RELATIONS OF RACE: EXPLORING THE PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES THROUGH FEATURE-LENGTH VISUAL NARRATIVES

by

FARRAH YOUN-HEIL

(Under the Direction of James F. Hamilton)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores what might be gained from examining in a new way the implications of media and communication for social injustices regarding race and ethnicity. To do this, it examines in depth two cases of feature-length visual narrative and the representation of race/ethnicity in relational rather than essentialized terms. The first case study considers the possibilities of the cultural production of social inequalities of race through visual documentary. It argues that LA 92 (2017) embodies an innovative means of addressing and reproducing social inequalities of race in ways that productively enable their confrontation and reconstitution. The second case study considers the possibilities of the cultural production of social inequalities of race through the scripted feature-film drama, Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022). While many studies explore race and media, they have yet to adequately address how media narratives produce contradictory understandings of racial inequalities. Instead, this approach proposes the direct, empirical examination of social relations and their making. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to concretely explain the process behind what is often simply asserted.

INDEX WORDS: Stereotypes, race, movies, narrative, documentary

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Austin. Your love and friendship are everything to me. In this universe and all universes, it's been a joy doing laundry and taxes with you.

For my parents, this work is inspired by the many lives you have lived and the one you continue to give me. I love you both forever and always!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

PROLOGUE

EPISTEMOLOGICAL REAWAKENING:

A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTION

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When Crazy Rich Asians first came out, I felt on top. It felt like the first time in a long time that I was proud to be Asian. Friends of mine would watch it and immediately call me to ask if I've seen it. Well of course I've seen it… but that's because the movie was for me and my people. I felt ownership over the film. Even when friends would express appreciation over scenes that showed them a moment of Asian culture like the scene where the family gathers around the table to make dumplings, I would nod emphatically because I didn't need someone explaining a significant cultural moment to me, one that I've experienced several times in my own life. There were several moments in the film that felt like an inside joke and all of us Asian Americans were a part of it. I felt like that others might laugh, but they didn't really get the joke. I didn't care if this was a romance movie or a comedy movie or a coming-of-age story, I saw this as an Asian American movie.

What did they intend for the movie Crazy Rich Asians? Who was their intended audience? Oh, it was definitely Asian Americans. This is an Asian American movie for Asian Americans. This is just the start to Asian American visibility in Hollywood, and I know things will take off! I wonder how Asian Americans talk about it.

These are thoughts I had that led to me conducting research on how Asian Americans communicated interracially about the film Crazy Rich Asians. I knew that to address these

questions, I wanted to use Stuart Hall's Encoding and Decoding Model. It was perfect! This model laid out simply what I needed and was a roadmap to understanding how the producers intended their move to be received and how audiences interpret it. Further, I wanted to understand how when Asian Americans talk about it, did it change the way they interpreted it?

What I found really surprised me, I was left actually with more questions than what I had started with. I remember thinking that if this movie were coming out, it must also mean that we're living in a more diverse society. I figured that this also meant that Asians in America would have this new sense of confidence and ownership over their Asian American identity. However, I discovered that the Asian Americans I got to talk to during my study were mostly apprehensive about talking about the film's racial and cultural significance interracially. Sure, they would talk about it as this lovely romantic comedy movie, but they often reserved the race talk for their friends and family who were also Asian or Asian American. I heard hesitancy and disbelief when they shared the conversations they had about the film. They, too, were unsure about why they felt so empowered by a film with an all-Asian cast about an Asian American struggling with her cultural identity but couldn't express to others who don't look like them. I empathized with them. I felt that when I talked to my Asian American friends we could dive deeply into the ways we felt represented but outside of those, I refrained from sharing. I would hold onto this contradiction to push for future inquiries. I was left confused, but I felt that I had a firm understanding of how to approach these questions.

* * *

I use this reflection to provide a sense of where I was situated in what Hall (1973) considers a framework of knowledge much prior to this dissertation work. At this time, I used

Hall's encoding and decoding theory with a linear application. I understood his model to a template to understanding the many ways audiences interpret the intended and unintended messages from the producers. Knowing what I know now, I realize the complexities that come with what Hall was intending with his encoding and decoding model. Initially, I didn't fully grasp the communicative activity that was regarding in this model, nor did I fully understand what that could look like. After gaining more of an understanding in my re-reading of Hall's theory, I was reminded of this study that I reflect on. I wondered whether because I misunderstood his model that the research I conducted was poor. However, in this process of becoming more epistemologically flexible, I find that my previous understanding of Hall and how I applied it contextualizes who I am as a researcher. Just as someone learns to bake a cake, we don't shame them for starting with a box of cake-mix. As someone still very early in her career, it's valuable for me to reflect on this process of *becoming*. Further, having the ability to look back on the application of Hall's model and understand new ways to apply it shows me my own growth as a scholar and my ability to be flexible. I have found this helpful in the way I engage with others' scholarship and when I read their work. It allows me to consider how everyone's research is contextualized by their own frameworks of knowledge and interactions. It stops me from making assumptions into how they make their claims or whether their argument is sound or not. Though I would conduct this Crazy Rich Asians study much differently today, I am thankful to have done it exactly the way I did.

* * *

For many, 2020 was the year for fear, confusion, and attempts to find yourself in a world that no longer makes sense. I was no exception. I began my PhD program in the fall,

immediately following the summer of unrest and during a time where there was a heightened sense of fear amongst people of color in the United States. Suddenly, more than ever before, I felt my personal life and my research identity colliding in somewhat of a detrimental way. I remember walking through the grocery store when I suddenly received a call from one of my best friends, someone who grew up with me. On the other end of the phone, I could hear her frustration and stress. She shares with me that she feels guilt. "Guilt over what?" I ask. She tells me that she feels bad about everything going on in the world, and that she feels guilty that she's a rich, white girl who never had to deal with any of this. I sighed heavy wondering where this was going, "okay…?" She says, "I don't know." I snap, something in me felt done, "Okay. So why are you calling me?" "I don't know, I thought you could help." "Help with what exactly? Did you only call me because you want me to make you feel better for being white and literally having white guilt?" She responds defensively, "No! That's not why…I called you because you're my friend, I thought." I push forward as if I have something to prove, "No… you only called me because I'm your *only* friend who *isn't* white, and you wanted my permission or something." I ended the phone call abruptly, and we didn't speak for weeks. I was angry and confused. This wasn't the only phone call I had like this, and this wasn't the only loved one in my life who is white that I started feeling tension with. One called me jaded. *Was I? Was what I was feeling misplaced?* I didn't understand the feeling I was having. But I felt as if because I'm Asian, that people thought it was my responsibility to make them feel better about who they are or to be the one to educate them on diversity and racism. But I felt that to them, diversity and racism was just a bunch of buzz words that they could use in their next conversation. But I asked myself, *as someone who devotes their scholarship to this, is this somewhat my responsibility?* I couldn't make sense of it.

While this confusion lingered in my mind, I brought these contradictions I was wrestling with for a class paper. I still could not understand why so many of us were feeling empowered and powerless at the same time. Then, with the rise in racial violence and attacks against Asian Americans, I couldn't understand how this was happening just shortly after the feeling that things might be getting better or at least from what I saw in the media. However, when I presented these contradictions to my professor, he suggested that I read Walter Lippmann's (1922) Public Opinion. To be honest, I wish it had answered all my questions or gave me some relief into the contradictions I was seeing. Instead, it complicated things for me, it gave me new questions, it made new contradictions appear and more things just did not make sense in the world. In some ways, the reading of Lippmann and the discussions I had with my professor regarding these complications did give me relief… it was showing me how it is society that is complicated and the way we socialize and communicate in the world is limited by our own experiences and how we interact with others. I felt newly energized into exploring something new. I couldn't understand the excitement I felt with these new complications. At the time, I had no idea that these broad questions of what is going on in the world and observed contradictions would become the basis of this dissertation work. Suddenly, I felt an urgency to not answer or solve these questions but to respond to them, inquire further into them, and to somehow make sense of them.

One of the new and most simple contradictions I was posed with concerned stereotypes. Plainly put, I begun asking myself: *Have I been thinking about stereotypes all wrong? Are they not bad and harmful? Are they not false? Are they not something we should avoid? When did stereotypes get so stereotyped?* I started doing a deep dive into everything about stereotypes in communication and media studies. I saw how stereotypes were used to understand racialization,

how it was applied to the way gender was represented in media, and overall, how it influences audiences' behavior. The trends of this research were not random, rather they were in relation to what was going on in the world. When stereotype studies of race started, it was during this same time visibility of Blackness started to arise. Gender studies and stereotypes research circled around women in media and women in the workplace coincidingly when the women's movement started to take charge. While most, if not all, of these studies took a media effects approach to understanding how stereotypes are a cognitive thing, does it mean that these studies were ill-informed or wrong? No, I started to understand where these efforts and motivations were coming from. By taking a step back and attempting to gain a bird's eye view of approaches to stereotypes, I started to understand the contextual relations that were at play. It's not finding whether stereotypes are good or bad, false or fact, or something to avoid. It's looking at another commonality all of these studies and approaches share, it's trying to understand how stereotypes are communicated, how they are acted upon, how they are socialized.

* * *

This epistemological reawakening is certainly contextualized by not only my intellectual and scholarly journey, but it is highly informed by my interactions and events happening during that year of 2020. I had no choice but to become flexible in my understanding of theory and to let go of whatever assumptions I had in order to attempt to understand the world that we were currently living in. By accepting that what I know can shift and change, I started to allow myself to see that for others too. I began consuming and interpreting media and my interpersonal reactions differently. I became more curious in how race in media is communicated and socialized. I was becoming more comfortable knowing that what I know is only in relation to my

experiences and my interactions and that research does not need to always be about solving problems. Rather, research can be about trying to make sense of these problems. This type of inquiry was solidified in how I wanted to approach my dissertation work. I felt reassured from my major professor who guided me through an understanding that this dissertation should be an exploration into further trying to make sense of the contradictions we continued to discuss. Having this reassurance provided me some freedom into asking kinds of questions I was nervous to ask or to pursue a type of research I was unsure I was capable of. By engaging with my questions this way, I found myself reading through literature to gain a broader understanding rather than to search for specific answers. Doing this kind of research at this early stage of my career is shaping my confidence in how I approach research, asking questions, and trying to address them.

* * *

The first time I saw the movie Everything Everywhere All at Once was in the theatres with my brother. I hadn't been to the movie theatres in a long time since COVID-19 restrictions, but I knew that this was a movie you wanted to see in theatres. I also knew I wanted to share this experience with my brother, who drove one hour to come see it with me. We were revved up, I felt that same energy that I felt when Crazy Rich Asians came out. We wanted to watch it together because here was this action-packed movie that was again, for Asian Americans.

While watching the movie, I was completely engaged, and I found every moment compelling. It certainly was action-packed, and the multi-genre framework made me feel like this movie could be for everyone. But how can that be? I first started watching the moving feeling like it was only for Asian Americans and by the end, it was something I needed to be

shared with everyone. Even more so, the movie had so many cultural references that are racially and ethnically marked. My brother and I laughed at the same time when a fanny pack was used to fight off security guards. We giggled when Joy spoke broken English to her Gong Gong because we understood it all too well. But these little shared moments weren't actually what made the film what it is. After the movie, the parts that stood out to us was the overall narrative fragmentation to unity and having that feeling of nothingness.

However, there is one part that continues to stick out to me. Watching and re-watching the film, I hold onto how the film uses this Chinese American family relations to signify intergenerational trauma. I think this initially stood out to me because it's been such a common theme with Asian American films for the last few years. By maintaining this sense of fragmentation to unity, the Wong family in the movie overcomes this trauma together. I cannot help but think of how this is and what their resolution says about Asian American families struggling with intergenerational trauma. Watching the Wong family process this trauma was clear to me. They were clearly a family who did not share their personal thoughts and feelings, they sheltered their own emotions and each family members, and they existed in a world where they simultaneously were attempting to please one another why continuously letting themselves and each other down. However, once they experienced a shared trauma together, they became more honest with themselves and one another. They became more forgiving and open with how they feel.

I think of my own family. I am reminded immediately reminded of growing up in a family who did not share anecdotes about our day, whether we were happy or sad, or what we really dreamed and hoped to do. We were close and felt close, but we just kept this emotional part of us to ourselves. That is until we unwillingly faced a shared trauma that ultimately

changed our family's life forever. When my brother suddenly passed away ten years ago, our family who never should show emotions reached a threshold. We were now a family who did not know how to process or talk about the emotions we were inevitably feeling. I remember clearly a few days before the first-year memorial, I was at my parents' house. I started to yell and was seconds away from storming out of the house when my dad stopped me, hugged me, and said, "It's okay to cry if you want to cry." I sobbed into his arms at his permissive words that I had never been given before. From this moment, my family suddenly has become one that probably overshares and constantly discusses where we are with our emotions.

* * *

The questions I started with resembled those I posed after my initial viewing of Crazy Rich Asians. However, knowing that I wanted to be more flexible in how I approach my inquiry, I chose to stop myself from looking at this movie as solely an Asian American film. I use the example of the movie's use of the family's shared trauma and how my family continues to overcome our shared trauma to demonstrate in what ways my experiences contextualize my understanding of the film. Initially, I felt connected to this movie because of all of the minor and major ways it represents Asians and Asian Americans. However, the reflection I share becomes much more about the family relations in the movie resonate with me. Although lack of talking about our emotions feels inherent to many Asian American and immigrant households, it certainly is not exclusive of other families.

This revelation of pushing through in what ways Asianness is essential to the film's narrative did not come naturally. This again during the critical discussions with my major professor when I decided that this was a film I wanted to analyze for my dissertation. The movie

provided contradictory stereotyping that demonstrate how race is communicated during the film's release. There was so much critical attention on the movie that assured me this movie was more than an Asian American film. But still, was Asianness essential to whether the movie worked or not? Sitting in his office, my professor asked if the movie would still work if the family was not Chinese American. At first, my gut reaction is to say no, there's no way. But together we discover outside of some minor cultural references, the imperative family relations represented can be relevant to any number of families.

I use this reflection to illustrate how messy and complex this process of becoming is. Even in moments when I think that I understand the complexities, it simply takes one more question posed to have me revisit my assumptions. I also reflect on this moment to remind myself how I did not start immediately knowing what it is I wanted to ask or discover but that it started with a few curiosities to develop.

* * *

Recently, I was teaching a lecture on critical analysis to a Media & Society class. We had just engaged in group discussions and practiced critical analysis on scenes from the film Remember the Titans (2000). Students were asked to identify structures of power in the scenes that were outside of or related to race, and then we got to share and talk through these findings. I developed this idea after I started asking myself to put race aside when analyzing. Not to ignore race or diminish its value but rather, to emphasize and understand how race can be signified through other forms of relations.

Many students started to reveal various relations of power they observed that related to social institutions. For example, Denzel Washington, who plays Coach Boone, says to one of his

players just as they're leaving his camp to forget about his mom and asks him, "Who is your daddy?" The movie uses family relations in these senses to signify power. However, I became excited when a student was eager to share one of her observations. She remarked how even after watching this movie several times, it was the first time she noticed that as Coach Boone is walking up to his players, the song heard in the background is Charles Wright's Express Yourself when the words sung are, "It's not what you look like…" She points it out to connect how the film is in some ways suggesting to not take race or the color of someone's skin for granted. I was recharged by this observation because it was something I had not considered before but also because this student was practicing critically thinking about the text at hand.

The next step was to ask the students to provide me with a form of an exit-ticket where they responded to a question posed on a post-it note and stick it on the wall. I wanted to use this method because I know sometimes it can be difficult to talk about race and social inequality in this kind of setting. Especially if it's not something you readily discuss; it can be anxiety inducing. So, asking the students to anonymously share their thoughts on a post-it note gave them space to own their thoughts and share freely. The question I posed was how much they thought about race in media prior to this class and whether they felt was accurately or inaccurately depicted in media. Again, I was so excited to see so many students engaged in thoughtful responses. After students started sticking them to the wall, I walked up to begin reading out loud some of their classmates responses. My intentions with this was to have students feel included if they heard their response read aloud and to also have students hear similar and differing perspectives from their fellow classmates. Many of the responses were categorized as either, "Yes, I've thought about it lots. I think it's both accurate and inaccurate, but media is doing a better job" or "No, I really never gave it much thought." However, I got to

one student response that stood out, and I admit that I hesitated before reading it aloud to the class. It read, “A decent amount because the school tries to infiltrate it a lot.” Initially, I feel gutted by this response. But I decide to still share this post-it note with the classmates because I believe it’s important for them to hear. However, I continued to think about this response. I wasn’t angered by it, but I felt awakened by it. It encouraged me to continue thinking of ways to teach in ways that does not isolate students and that demonstrates ways to learn about social inequalities that invite critical discourse.

After sharing with my husband who also teaches, he asked me if I stopped to address that student’s response with the class – like a teaching moment. I said no, thinking maybe I made a mistake. But I reaffirmed my positionality, which was that if I singled out this response, then it may communicate to students that this is a different or wrong response. While it was anonymous, I hoped that if I shared this student’s response openly and in the same vein as the other responses, they would feel understood that the way they see the world and understand the relations among it and media is okay.

* * *

As an educator, I build my pedagogy on critical race to help students construct an understanding of race and to ultimately, dismantle racism. However, I have to admit that this one little post-it note continues to sit with me. Although not seemingly relevant, I use this reflection and experience in the classroom to demonstrate one way I apply theory to practice. Because I am continuously on this scholarly journey of becoming, I, too, am eager to identify ways of implementing this in the classroom. I feel like I am creating an inclusive classroom by not forcing the students to analyze the text at hand in regards to race. I am believing that this then will demonstrate to students the many ways race is actually related to other forms of social

inequalities. While many students received this activity well and responded eagerly, I cannot help but focus on this one student's response.

This student suggested that they think about race considerably simply because the school infiltrates race into their classrooms. Although it's painful to hear, is this student wrong? It pushes me to look at how education as a social institution contributes to how knowledge is produced. As an educator, I must understand how I am an active participant and an active co-creator of knowledge for these students. I still feel that my response to share this student's response in the same manner as the others communicated that this is a normal way to respond. If anything, this further demonstrates how racial inequality is naturalized. Further, it shows how conversations about race make many apprehensive.

