.

Research Question 2: What kind of relationship do Asian-American characters have with the black protagonists? What kind of relationship do they have with the antagonists?

Another common factor between the Asian-American characters in these four films is their relationships with the black protagonists; all are friendly at best and civil at worst in their direct interactions with each other, and none of them demonstrate direct or

blatant violence against their respective films' protagonists. Their relationships with the antagonists vary more widely.

In *Fruitvale Station*, Marcus's friendship with Oscar is transactional, but clearly friendly. The two men use slang in their conversations, showing that they are comfortable with each other. Marcus isn't angry when Oscar doesn't have the weed he was there to purchase, and they offer each other smoke without expecting payment. Despite their positive interaction, it's not clear how close they are or how long they have known each other. It's also not clear whether they interact with each other outside of their drug deals. Marcus is not present when Oscar goes out with his friends to celebrate New Year's Eve, isn't present when Oscar is shot, and isn't present when he is taken to the hospital. There are no visible interactions between Asian-American and white American characters in this film, particularly between Asian-American characters and the police.

Similarly, Hiroki Tanaka's relationship interactions with the protagonist are also limited to less than a few minutes. However, it's clear in *Get Out* that Chris and Tanaka are meeting for the first time. Tanaka's relationship with Chris is definitely the least friendly out of the four relationships examined in this section, considering he bids on Chris' body in order to purchase him and put his brain inside his head. In the scene where they directly interact with each other, although Tanaka's question clearly makes Chris uncomfortable, Chris responds with a laugh and says, "I don't know, man." The conversation is about as civil as it can be in the given situation.

However, Tanaka's character is the most ingratiated with his film's antagonists, joining their party and participating in their auction. Tanaka's character is most revealed in this relationship and his participation in a group that promotes and carries out violence on black Americans. Although we don't see him directly attack Chris in their interaction, it is the underhanded and subtly shown oppression that implies that Asian-Americans are prone to use their model minority status as a means of self-preservation and persecution of other racial minority groups.

We also see complicity portrayed in Maya's character and how she maintains her relationships with Starr and Hailey. In their friend group, Maya primarily serves as neutral ground or peacekeeper when Starr and Hailey are fighting with each other. Maya is friends with both and supports both, even though Starr and Hailey's conflict is symbolic of racial tension between black Americans and white supremacy in its subtler form, taking shape in cultural appropriation and invalidation of black lives in favor of maintaining the comfort and safety white Americans are afforded in the status quo. Maya's attempt to deescalate the conflict between Hailey and Starr throughout the film without acknowledging the validity of Starr's pain or denouncing Hailey's racist behavior shows that despite her determination not to choose sides, she has essentially chosen Hailey's. That is, until the ending of the film. We see a disconnect between the events throughout the film and the montage at the end where it is revealed that Starr and Maya remained "true friends," while Hailey was no longer part of their group. It may be worth

noting that Maya's character development is portrayed more clearly in the novel the film was adapted from, in a scene where Maya tells Starr that Hailey has made racist comments to her about eating cats on Thanksgiving. However, because this development is absent in the film, Maya's character and her role as a peacekeeper in their friend group rather than an ally to Starr implies that neutrality in racial conflicts and detachment to violence against black Americans is enough to maintain black and Asian-American relations.

In *Sorry to Bother You*, Squeeze develops a friendly and supportive relationship with Cash and maintains positive relationships with Cash's friends while Cash attempts to create a partnership with the film's antagonists, the higher-ups at RegalView and WorryFree. He remains especially close with Detroit and Sal, another black man that worked at RegalView. When Cash finally quits his job with RegalView and wants to join the revolution again, Squeeze and Sal accept him immediately. Earlier in the film, Squeeze is seen standing outside the bar, smoking weed with a group of all black men. When Cash approaches and Detroit joins, one man asks her who invited her. She asks for a light, which the guy refuses, but Squeeze offers her a lighter without hesitation.

Squeeze's relationship with the antagonists is not friendly in any way, as he leads the movement to rebel against them and demand the justice they've withheld.

Squeeze does not directly interact with antagonist Steve Lift in the film, but he does interact with the managers at RegalView, addressing them in the first strike, saying, “RegalView management, you are hereby warned. We will not be overlooked.”

His relationship to the antagonists is consistently negative throughout the film to express his dedication to the union.

