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Nancy Wang Yuen  
*Biola University*

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# Missing in Action: "Framing" Race on Prime-Time Television

Meera E. Deo, Jenny J. Lee, Christina B. Chin,  
Noriko Milman, and Nancy Wang Yuen

**R**ACISM IN THE POST-CIVIL RIGHTS UNITED STATES IS REPRODUCED THROUGH SUBTLE and naturalized ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Feagin, 2000; Omi and Winant, 1994).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, efforts to document and combat racism need to match this shift into the ideological realm. This study analyzes the racial ideologies surrounding Asian/Pacific Islander Americans (APIAs) in prime-time television. By examining one of the most widely consumed media of popular culture, this article empirically demonstrates how APIAs continue to be marginalized and stereotyped in prime-time television through particular frames.<sup>2</sup> It also identifies specific instances in which this medium pushes the racial envelope, challenging existing stereotypes through counter-ideologies.

## Anti-Asian Racism and Ideology in the United States

Overt racist practices in the United States have historically shaped federal, state, and local policy. Explicit and direct in supporting individuals deemed "white" (Almaguer, 1994; Foley, 1997; Oliver and Shapiro, 1997; Wilson, 1978), U.S. legislation has historically denied people of color equal rights (Nakano Glenn, 2002; Takaki, 2000). Racialized meanings, characterized by fluidity and shifts over time and space, have affected the economic well-being and citizenship status of various groups. Historically, those deemed "white" have benefited from economic and social privileges withheld from those deemed "nonwhite" (Almaguer, 1994; Nakano Glenn, 2002; Takaki, 2000).<sup>3</sup>

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MEERA E. DEO is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles (e-mail: deo@ucla.edu). Her main research interests include access and equity in higher education, affirmative action in the United States and India, and cultural preservation in immigrant communities. JENNY J. LEE is a graduate student in the UCLA Department of Sociology. Her primary research interests include international/trans-racial adoption, immigration, citizenship and nationalism, and Korean society (e-mail: jlee@ucla.edu). CHRISTINA CHIN is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at UCLA. Her research focuses on the intersection of race and ethnicity, identity formation, and youth culture (e-mail: cbchin@ucla.edu). NORIKO MILMAN is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at UCLA. She is currently using qualitative methods to study how students and teachers construct attentiveness in first grade classrooms (e-mail: nmilman@ucla.edu). NANCY WANG YUEN is assistant professor of Sociology at Biola University (e-mail: nancy.yuen@biola.edu). She is working on a book chapter on cultural representations of South Central Los Angeles for a volume on Black Los Angeles, and a paper on how the news media represented Asian-American voters in the 2008 democratic primaries.

Overt racist acts punctuate the historical experience of APIAs. Sought for their labor power, Japanese, Chinese, and other Asian "coolies" were brought into the western United States and Hawaii in the 1800s (Almaguer, 1994; Nakano Glenn, 2002; Takaki, 2000). As they did with African Americans and other people of color, white employers coerced Asian labor, usually by way of duplicitous "labor contracts" that ultimately resulted in subcontracting and land tenancy (Almaguer, 1994; Nakano Glenn, 2002). Whereas European immigrant men were encouraged to bring their families to the United States and were treated as potential citizens, Asian men were regarded primarily as sojourner laborers (Nakano Glenn, 2002).

As a means of preserving racial boundaries, Jim Crow segregation was a key white supremacist principle enforced by the state. Like African Americans and other people of color, Asians were subject to de facto segregation. In addition, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Gentlemen's agreement of 1907–1908, and the 1917 Immigration Act denied entry into the United States to Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indians, and others (Ong and Liu, 2000: 15). Not until the Immigration Act of 1965 were the bans against Asian immigrants lifted. Furthermore, exclusion acts and anti-miscegenation laws prevented Asian families from being reunited in America and denied Asians the right to marry outside their race.

Before the Civil Rights Movement, ideologies served as justifications for overt racism at the state, local, and individual levels (Omi and Winant, 1994). Racialization sprouted with European colonialism and "has been first and foremost a way of describing 'others,' of making clear that 'they' are not 'us'" (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 27; see also Omi and Winant, 1994). In the U.S., whites waged ideological warfare on Asian immigrants with the same violent and savage character they had used against African Americans, though the effects were perhaps less severe given the smaller numbers of Asians in the United States (Lieberson, 1980: 368).<sup>4</sup> To exclude Asians from American society, whites characterized Chinese men and women as aggressive heathens, unworthy of citizenship (Almaguer, 1994; Takaki, 2000). Similarly, the Japanese were perceived as "perpetual foreigners," "aliens" whose allegiance rested with the Japanese government (Nakano Glenn, 2002). Besides exclusion, this racist ideology contributed to the most devastating anti-Asian, anti-citizen action in the United States: the incarceration of nearly 110,000 U.S. residents and citizens of Japanese descent in 1942 (Ong and Liu, 2000: 157). Deemed "foreign" based on their race, not for their actual place of birth or residency (Wu, 2002), APIAs continue to face the consequences of this racist ideology.