I use this reflection to remind myself how my epistemological reawakening is not only impacting how I draw upon theory and conduct research but also, how I put it into practice and in the classroom. By understanding how this student's and many others' understandings of race relations are contextualized by their experiences, interactions, consumptions of media, it allows me to find ways to continue the conversation with them. In this way, the classroom is a wonderful space to identify how these differing perspectives are communicated. By giving students this opportunity to express how their experiences contextualize their understanding, they can also become more confident communicators in a growingly diverse world. They can become individuals also open to first hearing differing perspectives to create a more interculturally competent society. My goal as an educator is never to have students feel like they can't voice what their unsure about or curious about. Rather, my goal is to give students safe space to share and explore their curiosities, ask questions, and to give students tools to become interculturally competent.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Heightened attention in the U.S. particularly since the 1950s and the emergence of the modern civil-rights movement and the passage of the Civil Rights Act have energized significant efforts to address social inequality of many kinds. Despite significant gains, social injustices continue to exist. Such standout examples only suggest the extent of countless everyday acts of racism. For example, racially violent hate crimes were committed against Asians due to the origin in China of COVID-19, and police brutality against Black Americans in the events that followed the death of George Floyd (Dixon & Dundes, 2020; Tessler et al., 2020).

One way of addressing racial inequalities continues to be through media representation. Often this effort is couched in terms of access and opportunity, such as efforts to institutionalize a greater proportion of people of color in front of and behind the camera in entertainment-media industries. For example, the Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment (1991) is a non-profit organization that advocates for more representation of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Hollywood. StayMACRO (2015) is a multiplatform media company created to bring representation of Black people and people of color's perspectives to the media.

However, despite these and many other significant efforts for decades and across many areas in addition to media representations, ethnic/racial inequality has persisted if not increased. Contrary to the increase of diversity in overall shared roles in entertainment media narratives post-pandemic, Asian Americans combat COVID-19 related racism, more than half of Latino Americans faced some form of racial discrimination, and Black Americans had a significantly

high perception of COVID-19 health threat due to medical-related racial discrimination (Cobb et al., 2021; Greenwood, 2021; Jun et al., 2021).

The persistence if not in some ways increase of racial inequality and discrimination despite these efforts suggests that exploring additional means of addressing the role of communication in addition to that of stereotypes might contribute more to these efforts. The common conceptualization of the role of media in social inequality focuses on stereotypes. As this thinking goes, stereotypes are simplistic, limiting, incorrect and/or harmful beliefs about a group of people. Messages that contain and transmit them are seen to result too often in harmful actions taken against a group of people. This dissertation proposes and explores a reconceptualization of social inequalities and communication by theorizing and studying it as a material process and practice. Recognizing stereotypes as a conceptualization instead of a naturally occurring, common-sense fact creates room to think more broadly about the complex relationships between social inequalities and communication, with the potential of inspiring additional means of addressing this problem.

Overview and Purpose of Study

From examining in different ways the implications of media and communication for social injustices regarding race and ethnicity. To do this, it examines in depth in two cases of feature-length visual narrative and the representation of race/ethnicity in relational rather than essentialized terms.

While many studies explore race and media, more would benefit from how media narratives produce contradictory understandings of racial inequalities. Instead, they tend to investigate them in oppositions that influence or impact one another. Within many studies is a

limiting understanding that an increase in onscreen representation of people of color equates to an increase in racial diversity and in social equality. Often issues of racial stereotypes in media are addressed, with media scholars typically agreeing that they are harmful and influential to audiences and therefore, need to be reduced and avoided (Ramasubramanian, 2007). Several times, scholars suggest ways to avoid harmful stereotypes with counter-stereotypes, which are seen to operate similarly to the stereotypical images they seek to counter (August & Kim, 2016; Holt, 2013). Other scholars have suggested that harmful representations of race are due to an inaccurate or inauthentic representation that do not resonate with audiences (August & Kim, 2016). Similarly, studies have also suggested that inauthenticity in representations of race is due to creating narratives, characters, and images for a White audience. However, despite valuable attention to the problem, many studies' limitation stems from focusing on narrowly construed causal relationships, leaving for others a consideration of the interwoven process of the social constitution of media, representation and race/ethnicity. By contrast, this study seeks to explore what might be the value of a relational rather than causal perspective on media and communication regarding race/ethnicity and social inequality.

Critical Literature Review

Underlying this dissertation is an engagement with wide-ranging literatures regarding media and social inequalities. The first of these include the common approach to studying stereotypes as essentialisms, which reduces a stereotype to a thing, often via a message, belief, or content. Within this approach is the notion that stereotypes in media reflect society or vice versa, which suggests that stereotypes are something that media relies on to produce essentialized representations and implies a cause-and-effect relationship between media and society. In

response to many efforts, the next approach seeks to de-essentialize stereotypes by subverting a stereotype's meaning, countering the effects of a stereotype, or understanding stereotypes simply as a form of communication. Lastly, what this dissertation suggests is an approach that seeks to address stereotyping as a human cultural and communicative activity of materially reproducing social organization as concrete social relationships.

This chapter provides an overview of the historical approaches to stereotypes in media studies. First, it demonstrates the limits of approaches to stereotypes as essentialisms. Next, it argues how approaches to de-essentialize stereotypes also limits the process of human understanding and comprehension. Lastly, this chapter addresses these limitations by suggesting an interpretive, cultural approach that recognizes stereotyping in media as a cultural material production and means for understanding communication as a form of activity.

Stereotypes as Essentialisms

A common approach to studying social inequalities and media is via their theorization as stereotypes. Why studies of social inequalities and media are commonly approached this way can be explained largely by two reasons. First, stereotypes are regarded as a cognitive belief that can be propagated through media consumption, but that also exist separately. Correlations are then proposed by documenting the degree to which mediated stereotypes correspond with preconceived notions of the same social group. For example, Bednarek (2012) claimed that a nerd stereotype was constructed through *The Big Bang Theory*'s (2007-2019) character, Sheldon. Sheldon's persona was consistent with generally-held characteristics of a stereotypical nerd such as impoliteness and anti-social dialogue with others. Bednarek thus identifies how the

construction of the nerd stereotype is at least reinforced through the similarity between represented stereotypes and their own conceptions of, in this case, nerds.

Recognizing this comparative approach suggests the next reason for the prevalence of the use of stereotypes in media research on social inequality, which has to do with claims of their social and behavioral impact. For example, Appel and Weber (2021) claim that stereotypical content serves as a catalyst for negative effects on racially marginalized groups.

At the root of such studies is the essentialization of stereotypes. This refers to the positing of stereotypes as a thing, whether a message, a meaning and/or a belief, which scholars take for granted as the starting point for research, instead of more fully examining their production. Essentializing stereotypes should be avoided because it limits our definition and thus, our understanding of the various ways stereotypes operate. For example, some studies provide evidence for what outcomes occur from stereotypical beliefs, which requires positing the existence of stereotypical beliefs from the outset instead of deep and sustained analysis of how stereotypes themselves are generated. This tendency is evident in Ramasubramanian (2011), which begins by operationalizing stereotypes as white audiences' stereotypical perceptions of people of color. After their existence is posited, White audiences' perceptions are then claimed to be reinforced by television's negative portrayals of Black Americans and Latino Americans.

To respond to the limitations of the essentializing of stereotypes, three important implications emerge. One concerns the implicit acceptance of a particular theory of communication and its corresponding social theory. The cognitive approach taken to defining and studying media and stereotypes is rooted in the conception of communication deriving from John Locke's philosophical speculation informed by classical-liberal social theory, an approach that locates the origin of communication in an individual's sensory perception (Peters, 1989). A

second implication is the separation of representation from what is seen as the "real world," which as a result requires their study as one of causal relationships. A third implication of essentializing stereotypes comes from the focus on meaning, which focuses attention regarding stereotypes on individual messages as a carrier for an encapsulated and essentialized meaning.

Stereotypes and Reflection

To develop this case in more detail, one can recall the common conception of media representation as separate from the world. The essentializing of stereotypes has another key implication to note. Similar studies claim that representations in media often not only rely on stereotypes but are false and not an accurate portrayal of societal realities (Appel & Weber, 2021; Erba, 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2018). This is similarly a comparative claim, but one that requires not only the positing and essentializing of the existence of stereotypes from the outset instead of inquiring more fully into how they are not just circulated but generated. It also requires the positing and essentializing of a consensual existence of an objectively accurate portrayal in relation to which the stereotypes can be detected. In regard to the study of stereotypes, this accepted premise is what informs studies of whether stereotypes reflect society or whether society reflects them. For example, an early study by Colfax and Sternberg (1972) analyzes the representation of Black Americans in mass circulation magazines between 1965 and 1970. They claimed that, because Black Americans were depicted in the magazines as tokenized, exotic, and so on, the perpetuation of such racial stereotypes negatively impacts Black Americans. Such an approach can be seen in studies of stereotypes in many topical areas. One such area is age. A study that analyzed the representation of older characters in Disney animated films sought to understand why children feel negatively towards older adults (Robinson et al.,

2007). Despite finding that most of the older characters were portrayed positively, researchers claimed that children were encultured to perceive older adults negatively due to the still large percentage of negative representations. In this way, it made a case that society was the more powerful causal agent for explaining how stereotypes work.

Yet another topical area in which this approach is used is gender. Ghaznavi et al. (2017) found that despite having non-stereotypical representations (assertive) of female characters in Hollywood and Bollywood films along with stereotypical portrayals (hyper-sexualized), the belief in stereotypical characteristics was more likely to remain. Similarly, Mitra's (2020) investigation into how photojournalists perpetuate stereotypes of Afghan women for Western audiences found too that pre-existing stereotypes in society overpowered attempts to change them through media representation. The opposing claim that media representations are the causal agent can be seen in studies of race and ethnicity. Behm-Morawitz and Ta (2014) claimed in their investigation that virtual representations influence beliefs in the real world and that video game play cultivated real world beliefs about Black individuals.

The unexamined proposition that media and society are distinct entities underlies and limits resulting studies as investigations of causes and effects. Necessary to this approach is the theorization of stereotypes as a content, as (a) meaning(s) and corresponding belief(s) of and about the actual social world. Why the separation of media from society matters is because of the resulting epistemological and ontological positions that also must be accepted. By essentializing stereotypes, such studies also presume them to be untruths or distortions, which as noted above infers the consensual existence of a stable, truthful and thus essentialized reality against which the stereotype is detected and evaluated. Distinctions between groups thus also become essentialized and unexamined (Dyer, 2002). Similarly, bell hooks refers to racialized stereotypes

of Black characters as a fiction or a way to project a fantasy (2015). The interpretation of stereotypes varies, which suggests questions about essentializing stereotypes as well as the purported social reality. Studies document how participants watch the same episode filled with the same stereotypical portrayals, but with their interpretation greatly differing. For example, in the early 1990s, Cooks and Orbe (1993) conducted interracial and intraracial focus groups after participants watched an episode of the sketch comedy show, *In Living Color.* Discussion in the focus groups focused on stereotypical portrayals of Black people characterized by the Black comedians in *In Living Color*. On one hand, a white woman in the interracial focus group said that the portrayals were negatively stereotypical and made Black people look dangerous. She also noted that she has never interacted with a Black person before as her town is very small with mostly white residents (p. 227-228). On the other hand, in the intraracial focus group made up of only Black participants, a male participant said he found the caricatures to be exaggerated (thus also arguably stereotypical) but funny. He felt that they were intentionally exaggerated for the purpose of comedy and enjoyed the content (p. 228-229). Audiences' interpretation interacts with how they interact with others, how they interact with other media, and how they interact with the world. Where the basis is to judge a uniform meaning or the social reality, against which these differing interpretations can be compared is left unaddressed.

Toward De-essentializing Stereotypes

Given these limitations, scholars have sought ways to respond to them. For example, Brunow (2011) reacts to Hall's (1997) call for the subversion of stereotypes in their efforts to challenge the urge to dichotomize stereotypes, finding self-reflexivity and other forms of "metaphenomena" in Black British filmmaking important for de-essentializing negative

stereotypes. Further, Brunow points to how the Black filmic essay, *Handsworth Songs*, interrogates media's simultaneous role in both constructing reality and defying truths. Here, there is acknowledgement that multiple realities or truths can exist and serves as example of shifting the study of stereotypes, identities, or realities in other than causal ways. More broadly, arguments are made for how media representation is capable of critically engaging with the ongoing relations of social inequalities when essentialized differences are deconstructed. For example, Nguyen (2022) analyzes the film series Asian Americans by focusing on the series' re-production of stereotypical images and narratives, Nguyen uses stereotypes critically to show how social and cultural relations and discourse have major implications for the racialization of Asian Americans. Again, by shifting away from concrete definitions that essentialize stereotypes, media scholars seek to understand stereotypes as a process people engage in to make sense of their world. In this example, Nguyen (2022) demonstrates strategic essentialism to unify Asian American experiences in order to signify race relations and social inequalities.

As noted above, another approach scholars take to de-essentialize stereotypes is by breaking or countering the presumed meanings of stereotypes through counter-stereotypes. Counter-stereotypes are intentional forms of representation that contradict, break, or alter previously held (often negative) meanings of stereotypes (Holt, 2013; Scherer, 1970). For instance, counter-stereotypes are claimed to occur implicitly in such means as the representation of characters, narratives, symbols such as of Korean and Korean American food in reality-food television (August & Kim, 2016). They discuss how two travel food television shows, Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown (2013-2018) and Top Chef (2006-) and their examples of episodes featuring "Bad Koreans" explicitly address harmful stereotypes associated with Korean Americans. So-called "bad Koreans" are prominent Korean-American cultural figures but who

go against the grain of Korean traditions and expectations. However, while a counter-stereotype approach provides a concrete way to identify and infer from a deep contradiction the role of representation in social inequalities, it still derives from the notion that media and society are separate and in opposition. Approaches to counter-stereotyping are also interested in how meanings constructed in representations actually work to shift audiences' perceptions. For example, Flood (2021) analyzes the film Moonlight (2016) and focuses on counter-stereotypes through how the protagonist, Chiron, explores his masculinity and queer identity as a Black boy to a Black man. The approach adopted here identifies that the counter-stereotype constructed is heavily in relation to historical mediated images of Black counter-stereotypes of the 1990s. However, audiences not familiar with this era are still able to consume and understand Moonlight's representations. Counter-stereotypes are useful in showing audiences how their preconceived definitions have multiple meanings. Similarly, Holt (2013) conducted a study to test whether counter-stereotypes would offset negative media messages about Black Americans—specifically, messages related to crime. By combining elements of priming to the study, participants' negative stereotypes towards Black Americans did seem to decrease, but stereotypes related to crime were more present. So, while constructed racial counter-stereotypes appear to successfully reduce negative perceptions, other stereotypical beliefs still exist. In this way, counter-stereotype studies attempt to de-essentialize stereotypes but still limit their approach to suggesting counter-stereotypes are an essentialized thing, meaning or belief.

A significant theoretical effort to more fully push past the essentialized separation of media from society is the sociological conception of typification. Instead of positing stereotypes as ideas in people's heads that have an effect on their behavior and whose truthfulness can be evaluated with a comparison to the "real world," typification theorizes a general activity that

people constantly engage in. Typification is regarded as a practical if not necessary survival tactic. It seeks to reduce the infinite flood of perceptions, sensations, actions, knowledge, events and all else that make up life into an intelligible selective synthesis, so that a person can make tentative decisions about actions to take.

While typifications are investigated as reductionist and in some cases harmful, they are considered a necessary and inevitable part of our everyday lives of how we make sense of everyone and the world around us (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), typifications are the means by which we understand or identify others in face-to-face interactions that affect how we interact with the interactant. As such and unlike stereotypes, typifications are not anomalies or errors to be corrected, but inescapable and fundamental to human perception and taking action in the world. The concept of typification also avoids presuming the essential existence of a singular, true view against which purported stereotypes can be measured. Instead, and to emphasize, typification is a fundamental human process of making one's way in the world, instead of as a damaging distortion that must be prevented or ended. Typification is regarded as necessary to human experience because it approaches human understanding in two ways. First, typification contextualizes human understanding. For example, Ahmad et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews to understand Malaysians' perspectives on LGBT individuals. They found that several typifications were necessary reductions to how the socialization of "truth" informed their participants' perspectives of same-sex relationships and heteronormative gender roles. Researchers drew upon typifications to contextualize how their participants made sense of LGBT individuals, not necessarily to find whether they perceived them negatively or positively, or the degree of accuracy they had in relation to a normative, consensual real world.

Second, typification materializes human experience. One can see this for example in studies of gender. Davies (2006) analyzes the use of gendered language and humor in the film Sling Blade (1996). She found that gender role typifications did not simply exist but were constructed through humor and were necessary for representing characters' sociocultural knowledge. Here, the humor and language used in Sling Blade is claimed to be a means of material production due to how language genders our everyday lives.

More broadly, materialization is seen to occur through the concrete reproduction of symbols and signs. This is the case in Baran et al.'s (1989) discussion on how product placements and brand imaging use rituals or everyday symbols to communicate with consumers. It can also be seen in studies of race and ethnicity. In her discussion of the model minority stereotype, Noh (2013) analyzes how one's self-identity is socially constructed and bound by our shared meanings. Here, typifications are not just used for individuals to make sense of other people, but they are also used to make sense of themselves.

Despite this value, typification (like conventional studies of stereotypes) continues to limit this process of human understanding and comprehension to a fundamentally cognitive level and matter of beliefs, which still too easily continues to presume an opposition between media and society, and beliefs and actions, while discounting the materiality of activities of signification. For instance, Intravia and Pickett (2019) investigated how internet news consumption and social media news consumption associate with how individuals racially typify criminals. They found a negative relationship between internet news consumption and criminal stereotypes, but a positive relationship between social media news consumption and criminal stereotypes. Their findings suggest participants' level of engagement with social media news may reinforce stereotypical beliefs or influence racialized perceptions. While the study shows how

participants process their comprehension of racially typifying, it still relies on the essentialized notion that media and society are separate and should be regarded as influencing one another, which in turn becomes a causal relation to be investigated.