In analyzing Squeeze’s relationship to the protagonists and antagonists, we must also look to the only other Asian character with a speaking part in the film: Mr. Yoshi Son, a Japanese businessman that buys the slave labor Cash is selling. Mr. Yoshi Son is not technically Asian-American, but his character serves as an example of a non-black person that benefits from the same oppression that white antagonists like Steve Lift benefit from. His positive business relationship with Steve Lift contrasts with Squeeze’s character and his relationship with Lift.

Particularly in cases where we see less direct involvement with racial conflict in these films, we can analyze the characters’ relationships with the protagonists and antagonists to get a sense of where they express support. With the exception of Tanaka, all the Asian-American characters are friends with the black protagonists in their stories. We see, however, that friendly relations with black characters is not necessarily evidence of support for the liberation of black Americans.

Research Question 3: How are Asian-American stereotypes presented in their characters' portrayals in black stories, especially compared to stereotypes perpetuated by white storytellers?

There's a lot of variation in how Asian-American stereotypes are presented in these four films, including consistency with the model minority image, defiance of model minority stereotypes, and resemblance to African-American stereotypes.

The model minority stereotype is most consistent in Hiroki Tanaka and Maya Yang. Tanaka's inclusion in the part indicates that he has wealth. Also consistent with the model minority concept, Tanaka is widely accepted by white Americans as an honorary member of their group. The two things that set Tanaka apart from the white characters he associates with are his physical appearance and his Japanese accent. Tanaka's strong accent combined with the model minority stereotypes he embodies create a character that is consistent with the perception of Asian-Americans in Xu and Lee's research – highly valorized, but perpetually foreign. Maya's character is also wealthy, shown in a wide shot of her family's large home. Following the model minority stereotype, her character is also accepted as an unquestioned member of the student body at Williamson Prep, which is predominantly made up of white, wealthy students. However, unlike Tanaka, who sits in the back row of the auction and speaks with a heavy accent, Maya's character doesn't show hints of ostracism. Even her physical appearance lends to a smaller degree of ostracism than Tanaka; Megan Lawless, the actress that

portrays Maya, is mixed-race Chinese American. Unlike its novel, *The Hate U Give* characterizes Maya in way that gives weight to model minority stereotypes without acknowledging the distinction between the experiences of white Americans and Asian-Americans as they relate to ostracism.

Squeeze's character in *Sorry to Bother You* defies many of the Asian stereotypes we typically see portrayed in American media. He does not have an accent and is portrayed as a leader rather than a submissive follower. His romantic involvement with Detroit's character also goes against the pattern of Asian men being portrayed as unromantic or lacking in any sexuality. His character does not particularly align with the model minority stereotype, as he is assumed to be poor along with the other telemarketers he works with. This is never definitively confirmed, however, so it's not completely clear how Squeeze's financial situation compares to Cash's in the beginning of the film; Cash was living in his uncle's garage, who was also poor and about to lose his house. Cash claims later that part of the reason he accepted the promotion was to pay his uncle. Because Squeeze's background is more vague – we know he once started a union for sign twirlers in Los Angeles and says he “helps folks fix [trouble]” – we can't know for sure how his motivation to be loyal to the union might be different from Cash. Does he have stronger principles or is he just less desperate?

Although the model minority stereotype seems to be consistent with wealthy businessman Mr. Yoshi Son's character, we see in his short scene that Yoshi is calling

from his home in Japan. Because he is solely Japanese and not Asian-American, the model minority stereotypes don't apply as they would to a character like Squeeze, because his character lacks history of immigration and integration into a community where he is the racial minority.

In *Fruitvale Station*, Marcus is also inconsistent with the model minority stereotype, but seems to take on different stereotypes altogether.

In an interview for *The Dissolve*, director Ryan Coogler said the purpose of having a character like Marcus in the film was to accurately portray the diversity of the Bay Area, where the film takes place:

It's a Bay Area story, so it's a very multicultural cast. The main character is black, but his family is multicultural. His girlfriend is Latina. You're going to see all that representation just by the nature of the Bay Area. The woman who turned the footage in was white. He has an Asian-American friend he deals with in the film. I hoped for everybody to be able to see it, and I hope the relationships we focus on are relationships anybody can see their own in, no matter where they're from.