Even "positive" stereotypes of racial minorities, such as the "model minority," can serve as ideological tools in preserving the racial hierarchy. Originating in the 1950s, the model minority stereotype is used to discount the existence of persistent racial discrimination while buttressing the myth of meritocracy—that if APIAs have succeeded economically in the face of past discrimination, then other racial minorities should follow suit.<sup>5</sup> The stereotype suggests that as hardworking entrepreneurs who are doing well economically and as dedicated students who excel in math and

sciences, APIAs have overcome discrimination and are now "outwhiting whites" (Lee and Gandy, 1996: 6). This model minority stereotype denies the poverty, illiteracy, and racism that afflict many APIA individuals and communities. It also counters civil rights efforts by condemning poor African Americans and Latinos based on individual and cultural characteristics. These ideologies continue to circulate in the post-Civil Rights era to buttress less overt, but nonetheless effective, efforts to stunt progressive antiracist efforts.

### **"Color-Blind" Ideology in the Post-Civil Rights Era**

Whereas past racism was often overt, codified by civil society, and fortified in private enterprise, the racial inequality that persists in the post-Civil Rights era is camouflaged with a "color-blind" smile (Bonilla-Silva, 2001: 138). Scholars argue that despite a contemporary "color-blind" ideology (*Ibid.*; Feagin, 2000; Omi and Winant, 1994), race continues to define the experiences of people of color. Omi and Winant (1994: 117; 60) note that although neoconservatives and neoliberals have rearticulated the United States as a color-blind society, it is still immersed in a "comprehensively racialized social structure." As such, they warn: "So today, more than ever, opposing racism requires that we notice race, not ignore it, that we afford it the recognition it deserves and the subtlety it embodies" (p. 159).

Color-blindness has now become a dominant ideology buttressing white privilege and supremacy. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003) examines white individuals' rationales for interpreting information, styles of talk, and personal testimonies. A majority of white respondents in his study believe that the racial playing field has been leveled and, following this, that race no longer permeates U.S. social relations. This so-called color-blindness remains "formidable" because the ideology leaves "little intellectual, moral, and practical room for whites to support the policies that are needed to accomplish significant racial change in this country" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001: 162). "Color-blind" racism is thus "the central ideological formation that has emerged to support and reproduce the new racial structure of the United States and the "seductive lullaby" that lures us into the false belief that racism has ceased" (*Ibid.*: 138; 204).

Indeed, as an ideology, color-blindness serves as a "practical toolkit of ideas and concepts, expressions, prejudices, and stories that provide individuals with 'naïve basic theories of social life'" (*Ibid.*: 137). Because this toolkit is so naturalized, an "ideological analysis about race" is "not a matter of finding 'racists,' but rather an attempt to uncover the frames, racetalk, and storylines that help lubricate a racial order at a particular historical juncture" (*Ibid.*: 138). To do this, we must pinpoint and analyze the collective representations that now serve as substitutes for overt racism.

One major disseminator of collective representations is the mass media. Joe Feagin (2000: 88) writes the following about the relationships between the mass media and racist ideology:

In recent decades white elites—especially white male elites—have continued to dominate the construction and transmission of new or refurbished ideas and images designed to buttress the system of racial inequality, and they have used even more powerful means to accomplish their ends. The mass media now include not only the radio, movies, and print media used in the past, but television, music videos, satellite transmissions, and the Internet.

Thus, television and other forms of media, perceived as pervasive agents of socialization, are perhaps the most prominent tools for circulating various social representations and therefore require further examination.

### **Impacts of Racist Ideologies in the Media**

Images on television do not exist in a vacuum, but rather convey and infuse ideological meanings into the societies in which they are produced (Adorno, 1957; Hall, 1980, 1981). In fact, “images of racial minorities in prime time television are not limited to the small screen, but are part of a larger discourse on Otherness in the United States” (Berg, 2002: 4). The ideologies of racial difference and “Otherness” disseminated through media images can engage feelings in the viewer, including fear and anxiety (Hall, 1997: 226). As Stuart Hall (1981: 10) explains, the relationship between ideology and practice is reciprocal:

How we “see” ourselves and our social relations *matters*, because it enters into and informs our actions and practices. Ideologies are therefore a site of a distinct type of social struggle. This site does not exist on its own, separate from other relations, since ideas are not free-floating in people’s heads. The ideological construction of black people as a “problem population” and the police practice of containment in the black communities mutually reinforce and support one another.