Theoretical Perspective of This Study

Studies of stereotypes, counter-stereotypes and typification yield important findings and continue to explore important issues regarding social inequalities. However, more fully approaching communication as the material making of social relationships explores additional ways of understanding and addressing such issues. This dissertation explores what might be gained by addressing this fundamental issue and phenomenon not as stereotypes or typification, but as the human cultural and communicative activity of materially reproducing social organization as concrete social relationships. Rather than focusing on stereotypes as a content or meaning with an effect, this dissertation considers social inequalities as a material communicative activity. Issues of the truth or falseness of stereotypes become issues of the implications of how the mass of humanity is produced, maintained and continually transformed into groups in constitutive relation. This dissertation builds on previous efforts to de-essentialize stereotypes and responds to many calls for broadening an approach. It seeks to join and contribute to this ongoing call for the re-evaluation and reconceptualization of social inequalities and media/communication.

A variety of scholarship rooted in interpretive, cultural approaches to communication has much value for an effort of redefinition and reconceptualization (Carey, 1975). When evaluating the communication discipline, Carey took issue with the unremarkable way with how we talk about communication, through simple human experiences. By not reducing communication to

this definition, the possibility exists for grasping the production of realities that continually shift and change.

Another relevant touchstone is the work of Stuart Hall and colleagues, which establishes a basis for understanding communication as a contextually-driven material process. In it, people are understood as active creators instead of passive recipients, but also themselves produced by the very social processes they engage in. Often misinterpreted as a model of communication that suggests transmission of messages is from sender to receiver is Hall's encoding and decoding theory (Hall et al., 1994; Hall, 1973). While initially perceived as a linear model of communication, Hall makes clear the complexity and polysemic nature of the encoding and decoding process (Hall et al., 1994). Moving away from the notion that representation is just a reflection of society or reality, Hall suggests the contextual nature of the model where the process of communication and production is constant making his model of encoding and decoding a material process of signification. Meaning, there is no start point or end point to communication or signification. Rather, Hall argues that society is actively existing in a world of signifiers. Interpretation and signification becomes a contextualized creative process with a potential range of contextually-determined outcomes—what Hall refers to as polysemy. Polysemy as a concept is necessary for approaching how media culturally produces social inequalities because it challenges a focus on stereotypes as having one definition or one meaning.

On critical framework that bridges an understanding of how race is communicated in the United States is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT addresses systemic racism in America and how it impacts communities of color at an institutional and societal level (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT usefully examines how many forms of racism appear in entertainment media (Yosso,

2002). Similarly, AsianCrit, an extension of CRT, is a conceptual framework that analyzes the experiences of Asian Americans in a white supremacist society (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Frequently used in education to understand Asian American student experiences and identities (Saito et al., 2022), it's less common in media and communication. In this dissertation, I bring AsianCrit into media studies to understand the politics of representation and how visual representations of race relations and social inequalities are produced through visual narratives. AsianCrit's framework is guided by three concepts (Museus & Iftikar, 2013), 1) incorporate CRT and current knowledge of critically analyzing how racism impacts the Asian American experience, 2) similar to LatCrit (Montoya, 1999) and TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), AsianCrit can serve both the Asian American community and other communities of color for broader discussions of racism in society, and 3) the tenets of AsianCrit are not final nor fixed, rather it is intended to be a foundation for growing scholarship on issues affecting Asian Americans. Within these three guiding principles are seven tenets: 1) Asianization, 2) transnational contexts, 3) (re)constructive history, 4) strategic (anti)essentialism, 5) intersectionality, 6) story, theory, and praxis, and 7) commitment to social justice (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Most applicable to how this dissertation frames how each film produce race are Asianization and strategic (anti)essentialism. Asianization describes how Asians are perpetually racialized by American society, evident through monolithic portrayals. One example of how Asianization oppresses Asians in America is through the reshaping of laws such as Affirmative Action (Yi & Todd, 2021). Strategic (anti)essentialism brings together CRT's anti-essentialism and Spivak's (1988) strategic essentialism to indicate how there are dominant social institutions shaping a racialized society while also suggesting that communities of color can and do categorize themselves to

highlight their similarities. In this sense, strategic (anti)essentialism suggests that essentializing race is complex and happens in multiple ways.

Another body of theoretical work informing this dissertation includes that of communication and cultural theorist Raymond Williams. In his critical enlargement and revision of historical materialism, he extends its effort to historicize human societies by recognizing the human activity of communication itself as a productive force. (Williams, 1982). By not limiting "production" to simply a narrow industrial/factory sense, Williams suggests a broader view of the term by recognizing the more fundamental need of any social/collaborative process of a "mode of social co-operation" (p. 91) that must already be in place for any industry to rely on (Williams, 1977). The making of this mode of social co-operation itself is a material and cultural human activity of communication. One of many illustrative examples Williams provides is how the re-production of images materialize and historicize social relations as such with seals and coins and how they "became a mode of defining a social area of credit or of power" (1982, p. 95).

In summary, communication in such perspectives is recognized and explored as a means of the actual production of social relations, instead of simply being a means of expressing them. Materials are physical, tangible, and are specific forms of what people do. Material, along with "signifying" (in distinction of "meaning") and "practice" (in distinction of "belief" and "behavior") are key terms used throughout this dissertation. Signification is a term deriving from semiotics as the structuralist study of meaning-making (not unitary meanings). As will be explained in more detail, signification produces meanings through specific relationships of signifiers and signifieds (Saussure, 1916). Lastly, "practice" refers to intentional activity by

people, seeking to distinguish it from behavior due to the intentionality and social basis of said activity in ways that will become clearer.

As a result, this perspective proposes the direct study of processes of meaning-making itself. In doing so, it also proposes for communication a much greater degree of centrality and importance in social life. Instead of being simply a symptom of a social order or an external shaper of it, it is regarded here as the very making, maintenance and transformation of social relationships and, through them, shifting identities central to people's lives.

Long-standing work in interpretive sociology helps makes this case (Duncan, 1962). Duncan argues that studying society and therefore, communication, is the means for understanding how social action through symbols produces and maintains any particular social order. For him, communicated expressions are manifest and direct "data of sociation" (Duncan, 1962, xvi-xvii). Communicative forms enact and thus produce social roles and hierarchies (Duncan, 1962, xvii). Similarly, Carey (1975) suggests in his ritual view of communication a social process by which the world is made understandable by making it concretely meaningful and thus navigable. For example, Carey the many ways we can spatially map our environment. While a map's purpose is to represent the environment and provide as much information, they communicate this successfully by representing the most simplified version of the space as necessary. There could be many different versions of maps that all illustrate the same environment; however, they do so in differing ways producing only what is necessary for each given map. And while they all illustrate the same environment, they produce different realities.

Another way Duncan's data of sociation is put to use is with Williams (1982), who understands it as forms that guide the making and use of media works. Through a historical analysis, Williams constructs an understanding of how drama was socially developed through

forms. For example, conflict and acts of violence were initially dictated or reported during classical stages of drama. Later during the Renaissance, conflict was staged and visible. At this time, drama developed because of social relations and the social orders during this period. Social order was simultaneously guiding new forms and being represented in these new forms. With television and film, forms were at its grandest scale operating in "intensely productive and vigorous" ways (Williams, 1982, p. 179). While many forms have shifted to have a multitude of genres, it relates appropriately to a range of social relations. Therefore, media forms produce a range of narratives, conflicts, and relationships that reflect and are contextualized by the complexities in society.

Conclusions

This chapter provides an argument of how historical approaches to stereotypes in media studies inform this dissertation. While essentializing stereotypes involves a cognitive approach to understanding their utility, media scholars traditionally used the practice of stereotyping to understand the relationship between mediated stereotypes and audience behavior. Because scholarship is relational, this cognitive approach to stereotyping shapes how media scholars then understand de-essentializing stereotypes. From this, typification as one approach to de-essentializing stereotypes provides a way of understanding how stereotyping in media serves as cultural material in how we presently communicate. However, this practice is still limited by a cognitive approach. Lastly, I address these limitations by suggesting the theoretical framework which this dissertation builds upon. This is an interpretive, cultural approach that recognizes stereotyping in media as a cultural material production and means for understanding communication as a form of activity.

CHAPTER 2

STRATEGY OF ANALYSIS

The analytical value of such a perspective is in avoiding the disabling separation of ideas from actions and the positing of messages that simply contain meaning. Instead, the approach taken here proposes the direct, empirical examination of social relations and their making. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to concretely explain the process behind what is often simply asserted. For example, it seeks to not simply assert what something means, but proposes why it means what it does.

This perspective also transforms the questions asked. Questions of to what extent audiences accept and are affected by particular messages, or about the degree of fidelity between messages and social realities become transformed into questions concerning what kinds of social practices enable and determine what possibilities for human action in the world.

This chapter first describes how this dissertation's study was designed with contextual relations to ask relational questions. Many questions are largely informed by the relational and textual practices of Hall (1973), Kristeva (1986), and how Saussure (1916) and Barthes (Fabbri et al., 2022) argue semiotics. Next, the key research questions of this dissertation are addressed. What follows is the specific focus of this study identifying how the questions of relationality and race are explored via two case studies of feature films that address race relations. Then, the strategy of analysis demonstrates what kinds of relations this dissertation is interested in, which are primarily paradigmatic and syntagmatic ones. And lastly, a procedure of analysis indicates the analytical process and steps taken throughout this dissertation.

Study Design

The resulting, key analytic approach taken here is guided by the value of relationality. Essentialist assertions regarding what something "is" are thus turned into propositions regarding how can we understand how something came to be in the first place. The position taken here is that any "thing" can only be fully explained—not just posited and accepted—by understanding the process of its making through relevant relations in ways that will become apparent.

Hall's discussion of encoding and decoding, despite its frequent misunderstanding, makes a clear point regarding signification not simply uniform steps in a process, but that all moments of the process of signification are themselves constituted through their relation with all other moments. Hall suggests the contextual nature to this process of communication and production. He argues that society is actively existing in a world of signifiers where they can and do hold multiple, endless, and changing meanings.

Building from Hall's observations, one kind of relational questions concerns contextual relations. Communicative activity is enabled by and thus explained by certain specific conditions in which it appears and that are its means. For Hall, this means an active process that producers and audiences of media texts are constantly actively participating in. Particularly, how meanings are structured through language and contextualized. Regarding his circuit demonstrating this communicative activity, Hall includes the importance of frameworks of knowledge, structures of production, and technical infrastructure in the encoding and decoding processes. Given these points, the process of signification during encoding and decoding processes are contextual and possess several connotated signifiers. During these moments, Hall draws upon Barthes (1967) to argue how connotated signifiers are contextualized and connected to our culture, language, and history.

Contextual relations can also include intertextual relations. Kristeva (1986) first coined this in literary linguistics in attempts to systematize and understanding of language and text. Intertextuality is the practice of how signifying systems works along and builds upon existing signifying systems. Therefore, texts, works, and media are produced relationally with other texts, works, and media. Similar to Hall, Kristeva (1986) finds messages as not something transmitted but as a form of activity. One way this she considers this is how we engage with works and others. Because of this notion of existing signifying systems, when we engage with others, we engage with our sense drawing from a place of familiarity.

A second kind of relational questions concerns the textual, with semiotics being the most useful perspective with which to explore. For Saussure (Lane, 1970), he argues that the relationship between signified and signifier is arbitrary because what is signified is not connected to any real object or meaning. Rather, the connection is between the sign and a system of language and our relationship to language. Further, rather than looking at words and its meanings, he asks to consider words and what concepts they signify. Barthes (Fabbri et al., 1965), on the other hand, is interested in the linguistics and semiotics of discourse and narrative. In these efforts, he also understands this through a system of language used that still relates to one another. Both Saussure (Lane, 1970) and Barthes (Fabbri et al., 1965) argue for ways to study these systems through a set of relationships in association with each other. Many relationships can emphasize groups in opposition or simultaneity or groups that are sequential to one another. For example, a paradigmatic approach identifies relational pairs that are in opposition of one another such as common narrative characters of a superhero and a villain, which displays opposite behaviors and characteristics. Another example is a syntagmatic approach, which describes looking at relationships through a sequence and how it changes

overtime. A common narrative demonstrating a syntagmatic relationship is a story of a duo who goes from just friends to a romantic couple.

To focus on the topic of inquiry in this dissertation into specifically race and social relations, issues of relationality have commonly been couched in terms of essentialized and de-essentialized conceptions and approaches. This refers to the positing of stereotypes as a thing, whether a message, a meaning and/or a belief, which scholars take for granted as the starting point for research, instead of more fully examining their production. Essentializing and de-essentializing stereotypes can limit our definition and thus, our understanding of the various ways stereotypes operate.

More current work seeks to critique as well as build from these polar opposites by keeping both poles in tension. Strategic essentialism relies on poststructuralist and postcolonialist conceptions to recognize and historicize the essentialist fallacy, but at the same time asserting its value in practice. Spivak (1988) remarks how strategic essentialism was utilized by colonizers to essentialize imagined similarities in order to group people together. In this sense, strategic essentialism is mobilized via structures of power. However, it can and is used by marginalized communities to do something similar in efforts to build relations of power among the others. Although derived from institutional power, strategic essentialism is one way other are able to shift relations of power from the dominant.

In the same vein, a recent response and variation if not flipside to this is strategic anti-essentialism, as posited by Museus and Iftikar (2013). It recognizes and historicizes the tendency for de-essentialism of race to be reduced to simply a matter of individual choice and preference. But, to also avoid uncritically essentializing race and drawbacks in doing so, it adopts the contention of anti-essentialism strategically (that is, self-reflexively and critically) in order to

maintain awareness of the determinations of race outside of individual choice and the need for those to change.

Key Questions this Study Addresses

Resulting key questions that this dissertation addresses:

1) How do key textual and intertextual relations in specific instances help produce "race"?

2) How do key contextual relations in specific instances help produce "race"?

3) What contributions might there be of such an approach to studying the implications of media and communication for social inequalities?

Specific Focus of this Study

To explore such questions through this perspective, this dissertation will explore two recent, feature-length visual narratives that address race and ethnicity in the United States. The first case study considers the possibilities of the cultural production of social inequalities of race through visual documentary. It argues that LA92 embodies an innovative means of addressing and reproducing social inequalities of race in ways that productively enable their confrontation and reconstitution. It conducts an in-depth examination of the recent social documentary LA92 (2017) co-produced by Oscar winner Simon Chinn and Emmy winner Jonathan Chinn and co-directed by T.J. Martin and Daniel Lindsay. The title refers to the social climate, street protests and riots in Los Angeles on April 29, 1992 following the recording and circulation of the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police. Following an initial release in theaters, the film was later distributed on the National Geographic television channel and is currently viewable on YouTube

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaotkHlHJwo). Supporting the release of this film is an educational guide and live expert panel discussion, both of which continue to be available on-line (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWGUgjgOW_Y). LA 92 is among a cohort of films released in 2017 that honor the 25th anniversary of the 1992 uprisings in Los Angeles.

In 1992, Los Angeles experienced an uprising from their citizens following a disappointing verdict for the Black community. The verdict involved the acquittal of four police officers charged with beating Rodney King severely. The night King was beaten, a nearby civilian caught the whole activity on his video camera, later exposing the police officers. However, while the verdict was enough to fuel a community who did not get justice, the King trials were ultimately the last straw of social injustice due to racial inequality.

The second case study considers the possibilities of the cultural production of social inequalities of race through scripted feature-film drama.

It conducts an in-depth examination of the recent award-winning feature film Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022) (hereafter referred to as Everything) with a runtime of two hours and 19 minutes. It is written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Sheinhert, produced by Anthony and Joe Russo and Jonathan Wang with financial backing and distribution through the major studio A24. Following an initial release in theaters beginning on March 25, 2022, the film was later distributed on April 8, 2022. Industry awards it has received include Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Film Editing.

This case study argues that Everything embodies a distinctive means of addressing and reproducing social inequalities of race that seek to normalize and, by doing so, to also equalize them. As such, it serves in its own, distinct way to concretely embody strategic anti-essentialism in all its complexity and openness by holding essentialism and de-essentialism in a productive

tension and relation. It highlights how narrative relations produce racial inequalities as naturalized and thus essentialized, but also in a de-essentialized understanding as a result of multiple conflicts prioritized throughout the film. It also highlights the key and productively contradictory ways Everything reproduces relations of race and ethnicity. By centering on a Chinese immigrant's relationships and family drama, on one hand it invites empathetic solidarity with woman who struggles with her own self-actuality and her identity as a mother, daughter, and wife. On the other hand, it also presents how the family's experiences are individualized even through a multitude of life possibilities that alienate and thus separate immigrant families.

One reason for their selection is that they are prominent works. Substantial institutional importance as indicated by their funding and support. For example, the LA 92 filmmakers were approached by co-producers Simon and Jonathan Chinn and National Geographic with the idea to direct the documentary. National Geographic Documentary Films are devoted to producing stories with global relevance that pushes our understanding of the world (National Geographic Films, 2024). While Everything Everywhere All at Once's distribution company, A24, is well known for releasing independent films that have a "distinctive point of view" (Doster, January 11, 2016).

A second reason is to ensure a healthy amount of primary empirical evidence of critical reflection at the time to document not only the making but also of ranges of reception and uses. Supporting empirical documentation includes in the case of LA 92 ten published accounts of filmmakers' recollection of their process, a 14-page study guide companion to the film housed on the National Geographic website (clearly intentionally connected to the film), and a 55-minute recording of a panel discussion that took place virtually on Youtube Live on June 7, 2020. In the

case of Everything, nine major published critical reviews as well as 29 news accounts of issues related to the film and its making were crucial.

A third reason is that, because they are very different kinds of works, their comparison helps highlight any substantial differences in social relations of race that can be attributable to different forms and relations of communication. A social documentary and a scripted feature motion picture each embody and enact very different epistemological claims. LA 92 is rooted in the long-standing cultural form of social documentary and its conventions in which such works are composed and through which viewers are encouraged to engage it. A social documentary operates within a set of conventions that challenge what is currently the case in society. Another key cultural tradition that LA 92 work within and through is education. While traditional education is commonly regarded as the value-free conveyance of basic knowledge, when intersecting with social documentary it seeks to bring our attention to and widen our understanding of how racial inequalities are embedded in society (Depaepe, 1997). The movie Everything draws on the long-standing forms and traditions of domestic family drama and scripted feature film. Levy (1991) suggests that feature films exploring domestic family drama demonstrate dominant ideologies about how society is structured. Though dramatized, this form of narrative can be a powerful means of reproducing social relations surround a family. Traditions and conventions of major studio scripted commercial feature film are informed in the U.S. by the mid-20th Century sociological debate regarding mass culture, and the resulting opposition of art and commodities. Traditions and conventions of family relations as the setting and focus for dramatic works is a fundamental basis of storytelling from antiquity.