This reflection of the community Coogler grew up in may serve as the primary explanation for the way Marcus is presented in the film – not in the way East Asian men are stereotypically presented in media, but in a way that more closely resembles African-American stereotypes. Marcus is first seen sitting in a barbershop where the barbers and other customers are all black. His arms are covered in tattoos and he wears a t-shirt and loose-fitting jeans not unlike the outfit Oscar is wearing when they meet. Most prominent is Marcus's language and dialect. Marcus's speaking style reflects the

grammar, vocabulary, and inflection typically used in African-American Vernacular English, or AAVE. For example, Marcus offers to share the blunt with Oscar by saying, “Ride one with your boy right quick though,” and addressed him with one of Oscar’s most frequently used words in the film, “bruh.” Oscar speaks the same way to Marcus and appears comfortable with the conversation, calling Marcus “my nig.” This characterization of Marcus may be a reflection of Coogler’s friends growing up in the Bay Area, although it seems to beg the question: Would Oscar’s relationship and the power dynamics present in their relationship change if Marcus was not portrayed so similarly to Oscar and the other black characters in the film, and if his characteristics were more consistent with Asian-American stereotypes? Would their relationship exist at all?

Like *Sorry to Bother You*, Coogler’s film seems to represent race with a white and nonwhite divide. The difference is in how stereotypes are presented in their Asian-American characters. The background of Marcus’s character is never explored, but his character may be interpreted in two different ways: one, that this is a more specific portrayal of the “Asian friends” Coogler mentions knowing as a child and an anecdotal reflection of the Bay Area; or two, that Marcus’s character is meant to represent the privilege Asian-Americans and other non-black people have of adopting styles, language, and other parts of African-American culture without being punished for them in the way black Americans are.

Discussion and Conclusion

Claire Kim's racial triangulation theory considers racial groups not on a single, linear racial hierarchy, but on completely different planes, taking into account varying levels of privilege as well as unique histories of immigration and oppression in the United States. With this framework in mind, I found important differences and commonalities in the Asian-American characters depicted in these four different films, concluding that despite variances in their engagement in racial conflict, their relationships with black protagonists and white antagonists, and the stereotypes they exemplified, each character showed they had the ability to choose sides in racial conflict, a choice not often afforded to black characters that are being targeted. This seemed to be the common theme tying each character together regardless of their involvement in racial conflicts or even their screen-time, and that is the implied ability to choose which conflicts to engage with and to what degree. This freedom to participate in conflict only as far as they feel comfortable is afforded to Asian-American characters while the main characters, all black, are thrown into the same conflicts as involuntary and often unwilling participants.

Marcus' character in *Fruitvale Station* and Maya Yang's character in *The Hate U Give* both avoid involvement in racial conflict, the main difference being that Yang's involvement is an intentional attempt at neutrality. Meanwhile, Hiroki Tanaka's character in *Get Out* actively participates in white supremacy when he bids on Chris' body. The auction scene transparently acts as an answer to Tanaka's question of whether the African-American experience is advantageous: in America, Asian-Americans are allowed a seat at the table while black Americans are not. Tanaka's character suggests that

Asian-Americans use this position not only to be complicit in white nationalism, but to participate in it as a beneficiary. On the other hand, Squeeze's character in *Sorry to Bother You* actively engages in racial conflict to improve the well-being of every group that's struggling to survive in a highly capitalized society, including mostly black, brown, and Asian folks, but white folks as well. Although the conflict is primarily framed as tension between classes, the movie incorporates racial conflict by connecting wealth to whiteness in several ways: in Cash's ability to only achieve financial success after mastering his "white voice," in the casting of rich characters as primarily white, and in Detroit's monologue on the exploitation of Africans for slave labor. Despite the work Squeeze does to get workers fairly paid, the scene in which he tells Detroit about his past work with sign twirlers in Los Angeles ties him to the rest of the characters in this analysis, because his admission that he helps people that need him implies that his desperation for pay is not on par with characters like Cash and Detroit. Squeeze started the union not because he needed it, but because other people did. Even Cash, who decided to accept the promotion and decided to quit, did not have complete control over his role in the conflicts that take place over the course of the film. Not only was he forced into his work by a desperation for money, but Cash was only enormously successful on the phone, while he was the subject of public humiliation on television or in public.

Squeeze, Maya, Hiroki, and Marcus all retain the ability to pick their battles, while characters like Oscar, Starr, Chris, and Cash are forced into their respective conflicts, their participation determined by desperation and other people rather than themselves.

