

Ovsana Tsaturian

Theories On Why Immigrant Stereotypes in *Fresh Off the Boat* Work

Fresh Off the Boat, released in 2015, is an Asian American sitcom that showcases several attempts to move past the stereotypes and caricatures imposed on immigrants on television. According to film theorists, stereotypes are meant to be self-representational and through modern technology and media, we can begin to close the gap between the cultural and generational chasm. These theories include that of Ella Shohart and Robert Stam's "Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation" which discusses the self-representational side of stereotypes and how they are neither negative nor positive. Along with this is Okoda Jun's "Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell" in which he also describes self-representation but specifically of Asian Americans within film and television. These theories, along with several others, will question how we can improve the representation within media for Asian American immigrants, decreasing offense and without removing the objectiveness that comes with creating a sitcom that those outside of the Asian American culture can enjoy. Even within the same culture, these theories do not address the difficulties of representation in media in context to generational differences. These important discussions along with analyzing the show and the way in which it chooses to tackle immigrant stereotypes embedded in sitcom comedy create space to revolutionize theories on this subject and progress our understanding of inclusivity and representation for Asian Americans in the media.

Based on the autobiography of Eddie Huang, *Fresh Off the Boat* caught the attention of television networks including 20th Century Fox and ABC. The show was picked up by the networks and they, very quickly, began casting Asian American cast members such as producer

Nahnatchka Khan who was best known for her work on *Don't Trust the B- in Apartment 23*. Along with Khan, author Eddie Huang was also asked to write the pilot episode as well as take on the role of executive producer. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, producer Khan discusses her own interest in working on the show as well as hiring Asian American writers in order to authenticate the cultural impacts within the show (Buris). She mentions that she “really related to the first-generation American/immigrant idea because that’s my story as well”(Buris). She also mentions that those who greenlit the show were immigrants themselves and although they immigrated from England, she claims that they really understood the value of having a show like this on air. Khan, herself, is not Chinese but was still able to relate to the immigrant idea and the immigrant spectator can relate to the family on the show just based on the relatability of moving to a new country and learning how to navigate the new life they lead. In the same interview with Khan, she also discusses how the title of the show changes many times because they worried it may be offensive to minorities. However, she follows this with, “...at the end of the day, this is a comedy that’s not quiet. We’re not apologizing for anything, so I think going the “unsafe” route and picking a title that announces itself and doesn’t apologize made sense” (Buris). These decisions seem to be directly linked with hiring immigrant or Asian American cast and crew and go to show the importance of hiring staff of the same or similar racial backgrounds.

The importance of having cast and crew in a similar racial background as that of the characters within the show can be explained by a film theory developed by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam that they call “Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation”. Within this theory, they talk about how stereotypes are neither positive nor negative and instead are meant to be self-representational. They claim that “historically, marginalized groups are unable

to control their own representation and we need to understand the dissemination of mass media in this regard”(Corrigan). What this is trying to say is that many marginalized groups such as minorities within American media have long been under the control of those that are not of similar racial backgrounds. They are unable to represent themselves because they are being represented by the other that has no relation to the struggles that the minority groups are going through. In the case of *Fresh Off the Boat*, we can see that this is not the case because they are being represented by groups that do have similar backgrounds. What this does is allow for representation that is more accurate and relatable to those that are watching and allows for a more diverse audience base because it expands the usual network of people that would watch shows of this nature. It comes across as more natural and real. *Fresh Off the Boat* addresses these concerns with its ability to take back control of the stereotypes portrayed on television by hiring Asian actors, writers, and producers.

We can compare this to the *Cosby* show whose main producers and writers consisted of the average white American. According to a different interview conducted by the Hollywood Reporter, the producer of *Fresh Off the Boat*, Nahnatchka Khan talks about diversity and *Fresh Off the Boat* compares to others of its kind from previous decades such as *The Cosby Show*. When asked about her thoughts on how the show tackles race especially considering that it revolves around an all-black family, she responds, “I can’t think of an episode where they tackled it head-on. They were trying to teach Theo about the value of money through Monopoly or whatever. Looking back through the 2019 lens, that was wild.” (Connell). On one hand, it acknowledges the difference between generations of television regarding race and that it was not as openly talked about at the time. However, what I think it doesn’t take into consideration is that

the Cosby show's almost all-white crew could have been a major contribution. If according to Ella and Robert, shows are meant to be self-representational, all that the Cosby show did was represent what the average black family looked like through the lens of a white perspective and not necessarily what it really was through the perspective of someone from that racial background.