Strategy of Analysis

All materials will be addressed via textual relations. The approach to analysis is through semiotics and of concrete, key textual relations that signify social relations of race. This is not an inductive, empirical recovery of all relations, which are infinite. Instead, as Barthes (1965) notes, what is engaged in here is an accounting of only the key syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, which are distinguished through the use of what's called the commutation test. Initially used as a tool of semiotics, a commutation test was re-conceptualized by Thompson (1978) to understand which relations in a narrative were crucial for explaining how it signified. For example, Denison (2014), recalls how female actresses in Japanese and Korean films are compared to one another when examining film production and how films are made. For this study, the commutation test was used to understand and justify whether specific representations of racial markers were necessary for the overall meaning of the film. Additionally, whether race was a contributing factor to the primary social relationships driving each film's narratives. Another example is such the case with this dissertation's case studies on LA 92 and Everything Everywhere All at Once and examining whether and to what degree is race essential to the narrative and understanding of the film. For LA 92, race is essential to each component of the narrative and to understanding not only the film but contextualizes the relations of social inequalities in 1992. However, for Everything Everywhere All at Once, race is not as crucial to explaining the narrative of the film. While it contextualizes the experiences and cultural artifacts presented throughout the film, it does not change the narrative and overall understanding of how social inequalities are communicated.

All materials will also be addressed in terms of contextual relations, which can also include intertextual relations. This includes a precise analysis of broader traditions and

institutions that determine the films' making and reception/use, as well as social analysis of forms to establish the kinds of relationships presented to viewers.

Procedure of Analysis

Corresponding to what Hall (1975) considers the "long soak," the first step in the analysis was the inductive, immersive viewing of both feature films. During this immersion, detailed and descriptive notes were taken on the films' compositions, sequences of images, what audio accompanied specific images, and so on. A second viewing followed this first one, with specific attention paid to the representation of race.

The next step involved a process of reflexivity and critical dialogue where overall impressions were clarified regarding the possibilities represented in both films for improved racial justice. Reflexivity is a tool of engaging with one's identity in relation to their lived experiences and relationships and how they contribute to the present study (Adams et al., 2015). During this step, reflexivity was used as a way to position the self in regards to the representations of race and how race is socialized in society. For example, as a Korean American woman who grew up in the southeastern United States, my relationship to how race is communicated in society contextualizes how I engage the films through the relation of my own experience and larger pre-existing "frameworks of knowledge," as Hall posits a key moment in the process of signification (Hall, 1973). Further, this relation informs the way I construct this study and interpret key relations. After gaining clarity in the overall significations, the next step was to engage in further discussion—supported by rereading notes taken and consideration of all other documentary materials for each film—as to how and what key textual, intertextual and contextual relations signified those overall senses. By continuing discussion as a form of critical

dialogue, the focus was to see to what extent race through relation was signified both within and outside of dominant norms. To remain focused on the topic of interest in this dissertation, representation of social relationships that signify race were prioritized. In this sense, how each film represented political, historical, cultural, and interpersonal relations contextualized the social inequalities of race.

I then worked relationally, drawing comparisons between the narratives to help highlight how each signified textually and either similarly or differently, while also recalling in analysis key intertextual and contextual relations that contribute to how each signifies race. This process helped highlight how the genres of each film (feature social documentary, and domestic drama feature film respectively) and their conventions plus relations of production and technical infrastructure (Hall, 1973) contributed to how the narratives signified race.

Because of each film's significance and acclaim, critical reviews were considered as intertextual materials. Search engines Factiva and Google were used to search for relevant and key materials. The search requirements and guidelines for the movie Everything Everywhere All at Once included searching the movie's titles, a date range of one month before the film's theatrical release and limiting to a year (02/11/2022-02/11/2023). However, given the film's significant amount of accolades, film festival commentary, and award season recognition, I expanded the search's date range (01/01/2022-05/23/2022) to include early critical reviews during film festival season and one month following the Academy Awards. The search revealed 1,130 articles. However, duplicate articles and irrelevant articles such as ones that consists of lists of movies to watch, "Best upcoming movies…" were removed from consideration. After this process, 39 pieces of materials were analyzed, which included articles, critical reviews, interviews, and podcasts. The search requirements and guidelines for LA 92 included searching

the documentary's titles and director names, a date range was established to maintain consistency with the search process for Everything Everywhere All at Once to include the Primetime Emmy Awards (01/01/2017-04/01/2018). The search revealed 154 articles. However, duplicate articles and irrelevant articles such as ones that consists of lists of movies to watch, "Best upcoming movies…" were removed from consideration. After this process, 31 pieces of materials were analyzed, which included articles, critical reviews, interviews, and podcasts. Further, LA 92 and National Geographic provide intertextual materials such as discussion guides and panel discussions, specifically to work in conjunction with the viewing of the film. Critical reviews contributed immensely to understanding both films as cultural productions, contextualized by society, and informed by the given social relations at the time.

Conclusions

This chapter argues for the analytic value of approaching this dissertation via relationality. By designing this dissertation with contextual relations, key questions of relationality are posed to understand how textual, contextual, and intertextual relations produce race. These questions are largely informed by the relational and textual practices of Hall's (1973) argument that media involves a communicative practice. Further, Kristeva (1986) and intertextuality demonstrate how texts are intertextually woven among a system or network of pre-existing works. With these in mind, this dissertation uses an analytical approach building upon Saussure (1916) and Barthes (Fabbri et al., 2022) emphasis on how signs and systems of signs should be studied in relation to the concepts and relationships they signify. Primarily, this dissertation analyzes these significations of relations via a paradigmatic approach and a syntagmatic approach to relations.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL INEQUALITIES OF RACE THROUGH SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY: THE CASE OF LA 92

This chapter considers via a case study the possibilities of the cultural production of social inequalities of race through visual documentary. This chapter argues that LA92 embodies an innovative means of addressing and reproducing social inequalities of race in ways that productively enable their confrontation and reconstitution. It conducts an in-depth examination of the recent social documentary LA92 (2017) co-produced by Oscar winner Simon Chinn and Emmy winner Jonathan Chinn and co-directed by T.J. Martin and Daniel Lindsay. The title refers to the social climate, street protests and riots in Los Angeles on April 29, 1992 following the recording and circulation of the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police. Following an initial release in theaters, the film was later distributed on the National Geographic television channel and is currently viewable on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaotkHlHJwo). Supporting the release of this film is an educational guide and live expert panel discussion, both of which continue to be available on-line (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWGUgjgOW_Y). LA 92 is among a cohort of films released in 2017 that honor the 25th anniversary of the 1992 uprisings in Los Angeles.

In 1992, Los Angeles experienced an uprising from their citizens following a disappointing verdict for the Black community. The verdict involved the acquittal of four police officers charged with beating Rodney King severely. The night King was beaten, a nearby civilian caught the whole activity on his video camera, later exposing the police officers.

However, while the verdict was enough to fuel a community who did not get justice, the King trials were ultimately the last straw of social injustice due to racial inequality.

After my initial viewing of the film LA 92, I felt guilt and a sense of responsibility that I was unsure how to seize. I was unsure if my feelings were similar to what most viewers felt after watching a series of tragic and racialized events or if the feelings I had were due to my own racial and ethnic identity. While this was not my first time engaging with materials concerning the 1992 civil uprising, I did not become aware of it until my adulthood. Often, I would see and hear about it from the point of view of the Korean American community. Because the interracial tensions are between Black Americans and Korean Americans, I could not help but identify Korean Americans in LA 92 as the villains in this story as if there were somehow heroes and villains at all. Further, I was immersed tremendously in LA 92 for three other but highly related reasons. First, during 1992 and the civil uprising, my grandmother, a Korean immigrant, was living in Koreatown in downtown Los Angeles. Watching the archival footage made me nervous thinking of her in this environment. The second reason was again a personal one, during this time and throughout the 1990s, my parents owned and operated a small business directed for the Black community in a rural town. They owned a small beauty supply store that sold hair and beauty products for the Black community. There is one scene in particular that is later discussed in this chapter where a Korean business owner stands in front of her store and attempts to protect it from looters. It is difficult for me not to relate and picture my own Korean mother as the one standing there. For these reasons, it often made it difficult to separate myself as an objective researcher. Lastly, although the film was released 25 years after the uprising in 2017, the first time I watched the film was in 2022 and two years after the summer of unrest in 2020. Watching the film felt like a harrowing foreshadow that warned audiences of what is to come. However,

because of these reasons I choose to use my interpretations to contextualize further my understanding of the film. The feelings of hopelessness that I am left with are deepened but I believe are widely shared with viewers. Additionally, the sense of responsibility to participate in addressing these social inequalities may be heightened for myself but is implied in the timeliness of the film's release.

As such, it serves as a useful exploration of concretely embodying strategic anti-essentialism in all its complexity and openness by holding essentialism and de-essentialism in a productive tension and relation. It highlights how the organization of the narrative constructs a productively contradictory understanding of racial inequalities as naturalized and thus essentialized, but also in a de-essentialized understanding as the result of other forces at work. It also highlights the key and productively contradictory ways LA 92 reproduces relations of race and ethnicity. By being entirely composed from pre-existing on-location local-news footage shot 25 years prior to the making and release of the documentary, on one hand it invites empathic solidarity with Black residents of Los Angeles. On the other hand, it also presents how news coverage of the street protests and riots can alienate and thus also separate if not also disparage (in the case of this film) Black residents.

LA92 and Conventions of Social Documentary

LA92 is rooted in the long-standing cultural form of social documentary and its conventions in which such works are composed and through which viewers are encouraged to engage it. According to Thomas (2002), social documentaries have long been considered a form of historical discourse that documents and addresses needs for social change and progress. Often, many works are calls to action that "claim a direct relationship between their recorded material

and the real world" (Thomas, 2002, p. 134). While social documentaries claim a direct correspondence to the world to enhance their relevance, they are also the result of creative choices made during the production within specific sociocultural contexts. Further, LA 92 relies on these conventions and how they overlap with cultural institutions of social filmmaking and education. While these conventions work independently, they also overlap and operate in combination.

Social Unscripted Filmmaking

A social documentary operates within a set of conventions that challenge what is currently the case in society. In the early 20th Century, the filmmaker John Grierson greatly influenced the nature and purpose of documentaries stating that they "should be an instrument of information, education, and propaganda as well as a creative treatment of reality" (Hayward, 2013, p. 90). Barnouw (1974) provides an in-depth overview of ways in which documentaries are situated within historical contexts. For example, Barnouw suggests the possibilities for reinterpretation or "revisionist history" when researchers and filmmakers discover archival materials.

Overall, the filmmaking process of LA 92 is highly informed by primarily two broad social documentary conventions. The first of these conventions is the conventional intention of exposing the hidden. Much like the role that Barnouw labels "the advocate,*"* LA 92 brings attention to social issues of marginalized communities. An advocate social documentary intentionally challenges social inequalities as a way to raise awareness. One way this can be addressed is to essentialize race by confronting post-racial assumptions—baldly put, to establish that race and its inequalities exist.

Similar claims are made by additional social documentaries that, like LA 92, seek to establish the realities of racial inequality in the United States. For example, *The 1619 Project* (2023), contextualizes our everyday life by articulating how the introduction of slavery has since embedded all aspects of American culture and life. While the series follows the book's author, Nikole Hannah-Jones, through her own experiences as a bi-racial woman and her historical overview of how slavery is ingrained in American culture, *The 1619 Project* brings to light a variety of perspectives regarding the same social issues. This is also the case with Ava DuVernay's documentary, *13th* (2017), which uncovers how the 13th Amendment disproportionately enslaves and incarcerates Black Americans. Again, this film essentializes race to expose how racial inequalities are communicated in society.

The second way LA 92 relies on conventions of social documentary is by using and repurposing archival footage that was not shot by the filmmakers. In the case of LA 92, it consists entirely of archival footage that the filmmakers re-edited and reused. As Auguiste (2015) notes, filmmakers' use of solely archival material grounds the historical consciousness of the subjects presented in the film, with the narrative operating within and reproducing for viewers those given historical traditions. Drawing on this strength, LA 92 and other such films that choose only archival materials place their stories wholly and directly in those specific historical moments. For example, Let the Fire Burn (2013) exposes the 1985 events surrounding the Philadelphia police dropping explosives on row houses due to the long-time feud between the city of Philadelphia police and the Black Liberation group MOVE. Let the Fire Burn is also composed wholly from archival footage.

In this way, conventions of social unscripted filmmaking work with traditions of journalism. According to Peterson (1956), the press and journalists have a social responsibility to

their public. Guided by the social responsibility theory, Peterson lists six criteria for the press: a) "providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs," b) "enlightening the public," c) "safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as watchdog against government," d) "bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services," e) "providing entertainment," and f) "maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests" (p. 74). Documentary filmmakers operate within these conventions of journalism to act socially responsible when conveying information. Specifically, one aim to achieve this is producing a narrative that is grounded in objectivity. However, Peterson (1956) argues how objectivity in the media does not always produce a whole truth due to a lack of presentation of a story from multiple perspectives or having conflicting sources. Further, there has been debate over whether the objectivity that journalists seek is actually objective. For example, traditional notions of objectivity are typically adopted in white, mainstream media that reproduce dominant ideologies (Alamo-Pastrana & Hoynes, 2018). With this in mind, LA 92 maintains these conventions of journalistic practices by challenging this type of objectivity.

Education in Unscripted Filmmaking

Another key cultural tradition that LA 92 work within and through is education. While traditional education is commonly regarded as the value-free conveyance of basic knowledge, when intersecting with social documentary it seeks to bring our attention to and widen our understanding of how racial inequalities are embedded in society (Depaepe, 1997). Barnouw (1974) recognizes the value documentaries can have to call attention to and educate people about issues they were unaware about. For example, when discussing guerilla-style documentaries covering the Vietnam war, he notes that many found that "television was bringing the war 'into

the home'" (Barnouw, 1974, p. 273). This practice gave filmmakers the ability to teach audiences about realities they do not often see. This is the case for LA 92, a film that educates Americans in their homes about social issues.

Similar efforts of using social documentary to educate about social issues can be seen regarding climate change. Cooper and Nisbet (2007) note how climate change documentaries are produced for both education of and advocacy for climate change. However, they also found that individuals tended to interpret messages in a way that already align with their beliefs despite being invited to consider diverse perspectives. In this case, some audience segments continued to advocate and agree with the need for policy change, while others who deny climate change maintain their beliefs despite viewing the same messaging. For this reason, Cooper and Nisbet (2007) encourage filmmakers to first educate audiences over advocating for social issues prior to advocating for action.

Racial and social inequalities are as politically divisive as climate change. LA 92 can be seen to educate their audiences through first creating a relationship between them and the subjects of the documentary prior to overtly advocating for change. Kansteiner (2017) suggests that building this relationship to educate is possible because filmmakers make choices in creating "collective memories" (p. 176). Further, as an example of historicizing the events presented, filmmakers' and audiences' immersion helps encourage "an empathetic relationship to past actors and events and attempt to grasp what really happened from the vantage point of the past not the present" (Kansteiner, 2017, p. 176-177).

The second way *LA 92* conventionally engages in education is through overt instruction. Implementing film and television in classroom curriculum has long been used as a form of "edutainment" (Saldaña, 2009). Popular films can serve as forms of human experiences and

examples of real-life conflict. In this sense, social documentaries such as LA 92 can be instructional tools that exhibit and contextualize social conflict. While entertainment can be a form of education, Kansteiner (2017) also recognizes that it can also limit engagement when viewers rely on minimal materials. However, it can work as a pedagogical tool when providing students with opportunities for critical discussion. As will be discussed, where LA 92 is presented from the vantage point of the past, it additionally contextualizes society in the present. The way this is done in the case of LA92 is to work in conjunction with additional materials provided by National Geographic such as a panel discussion and discussion guide.

Addressing Epistemological Challenges

In their claim to depict what is actually happening in the world, many conventions are used to respond to an interlocking set of key epistemological challenges. These include how to establish and validate the reality or actuality of the problem; how to convincingly respond to criticisms that filmmakers have axes to grind, cherry-pick or exaggerate due to self-interest; and how to authoritatively confront naysayers' case that the U.S. is actually a "post-race" society.

By working with and through social documentary, education and journalism, LA 92 effectively responds to these epistemological challenges in two key ways. First, by using existing footage shot for different purposes by other people, the filmmakers can legitimately claim they had no say or role in what and how to film events and people. While their own lived experiences certainly inform their interpretation and assemblage of materials, the filmmakers incorporate footage from a broad spectrum of resources available to them. Second, the footage it uses was shot by local television news crews who were themselves operating within professional-

journalism conventions that enshrine values of objectivity and neutrality. In addition, other than an original music score, all audio is diegetic and also from the archived news footage.

How these conventions as enacted in the film itself constitute claims of accuracy and validity is significant. One could imagine LA 92 including present-day interviews with academic and policy experts as well as participants who were there in 1992, then filming today the same important sites, shooting footage in color in order to complement the archival footage primarily in black and white.

Overview and Summary of LA 92

What follows is a brief summary of LA 92. Its parts are delimited visually and narratively by title cards—a black screen with white text superimposed on it. While some of these identify locations where footage was shot or explain/identify the significance of what preceding footage shows, the ones that delimit major parts of the film display simply a specific month, day and year.

August, 1965 Watts District of Los Angeles

Acting as a prologue to the events in Los Angeles in 1992, the film opens on a quote appearing with no audio, “We have to do with the past on as we can make it useful to the present and to the future.” - Frederick Douglass, 1852

While the screen stays black, police audio dispatch is heard detailing a looting incident. Suddenly, classical music with strings soundtracks footage showing a series of black and white videos of police brutality, cars on fire, and Black citizens in distress. Music crescendos then abruptly stops at an all-black screen that reads,“August 1965. Watts District of Los Angeles.” A

compilation of news reporters reporting on the Watts District riots considering it, “the most widespread, the most destructive racial violence in American history.” Reporters talk over videos of continued uprising and police violence.