My second research question asked how the Asian-American characters were portrayed within the context of their relationships with the protagonists and antagonists of their films. Marcus' relationship with Oscar was friendly but casual, while his relationship with the police was not shown. Maya's relationship with both Starr and Hailey was largely positive until it was vaguely implied at the end that she chose to only remain friends with Starr. Her insistence on supporting both paired with the film's final montage seem to imply that neutrality in racial conflict is acceptable. The relationships in *Get Out* and *Sorry to Bother You* are more clear-cut – Tanaka has a civil but uncomfortable interaction with Chris but ultimately demonstrates loyalty to the film's antagonists. Squeeze remains on good terms with the protagonists and actively rebels against the film's antagonists.

This basis of outward friendliness to the protagonists present in the interactions between each Asian-American character and their respective black protagonists, particularly compared to the all-white antagonists, implies that Asian-Americans might not always be seen as dependable allies in racial conflicts, but for the most part, they can be expected to maintain civil, if not friendly relations with other racial minority groups.

The stereotypes presented in each film did not produce completely consistent conclusions, although lack of ostracism displayed in three of the four characters might suggest that the perception of Asian-Americans as perpetual foreigners might be shifting. Tanaka's and Yang's characters were both consistent with model minority stereotypes, wealthy and highly valorized. However, Squeeze and Marcus defy the model minority

perception, with Marcus more closely tied to African-American stereotypes in his language and dress. While the stereotypes presented in the four characters are inconsistent, we see a pattern in the four films when we compare the stereotypes present in Marcus' character, the relationships Maya and Squeeze have with Starr and Cash, and Hiroki Tanaka's participation in the auction scene – all four films present non-black characters as having more access to privilege than their black counterparts, and yet still desiring parts of black culture, but only in ways that are convenient or exploitative. Marcus speaks and dresses the same way Oscar does, but avoids the same consequences Oscar faces for being black in America. When Hailey uses phrases like “girl” and “our people” to refer to a community she both openly degrades and yet wants to be a part of, Maya doesn't say or do anything to stop her. Squeeze becomes part of Cash's community, befriending his friends and even sleeping with his ex-girlfriend, but doesn't share the same desperation they do. And Tanaka bids on Chris' body, showing that even when Asian-Americans tend to enjoy privileges that black Americans do not have access to, they sometimes desire to adopt – or steal – parts of black American culture, knowing that they will not face the same negative consequences if they do and that they can shed them whenever they choose.

Ultimately, the perception of Asian-Americans as model minorities persists in ways, although valorization was more common across the four films than ostracism was. One common perception was clear in each character: Asian-Americans participate in

racial conflicts and adopt or condone the adoption of black culture on a purely voluntary basis, a privilege that isn't usually afforded to black Americans. However, it is the choice to stand in solidarity with other groups that strengthens black and Asian-American relations.

As Kim's theory proves, it's possible to fight for both one's own rights and somebody else's, even if they've agreed to sell slave labor in exchange for a fat paycheck and only quit when Armie Hammer threatens to turn them into a horse. These stories are fictional, but the impact these stories have on public perceptions of very real conflicts is important, particularly during times like the 1992 LA Riots or the shooting of Akai Gurley in 2014. This critique does not determine what Asian-Americans are doing right or wrong in addressing racial conflict in the United States, nor does it chart a path of action for Asian-Americans to better support black activism movements like Black Lives Matter. Instead, the analysis of Asian-Americans and their roles in black stories written by black creators offers information on how Asian-Americans and their relationships with black Americans are being perceived in the United States, building a foundation of understanding on what has happened and what still needs to be done. Perhaps Americans see characters like Hiroki Tanaka in ourselves or in each other, and this research demonstrates that once we understand the impacts of racist and harmful behavior even in its most nuanced forms, there are many ways that we can be better.