Hollywood Reporter, although maybe unintentional, provided a necessary firsthand perspective on what it is *Fresh Off the Boat* is trying to accomplish in terms of its discussion on immigration and diversity. Being a part of an ethnic minority, Khan provides wonderful insight as to what it is like to be a producer of this show in a white male-dominated industry. Even Khan claims that shows from previous decades did not do a good enough job at discussing race due to their inability to see beyond the white male spectator. She claims "*Seinfeld* was an amazing show. It's iconic and defined a whole generation of comedy writers — but by their own admission, that show was about nothing. When we came out, with shows like *Black-ish*, there was a re-embracing of the thing that you weren't supposed to talk about — which is race"(Connell). When relating this back to her statement about a supposed "inclusive show" such as The Cosby show, we can see that this statement also applies. Within these decades of television, race was not discussed which became a problem because the shows would not offer any real value to society, and the only real value that the Cosby show provided with its predominantly white producers and writers was its ability to reinforce certain stereotypes about race.

However, when discussing self-representation, we must also address concerns about stereotypes that can occur in shows such as *Fresh Off the Boat*. According to the journal titled

“Speaking like a Model Minority: ‘FOB’ Styles, Gender, and Racial Meanings” in the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, Shalini Shankar discusses the stereotypes that might be forcibly imposed on Asian Americans. They specifically discuss stereotypes regarding high levels of education, economic sufficiency, low crime rates, and so on, and this is something seen in *Fresh Off the Boat*. Two of the three sons in the sitcom show signs of high levels of intelligence and characteristically stay out of trouble. However, within the show, our main character, Eddie, is not the model minority stereotype that we see in other Asian American characters. He regularly gets in trouble and is average or below average in his classes. However, the show makes this synonymous with his more American characteristics due to him being the “black sheep” in the family or at least the least Asian American within the family.

Shankar also makes it clear how much pressure there is on Asian Americans to perform a certain way in the eyes of other Americans. However, even the show, *Fresh Off the Boat*, feels very performative. Shankar asks the reader to ponder what it means to be a model minority and why it was that Asian Americans were so easily integrated into the upper-middle-class white society. They specifically focus on speaking styles and even more relevant, he focuses on the speaking styles of teenagers. They claim that in Asian families “parents speak to one another and their children in their heritage language”, but also mentions, that “their children by and large reply in English and speak English among themselves” (Shankar). This English-speaking norm, he claims is a pressure to perform as an American as an Asian teenager which comes from the fear of being considered someone who is “Fresh Off the Boat”. In the show, *Fresh Off the Boat*, they represent this concept well. Teenager Eddie is very obsessed with hip-hop and American culture and speaks with his parents and grandmother in English, but the grandmother speaks back in Chinese. In one episode, there even becomes a challenge as to who can speak in Chinese the

longest. There is a lot of pressure to represent the Asian American community and represent it well and accurately without offense in order to create a better understanding for others outside of this culture. One part of that is facing the harsh realization of the pressures put on real-life immigrants outside of the show and incorporating that in order to can audience relation.