Societal racial stereotypes—exacerbated and reproduced in media images—can translate into structural racism, as in the example of police containment of African Americans, and prejudicial behavior on the part of individuals. However, mirroring the general trend of implicit racism in the post-Civil Rights U.S., the media rarely project explicitly racist messages. Rather, having a greater influence on racist thinking and behavior is the omission of particular images and messages, including a denial of structural racism and the continued impact of past discrimination on today’s racial minorities (Entman, 2006: 13). When the media do reveal discrimination or stereotypes, they are often subtly mentioned or weaved into the background of storylines, rather than explicitly stated and emphasized. For example, images of young men of color as criminals dominate the media, causing viewers to engrain these images subconsciously (Entman, 2006; Kang, 2005).

Social cognition experiments point to the potential impact of media images to

create implicit racial biases on the part of viewers (Kang, 2005). Such experiments show that the mere image of a "black face" can lead to negative interpretations and behaviors on the part of subjects, such as "shooting" an unarmed virtual black person in a video game (Correll et al., cited in Kang, 2005: 1493). Furthermore, studies demonstrate that people rely on popular images to make assumptions about groups with which they do not interact (Entman, 2006; Fujioka, 1999). For instance, whites who are initially ambivalent toward nonwhites may move toward animosity when inflamed by particular situations (i.e., meeting a young man of color when walking alone at night) that are exacerbated by stereotyped media depictions (Entman, 2006: 11).

### **Frames: How the Media Package Racial Ideology**

Within the media, ideologies are transmitted through frames. Each frame tells the audience how to think about an issue and encourages the audience to interpret events in terms of a key idea (Crane, 1992: 80; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Since whites dominate the mass media behind and in front of the screen (Feagin, 2000: 88; Screen Actor's Guild, 2004), people of color "have only a token presence in the choice and shaping of news reports and media entertainment" (Feagin, 2000: 88). As a result, media frames often serve to reinforce dominant racist ideologies (Feagin, 2000; Hall, 1981).

We review three ways in which the media frame racist ideologies. First, the media can frame stories by representing particular images to the exclusion of others. The general overrepresentation of whites and under-representation of people of color in film and television (SAG, 2004) reinforce the racial hierarchy by privileging whiteness (Gray, 2005: 10). Furthermore, the inclusion of whites in and the exclusion of people of color from particular roles and settings also reinforce racist ideologies. For example, in the framing of Hurricane Katrina, newspapers overwhelmingly portrayed African Americans as victims and whites as rescuers, despite large numbers of African Americans and whites in both groups (Lee and Gandy, 2006). Our study demonstrates how the exclusion of APIAs as central characters on prime-time television and from particular genres and settings renders them as invisible "others."

Second, the media can choose frames that directly resonate with existing racist ideologies and stereotypes (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Snow and Benford, 1988; Somers, 1994). In film and television, representations of APIAs as ideal workers, geeky nerds, passive individuals, or academic overachievers resonate with the dominant ideology of the model minority myth (Wu, 2002). Our study presents several frames in prime-time television that echo current racist ideologies and stereotypes surrounding APIAs.

Third, since racial meaning can never be fixed, the media can choose frames that counter dominant ideologies (Hall, 1997: 270). The media can frame race as complex, unstable, and contested (rather than essentialized and natural), and/or

substitute frames of positive images for the negative imagery of people of color (*Ibid.*: 272). For example, the reframing of "black" as "beautiful" is a positive identification that counters traditionally negative associations of blackness (*Ibid.*). Indeed, Gray (1995: 92) maintains that the most powerful and thought-provoking representations "mark, displace, and disarticulate hegemonic and normative cultural assumptions and representations about America's racial order." These cultural struggles rightly problematize our racialized past and offer alternatives for our present and future (*Ibid.*: 173). Our study provides examples of how prime-time television can counter dominant ideologies through positive and nuanced framing of APIA experiences.

### Methodology and Sample

This study examines network websites and episodes of prime-time programming on the six national broadcast networks. Since the study focuses on recurring characters that develop in depth and complexity over time, news magazine programming, reality shows without regular hosts, animated series, and movie specials were excluded. Regular characters were determined using the program's opening credits, along with network websites and self-reports. In addition, this study examines diversity within the APIA community by distinguishing between monoracial and multiracial APIA actors.<sup>6</sup> Monoracials and multiracials were identified by coding websites for actor phenotype and name, as well as character name. For ethnically ambiguous actors, reliable Internet databases, such as *www.imdb.com*, were used to investigate.

To maximize the data from recorded episodes, we intentionally coded only first-run episodes (not reruns) in which the APIA regulars appeared. Consequently, if the APIA regular did not appear, the recording schedule was extended to capture episodes in which s/he did.<sup>7</sup> As a result, APIA presence may be overstated in our study. Data for the fall 2004 season uses one recorded episode of each show, while the 2005 season includes averaged data collected from two episodes of each show. Excluding commercial time, the average show time is 41 minutes for hour-long programs and 21 minutes for half-hour programs.