Works Cited

- Anderson, M. (2019, December 31). History of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter: Social activism on Twitter. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/08/15/the-hashtag-blacklivesmatter-emerges-social-activism-on-twitter/>
- Adamson, D. (Producer), & Karas, J. (Director). (2016). *Ali Wong: baby cobra* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.netflix.com>
- Black Lives Matter. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>
- Blue Lives Matter NYC. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://bluelivesmatternyc.org/pages/frontpage>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2004). From bi-racial to tri-racial: Towards a new system of racial stratification in the USA. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(6), 931–950. doi: 10.1080/0141987042000268530
- Caliendo, S. M., & McIlwain, C. D. (2011). *The Routledge companion to race and ethnicity*. London: Routledge.
- Coogler, R. (Director). (2013). *Fruitvale station* [Film]. The Weinstein Company.
- Davé, S. (2017). Racial accents, Hollywood casting, and Asian American studies. *Cinema Journal*, 56(3), 142–147. doi: 10.1353/cj.2017.0030
- Kim, C. J. (1999). The racial triangulation of Asian Americans. *Politics & Society*, 27(1), 105–138. doi: 10.1177/0032329299027001005
- Liu, W. (2018). Complicity and resistance: Asian American body politics in Black Lives Matter. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 21(3), 421–451. doi: 10.1353/jaas.2018.0026
- Lopez, L. K. (2016). *Asian American media activism: Fighting for cultural citizenship*. New York: New York University Press.
- Marist College Institute for Public Opinion. (2015). *PBS NewsHour/Marist Poll, September 2015* [Data set]. PBS NewsHour [Distributor]. Retrieved from: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/j64c02ub48aipja/PBS-NEWSHOUR-MARIST-POLL-SEP2015.pdf>
- Mcgee, E. (2018). “Black genius, Asian fail”: The detriment of stereotype lift and stereotype threat in high-achieving Asian and black STEM students. *AERA Open*, 4(4), 233285841881665. doi: 10.1177/2332858418816658

- Mok, T. A. (1998). Getting the message: Media images and stereotypes and their effect on Asian Americans. *Cultural Diversity and Mental Health*, 4(3), 185–202. doi: 10.1037/1099-9809.4.3.185
- Nishime, L. (2017). Whitewashing yellow futures in *Ex Machina*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *Advantageous*: Gender, labor, and technology in sci-fi film. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 20(1), 29–49. doi: 10.1353/jaas.2017.0003
- Nguyen, T. H. (2014). *A view from the bottom: Asian American masculinity and sexual representation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Oh, S.-K., & Hudson, J. (2017). Framing and reframing the 1992 LA Riots: A study of minority issues framing by the Los Angeles Times and its readers. *Revista De Comunicación*, 16(2). doi: 10.26441/RC16.2-2017-A6
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2015). *Racial formation in the United States*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Peele, J. (Director). (2017). *Get out* [Film]. Universal Pictures.
- Petersen, W. (1966, January 9). Success story, Japanese-American style. *The New York Times Magazine*.
- Phippen, J. W. (2016, March 3). Why was officer Peter Liang convicted? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/03/peter-liang-police-shooting/471687/>
- Poverty by Detailed Group (National). (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://apidata.com/stats/national/national-poverty-aa-aj>
- Riley, B. (Director). (2018). *Sorry to bother you* [Film]. Annapurna Pictures.
- Sastry, A., & Bates, K. G. (2017, April 26). When LA erupted in anger: A look back at the Rodney King riots. *National Public Radio* Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots>
- Tillman, G. (Director). (2018). *The hate u give* [Film]. 20thCentury Fox.
- Wang, H. L. (2016, April 23). 'Awoken' by N.Y. cop shooting, Asian-American activists chart way forward. *National Public Radio* Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/04/23/475369524/awoken-by-n-y-cop-shooting-asian-american-activists-chart-way-forward>

- Wong, P., Lai, C. F., Nagasawa, R., & Lin, T. (1998). Asian Americans as a model minority: self-perceptions and perceptions by other racial groups. *Sociological Perspectives*, *41*(1), 95–118. doi: 10.2307/1389355
- Xu, J., & Lee, J. C. (2013). The marginalized "model" minority: An empirical examination of the racial triangulation of Asian Americans. *Social Forces*, *91*(4), 1363–1397. doi: 10.1093/sf/sot049