Representation in television, especially in sitcoms, has to be done very well in order not to offend the audience that it is trying to reach but also entertain the audiences that it normally wouldn't reach. What *Fresh Off the Boat* does so well is showcase what it means to be an American who is not white. According to Faustina Ducros, author of "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders on TV" they claim, "Representation on television is significant because it can affect our sense of "cultural citizenship"-the extent to which a group belongs to a common understanding of what is "American"(Ducros). There is a note to make about how these segregations of race and cultural differences are imposed on a country that claims it is diverse and that everyone can be an American. Even though *Fresh Off the Boat* can be seen time and time again as promoting their cultural difference in a positive light, there is still no shame within the show for being an American. In fact, the characters do their best to assimilate. Throughout the seasons we see Eddie's father, Louis, opening up a Western steakhouse known as "Louis Huang's Cattleman's Ranch Steakhouse". In Season one we establish that Louis desires to become more assimilated with American culture and a western steakhouse is one of the more Americanized restaurant styles that could have been chosen as a family business. However, even though Louis wants to be more assimilated, there is a fear that develops within the family that they are losing their ethnic identity. In a scene in which someone tells Louis that he is the first Asian American member that he forgot was Chinese, they realize how important it is to keep certain cultural or ethnic identities within themselves. They also understand that in order to be

American they do not have to be or behave like white people and that being American is actually just about accepting the balance between their identities and the American identity. This type of representation of balance in identity or the truer definition of Asian American is something the show writers do well.

The idea of showcasing an Asian family embracing their American and Asian identities simultaneously may not have been a possible approach in representation with older technologies, but it is definitely possible and evident with modern technology. In a theory called “Screen Memories and Entangled Technologies: Resignifying Indigenous Lives” the idea of access to other cultures is thoroughly discussed. This chapter discusses the use of modern technologies in order to create a better understanding or acceptance of traditional cultural practices (Corrigan). Specifically, how media-makers use their productions and programs in order to reach communities that may not have access to certain cultures. In *Fresh Off the Boat*, we are shown through modern technology, what the 1990s was like for an Asian American immigrant family. We understand various parts of their culture and the history of Asian American cultures as they fight to hold onto cultural practices while also fighting to veer away from stereotypes. This perspective is very important not only in representing Asian Americans to other Asian Americans in order to promote themselves and validate their identities, but to validate their identities with other cultures that may not have access to perspectives like these.

One interesting phenomenon that occurs within the show is the use of accents. Typically, accents within television sitcoms are solely to increase the situational comedy effect. According to Shilpa Dave in his article “Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies”, the use of accents within a comedy or sitcom is used in order to gain more comedic effect.

However, Shilpa's case is that shows work better when we see a more realistic version of these racially diverse characters with more realistic American accents as we see in real life instead of having their accents be the bud of the joke (Dave). He mentions a show called *Master of None* in which Aziz Ansari's character is auditioning for a role and the only way in which he will get it is if he plays up his Indian accent (Dave). What this does is, it shows how Hollywood wants to see these caricatures. They are constantly being used as a mode of humor instead of using the actual words behind the accent. However, he does mention that *Fresh Off the Boat* refuses to do that and one of the reasons for this may be due to the fact that the show was written by a production staff that has many Asian American writers. Therefore, being in a self-representational mindset, the show uses real-life situations in which parents could potentially speak to their children in English but with heavier accents as a realistic representation of the average Asian American life. The show never uses its accent as a weapon against the Asian American community and embraces it as a normal part of what it means to grow up as an immigrant in America.

The parents in *Fresh Off the Boat*, as characters, do a wonderful job of showing the generational chasm that comes with being an immigrant that is much more profound than the average American generational chasm. Andrew Chan in his article, "If It Makes You Happy" discusses the importance and the relevance of immigrant parents in the face of liberal attitudes. In the show, Eddie cannot relate to his parents and always feels as though they do not understand him or the life that he is navigating. There are constant references to the embarrassment that comes with being the child of two Asian American immigrants. In Chan's article, he agrees that we do see immigrant parents being made to look like a joke because of their reactions to the situations that they are put in that are outside of the comfort zone of their familiar cultural

practices. He claims, “immigrant parents are deployed as a comedic spectacle of hopelessly inassimilable foreignness. The same routines – the exaggerated accents, the incredulity in the face of liberal attitudes...” (Chan). Although Chan believes this to be true about *Fresh Off the Boat*, there is a certain element that is neglected which is the efforts that the parents make in order to assimilate to American norms, especially characters like Louis. Even with the parents working so hard within the show to assimilate to American norms, there is a comedic spectacle of those efforts that prevent the show from progressing beyond this. However, with how hard the writers work to create a self-representational television sitcom, this can be assumed to be necessary in order to provide the real effect of what an Asian American family endures through their navigation of immigrant life.