All data were subjected to two levels of analysis. First, a macro-level analysis examined general program characteristics, including genre, network, and program setting, for all prime-time programming on the six national broadcast networks. This information was obtained from network websites and by reviewing episodes. Second, a micro-level analysis identified more detailed characteristics, such as race, gender, occupation, intimate relationships, character setting, language, character name, screen time, and plot summary, for each regular character on shows featuring at least one regular APIA actor. The race and gender of characters were obtained from network websites, while all remaining information was obtained from coding recorded episodes. To ensure reliability between coders, eight percent of the

sample was coded by each of the coders independently. The observed frequency of agreement, based on the calculation of kappa, was at 95% or higher.

**First Frame: Selective Representation Equals Invisibility of APIAs**

Prime-time television frames APIAs in largely exclusionary ways. Although APIAs comprise about five percent of the total U.S. population, or approximately 15 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), APIA actors were featured in a mere 1.3% of all lead roles in film and television (SAG, 2004). A closer look into prime-time television during the fall 2004 and 2005 seasons reveals similar findings. APIA characters comprise only two percent of all regular characters in 2004, and only 1.7% in 2005 (Chin et al., 2006). That is, among the 75 prime-time programs in the fall 2004 season, only seven featured at least one APIA character, and only eight out of 84 programs did in 2005 (see Table 1). Furthermore, with the exception of NBC's *ER* and *Hawaii* and ABC's *Lost*, all programs featured just one APIA character each, suggesting APIA tokenism in character casting.

**Table 1:**  
**APIA Regulars by Network, Season, Program, Character, and Ethnicity**

Network	2004		2005	
	Program	Character (Ethnicity)	Program	Character (Ethnicity)
ABC	<i>Lost</i>	"Jin-Soo Kwon" (Korean)	<i>Grey's Anatomy</i>	"Cristina Yang" (Korean)
		"Sun Kwon" (Korean)	<i>Lost</i>	"Jin-Soo Kwon" (Korean) "Sun Kwon" (Korean)
NBC	<i>Crossing Jordan</i>	"Bug" (So. Asian)	<i>Crossing Jordan</i>	"Bug" (South Asian)
	<i>ER</i>	"Neela Rasgotra" (South Asian) "Jing-Mei" (Chinese)	<i>ER</i>	"Neela Rasgotra" (South Asian)
	<i>Hawaii</i>	"Linh Tamiya" (Japanese) "Kaleo" (Samoan)	<i>Inconceivable</i>	"Rachel Lu" (Chinese)
	<i>Law &amp; Order: Special Victims Unit</i>	"George Huang" (Chinese)	<i>Law &amp; Order: Special Victims Unit</i>	"George Huang" (Chinese)
UPN	<i>Enterprise</i>	"Hoshi Sato (Japanese)"	<i>Half and Half</i>	"Adam Benet" (Filipino)
WB	<i>Gilmore Girls</i>	"Lane Kim" Korean	<i>Gilmore Girls</i>	"Lane Kim" (Korean)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7 programs</b>	<b>11 characters</b>	<b>8 programs</b>	<b>9 characters</b>



This diminished presence in the American television landscape is especially disconcerting given that several programs take place in areas where APIAs comprise a significant proportion of the population. For example, APIAs comprise over 30% of the population of San Francisco, California, but of the five programs set there during the 2004 and 2005 seasons, only one features an APIA character (UPN's *Half and Half*). Only one of the two programs set in Honolulu, Hawaii, includes APIA characters (NBC's *Hawaii*), a rather poor reflection of the 60% APIA population in that area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Unfortunately, all 20 programs set in Los Angeles County, California, which is more than 10% APIA, completely exclude APIAs from their collective casts. Similarly, only one of the 24 programs set in New York City, which is also nearly 10% APIA, features an APIA character (NBC's *Law & Order: SVU*). In short, of the 51 programs set in densely APIA-populated locations,<sup>8</sup> most do not feature a single APIA regular character, thereby failing to present an accurate portrayal of the "American" public on the small screen.

An examination of television genres reveals how APIA invisibility extends beyond a lack of geographical presence. Regular APIA characters rarely appear on television sitcoms, and instead tend to be in television dramas (Chin et al., 2006). Sitcoms completely excluded APIAs in the fall 2004 prime-time season, and the only APIA regular in fall 2005, "Adam Benet" from UPN's *Half and Half*, was of marginal significance to the program. The show does little to elaborate on Adam's background or personal life, which is hardly surprising considering his on-screen presence is less than one-third of that of other regular characters (*Ibid.*).