Transitioning from black and white footage to color footage, a voiceover from Martin Luther King Jr. is heard, “Out of the ashes of this community, I think that is an opportunity to build a better society, in terms of economic security, better housing conditions, better schools, and to deal with the police problem to make Los Angeles a model city for the nation.” What follows is a brief montage giving audiences a sense of how Los Angeles progressed since 1965. Tom Bradley (in office 1973-1993), a former police officer, becomes Los Angeles’s first Black mayor. While Daryl Gates (served from 1978-1992) begins his tenure as police chief along footage suggesting this is a dangerous time for Black citizens. Focus then shifts to footage instilling Los Angeles as the ideal American dream location for immigrants and as an ethnic and cultural melting pot.

March 1991

Continuing with a background of what life was like in 1991, police dispatch is heard locating three Black men over aerial views of the city at night. A blurry home recording (March 3, 1991) is now shown of a Black man laying down and surrounded by several police officers taking turns beating him with their batons. The man attempts to get up but is continuously beaten back to the ground. What follows is news coverage of the incident where it is announced that the man was hit 56 times. News reports introduce the victim, Rodney King, with disturbing images, detailed drawings, and audio description detailing the severity of the injuries, “Doctors said he suffered a concussion. One of his eye sockets was pulverized. His cheekbones was so pushed in

from the blows to his face that it would require reconstructive surgery." Police chief Gates holds a press conference stating the beating was not racially motivated and that the procedures that should have been taken failed simply because of human error.

Days later, another incident in Los Angeles is captured on camera. This time, Korean grocery store owner, Soon Ja Du is seen shooting and killing the 15-year-old Black teenager, Latasha Harlins after she accuses her of stealing orange juice. Next, news coverage includes protests and a reporter's audio contextualizing the broader implications of this death, "The case has become a symbol of tensions between two large groups in this ethnically diverse city. African Americans and the Koreans, who've become successful merchants in many of the poorest Black neighborhoods." After the jury finds Soon Ja Du guilty of voluntary manslaughter with a recommended prison sentence of 16 years, the judge reduces her sentence to community service and a small fine. The community responds with anger and continues to protest. The trial against the police officers and Rodney King's attackers begins.

April 29, 1992: The Day of the Verdict

The verdict is announced that the four officers are found not guilty except for one officer found guilty of using excessive force. As the verdict is read, Black residents around Los Angeles are seen in disbelief. Tensions begin to rise amongst the community and reporters interview citizens who both agree and disagree with the verdict, both groups angered. Protestors run towards the police station and are seen outside chanting, "Guilty! Guilty! Guilty!" What follows is a series of peaceful protests taking place led by residents, religious leaders, and local politicians. As protestors continue to march, police dispatch audio is heard requesting back up at Florence and Normandie, "we're taking bottles and rocks." As a swarm of police officers are

seen trying to detain and calm the public, Black residents persist and hold their ground. Suddenly, all police officers are ordered to leave the area. What follows is residents stopping cars, throwing bottles and rocks at cars, and pulling drivers out of the cars to attack them. Aerial news footage from a helicopter shows residents starting to break into local stores and take things. Harrowing music continues as the scene becomes increasingly chaotic throughout the night with cars and buildings on fire and people lying dead along the streets. The chaos grows from the neighborhood in South Central to across the city. At midnight, the California governor requests the National Guard as the city is seen in flames.

April 30, 1992

Footage of peaceful protesting in front of the White House in Washington, D.C. calling on President Bush to make a statement. Politicians at the national level begin to make statements including presidential candidate, Bill Clinton. The city is seen in smoke and ashes as residents walk around - some shaking their heads. Black residents are distraught over their neighborhood and local businesses destroyed. Then, audio is heard reporting that most of the businesses damaged were owned by Koreans as footage shows buildings boarded up and spray painted, "BLACK OWNED." As the city is under a State of Emergency, large groups of residents are seen entering vacated stores and taking what's inside. Local business owners are seen trying to protect their store but are left in tears. A building in Koreatown is seen on fire when Korean business owners begin to stand guard in front of their stores wielding firearms and shooting at on comers because no police or National Guard are on the scene. The fires continue to spread across the city, now in Hollywood. Footage of dead citizens, covered in blood, are seen throughout the

streets of Los Angeles. The National Guard was delayed but is now being deployed into the city while the city is under a strict curfew. Several residents are seen seeking shelter at the Red Cross.

May 1, 1992

The day starts with footage from the Red Cross of residents waking up and sharing their experience during the last couple of days. They are seen watching the news, which reports how it has spread from local to national to global significance with one news station reporting, "The British Mail had a rather scathing conversation about it. They said that racism in the United States of America is as American as apple pie." The city is now attempting to put their community back together. A live news special report is shown of a nervous, saddened Rodney King giving a statement requesting for peace and for everyone to try to get along. Finally, as still images from the chaos is shown, President Bush releases a live statement addressing the American people, "It's not a message of protest. It's been the brutality of a mob, pure and simple. And let me assure you, I will use whatever force is necessary to restore order." Previous footage of the four police officers tried for beating Rodney King is shown, Bush continues, "We must respect the process of law, whether or not we agree with the outcome." Next, uplifting music is heard as the community comes together to clean up the city and show they will not be divided. As the uplifting music fades, black and white footage of the 1965 Watts District returns cutting back and forth with footage from the last few days. The film ends with a statement superimposed on a black screen, "The city reported 58 deaths, 2,383 injuries, and more than 11,000 arrests. Damages would eventually exceed $1 Billion. It remains the most destructive civil disturbance in American history."

Narrative Relations

Structural relationships signify racial inequalities as largely naturalized and thus essentialized. These include syntagmatic relations of sequence, paradigmatic relations of similarity and opposition, and how they work together in key ways.

The first key syntagmatic relation is one of repetition. This signifies a timeless, unchanging pattern of consistent racial strife and inequality. The same kinds of scenes are shown one after the other but that occurred in different times. This relation signifies racial inequality and violence as naturalized in the sense that it has existed for a long time, and that it is to stop or end. We see repeated scenes of police brutality, combatant brutality, scene after scene after scene. The film shows multiple instances in different points in time of cars and buildings burning, police officers attacking citizens, and several individuals, mostly Black, in distress and bloodied. A complementary syntagmatic relation that is interspersed with the scenes is the repeated interlude of a reporter telling audiences how police brutality just impacted the community. Often these two repeating patterns are combined, as in a voice-over of a reporter describing church leaders who were pleading for peace, with visuals of cars being overturned and set on fire.

A second way that structural relationships signify racial inequalities as largely naturalized and thus essentialized is through paradigmatic relations. These operate in a number of ways. One way is to connect different instances into a single sequence, thus equating them. Preceding the LA 92 explosion is the Frederick Douglass quotation, the footage from the Iraq War and its military brutality, the 1960s and the hiring of Police Chief Gates and his objective along with the Watts riots, the 1992 King beating and the resulting riots. By placing them in the same sequence,

one immediately followed by another, they signify as rooted in the same brutality that enforces racial inequality.

Another way racial inequalities are naturalized is also done through paradigmatic relations that place certain social institutions as unvaryingly aligned with certain racial groups. In this way, paradigmatic relations consistently code race through religion, with black/moral-religious opposed to white/immoral-secular. For example, scenes of speakers in the Black community commonly take place in religious settings such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Churches as a place for gathering. Maxine Waters, a U.S. Congresswoman, speaks in front of a congregation at Bethel AME Church following the verdict against Soon Ja Du. Another gathering occurs following the verdict against the four White police officers charged with the beating of King. The black screen reads in white superimposed text, "First AME Invites Community Leaders and Politicians to Gather for Peaceful Protest" (47:29). Instead of diegetic audio, harrowing orchestral music plays over a series of clips showing community leaders exhorting the congregation.

In relation to Black residents, identification and solidarity are more easily invited than difference and threat, due to repeated depiction in this close setting of disproportionate if not unprovoked police brutality. Corresponding to LA 92's narrative relations, repetition of harrowing images indicates persistent if not unchanged social relations through a paradigmatic relation of opposition between the pairings of Black/residents and White/police officers. For example, within the first minute of the documentary, Black residents of Los Angeles' Watts district are brutally beaten by the police unprovoked. Similarly, the repeated image appears again from a bystander's video footage of police attacking Rodney King. Through such textual relations and social relations, race relations come to be essentialized as a constituent fact of U.S.

society. This intention on behalf of the filmmakers is made clear in an interview, in which they noted "You can't talk about American history without talking about race and class" (Carey, December 18, 2017).

However, such essentialized race relations are at the same time de-essentialize as well, through viewers' intimate engagement with depictions of Black-resident brutality and looting, with other Black residents urging looters to subside. A disgruntled Black citizen named Lawrence, walks throughout the streets, wielding a hammer, and looks at his neighborhood in shambles. Near tears, he shouts to passersby: "That's not right! I worked too hard for this… That's not right. That's not right. That's not right what y'all doing. I came from the ghetto, too. Same as all of you did. But still y'all mess up my business! And you call this black power? You mad at white people? Why destroy my business? Why destroy my store? Why steal my computer? I'm trying to make it! Can't you understand that? Can't y'all see that? I'm trying to make it" (1:26:19-1:27:10).

As Lawrence pleads with members of his neighborhood, LA 92 de-essentializes race by contextualizing social relations within racial groups. Much of the film's intraracial representation of Black communities resembles understanding and identification within the community. But, by representing intraracial conflict in this way, it becomes difficult and complicated to identify in singular ways.

Another way LA 92 de-essentializes race is through representation of conflict and difference between Black residents and Korean residents. For example, there are several instances of individuals and protestors believing in solidarity between the two communities. One in particular stands out following the not-guilty verdict of Korean shop owner, Soon Ja Du over the death of Latasha Harlins, a Black teenager. Outside the courtroom, a Black gentleman is

interviewed on his reaction of the verdict, “Latasha was killed. Our family was killed. Racism is not the Korean killing her. Racism is the court system that allows her to kill her” (25:24). While he expresses disappointment in the results of the trials, he voices the complications of interracial conflict because of a systematic issue impacting Black Americans.

A crucial syntagmatic relation that also signifies the racial strife of LA 92 as essentialized and unchanging is the absence of an Act 3. LA 92 diverges from the conventional development of a storyline through a three-act structure of problem instigation, confrontation, and finally its resolution (Field, 1979). By contrast, the film ends at the end of Act 2, which is conventionally regarded as the lowest point of hope and highest point of dramatic confrontation (Field, 1979).This absence is also how the film shifts from what Barnouw (1974) considers an observer documentary to an advocate documentary. This underscores how the film acts as a call to action to continue to confront the problem that continues to exist.

Syntagmatically, the film’s absence of an Act 3 allows space for the narrative to continue after the film concludes and goes beyond the film itself – into society and how audience’s interpret it. As a form of commentary on society, the majority of LA 92 creates a sense for audiences or observers that they are beyond these social issues where those issues are left in the past. For example, the ending of the documentary starts with Rodney King providing a statement to the people of Los Angeles after days of the largest civil disturbance in the United States asking citizens to get along and try to work it out, “It’s not going to change anything. We’ve got to quit.” His nervous disposition gives a sense of unintended responsibility as he pleads with Los Angeles. Next, with melancholy music in the background and amongst a series of harrowing images displaying Los Angeles in blazes of fire, President Bush is once again seen preparing to address the American people singing and humming the tune of Tonight from West Side Story

before going live. The next series of footage shows the immediate aftermath of communities joining together to rebuild their city. Protestors march down the street with brooms in arms chanting, “Stop the Violence!” Racial barriers are broken down as citizens clean up mass destruction together. A sea of Korean Americans are seated together asking for peace and unification, many hold signs reading, “We Want Peace,” “Responsibility are Government & White,” “We Know it Was Injustice.”

LA 92*’s* narrative then shifts to an advocate documentary where it is insinuated that there is a clear systemic issue that everyone, past and present, is involved in. While a sense of resolution and hope is initially distilled, the tone returns to a feeling of hopelessness as the documentary cuts to the 1965 Watts district news footage seen from the beginning of the film. The filmmakers exhibit an ongoing pattern of racial injustice in society, one that engages audiences to question this pattern today. For example, in a film review written by *The Hollywood Reporter* (April 21, 2017), they suggest a great significance of LA 92’s release 25 years after the riots. The review references a conscious America aware of the historical and present strife between law-enforcement and Black Americans. Another critical review from *The Atlantic* (Newkirk, April 29, 2017) contextualizes the timing of the film’s release by comparison among the cohort of films released to mark the 25th anniversary. The review mentions Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charlotte – all cities impacted by fires due to civil uprisings and racial injustice in recent news from 2017. The review prioritizes a need to take a look at the historical racial injustices to address the current social inequities present. LA 92*’s* missing Act 3 works syntagmatically to connect the documentary’s narrative to today’s society and an ongoing sense of hopelessness and deeply systemic racial injustices. Here, by ending the film at its highest

point of confrontation, the film production of social inequalities from 1992 are evident in today's society.

A third key syntagmatic relation is the sequence from LA-specific events to commentary from national leaders, which signifies Los Angeles events as indicative of a national issue. For example, Los Angeles mayor, Tom Bradley, appears on screen at City Hall to address the city after the Rodney King trials announce a verdict (40:30). This is followed by California Governor Pete Wilson taking stage in Sacramento to announce a state of emergency in Los Angeles (1:07:44). First, the film depicts the 1965 Watts District police brutality events to connect to what is followed by similar events in Los Angeles in 1992. The film starts to end by signifying national importance with soon-to-be President Bill Clinton being interviewed during his presidential campaign on the uprising in Los Angeles, and the dispatch of the National Guard. At this point, the filmmakers push the narrative syntamagtically from outsider to insider insinuating this event is not in isolation. In a Film School interview (Kasper, November 27, 2017), the co-directors each recall learning about the events in Los Angeles in 1992 in real time from their respective states of Washington and Illinois.

Social Relations

LA 92 grapples more fully with the challenge of producing a strategic (anti)essentialism (Museus & Iftikar, 2013) through how it reproduces social relations of, in this case, race. The film displays in a number of ways how social relations of race are produced via sympathetic intimacy, plus alienation as well as its critique.

Sympathetic Intimacy

The term "sympathetic intimacy" refers to viewers feeling a sense of understanding and closeness to characters as they experience conflict or difficult incidents. It is a sympathy toward subjects produced through representation of closeness to them and their lives. Of course, what specifically is shown and for whom in what circumstance can potentially produce a range of feeling from sympathy to revulsion. The analysis here focuses on the intended representation as indicated in the contexts of the entire film as well as its clearly intended audience.

What proposes a social relation of solidarity via sympathetic intimacy between viewers and the situation of Black subjects in the film includes on-the-street direct footage of actions the police take, and that Black residents and others take. Via the positioning of recording cameras and microphones, viewers are often within arms' reach of those in the scene. Similar to how Kansteiner (2017) describes an empathetic relationship, viewers are immersed to connect with the past images in relation to viewers' present-day lives. For example, Ulgen (April 22, 2017) doesn't consider the LA 92 documentary a reflection of the past as much as it is a "submergence into a negative feedback loop of racial turmoil in US inner-cities." For Ulgen, the sympathetic intimacy towards Black residents is partially due to what continues to be witnessed around the nation.

However, LA 92 at the same time produces alienation, particularly through key absences generated via the paradigmatic opposition of public and private, and with the private left unrepresented. While viewers are often within arms' length of Black residents, those engaging in street actions are rarely if ever named, identified or personalized. Even when identified by name such as Rodney King's family, such identification is made during public statements in official

proceedings. No footage exists of Black residents at home, informally conversing with family and friends, engaged in everyday household chores, or in quiet contemplation.

What is crucial to how this opposition signifies is what Macherey (1966). calls a "strategic absence," because it signifies in relation to its opposite through its absence instead of its presence. In terms of what's seen in LA92, blacks are shown almost exclusively in the streets, engaging in confrontations, marches and in some cases vandalism. What is not shown is Blacks in their homes engaged in such private and mundane tasks as cleaning up dishes in the sink, vacuuming the living room, putting their children to bed, and so on. Such settings and scenes that are central to and more fully representative of human experience are the opposite of the public-facing mass actions, but entirely absent. Including only this slice of human experience reduces Black residents to simply a creature of the street and mass action instead of a fully realized human being. In doing so, it also essentializes them by showing them not in a variety of settings and engaged in a range of tasks, but solely and only as a member of a street group or mob.

Another way alienation is also generated complexly is through the paradigmatic opposition Black/criminals and Korean-Americans/law-abiding citizens. Though presented as an opposition, it signifies a persistent racialization of both racial groups because it both dehumanizes them while characterizing them in relation to another group, specifically, Whites. With racialization in mind, this opposition signifies what Museus and Iftikar (2013) refer to as "Asianization" because it signifies the relationship of Asian Americans in opposition to not only Black Americans but to society as a whole through societal oppression. LA 92 shows examples of how Asian Americans were socially constructed as what could be called honorary Whites. Such examples show Korean citizens primarily as business owners in the community or peacefully protesting. Specifically, after a series of shots of looting, we see people casually

walking on the sidewalks and streets during the day when we hear a woman's voice shout, "Don't you dare set a fire" as the screen cuts to an older Asian woman standing in the center of a broken storefront with her arms wide open blocking access to the store. A group of looters stand in front of her while one eagerly tries to enter her store. A man and her shout back and forth. She defends her store and continues to take up space spreading her arms and legs wide and shouts back, "Get out! I'm closed!" Waving her hands and she says, "This is America… get out!" Another looter begins to join in and shouts, "F*ck the Chinese. F*ck the Chinese." To which she replies, "I'm not Chinese. Keep your mouth shut!" Several others shout at her as she continues to state, "This is America" (1:24:14 - 1:24:56).

However, where the previous scene shows an Asian citizen as a patriotic business owner defending her store, Black residents are similarly racialized but in opposition as committers of crime. One example that is often referenced as a key event of the riots is a scene showing an altercation at the intersection of Florence and Normandie. We see Black citizens stopping cars, pulling drivers out, and assaulting them. They kick them as the drivers run away. We hear news reporters via aerial news footage warning viewers to stay away from the area. A white semi-truck is stopped at the intersection and the driver is pulled out, a reporter states as the White driver is severely beaten and kicked, "All this guy did was enter this area. That's his only crime." By limiting exposure of Black citizens in situations where they are committing crimes and leaving out their private-home life, audiences gain an understanding of how Black identity was essentialized during this time.