Honors Capstone Reflection

In my four years as an undergraduate student at Utah State, I worked on majors in Communication Studies and Print Journalism, along with a minor in English. The flexibility in the honors capstone project that allowed me to pursue whatever project I wanted to was exciting because I could incorporate multiple interests into one passion project, but it was also daunting, because I didn't know where to start. A few different experiences helped lead me to the subject I eventually landed on: I was able to write cultural critiques on different television programs in both my gender research class with Mollie Murphy in the communication studies department and my media smarts class with Candi Carter Olsen in the journalism department. I loved being able to connect theories and research from class to the entertainment I consumed at home for fun. I also saw a couple of different research presentations in the journalism department that analyzed films and television, one by former honors student and undergraduate teaching fellow for my media smarts class Pono Suganuma and the other by my departmental honors advisor, Debra Monson. All these different inspirations combined with the rhetorical criticism class I took from my current mentor, Jennifer Peeples, helped me to decide on my topic – how representation of Asian-American characters in black films help us determine the role of Asian-Americans in black activism in the United States. This topic allowed me to combine the knowledge I gained in my communication and journalism classes, as well as incorporate my interests in writing and politics.

The process of writing my capstone was almost cyclical, going back and forth between the research I found and read online, the notes I kept from my classes, and the films that I chose to write about. Jen was helpful in narrowing my topic down to a manageable scale and formatting my paper to fit the expectations of a research paper. With her help, I narrowed my film selection to four films, all released after 2013, the year Black Lives Matter was founded. I also framed my paper so my research all came back to one theory – racial triangulation theory. I don't think I could have completed my capstone without Jen's encouragement and expertise. Finding research and taking notes on the films was less difficult than organizing all the information such a way that the analysis made sense and every connection was clear and concise. Jen was also a massive help in making sure my APA style was consistent and correct.

It wasn't immediately obvious how my capstone project would connect me to my local or global community until I started to get into the research and realized that not a ton of research has been conducted on Black-AAPI relations. As an Asian-American myself, I saw a need for research that applied and expanded on racial triangulation theory, a theory that states that racial privilege can't be measured on one linear scale, but ethnic minority groups must examine their varying levels of privilege while acknowledging their unique histories of oppression. Like there is much more to black representation in media than movies on slavery, there is more to Asian-American representation than *Crazy Rich Asians*. As well, the intersection between these two

groups must be examined. While some research has been done on Black-AAPI relations, it was even more difficult to find research that connected it to media representation. As I learned in various communication and journalism classes, our media consumption affects our attitudes and behaviors significantly. I hope that work similar to the research I did in my capstone can be continued in the future to emphasize the need for diverse representation in media and the need for solidarity between ethnic minority groups in the United States against white supremacy.

A lot of the work I did in my undergraduate education, particularly in my communication studies major, was heavily theory-based, and it took extra work for me outside of class to apply the concepts I learned in my personal and professional relationships, as well as my work in various on-campus and off-campus organizations. My capstone was a great opportunity for me to take everything I'd learned in my majors and apply it to one project that encompasses the education I gained and the passions I developed while I was in college. Writing this analysis also further cemented my plans to pursue a career in writing, especially writing that furthers diverse representation in media.

Through this project, I also gained a valuable mentor in Jen Peeples. I took an interpersonal communication class from Jen my freshman year at Utah State and took communication criticism from her in my junior year. As a professor, as a mentor, and as one of the toughest graders I've had in college, Jen has greatly helped me to develop my

academic writing voice and my research skills, as well as my presentation skills. As I've finished revising my honors capstone with her, Jen has also helped me prepare to apply for graduate programs by helping me search for conferences and publications to share my work through.

In my classes, I learned about the impact of media from two primary perspectives – as a consumer and as a creator. I wrote my capstone as a consumer – a watcher of four moving films – and critically analyzed the messages that were given to me to better understand the artist's motivations and the social impacts of the films' messages. However, my research also taught me, as a writer, to carefully consider the cultural impacts of the messages I send in my own work. I hope that this is part of the impact of my research or other similar research that's published in the future, and that audiences and creators and politicians might consume entertainment more critically, understand the more nuanced forms racism takes in the United States, and understand how we can translate that understanding into substantial social change.

Bio

Naomi Ward graduated summa cum laude from Utah State University with a Bachelors of Science in 2020, with majors in Communication Studies and Journalism and a minor in English. While at Utah State, she served as senator for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, competed on the speech and debate team, wrote for the Utah Statesman, volunteered for Citizens Against Physical and Sexual Abuse, and was an active member of Kappa Delta sorority. This summer, she will complete a summer internship with KidSave in Washington D.C. and in the fall, will move to Japan to teach English through the JET program.