Most sitcoms revolve around families and domestic settings, so the framing of APIAs in largely dramatic rather than sitcom genres ultimately reflects their exclusion from popular perceptions of what constitutes a quintessential "American" family. This absence is especially troublesome because long since *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch*, the concept of the "American family" has crossed color lines, as evidenced by *The Cosby Show*, and more recently by ABC's *George Lopez Show* and *My Wife and Kids*. In fact, neither before nor after ABC's single season of *All-American Girl* in 1995 has there been any effort to situate an APIA family as the central premise of a program.

Omission from the sitcom genre also restricts characters from embodying a broader spectrum of class, occupational, and ethnic/cultural roles. Unlike most dramas, which are characterized by particular themes (e.g., medical, police, and legal) that determine a specific range of character types (e.g., doctors, detectives, and lawyers), sitcoms often feature characters from various walks of life. In addition to the central family members, other regular characters can include neighbors, co-workers, or local merchants and shop owners from diverse class, occupational, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, the absence of APIAs from sitcoms results in their invisibility in American families and the fabric of everyday American life.

Another exclusionary framing of APIAs is the low screen time of APIA versus non-APIA regulars on prime-time television. Since the development of a character's

personality, background, and relationships directly relates to the screen time allotted to that character, the lower screen times of APIA characters render them largely one-dimensional and subordinate to the non-APIA (mainly white) regulars. In the 2004 and 2005 seasons, the highest screen times for APIA female and male characters ranged from only 20 to 40% of the highest times for non-APIAs.<sup>9</sup>

When we consider each APIA character's screen time relative to the screen times of the other regular characters within the same program, we learn even more about the invisibility of APIAs.<sup>10</sup> In 2004, seven out of 11 APIA characters (64%) ranked either last or second-to-last in their respective programs. Considerable improvement was made in 2005, where only one APIA character ranked second-to-last and none were ranked last. Unfortunately, no APIA characters had the highest or even second-highest screen time on their own shows in 2004, although "Cristina Yang" of ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* ranked second in her program in 2005. Thus, even when APIAs were not completely invisible, their low screen time rankings suggest that they were not integral members of these shows.

The absence of APIAs from particular settings, such as their private residences, further frames APIAs as invisible and isolated.<sup>11</sup> Seeing a character in her own home helps to establish character depth and multidimensionality by providing glimpses into that character's personality, cultural background, and family/social life. These opportunities enable audience members to connect with characters, and also help to signify which characters are most central to the program's narrative. In 2004, only one of the 11 APIA characters was shown in her own home: "Lane Kim" of WB's *Gilmore Girls*. Considerable improvement was made in the 2005 season, when three of the seven APIA characters were featured in private settings: their own home in the case of "Lane Kim" of WB's *Gilmore Girls* and "Rachel Lu" of NBC's *Inconceivable*, and visiting her co-workers' home in the case of "Cristina Yang" from ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*.

In short, invisibility is reinforced through prime-time television's selective representation and exclusion of APIA characters. APIAs are underrepresented on prime time and they are often completely dismissed even in geographical locations that have dense APIA populations. Additionally, the peripheral roles, if any, that APIAs portray in the sitcom genre substantiate popular notions that they are not "American" (Lee, 1999: 13). This denies APIAs access to a broad range of class, occupational, and cultural characteristics and limits the variety of APIA characters found on television.

For APIAs who escape invisibility, their significantly lower screen times and lack of depictions in private settings restrict their ability to portray well-developed, multidimensional characters to the viewing public. Excluding or marginalizing APIAs on television propagates the idea that these individuals have no community and are perpetual foreigners (Lee, 1999; Tuan, 1998; Wu, 2002). The gross under-representation of APIAs, particularly in areas with high APIA concentrations, perpetuates

the invisibility of APIAs and implicitly suggests that APIAs are still "foreigners" who have not established prominent communities within the United States.

### **Second Frame: Reproducing Racist Ideologies by Perpetuating Stereotypes of APIAs**

In addition to selective representation, frames also serve to perpetuate dominant ideologies or stereotypes on prime-time television. Racialized APIA images and characters are not a new phenomenon on television or at the movies. From the earliest images of immigrants with heavy accents to nerdy overachievers, stereotypic images of APIAs have historically dominated the small screen. Three major stereotypes that frame APIAs in prime-time television include: (1) the "model minority," (2) the sexually undesirable APIA man, and (3) the sexually available APIA woman. Although these familiar ideologies and images provide shortcuts to connect with audiences, these limited representations silence the multiple voices of the APIA community, thereby erasing ethnic, cultural, social class, educational, and other differences to create one homogenous and often misrepresented group.