Along with the opposition of how Black citizens and Korean citizens are depicted, alienation is also generated via the absence of racial groups in Los Angeles. The film presents race as a major contributor to the divisions amongst the LA 92 community; however, prominent

racial groups and communities in Los Angeles at the time are absent from the film. While Hispanic and Latino communities made up about 35% of Los Angeles (US Census Bureau, 1990), they are rarely acknowledged throughout the film despite having the second largest racial population in Los Angeles. Further, Black Americans (12%) and Korean Americans (11%) are largely depicted as groups and White Americans (59%) are typically individualized in the documentary, but Latino Americans' absence from the documentary's coverage suggest race is not the sole factor for the conflict.

A third way is the typical positioning of the camera in the midst of the police and facing the Black residents, instead of in the midst of Black residents facing the police. On some occasions, and embodying the journalistic convention of neutrality, the camera shoots footage from the side of the confrontation, with police on one side of the frame and Black residents on the other side. For example, after the King trial, protestors arrive at Parker Center, the LAPD Headquarters in Downtown Los Angeles. A row of police officers guards the building with the camera positioned behind them facing the protestors. Another camera angle shuffles and follows a small group of police dragging a Black citizen into the building. A close-up camera shot shows only a Black citizen shouting something towards the police officers while gesturing profanities. Various camera angles are seen from within the group of protestors and Black residents; however, never do cameras face the police officers from the perspective of the protestors. Alienation in this sense describes the relation of viewers to those depicted in the action.

However, this alienation is also critiqued, thus seeking to de-naturalize and de-essentialize at the same time. Because of the notion that media is selective in how they frame images and events, the documentary questions key relations amongst news media, the public, and transparency. LA 92 critiques this alienation by signifying it as an outcome of conventional

journalism. LA 92 solely uses archived news footage and thus limits itself to what it shows as well as doesn't show. In doing so, it throws into high relief the importance of how things are portrayed, rather than treating footage as transparent and neutral and the "whole story," and thus to be taken for granted.

The film works as much as a critique of journalism. While the filmmakers certainly choose what to exhibit through this alienation, they are limited by their source of footage. They acknowledge the contributions of the many camera operators who captured this footage by noting "These are men and women whose first instinct was to go out and capture history as it was happening" (Carey, December 18, 2017). However, the implications for social relations of race due to how the footage captured this action is similarly meant to be considered.

For example, the filmmakers clearly describe their decision-making process to expose news media's performance and "façade in America… this idea that America presents itself as one thing, but it's reality is something else" (Grobar, August 14, 2017). By focusing on showing viewers how the press prepares for their sets, it attempts to invite viewers into a reality that is never shown on screen in the news. However, even in this sense, some find the documentary sensationalized, which resembles much of what is seen in the news today (Mumford, April 20, 2017). For example, Mumford (April 20, 2017) notes the film was not only limited but prioritized, "sensationalism over insight."

Another way it focuses on not just the reality of the events but representation of the social turmoil in LA of 1992 is by focusing explicitly on the release and viewing of the video shot and circulated of the King beating. The King video—not just the beating—plays the central role. For both the crimes against Rodney King and Latasha Harlins, video footage is primary evidence for the charges. This film documents retrospectively that LA "race riots" were not hidden, but were

presented in a selective way, as individual, discrete street-located events in an ongoing contestation centered on race relations and civil rights.

In addition, the Rodney King video too is not portrayed as a cause out of nowhere, due to the syntagmatic relations of repetition between it and the footage that precedes and follows it. The King video is signified as simply yet another instance of racist police brutality and militarized brutality. Where the film essentializes race, it too further essentializes race relations due to ongoing institutionalized racism. LA 92's repetition of these images suggest the unwillingness of conventional TV-news journalism to contextualize the 1992 situation in a longstanding presence and persistence of racial inequality (e.g. Douglass quotation at the start), plus a warning to the present day (e.g. the year of LA92's making and exhibition).

Intertextual Relations

For LA 92, relations with intertextual materials are important. National Geographic's sponsoring and distribution of an educational guide provides evidence of the educational intention of this film, as does a panel discussion between moderator, Debra Adamas Simmons and participants Dream Hampton, Jamal Simmons, Jelani Cobb, Jane Elliot, T.J. Martin, and Dan Lindsay. (A 92 Panel – Live | National Geographic, June 7, 2020). A link on the documentary website links to further educational materials (LA 92 Discussion Guide, 2017). The discussion guide, originally published at the documentary's release in 2017, provides not only information about initiatives directly following the 1992 riots, but it further connects these social issues to The Black Lives Matter movement after the death of Trayvon Martin in February of 2012 (The People's Word, February 27, 2024). Discussion questions are posed exploring how America deals with race problems, how protests can be peaceful, and whether we understand the legality

and use of videotaping crimes. Where the filmmakers are keenly aware of how media can frame and sensationalize incidents, they also acknowledge how citizens videotaping has power to uncover the hidden. For example, the discussion guide relates the death of Trayvon Martin to the racial injustices today and to what was depicted in the documentary; however, video footage of the shooting is not available. To further impose how video footage complicates perceived progressive race relations in the United States, the discussion guide specifically connects the cases of Rodney King and Latasha Harlins to the shooting of Walter Scott in 2015, the death of Eric Garner in 2014, and the shooting of Tamir Rice in 2016 (LA 92 Discussion Guide, 2017). It does so by suggesting all these cases are examples that America has not fully dealt with its issues of race relations but that individuals and a rise in technology give power to those who expose it. In this way, the discussion guide acts also as a guide for activism and practice.

Another way intertextual relations signify the film and events as ongoing and systemic is by putting them in conversation with George Floyd's killing in May of 2020 and the protests to follow (The Week, May 25, 2021). One can see this clearly in the panel discussion that followed a virtual screening of LA 92 on June 7, 2020, which occurred just weeks following the killing of Floyd. As described on the access page to the discussion, the panel is positioned as "a diverse, influential panel for an evening of reflection, discussion, and action on ending systemic racism in America" (A 92 Panel – Live | National Geographic, June 7, 2020). One of the panelists, filmmaker Dream Hampton, expresses how he feels energized in an otherwise hopeless setting because he sees contemporary action taking place in Minneapolis in the for of dismantling the police force. But other panelists express feelings of hopelessness because of the cyclical nature of racial injustice in the United States. LA 92 filmmaker T.J. Martin states that he and his crew sought to create an immersive and visceral experience for viewers to minimize the distance

between audience experience and the experience of those on screen. He highlights the educational/activist intention informing the film, believing that people do not fully understand what the conflict was or what it meant for those involved.

Other panelists also respond to the sense of persistent and ongoing unequal relations of race. Jamal Simmons, CBS News Political Contributor, calls for a need to examine what our future looks like due to similar actions taken by then-President Donald Trump to enforce, "militarization on streets without provocation attacking domestic protestors" (National Geographic, June 7, 2020). Substantiating Martin's claims of ongoing cyclical injustice, the panel provides evidence of such. Jelani Cobb, Staff Writer for the New Yorker, references several uprisings over the past fifty years to provide evidence that the cause of uprisings is due to inherent and unchanging "socio-economic subjugations of all the failing institutions."

In doing so, the panel reproduces the key signification of LA 92 that history repeats itself and that social inequities are intrinsic to the fabric of America. At the same time, and while the intertextual materials confirm the seriousness and importance of racial inequality, unlike the film these unsuccessfully hold in tension essentializing and de-essentializing due to working more fully within conventional traditions of journalism.

Conclusions

LA92 invites viewers to reconsider not just the depicted events, but news footage of those events. The footage brings viewers into the action in an often very intimate way. But only providing access to street confrontation and action, a small sliver of an entire human life day to day. Immersion is multivalent socially, lending itself to solidarity as well as alienation at the same time by objectifying the participants and depersonalizing the participants.

But, this is not to suggest that LA92 purports that news footage specifically or representation generally is false or simply creates a false consciousness. The film attempts to not make simple claims that the news footage is irretrievably flawed, neither that it is transparent objective truth, nor that it is without value. The footage represents and claims the actuality of crucial and critical situations and acts. While it alienates the viewer from the participants, it also critiques this alienation as the outcome of uncritical journalistic conventions that essentialize cases they report, while also exploring forms and means of representation that might aid efforts to put into practice strategic anti-essentialism.

CHAPTER 4

RACE AND SCRIPTED DOMESTIC DRAMA: THE CASE OF EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

Introduction

This chapter considers via a case study the possibilities of the cultural production of social inequalities of race through scripted feature-film drama.

It conducts an in-depth examination of the recent award-winning feature film Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022) (hereafter referred to as Everything) with a runtime of two hours and 19 minutes. It is written and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Sheinhert, produced by Anthony and Joe Russo and Jonathan Wang with financial backing and distribution through the major studio A24. Following an initial release in theaters beginning on March 25, 2022, the film was later distributed on April 8, 2022. Industry awards it has received include Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Film Editing.

After watching the film the first time, I first felt that this was a movie for Asian American audiences. However, the more I thought about this and the more discussions I had about how this movie represents race, I started to consider whether race and ethnicity are even important at all to the film's narrative. While I initially connected with the familial intercultural and intergenerational conflict while identifying strongly with Joy's character and struggles, I came to feel that the film did not need to identify racial or societal conflict in order to highlight Asian visibility. I came to question whether those familial intercultural and intergenerational conflicts

were specific to Asian American families, and they really were not. Overall, I felt hopeful after watching the film, that things will be okay when effort is made.

This chapter is my effort to work out what key relations generated this understanding. It argues that Everything embodies a distinctive means of addressing and reproducing social inequalities of race that seek to normalize and, by doing so, to also equalize them. As such, it serves in its own, distinct way of concretely embodying strategic anti-essentialism in all its complexity and openness by holding essentialism and de-essentialism in a productive tension and relation. It highlights how narrative relations produce racial inequalities as naturalized and thus essentialized, but also in a de-essentialized understanding as a result of multiple conflicts prioritized throughout the film. By centering on a Chinese immigrant's relationships and family drama, on one hand it invites empathetic solidarity with woman who struggles with her own self-actuality and her identity as a mother, daughter, and wife. On the other hand, it also presents how the family's experiences are individualized even through a multitude of life possibilities that alienate and thus separate immigrant families.

The movie Everything and Conventions of Domestic Drama as Scripted Feature Film

The movie Everything draws on the long-standing forms and traditions of domestic family drama and scripted feature film, and the conventions in which such works are composed and through which viewers are encouraged to engage it. Recovering the range of examples even in summary underscores its centrality. As Levy (1991) notes from a perspective other than what is used in this dissertation, commercial feature film illustrates and informs audiences about social roles such as those of families. Further, he suggests that feature films exploring domestic family drama demonstrate dominant ideologies about how society is structured. Though dramatized, this

form of narrative can be a powerful means of reproducing social relations that constitute a family. More specifically regarding the topic of this dissertation, Han (2016) and Brooks (1976) suggest that drama is an "expressive mode" useful for understanding the representation of ethnic families, specifically Chinese American families.

In scripted drama's assertion and effort to depict the subjective truth and experience of not only a specific family life but, in doing so, to shed some light on similar dynamics in many families, it is in many ways set free from the epistemological challenges of unscripted, documentary narratives that instead seek to establish and validate the reality/actuality of what is depicted. Rather, the creators depict some parts of their own lived experiences with family to create senses of reality. Or, in some cases of scripted drama in television, family life and American society are reproduced on screen while also determined by considerations of market value and current cultural trends (Taylor, 1989).

Yet, commercial feature films are held nevertheless to the challenge of convincingly achieving an emotional power and recognition by large swaths of viewers, who ideally recognize themselves and their families through these narratives. In order to create relevance and audience engagement from their narratives regarding families, the creators make choices within the conventions of domestic drama. The movie Everything relies on such conventions and their overlap with cultural institutions of scripted commercial features, family, and race. While many conventions work independently, they also operate in combination.

Scripted Commercial Features

Traditions and conventions of major studio scripted commercial feature film are informed in the U.S. by the mid-20th Century sociological debate regarding mass culture, and the resulting

opposition of art and commodities. Macdonald (1953) discusses extensively how mass culture acts as a monopoly that, like a factory, churns out standardized cultural products. For example, through market research, audiences' common denominator of appeal is established to establish a baseline of consumer values and interests, which then become established as templates that guide further production.

However, in response to the mass-culture critique, more recent recognitions note that the complexity of cultural production has always expanded beyond the boundaries of any particular normative vision, whether approving or critical. Levy (1991) argues that the film industry serves as dual functions, both as an economic institution and as a cultural institution. Its need to commodify is plainly visible since the U.S. Supreme Court stated in 1915 that the film industry is a business for profit (Levy, 1991, p. 188). However, as a cultural institution, it is a major cultural practice that signifies social relations. This is the case for the film Everything. Although adopting in many ways an avant-garde surrealist take in ways that will be discussed, Everything operates as well within the industry and commodity conventions by seeking to appeal to multiple audiences by creating a film spanning across multiple genres.

Family Relations

Traditions and conventions of family relations as the setting and focus for dramatic works is a fundamental basis of storytelling from antiquity. Family intrigue in ruling dynasties is present in ancient Greek tragedies, such as Oedipus by Sophocles, Shakespearian dramas such as Hamlet and Henry IV. This continued to be the case for centering dramas and melodramas around the rising families of the bourgeoisie, which created a closed and imagined world filled with family conflict (Nowell-Smith, 1987). Domestic theatrical drama composed in the 19th

Century came to increasingly address newly-emerging middle-class family dynamics and conflict set in their drawing rooms and residences (Williams, 1982). They commonly focus on the minutiae of psychological portraits of family relations in isolation from explicit linkage to larger contexts.

Domestic drama in feature films works within these theatrical traditions and conventions, to the extent of often adapting an originally theatrical script into a motion-picture or television production. Perhaps the most prominent example includes that of Death of a Salesman (1949), which originated as a stage play written by Arthur Miller. It has been later adapted multiple times for feature film and television, centering around Willy Loman, a salesman who struggles with finances and family conflict. Similar to Everything's protagonist, Loman takes a look at his past and the choices made in order to understand his troubles.

Another example of a major-studio feature films adapted from the stage includes Streetcar Named Desire (1951) produced by Charles K. Feldman and directed by Elia Kazan, in which Blanche DuBois loses everything and moves in with her sister and brother-in-law. While the story follows the tumultuous relations amongst the three, DuBois constantly struggles to move away from her past. Additional major-studio examples include Ordinary People (1980) produced by Ronald L. Schwary and directed by Robert Redford, in which a family experiences a sudden loss of the oldest brother and the parents and younger brother struggle through their grief. Legends of the Fall (1994) co-produced by Jane Bartelme and Sarah Caplan and directed by Edward Zwick depicts the story of a close-knit family who then struggles with grief, jealousy, and rivalry after one of the three sons is tragically killed during World War I.

To underscore the importance of domestic drama in scripted visual narratives, it is worth briefly noting its prevalence in television productions as well, which complements its

prominence in feature film. Taylor (1989) explains and characterizes this complex landscape as as a valuable form of cultural interpretation that probes the relationships between family and public life. Further, Taylor describes the complexities of how television produces meanings through narratives that are constructed by an industry keen on garnering mass reception. Therefore, television serves as a symbolic representation of what family drama might look like during these periods of time. Brooks (2005) elaborates this as a struggle for television writers and producers to represent an idealized family while also depicting the real changes in family dynamics through the decades. For example, Brooks notes the prominence of divorce starting in the 1960s. However, due to television censorship regulations, divorced parents were not allowed to be shown on screen. Therefore, to address both the reality for many families in America and the need to represent an idealized family, producers chose to feature families that were single-parent households.

Traditions of domestic drama extend to the representation of relations of race in the U.S., tending to emphasize confrontation of the family with societal racism, instead of primarily the dynamics between family members. Prominent examples originated in theater, then were adapted to feature film. Examples include Raisin in the Sun (2008) produced by and directed by Daniel Petrie; Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967) produced and directed by Stanley Kramer; Sounder (1972) produced by Robert Bonoff Radnitz and directed by Martin Ritt; The Color Purple (1985) produced by Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall, Steven Spielberg and Quincy Jones and directed by Spielberg; Fences (2016) produced by Paramount Pictures and directed by Denzel Washington; and Mudbound (2017) produced by Carl Effenson, Cassian Elwes, Charles King, Sally Jo Effenson, Christopher Lemole, Tim Zajaros, and Kim Roth and directed by Dee Rees.

What these examples further exemplify is how domestic drama is a form of blurred boundaries between the public and the private. By showing the emotional strife families feel and experience, the public is invited into characters' homes to experience it alongside them. This produces an intimacy with the audience that involves emotional work and that further blurs the boundary between these public and private spheres.

The movie Everything responds to these long-standing traditions and conventions and their epistemological challenges by reproducing social relations of race in two key ways. First it de-emphasizes race relations by instead foregrounding intergenerational challenges between a mother (the central character), her daughter, and her father. Importantly, and as part of this, it does so by prioritizing the mother's efforts to grapple with her own and others' multiple and often contradictory senses of themselves, with these multiplicities characterized by career path and activity, instead of race.

This practice becomes particularly complex when centered on immigrant families who experience intercultural and intergenerational conflict. Han (2016) describes how the role of domestic drama is essential regarding experiences of Chinese immigrant families in the United States. These family experiences help explore a multitude of conflicts ranging from balancing conflict within their Chinese community and facing outsiders to struggling with one's cultural, racial, and ethnic identity. Further, while depicting a Chinese American family certainly contextualizes the immigrant experience, the primary themes appeal to broader audiences. Therefore, culturally and racially specific features are not distractors of overall messages as evident with Everything.

The second reason why Everything marks a unique and distinctive articulation of race relations is due to constitutive intertextual relations. While the feature film de-emphasizes race

by focusing instead on intergenerational conflict and intrapersonal identities, the constitutive relation between the casting of Asian-heritage actors in all lead roles and the contrasting primacy of white Anglo-heritage actors throughout entertainment media set off a firestorm of press coverage that underscores the novelty of these casting decisions, thus explicitly and underscoring race relations with a degree of explicit attention not present in the film itself. For example, several critical reviews of the film do not discuss how the film represents race or ethnicity, but rather, they focus on the careers of the Asian actors and what hardships are experienced for Asian actors in Hollywood (Parkes, 2022 January 26; Lee, 2020, August 26).