Another obstacle that provides insight as to the stereotypes and racial splits that take place in Asian American television is the stereotypes forced upon the writers and producers of the show as well. This stereotype has existed far before the show *Fresh Off the Boat* but still exists on television networks today. In an article titled “‘Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell’: Asian American Film and Video by Jun Okada, a film critic and programmer named Daryl Chin shares his experiences. He claims that as a film reviewer in the 1970’s he was one of the only Asian Americans in New York City who was employed as a writer on film and was constantly forced to explain, “No, I did not write about Asian American films or even Asian films: my ‘specialty’ (such as it was) happened to be avant-garde and independent films” (Okada). The reason this is so powerful is that it removes the race from the artist. Chin’s point was to show that just because he is Asian does not mean that he has to be confined to Asian American or Asian film and can just choose a genre that he specializes in the same way that anyone of another race, but specifically white people, are allowed to claim. There is a pressure to

represent your own racial background that is not talked about as often and *Fresh Off the Boat* writers and producers were faced with this same pressure as well. Not only was the show self-representational, but they also had to be able to make it work in a way that different racial backgrounds would be able to be entertained as well. That is why the show worked so well. The ability to create narratives that were not specifically Asian American but in fact vaguer and about a family who happened to immigrate to the United States and navigating that is not confined to just Asian Americans. It can reach diverse audiences across America.

The self-representational nature of the show provided by Asian American immigrant writers, producers, and cast members combined with validating theories on how stereotypes may work in favor of a sitcom, create a unique show like *Fresh Off the Boat*. We are able to see beyond the boundaries of cultural chasms and generational chams by understanding what it means to be an immigrant in America in the 1990s and how there can be a balance to stereotyping that may not always be negative. Even though the show was based on an autobiography by Eddie Huang, the sitcom provides a great new perspective on the struggles of Asian Americans to make a decision on how best to navigate assimilation and whether or not it takes away their ethnic identity. At the same time, it tackles race and ethnicity in ways that are profound and open doors that can lead to more revolutionary and inclusive sitcoms. We have already seen the shift and the effect that *Fresh Off the Boat* had after it first aired with shows such as *Black-ish*. Race doesn't have to be tip-toed around and can be representational when done correctly with examples and input from people who have experienced these struggles firsthand. Yet, it can still be a universal show to enjoy no matter the cultural background.

Works Cited

- BUSIS, H. How Fresh Off the Boat Jokes About Race (Without Being Racist). *Entertainment Weekly*, [s. l.], n. 1345, p. 50, 2015. Disponível em: Acesso em: 11 abr. 2022.
- CHAN, ANDREW. “If It Makes You Happy.” *Film Comment*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2018, pp. 18–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44991262>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2022.
- Corrigan, Timothy, et al. “Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation .” *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, 2011.
- Corrigan, Timothy, et al. “Screen Memories and Entangled Technologies: Resignifying Indigenous Lives .” *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Bedford/St. Martin's, Boston, 2011.
- CONNELL, M. O. Fresh Off the Boat: As her groundbreaking sitcom nears 100 episodes -- and she prepares to leave it -- producer Nahnatchka Khan talks about the new rules of broadcast TV. *Hollywood Reporter*, [s. l.], v. 425, n. 12, p. 36–37, 2019. Disponível em: . Acesso em: 11 abr. 2022.
- Davé, Shilpa. “Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies.” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2017, pp. 142–47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44867828>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2022.
- ducros, Faustina M., et al. “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders on TV.” *Contexts*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2018, pp. 12–17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26562934>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2022.
- OKADA, JUN. “‘Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell’: Asian American Film and Video,

1971–1982.” *Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements*, Rutgers University Press, 2015, pp. 12–38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1g6w.5>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2022.

Shankar, Shalini. “Speaking like a Model Minority: ‘FOB’ Styles, Gender, and Racial Meanings among Desi Teens in Silicon Valley.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2008, pp. 268–89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43104196>. Accessed 18 Apr. 2022.