*The "Model Minority" Stereotype:* The stereotypic framing of APIAs on prime-time television as the ideal worker, the scholastic overachiever, the math genius, or the geeky science/computer nerd is persistent. Over half the APIA-identified characters in both seasons held high status occupations, many of which require advanced degrees. Almost all APIAs on prime-time television are in highly prestigious professions: medical doctors or examiners, forensic psychiatrists, and attorneys. For example, several APIA characters were in medical fields, such as *Grey's Anatomy's* (ABC) "Dr. Cristina Yang," *Law & Order: SVU's* (NBC) "Dr. George Huang," *Crossing Jordan's* (NBC) "Bug," and *ER's* (NBC) "Dr. Jing-Mei" and "Dr. Neela Rasgotra." APIAs on prime time are also characterized as exceptionally bright academic overachievers. As an example, the WB's program website even describes "Lane Kim" on *Gilmore Girls* as "brainy."<sup>12</sup>

The high-status framing of most APIA characters may reflect their presence in mostly one-hour dramatic television shows, where most characters, regardless of race, tend to have high-status occupations. This perpetuates stereotypes of APIAs as workaholic professional colleagues, rather than friends and neighbors. Moreover, the exclusion of APIA characters from a varied range of occupations and careers may contribute to generalizations about APIA individuals and obscure the diverse and complex experiences of APIAs, particularly with regard to social class and educational attainment. Television images thus reinforce the misconception that APIAs have overcome all racial barriers to achieving the "American Dream."

*The Stereotype of the "Undesirable APIA Man":* Prime-time television also frames APIA men as sexually undesirable. Historically, APIA men have been depicted and stereotyped in the media as effeminate, nerdy, weak, non-aggressive, asexual, or sexually deviant (Chan et al., 1991). In the fall 2004 and 2005 television seasons, eight of the 14 APIA characters were not involved in meaningful or long-

term relationships. The fact that five of the eight were APIA males is significant in that it perpetuates the stereotype of the sexually undesirable APIA man. Audiences regularly see non-APIA characters actively pursuing or involved in romantic relationships, but APIA males are rarely seen taking the initiative and are not the object of desire.

An interesting exception is UPN's *Half and Half* character, "Adam Benet," a gay man who is open about his sexuality with his colleagues at work. Adam is highly flirtatious and employs sexual innuendo several times among coworkers, but he is never linked romantically to anyone. Rather than being asexual, his "hypersexuality" is framed as a funny and exaggerated form of sexual deviance. Thus, the one program that showcases an APIA man's sexuality does so as comedy.

Only one APIA male was involved in a long-term relationship: "Jin Soo" on ABC's *Lost*, who was married to "Sun." Together, this monoracial Korean couple represented the only two APIA characters featured as a married couple that audiences saw consistently on screen together. The marital status of the other five APIA males was definitively single or was never made explicit, thereby sustaining the image of solitary APIA males. We can link this to the historical perception of APIA males as sojourner laborers, in the U.S. for the sole purpose of working and therefore not to be treated as friends or family (Nakano Glenn, 2002).

*The Stereotype of the "Available APIA Woman":* Unlike their male counterparts, APIA female characters were framed with more active romantic lives; at least six women were involved in heterosexual relationships with other characters. Excluding the one monoracial immigrant couple discussed above, audiences were exposed to mostly interracial romantic pairings among APIA female characters, often with African-American men. Viewers followed "Cristina Yang" on *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC) during her complicated relationship with an African-American colleague as she learned she was pregnant with their child. "Neela Rasgotra" and "Jing-Mei," both doctors on NBC's *ER*, were involved in romantic relationships with African-American doctors from their workplace. "Lane Kim" on *Gilmore Girls* (WB) avidly pursued a relationship with a white male friend who was also a member of her rock band.

Although romantic relationships add to the complexity of these characters and pique audience interest, they also frame APIA women as intimately available to men. Interestingly, this pattern of interracial dating on the small screen differs from current trends of intermarriage among APIA women. In reality, APIAs tend to marry within their ethnic groups, though there is a high rate of intermarriage between white males and APIA females (Alba and Nee, 2003: 263; Qian et al., 2001). However, APIA women in prime time are rarely married. The notable finding here is not that APIA women are shown in relationships—an accurate representation of reality—but that they are rarely shown in long-term relationships and almost never with APIA men.

*Third Frame: Counter-ideologies:* Although the 2004 and 2005 seasons did little

to erase racialized, stereotypic images of APIAs, some programs did make subtle attempts to frame racial issues as complex and contested. In these few instances, dialog between characters highlighted and problematized racial issues specific to the APIA community. For example, in an episode of *ER* (NBC), a white male intern has difficulty pronouncing Neela's last name, Rasgotra. Out of frustration, she tells the intern that rather than attempting to correctly address her as Dr. Rasgotra, "Neela is fine." This subtle interaction addresses the difficulties many APIAs, along with other individuals with ethnic names, may have regarding cross-ethnic interaction. This frustration may explain why some APIAs change their ethnic or traditional names to more "Americanized" names.