While in a key way, the film reproduces the conventions of domestic drama in scripted feature film by focusing throughout on intrafamily conflict, it deviates from them as well. One key deviation in relation to dominant American practice is to build the story around an Asian-immigrant family. In addition, it seeks to underscore this novelty by including not only cliché features long used to signify Asian-ness, such as positioning the mother and her family in the U.S. as owners of a self-serve laundromat, a move that recalls as well as modifies the common American visual cliché of linking Asians and laundry services. It modifies this because it is self-service, where customers do their own laundry. The directors were self-aware and self-conscious about their decisions to use Asian American tropes that signify Asian-ness but persisted because of the truthfulness to these depictions (Lee, 2022). For example, in an interview, the co-directors shared how during the decision to include a stereotypical laundromat, Dan Kwan shared that that is what the laundromat his grandfather owned looked like, and they continued to embrace the complexities of relying on Asian tropes (Lee, 2022).

A second deviation is to relinquish the realist convention of locating the core of the conflict in a mimetic social world that seeks to represent itself in realist terms. The film

Everywhere does so by placing the key setting for confrontation of the conflict in a fantasy multiverse of time travel, overlapping/simultaneous A-story and B-story timelines, and surreal action that manifests itself physically in the bodies of the characters. In doing so, the directors visualize multiple identities for characters, but who maintain the same physical and racial, ethnic characteristics.

Overview of Everything Everywhere All at Once

The action/comedy/drama film centers on Evelyn (Michelle Yeoh), a Chinese American immigrant navigating and preventing the destruction of the multiverse. At the same time, she struggles with her marriage to Waymond (Ke Huy Quan), with accepting her daughter's (Stephanie Hsu) sexuality and Americanness, with gaining acceptance from her father (James Hong), and with saving her failing laundromat business from the IRS auditor (Jamie Lee Curtis).

What follows is a brief summary of Everything. Its parts are delimited visually and narratively by superimposed titles that appear to mark key, parts of a conventional three-act drama, but as will be discussed the parts thus delimited do not necessarily correspond to the actual dramatic organization.

In what can be considered a prologue, the film starts by depicting everyday chaos in a family who owns a self-service coin laundromat in an unnamed U.S. city. The main character Evelyn (a Chinese immigrant to the U.S., middle-aged wife and mother) is wholly preoccupied with running the laundry, figuring out business taxes, paying bills, and preparing food for her recently arrived father, Gong Gong, with the help of her husband Waymond (also of Chinese heritage).

In the central conflict, Evelyn is at odds with her early-20s daughter Joy. Evelyn is too demanding and lacking in sympathy. Joy reaches a new low in feeling even more rejected and abandoned by Evelyn, and drives away from the laundromat.

Act One is marked by the superimposed title "Part I: Everything." Evelyn, Waymond and Gong Gong drive to the IRS tax auditor's office, to respond to questions about their tax claims and status. At the same time, Evelyn discovers through surreal-style overlapping sequences of "normal" life and the simultaneous "multiverse" of infinite life possibilities that the multiverse is in danger, and that she's expected by all other people to save it. To save it, she needs to believe in herself and her abilities, then to take action.

The authoritarian leader of the evil group seeking to destroy the multiverse is bodily her daughter Joy, a surreal echo of their real-world personal conflict. As a version of Joy that is a surreal, humorous, and bloodthirsty exaggeration, Evil Joy is looking for Evelyn in order to eliminate her challenge so she can destroy the multiverse. But Evil Joy is evil not because of some intrinsic fault. She'd been trained too hard to jump between different multiverses, and became unhinged from the multiplicity and relativism.

Act Two depicts Evelyn gaining agency, courage and strength. She sees the only way for her to defeat Evil Joy and protect the multiverse is to become even more powerful than Evil Joy, but in which Evelyn threatens to become as authoritarian as Evil Joy. Evelyn now instead of Evil Joy becomes the focus of efforts to be destroyed to save the multiverse. After a penultimate confrontation and fight, Evelyn appears dead. Evil Joy appears ascendant.

At this moment the film appears concluded, with the defeat of what had become Evil Evelyn, signaled by a superimposed title "The End," which is also expressed as a superimposed Chinese character. However, Act Three actually picks up at this point. The movie credits start to

roll, as thought the film is over. As the camera dollies away, we see that the credits naming everyone who worked on the film are actually on a screen in a movie theater, in which Evelyn (in one of her many virtual identities as a glamorous movie star) and many other well-dressed glamorous people, including an alternate Waymond, are watching. Evelyn becomes agitated. She gets up from her seat and runs out of the movie theater, exclaiming "Where's our daughter?"

After a series of mistakes in many different situations all of which correspond to her many different identities, we see her lacking control in her life. However, suddenly, all seems settled. Evelyn is shown at her desk in the home above the laundromat, telling herself that she made it. Her husband Waymond says the party to celebrate the laundromat is all set up and ready to start.

Further breaking the conventional three-act structure of visual feature narrative, the superimposed words "Part 2: Everywhere" signals an additional act. Joy and her girlfriend Becky arrive at the laundromat to join the party. Joy becomes Evil Joy, and the multiverse confrontation with Evelyn continues. Evil Joy leads her slowly and ceremonially in a stark white, official-looking meeting hall toward a giant black bagel at one end, seething and pulsating as apparently a voracious devourer of all existence. In what appears as a moment of selflessness and regret, Evil Joy intends to sacrifice herself but also with Evelyn at her side, so that they can end everything together. As they slowly and ceremoniously walk toward the bagel, Evil Joy states while holding hands with her mother Evelyn, "I'm looking for someone to see what I see, feel what I feel. And that someone is you."

An immediate cut takes us to Evelyn back at the laundromat, where she is handcuffed by police officers seeking to arrest her for tax fraud. But, without explanation, the IRS agent suddenly tells the police to let Evelyn go, and that she gave Evelyn another chance. Evelyn's

husband Waymond then addresses everyone at the laundromat. Rising above the chaos, he proclaims that there's simply too much fighting and that people are scared and confused. He concludes "The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Especially when we don't know what's going on." In contrast at the start of the movie to her disinterest in Waymond and their relationship, Evelyn now looks squarely at him, then embraces him.

Yet we then see Evil Joy still trying to drag Evelyn into the bagel with her, fatalistically pronouncing "Good feelings always just go away." The bagel continues to suck everything in. Evelyn steps aside, but Joy plans to enter the bagel no matter if Evelyn goes or not. After an immediate cut back to the laundromat, Evelyn embraces the IRS agent, proclaiming "There is always something to love." Switching back suddenly to the multiverse conflict, Evelyn's parrying of attacks in multiple settings generates in her challengers gratitude and thankfulness, not threat and anger.

Evelyn continues to try to reconcile with Joy at the same time her father, Gong Gong rejects her as a daughter. Reflecting on her own past relationship with her father, Evelyn comments that Joy is "stubborn and a mess." But, in that way, "just like me."

Evelyn, Gong Gong, and Waymond all try to hold Joy back from a doomed fate inside of a nothingness bagel. Outside the laundromat, Joy tells Evelyn that she hurts whenever she's around her, and so suggests they go separate ways. At first Evelyn agrees, then responds that there are many things that Joy does that she doesn't like. But concludes: "And, why, no matter what, why I want to be here with you." Switching suddenly to the multiverse and the nothingness bagel, Joy reaches out from inside the bagel to escape it, then we see her and Evelyn embracing in the parking lot. Evelyn says, "We can do whatever we want."

An epilogue to the film is marked by the superimposed text “Part 3: All at Once.” We see Evelyn, Waymond, Gong Gong and Joy in their home above the laundromat, definitely late in arriving at the IRS office with rest of receipts to get checked and approved. Becky drops off the family at the IRS, and before the meeting, Evelyn gently embraces Waymond, giving him a kiss.

Seated in the IRS agent’s office, the agent says things are better, but that there are still problems. Evelyn is daydreaming instead of listening, enjoying having her family members around her. The IRS agent says: “Evelyn, did you hear me?” Evelyn shakes her head, and responds: “What did you say?” This is followed by the superimposed title of the film “Everything Everywhere All At Once” (also expressed in Chinese characters), followed by the film’s credits.

Narrative Relations

Structural relationships produce racial relations as largely naturalized and thus essentialized. These include paradigmatic relations of similarity and opposition, syntagmatic relation of sequence, and how they work together in key ways.

The first key paradigmatic relation is one of simultaneity, which de-essentialize identities through visualizing coterminous virtual and possible multiplicities. The film is a fusion of distinct but linked places, times, and possibilities, not blended together into a uniform single set, but wildly different separate, whole distinct pieces thrown together and linked visually by combinations of match cuts and dissolves. This simultaneity is clearly captured in the film’s title, but it is visualized in the wildly diverse but interlocked versions of characters, settings, and situations.

One such example of how the film de-essentializes identities through simultaneity is through the opposing and mirroring of the main characters, Evelyn, Waymond, and Joy and their multiverse "Alpha" versions. For example, Waymond and his twinned Alpha Waymond simultaneously represent two common and opposing Asian male tropes often depicted in media that challenge oppositions of masculinity. He assumes a stereotypical portrayal of an Asian immigrant, his haircut, glasses, and fanny pack in addition to his general fearfulness and effeminate behavior signaling familiarity of Asian male characters in Hollywood. However, with Alpha Waymond, his character similarly signals familiarity of Asian male characters in Hollywood while serving as an antithesis to his Waymond counterpart. Alpha Waymond is a skilled martial artist, well-spoken, and a leading man guiding Evelyn through conflict. The film draws upon this simultaneity to signify the multiple possibilities that can be achieved together. Such openness and indeterminacy are taken to a self-consciously comic extreme toward the end of the film, in which Evelyn and Joy are rocks sitting at the edge of a cliff in a desert.

At the same time, the film signifies essentialism by maintaining consistency of characteristics in terms of gender/sex, ethnicity, age and race across these multiple iterations. Although these categories of identity could also conceivably be logically included as one of the multiple virtual/possible identities Evelyn and other characters access, they are never signified as such. Continuing with Waymond as an example of this, Waymond, Alpha Waymond, and all of their possible identities maintain the same, if not similar, physical characteristics. And Alpha Waymond is not completely different from, but instead is a more extreme possible version of Waymond. This demonstrates the film's efforts to map itself outside of simple opposition by emphasizing the complexities of identity. In an interview with *Express* (Crumlish, February 24, 2022), Quan, who plays Waymond, discusses how he seeks roles that are not stereotypically

Asian and how his previous roles in Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom (1984) and The Goonies (1985) were not "typical stereotypical Asian characters." Here, while his roles in the movie Everything essentialize race, Quan contextualizes many forms of representation because of how they contribute to the overall narrative of the films.

A second way that structural relationships signify racial inequalities as de-essentialized is through syntagmatic relations. One example of this is by the film's syntagmatic relation of a conventional story arc that traces a story about fragmentation/difference to unity. Main characters undergo a transformation arc, but within the boundaries produced by the paradigmatic relations noted above. The film uses as well as critiques the conventional three-act dramatic structure of problem, confrontation and resolution. But, hardly one of closure, the resolution is to acknowledge and embrace multiplicity and indeterminacy, while at the same time underscoring the need to take decisive action when a desirable pathway presents itself. Through these relations, it signifies not answers, but hope. One needs to accept that there are no guarantees or final dependable answers, but that this indeterminacy also signifies ever-present possibilities for change for the better.

Racial inequality is signified as naturalized and thus essentialized because of how the film follows a conventional family drama story arc. While this particular conflict exists within a Chinese American family, the conflict is not dependent on cultural traditions and intercultural conflicts singularly applicable to Chinese American families. Rather, they signify parent-child and family dynamics. These relations constitute the central family relation in the film, which is between Evelyn and her daughter Joy, with Evelyn signifying cultural traditions of Chinese immigrants and Joy that of first-generational children of immigrants challenging those cultural traditions. Throughout the film, Evelyn struggles with understanding Joy's physical appearance,

queer identity, her romantic relationship with a white woman, lack of career ambition, and inability to speak Cantonese or Mandarin fluently. For Joy, her struggle is seeking approval and acceptance from her mother.

One example of this syntagmatic relation of the conventional story arc of fragmentation to unity is the resolution between Joy and Evelyn. At the close of Act 3, Joy and Evelyn finally confront their conflict, but by accepting each of their differences. Joy initially resolves to the understanding that her mother and her will never get along, so they might as well separate. Frustrated and in tears, she says to her mother, "Just stop. Good for you, you're figuring your shit out. And that's great, I'm really, really happy for you… But I'm tired." An irredeemable break between them appears imminent, with Joy saying while looking away from her mother, "I don't want to hurt anymore and for some reason when I'm with you… it just hurts the both of us." We see Evelyn gulping and apprehensive. Joy slightly nods and continues while looking slightly defeated, "So, let's just go our separate ways, okay? Just let me go." They both take long pauses and Evelyn hesitantly nods before softly saying to her daughter, "Okay."

However, after at first defeated, Evelyn changes her mind and goes after her daughter who is sitting in her car. "Wait." Joy, in tears, comes out of the car. Evelyn immediately says to her, "You are getting fat. And you never call me even though we have a family plan, and it's free!" Joy looks confused. Evelyn continues, "You only visit when you need something. And you got a tattoo, and I don't care if it's supposed to represent our family, you know I hate tattoos. And of all the places I could be, why would I want to be here with you? Yes, you're right… It doesn't make sense." Evelyn continues, "Maybe it's like you said, maybe there is something out there… some new discovery that'll make us feel like even smaller pieces of shit. Something that explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what, I

still want to be here with you… I will always… always want to be here with you." Joy sobbing but trying to hold back, "So what? You're just going to ignore everything else? You could be anything, anywhere… Why not go somewhere where your daughter is more than just…this?" Joy laughs nervously, closes her eyes, and continues, "Here all we get are a few specks of time where any of this actually makes any sense." Joy opens her eyes to her mother starting to smile and Evelyn responds, "Then I will cherish these few specks of time." Joy and Evelyn embrace one another and cry in each other's arms. Evelyn comforts Joy. Waymond chuckles in the distance. (2:03:49-2:10:09). Here, the film's syntagmatic relation of conventional story arc signals racial inequality. By essentializing intergenerational trauma because of how inherent that experience is in immigrant family relations, the film only contextualizes these experiences to connect with general audiences.

Social Relations

The movie Everything reproduces social relations that complexly essentialize as well as de-essentialize relations of race between characters in the film and the viewing audiences. It works hard to encourage a sympathetic intimacy with Evelyn and her predicaments, thus universalizing her dilemma as a mother instead of signified as a member of a specific race or ethnicity.

Sympathetic intimacy

What produces a social relation of solidarity includes conventional ways of providing viewers with the visual and narrative means of sympathetic intimacy. Viewers remain intimately engaged with Evelyn throughout virtually the entire film. She's the center and focus of the story

narratively. Rarely is she not in the scene. Shots of her are characteristically medium close-ups to extreme close-ups. Viewers see through her eyes major intimate events in her life. In addition, sympathetic intimacy is produced by blurring the boundaries between the public and private life for Evelyn, and thus those identities and cultures she represents, by inviting audiences into these intimate details.

For example, through her conversations with her husband and daughter, viewers get a sense that her family feels Evelyn rejects who they are and does not accept them. However, viewers also witness Evelyn's personal, un-shared thoughts, feelings, and memories and gain an understanding that she is the one who feels misunderstood and misled throughout her life. By using multiverses to indicate different life possibilities for every one of Evelyn's life decisions, the film visualizes Evelyn's memories to indicate how she relives and reconsiders critical life choices she made such as leaving her parents and home in China to move to America with Waymond, someone her father disapproved of. Here, the directors use sympathetic intimacy to build audience's emotional involvement, or how Han (2015) describes this process as establishing intimacy through collective memory. Kansteiner (2017) suggests how building viewers' collective memories through immersion of the experiences on screen encourage an empathetic relationship with characters such as Evelyn.

However, the movie Everything at the same time produces alienation, particularly through key identification of microaggressions via the paradigmatic opposition of cultural identity. For example, on occasion, a beat in a scene reproduces an alienating relationship with Evelyn and her family members. But the comparative frequency and importance renders these as a backdrop instead of a main driver of the narrative. While revealing to viewers Evelyn's personal thoughts and feelings encourages identification, viewers also see how Evelyn's feelings

of alienation are projected onto those around her when she experiences a language-related microaggression. In the IRS office, Evelyn and Waymond meet with the IRS tax auditor, Deidre, who has several of their receipts stacked up on her desk. After reviewing their business expenses, Deidre sternly states that it does not look good for them. Evelyn begins to talk but is interrupted by her husband, "Sorry, my wife confuses her hobbies for businesses. An honest mistake." Evelyn, disappointed, looks at her husband embarrassed. Deidre tells the couple, "We'll most certainly have to fine you for *gross negligence*." Holding back tears, Evelyn responds, "You're always trying to confuse us with these big words." Much slower than before, Deidre says, "I... thought... you… were…going… to… bring… your… daughter… to help… you translate" (21:02-21:40). Here, the paradigmatic relation of opposition with Evelyn's cultural identity signifies racial inequality by demonstrating how she balances and negotiates her Chinese identity while having an inherently American experience. Similarly, Eguchi (2013) describes how this practice of racialization occurs when Asian Americans negotiate their racial and ethnic identities during intercultural interactions.

At the same time, the film reproduces strategic (anti)essentialism via a paradigmatic opposition of power. This scene both essentializes race from the person of color's point of view while also depicting how dominant institutions oppress people of color. First, the film depicts a common experience for Asians and other immigrants to the United States who experience microaggressions due to English as their second language. However, it is unclear whether Evelyn uses Deidre's assumptions about the couple to her advantage or articulates exactly what her feelings are. The next way this scene demonstrates how alienation essentializes race is by signaling how dominant social institutions oppress people of color or immigrants. Here, race and whiteness are coded through social institutions and Deidre is in the position of power. The film

produces social inequalities by signifying race relations racialized and oppressed in these intercultural interactions for immigrants. Critical reviews of the film often suggest the importance that Evelyn's character as not just Chinese but as an immigrant as well (D'Alessandro, 2022; Ehrlich, 2022). The filmmakers exhibit an ongoing pattern of social injustice in society, one that engages some audiences to be familiar with and others to be aware of.