With its racially diverse and large ensemble cast, *Lost* (ABC) also uses racialized interactions to address APIA racial issues. In two scenes, racialized comments that misidentified their ethnicity were directed toward the Korean couple. In one circumstance, a Latino character incorrectly refers to the couple as "Chinese"; later, a white character refers to a Korean character as "Mr. Miyagi," the popular Japanese character in the movie, *The Karate Kid*. An Iraqi character then correctly identifies and refers to the couple as Korean. These interactions problematize the ethnic homogenization of APIAs; conflating Asian ethnic identities as interchangeable and lumping APIAs into a homogenous group denies the diversity and complexity of APIAs (Lopez and Espiritu, 1990; Espiritu, 1992).

Our principal findings demonstrate that APIAs are largely invisible on prime-time television and that stereotyping continues when they are present. However, a few programs stand out for challenging these frames through counter-ideologies. The 2004 season of *ER* (NBC) was especially notable for including two APIA characters and providing complexity to each. Neither "Dr. Jing-Mei" (played by Ming-Na) nor "Dr. Neela Rasgotra" (played by Parminder Nagra) had high screen times, yet both were shown to have private lives. Neither was simply a "token Asian" relegated to the workplace. The former discusses the difficulty of caring for her ailing father. The latter struggles with whether she really wants to be a doctor, temporarily quitting her job as a medical resident.

*Grey's Anatomy* (ABC) featured Sandra Oh as "Dr. Cristina Yang" in 2005. It was exemplary for several reasons. Although only one APIA appears on the show, Cristina is given significant screen time to develop a multifaceted character. The character is shown in a variety of settings and is involved in an intimate relationship. The audience sees Cristina as a competent professional in her workplace, but is also privy to her private life. We see her having dinner with her boyfriend at a local restaurant and talking with friends and coworkers in their homes. Sandra Oh received a Golden Globe and Screen Actor's Guild award for the performance; that the character had depth and Oh was given the on-screen time to develop a following no doubt helped greatly.

A third notable show is ABC's *Lost*, which features "Jin Soo" (played by Daniel Dae Kim) and "Sun" (played by Yunjin Kim) as the only married APIA couple on

prime-time television for the 2004 and 2005 seasons. This program has a number of distinguishing features. For one, the character complexity extends beyond glimpses of the intimacy between Jin Soo and Sun, with both characters also closely linked to others on the show. Additionally, *Lost* made the bold decision to problematize race by including racial issues in the dialog of characters (i.e., one character correcting another regarding the APIA ethnicity of a third). Furthermore, the show includes the unique aspect of including the Korean language in the dialogue between Jin Soo and Sun—at times providing English subtitles for the audience to listen in on their discussions.

Significantly, two of the three exemplary programs discussed above consistently garner the highest audience ratings for all prime-time television programs. For the week of October 10–16, 2005, ABC's *Lost* had a viewing audience of 14.1 million, ranking fourth according to Nielsen ratings. Similarly, ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* ranked fifth, with an audience of 13.4 million.

### Conclusion and Implications

The sociological literature on race and media representation directly connects to the current representation of APIAs on prime-time television. Three frames have been examined in this article. The first involves the invisibility of APIAs. Stereotypical depictions of APIAs are a second frame used to reproduce racist ideologies. A third frame presents the possibility of countering dominant racist ideologies on prime-time television. Though limited in scope, a few exemplary shows do frame discussions of APIA experiences in positive and nuanced ways.

People rely on film and television characterizations to formulate beliefs about unfamiliar groups. Thus, the extent to which audience members can refer to well-defined and multifaceted APIA characters can have critical implications (Entman and Rojecki, 2001). For one, APIAs are perceived by society and portrayed by the media as "other" than American. Although the history of Asians in America stretches back over 150 years, people of APIA heritage are still not considered fully part of the American social fabric. This community is largely isolated or ignored in American society, and is rarely part of prime-time television programming. The exclusion of APIAs from sitcoms prevents APIA actors from playing a breadth of roles and perpetuates the stereotype of APIAs as not being representative of the American family. When APIAs are represented, screen time is generally limited and they receive one-dimensional roles. Additionally, television broadcasts stereotype APIAs. Most APIA characters are "model minorities," supposedly outperforming whites academically and economically. The "model minority" stereotype grounds APIA success not in prior educational qualifications and/or community resources, but in a uniform cultural proclivity toward hard work, emphasis on formal education, and attention to detail (Steinberg, 2001: 79, 84–86, 270–275; Maira, 2002: 7). Another stereotype reinforced in prime-time is that of the sexually undesirable APIA man, as they are rarely seen in any type of sexual or intimate relationship.

Combining these stereotypes, we see that the American inclination to separate "us" from "them," or the "familiar" from the "strange," results in the labeling of APIAs as "others." Instead of being Americans, they are "exotic Orientals" (Said, 1978; see also Nakano Glenn, 2002: 227).

The exclusion of APIA characters from shows set in areas of high APIA population density reinforces the invisibility frame by creating the perception that large blocs of APIAs do not exist. This could lead government and local officials to refrain from targeting APIA voters and/or address issues particular to the APIA community. For example, although New York City's Chinatown was located only 10 blocks away from ground zero, and was the largest residential area devastated by the September 11 attacks, the media excluded it. As a result, efforts to provide aid to devastated communities initially excluded Chinatown.

It is possible to challenge the deficient coverage of APIAs in the media. Indeed, the data used in this article have also yielded two policy reports (conducted by the authors in conjunction with the Asian American Justice Center) that petition and pressure television networks to increase and improve APIA representation in prime-time television. Civil rights organizations such as the Asian American Justice Center and the NAACP, along with grass-roots organizations such as the Media Action Network for Asian Americans and union subcommittees focused on diversity initiatives (within the Screen Actor's Guild and other guilds), actively work to protest and alter the invisibility and misrepresentation of APIAs in popular culture. As a result, images (or a lack thereof) of APIAs in prime-time television are not stagnant, but have the potential to change and improve with the help of social movements. Outside prime-time television, independent filmmakers, along with Asian-American theater companies such as the East West Players, provide alternative voices and images to those circulated by Hollywood. Besides subcultural contributions, Asian-American cultural producers (e.g., actors, writers, and directors) also challenge and subvert stereotypical representations from within prime-time television and mainstream films (Yuen, 2004). This work must be further complemented by the analyses of social movements and the subversive actions of cultural producers and audiences (Gray, 2005).

## NOTES

1. Ideology is a set of principles and views that embodies the basic interests of a particular social group. It can affect a person's thoughts or actions without being fully understood or accepted by that individual (Feagin, 2000: 69).

2. The term "frame" (and framework) is borrowed from Goffman (1974: 21) to denote "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective (Snow and Benford, 1988: 464). Within the media, frames act as "interpretive packages that represent different ways of interpreting an issue" (Crane, 1992: 79-80).

3. Definitions of who is "white" can change over time. A case in point is that in the United States, Southern and Eastern European immigrants (the majority of whom came at the turn of the 20th century) changed from nonwhite status to white status by the third and fourth generation (Alba and Nee, 2003).

4. This was in large part due to restrictive immigration policy (Alba and Nee, 2003: 69; Almaguer, 1994; Takaki, 2000).

5. Although many APIAs of East Asian origins have high socioeconomic statuses, a disproportionate number of APIAs live below the poverty line. See Wu (2002) for persistent discrimination against APIAs and the diversity among APIAs to account for socioeconomic discrepancies within Asian ethnic groups.

6. A monoracial APIA is a person of a single or multiple Asian ethnic or Pacific Islander heritage, while a multiracial APIA is a person of Asian or Pacific Islander descent plus one or more non-Asian races.

7. The sampled episodes aired between September 29 and November 19, 2004, and September 26 and December 22, 2005, between the standard prime-time television hours of 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m., Pacific Standard Time (PST), with the exception of Fox's *MADtv*, which aired at 11:00 p.m., PST.

8. Defined here as comprising at least 10% of the total population.

9. In 2004, the highest APIA screen time of almost eight minutes in a one-hour drama is less than one-third of the highest character screen time of nearly 28 minutes. The 2005 season revealed some improvement, as the highest APIA screen time of about 12 minutes is about 40% of the highest character screen time of about 30 minutes. In both instances, female characters held the highest APIA screen times. APIA males average significantly less screen time presence, at only about 20% of the highest character screen time in 2004, and 30% in 2005.

10. This type of evaluation reveals nuances that may be missed if only actual screen time measurements are accounted for. For example, a character screen time of seven minutes may rank first or second in a large ensemble program, such as ABC's *Lost*, where screen time is widely distributed among 15 characters. However, the same amount of time may rank last in a program such as NBC's *Crossing Jordan*, which only features six regular characters.

11. Granted, certain genres may determine and limit the range of settings available. In police dramas, characters are primarily seen in the precinct. However, it is not uncommon to see certain characters even in dramas outside the workplace, or within their own homes.

12 *Gilmore Girls*, Keiko Agena, n.d. Retrieved August 1, 2006, from [http://thewb.warnerbros.com/web/show\\_bio.jsp?id=GG-D-KAgena](http://thewb.warnerbros.com/web/show_bio.jsp?id=GG-D-KAgena).

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