Intertextual Relations

For the film Everything, relations with the intertextual components have important value on how the film produces social inequalities of race outside of the narrative itself. The film displays a number of ways how relations with the intertextual components such as critical reviews, interviews with cast and filmmakers, panels, and use of language and cultural references produce a sense of race relations in society and the Hollywood industry. These include paradigmatic relations of opposition in view of hiring practices of Hollywood.

The first paradigmatic relation is one of opposition of generational language. The film essentializes race by de-emphasizing its importance in comparison to the much larger significance of generational and gendered conflict. One example of this is how culture and ethnicity are coded through language by signifying intergenerational conflict within conversational language. Intergenerational conflict is notably at the forefront of this domestic drama as Evelyn struggles with both acceptance from her father and understanding her daughter's way of life. Throughout the film, Evelyn switches her language depending on who she is speaking with. For example, when she speaks with her father, Evelyn talks in a Cantonese dialect, she primarily talks in English with some Mandarin dialect with her daughter, and she switches between English and Mandarin to her husband, Waymond, who is fluent in all three

languages. The filmmakers use language to intertextually address how language is socially constructed and used every day. In this sense and for Evelyn, her need to switch languages to communicate points to the productivity of language and constructs one understanding of how she experiences intergenerational conflict. In a critical review from *Variety* (Debruge, March 11, 2022), they reference this multilingual film as "Chinglish" due to Yeoh's act of switching among three languages mid-sentence. The film's narrative essentializes race to signify racial inequalities through the difficulties and realities of how social inequalities are communicated in society.

The second way the film essentializes race is by de-emphasizing the racial identity of the protagonist and making decisions that the main character will be a matriarch figure. The filmmakers reveal that they always hoped Michelle Yeoh would be cast in the film. However, her role was initially written as the wife to the protagonist, who was envisioned for Jackie Chan (Sun, 2022, March 15). While they wanted a leading man because of the action-filled expectations, the filmmakers struggled putting together the narrative that surrounded a lead patriarch. The filmmakers then switched the roles, which resembled much more of their own lived experiences with a strong matriarch in the family. In an interview with the filmmakers, Daniel Scheinert shares part of their decision making, "We have these very strong moms and grandmoms, and we're both kind of these dopey, gentle guys ourselves. As soon as we switched it, we were like, 'Oh, now the husband and wife characters are much more relatable" (Sun, 2022, March 15). Further, they share what drew them to Yeoh even more was her familial energy that felt well-suited for the matriarch role. Throughout the film, the filmmakers' decision-making becomes evident that they focused on Evelyn's relationships and conflicts as a woman, wife, mother, and daughter rather than any racial conflicts she experiences. In this sense, the film naturalizes race relations through depictions of gendered conflict.

A third way race is essentialized is through critical coverage and comment on the film. It does so through a paradigmatic opposition of common hiring and casting practices of Hollywood feature films versus the casting of this film. While racial conflict is absent, if not minimal, in the actual film, the critical coverage of the film highlights the disparaging experiences of race relations in the Hollywood industry. Even more so, the critical coverage centers on the cast's careers in Hollywood and their specific experiences as Asian actors navigating an industry that historically ignored them. For example, when coverage of the film started in the summer of 2020, an interview with James Hong, who plays Gong Gong, stood out (Lee, 2020, August 26). The article showcases Hong's tenured career as an actor and the hardships he had starting out as a Chinese-American actor constantly cast in the same roles. Specifically, these were roles taken up primarily by Asian American actors that Hong describes as, "villains, immigrants being rescued by white guys or gimmicky ch*nky roles with heavy accents" (Lee, 2020, August 26). Hong's passion for advocating for Asians in the arts led to co-founding East West Players, a Los Angeles Asian American theatre devoted to providing a space for Asian American actors and Asian stories.

The interview's release was timely given a campaign led by actor, Daniel Dae Kim to fundraise money for a Hollywood Walk of Fame Star for Hong. Further, this form of media activism and strategic essentialism comes during the summer of unrest when Asian Americans were experiencing heightened racial violence and injustice due to rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 virus (Jun et al., 2021). While the film presents social relations as naturalized and gives a sense of fragmentation to unity, the society in question operates much more in opposition. On one hand, the Asian American community in Hollywood present an intraracial unified front. On the other hand, in reality, social relations are consistently fragmented

interracially, and the current race relations are disjointed. The casting of the film is comprised mostly of Asian American actors, which signifies race relations in the context of strategic (anti)essentialism. The timing of the film's release is further contextualized by those race relations. Therefore, the film draws audiences' attention to racial inequalities in society through their naturalized and essentialized representations of race.

This was such the case with actors, Michelle Yeoh and Ke Huy Quan. When critical reviews cover Yeoh and Quan's acting in the film, they focus on the obstacles they each faced navigating a white-washed Hollywood industry more than the film itself (Crumlish, 2022, February 24; Sun, 2022, March 15). Instead, the film is signified through critical commentary as the rise in Asian visibility in comparison to false diversity and representation on screen (Zhou, 2022, March 14). Here, the opposing relationship between an interracially fragmented society and an intraracial unified Asian American community in Hollywood is highlighted. Again, with the timing of the film's release, the race relations during 2022 contextualize the film and how the actors communicate about it. The film is contextualized through the relations signified outside of the film. Often, the critical reviews that relate cultural conflict and experiences in the film to the real world focus on how immigrants in America experience social inequalities. By essentializing the immigrant experience, the film provides social and historical context into how immigrants navigate among various social groups. However, given the racial climate for Asian Americans in the United States after 2020, the film becomes much more of a cultural signifier of Asian visibility in the context of strategic essentialism.

Conclusions

This chapter indicates key ways the feature film Everything Everywhere All at Once complexly produces social inequalities of race. The film does so by operating within the conventions and traditions of scripted commercial films and family relations. In doing so, the film produces social inequalities of race via narrative, social, and intertextual relations. This chapter addresses how each set of relations is contextualized by race relations while also demonstrating how each set of relations work together as well.

By relying on a conventional three-act story arc, the movie's narrative achieves a resolution to its conflict. This is one of many signifying relations that together produce a sense of hope that everything will be okay. While the film essentializes race throughout, it does so to signify how race relations and racial inequalities are naturalized. The movie never addresses race directly but includes cultural artifacts signaling race and ethnicity. Rather, these artifacts contextualize the family relations. However, the film de-essentializes race at the same time to further reproduce social inequalities. For example, Evelyn's personal thoughts and feelings are shared openly to develop an empathetic audience via sympathetic intimacy. In relation to how the film produces strategic (anti)essentialism, Evelyn's struggles as a mother, daughter, and wife signify how race relations are naturalized.

To the greatest extent, the film's production of strategic essentialism occurs through its relationship to its critical reviews and attention. In this way, the film's production of strategic (anti)essentialism in the film's narrative thus produces essentialisms of race outside of the film. By essentializing race, the film's actors and critical attention point to the historical racial inequalities in the Hollywood industry and how they are embedded into the conventions of casting for commercial feature films. Thus, the film serves as a cultural production of this

strategic essentialism and simultaneously is contextualized by and contextualizes racial inequalities.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation brings great importance to how race is research in the fields of communication and media studies. By demonstrating why there are multiple ways to study how race is produced in mediated forms, the implications are how there continues to be a need to re-theorize and re-conceptualize stereotyping in media studies. Because approaches to stereotypes in media often suggests it is a belief or a cognitive though, it limits how stereotyping is a communicative activity that is constantly relational. Given this, this dissertation takes an interpretive, cultural approach that recognizes stereotyping in media as a cultural material production and means for understanding communication as a form of activity. Further, this dissertation suggests how textual, intertextual, and contextual relations exist to produce race and race relations.

Key Questions this Study Addresses

This dissertation explored two, recent feature-length visual narratives that address race in the United States to explore the following set of key research questions:

1) How do key textual and intertextual relations in specific instances help produce "race"?

2) How do key contextual relations in specific instances help produce "race"?

3) What contributions might there be of such an approach to studying the implications of media and communication for social inequalities?

Summary of Case Studies

LA 92

LA92 invites viewers to reconsider not just the depicted events, but news footage of those events. The footage brings viewers into the action in an often very intimate way. But only providing access to street confrontation and action, a small sliver of an entire human life day to day. Immersion is multivalent socially, lending itself to solidarity as well as alienation at the same time by objectifying the participants and depersonalizing the participants.

But, this is not to suggest that LA92 purports that news footage specifically or representation generally is false or simply creates a false consciousness. The film attempts to not make simple claims that the news footage is irretrievably flawed, neither that it is transparent objective truth, nor that it is without value. The footage represents and claims the actuality of crucial and critical situations and acts. While it alienates the viewer from the participants, it also critiques this alienation as the outcome of uncritical journalistic conventions that essentialize cases they report, while also exploring forms and means of representation that might aid efforts to put into practice strategic anti-essentialism.

Everything Everywhere All at Once

This chapter indicates key ways the feature film Everything Everywhere All at Once complexly produces social inequalities of race. The film does so by operating within the conventions and traditions of scripted commercial films and family relations. In doing so, the film produces social inequalities of race via narrative, social, and intertextual relations. This chapter addresses how each set of relations is contextualized by race relations while also demonstrating how each set of relations work together as well.

By relying on a conventional three-act story arc, the movie's narrative achieves a resolution to its conflict. This is one of many signifying relations that together produce a sense of hope that everything will be okay. While the film essentializes race throughout, it does so to signify how race relations and racial inequalities are naturalized. The movie never addresses race directly but includes cultural artifacts signaling race and ethnicity. Rather, these artifacts contextualize the family relations. However, the film de-essentializes race at the same time to further reproduce social inequalities. For example, Evelyn's personal thoughts and feelings are shared openly to develop an empathetic audience via sympathetic intimacy. In relation to how the film produces strategic (anti)essentialism, Evelyn's struggles as a mother, daughter, and wife signify how race relations are naturalized.

To the greatest extent, the film's production of strategic essentialism occurs through its relationship to its critical reviews and attention. In this way, the film's production of strategic (anti)essentialism in the film's narrative thus produces essentialisms of race outside of the film. By essentializing race, the film's actors and critical attention point to the historical racial inequalities in the Hollywood industry and how they are embedded into the conventions of casting for commercial feature films. Thus, the film serves as a cultural production of this strategic essentialism and simultaneously is contextualized by and contextualizes racial inequalities.

Discussion of Research Questions

The research questions are used to guide this dissertation's interests how productions of race relate to social relations and intertextual relations. The following discussion addresses how the two case studies address each of these questions.

How do key textual and intertextual relations in specific instances help produce "race"?

In the cases of LA 92 and the movie Everything Everywhere All at Once, there are number of key textual relations that help produce race. To analyze these productions of race, a syntagmatic and paradigmatic approach identified key ways that textual and intertextual relations helped produce race and race relations.

Syntagmatic relations of repetition were analyzed to indicate how racial inequalities are naturalized. This was evident with LA 92's repetitive images of police brutality against Black people and the repetitive and cyclical nature that racial injustices brought on civil uprisings. In these instances, race and Blackness were essentialized via who these racial injustices were directed towards and via a Black community with a unified front. However, despite the overall race relations among the Black and Korean community in Los Angeles, there were moments that showed members of both racial communities unified together. In this sense, the production of race is complex and not always indicative of the same thing despite repetition.

Another example of how race is produced via syntagmatic relations is how LA 92's narrative sequence builds upon fragmented relations to continued fragmented relations while the movie Everything's narrative sequence builds upon fragmented relations to a sense of unity. Where LA 92's narrative gives a sense of social relations as hopeless, Everything gives a sense of hope. What these contrasting narrative structures allude to is the complexities there are to race relations. Both overall senses re-produce senses of race relations that exist in the world. They are indicative of how society simultaneously can be and is hopeful and hopeless. By demonstrating the contrasting ways race relations are understood, the films produce race as complex. This is further indicated on the films' relationships with intertextual relations. To further emphasize the

complexities of race, both films' intertextual relations complicate race relations. Using their discussion guide, LA 92 co-creates understandings of and co-produces race with their audience. They take ownership over the fact that their film cannot show the multiple and complex ways race relations are communicated in the United States. Such is the case for the movie Everything. While race is not imperative to the narrative of Everything, it is essential and necessary for how it co-produces race via intertextual relations. While the film brings fragmentation to unity and gives a sense that resolution to conflict is possible, the intertextual relations to how race is communicated in the Hollywood industry and society complicate what that resolution looks like. It becomes clear that resolution is a difficult and taxing process often put on those marginalized. However, it maintains its sense of hopefulness that further brings a complexity to race.

Paradigmatic relations of opposition and similarity produce race by emphasizing the complex ways race relations are naturalized. This is evident primarily with how both films creates a sense of closeness that evokes familiarity and intimacy to those in the film experiencing social inequalities that signifies race relations. This was evident in LA 92 producing specific perspectives from protestors and in the movie Everything with Evelyn's personal thoughts and feelings blurring the lines between private and public. Each film draws upon essentializing and de-essentializing race to emphasize the communicative activity that is practiced in social relations. By essentializing and de-essentializing race, the filmmakers achieve that sense of closeness with broad audiences. The sense of familiarity is adopted from the perspective of those in the film and thus, empathy builds to connect with them.

How do key contextual relations in specific instances help produce "race"?

The case studies provide examples of two feature-length visual narratives that contextually relate to other forms and texts to help produce race. What this dissertation demonstrates with specific instances of contextual relations is how complex and complicated race and social inequalities are. Specifically, the contextual relations indicate how social relations is a range of possibilities and cannot be pinpointed to one thing. This is done by the films' production of social relations, which is contextualized by showing a range from the past-to-present-to-future and how they demonstrate how race relations range from naturalized to sensationalized.

First, the films make clear that there is a range to understanding the ways that race relations have been historically communicated. In particular, LA 92 contextualize Los Angeles's civil uprising in 1992 with their own community's past. Further, the timing of the film's release and the events of both the 1965 Watts Riots and the 1992 LA Riots contextualize race relations in present day. What this suggests is that the film's production of race should not be understood or analyzed in isolation. Even then when taken into consideration how these past and present events contextualize the film's production of race, we are still not able to fully grasp the complexities of race and race relations. The movie Everything's intertextual relations is one way to understand how it's production of race is contextualized. As previously mentioned, the film's intertextual relations co-produce race with it. This indicates how the production of race is a communicative activity and an ongoing practice that again cannot take specific instances in isolation. For example, during the summer of 2020 after George Floyd's death and a rise in anti-racist protests, a screening of LA 92 and panel was held virtually to further contextualize those events. In this sense, LA 92's intertextual relations demonstrate how the communicative activity surrounding race relations shifts and changes.

The next example is how the films show a range of how race relations range from naturalized to sensationalized. In the movie Everything, filmmakers portray everyday ways race is communicated such as microaggressions to demonstrate how race relations are communicated and normalized. Through these everyday interactions, they produce race as something that can be discretely communicated at times and signifies race as naturalized in society. However, through the film's intertextual relations, there is a larger indication of how race relations are sensationalized. This is done via the critical attention of the film primarily focusing on the racial inequalities in the Hollywood industry and the severe impact it has had on actors and society. This contextual production of race shows how social relations as a communicative practice is not a simple process. The complexity of this process is also demonstrated in LA 92. LA 92 simultaneously shows a paradigmatic relation of opposition to race relations as naturalized and sensationalized. Again, through a portrayal of everyday ways race is communicated, it signifies race relations as normalized. The everyday racial violence and racial injustices experienced by Black people were assumed and expected by all in the community. However, when suddenly there became technology to document and record these incidents, these racial injustices became sensationalized. Despite national and global attention to the social inequalities in the United States, race relations maintain as complicated and ranging from hopeful to hopeless.

What contributions might there be of such an approach to studying the implications of media and communication for social inequalities?

This dissertation's approach to studying the implications of media and communication for social inequalities makes relevant contributions to the communication and media studies discipline. This is done in three ways, by 1) demonstrating how there are multiple ways to study

race, 2) discussing how representation does not need to only be discussed by presence or absence of representation, and 3) trying to find a more robust and empirical means to study race and media.

First, this dissertation demonstrates how there are multiple ways to study race outside of investigating stereotypes. While the stereotype research in media studies is robust, building on these kinds of inquiries has shaped this dissertation's understanding that this kind of work is a communicative practice. It builds upon and is contextualized by these kinds of works. Studying race in media as a form of communicative activity allows for a broader exploration into how we understand race. Further, it gives scholars permission to understand how the process of race is produced change and therefore, not be limited in the conclusions they make. This is further demonstrated in the following two examples.

By moving away from discussing how racial representation was either present or absent in these films, this dissertation can focus on how race is communicated and identify ways that inform a process of race relations. In this way, this dissertation contributes to how we can study representation not in binary ways. Like discussions surrounding stereotypes in media, discussions on representation as either false or true limit the conversation to whether race is present or not. However, many kinds of discussions do not fully grasp how race is then communicated in these moments. There are certainly many ways that racial representations that are stereotypical are presented in horrific and detrimental ways, but there also exists stereotypical representations of race that are presented in beneficial ways. Rather than focusing on whether one way is better or more appropriate, this dissertation is interested in how the many ways are contextualized by one another and how they then produce race.

Lastly, this study reflects efforts to find more robust and empirical means to studying race and media. Because studies of race and media are often doing so in indirect ways, this dissertation seeks to study them in a direct relational way. Rather than identifying ways that the representations of race affect society, this dissertation suggests an approach to how they are constantly contextualized by one another and in communication with each other. For example, rather than identifying ways that negative or positive representations of race influence social inequalities, this study takes an approach that seeks to understand how they are already in communication with each other and how they already co-exist and contextualize one another. This study demonstrates an understanding that race relations are not liminal and therefore, should be studied as such. Overall, approaching to studying the implications of media and communication for social inequalities contributes an understanding that race relations are not just represented, they are made. Race relations are constantly produced, co-created, and communicated.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study reflect the degree to which an exploratory study can investigate how feature-length visual narratives produce race. While analysis of the two films provide some justification to the contradictions and range of ways race is communicated, it is limited by the number of case studies to make broader claims. Additional studies would benefit from analyzing multiple cases of various genres to further demonstrate how there are multiple and endless ways race is produced via these forms. Expanding analyses to explore many kinds of cultural productions of material would also further benefit this kind of work. For example, because television is one form that is traditionally argued to have behavioral media effects on audiences,

inquiry into how it produces race, race relations, and social inequalities would be beneficial. Lastly, one limitation of this study is the difficulty of grasping the relations and fully understanding the many ways they are produced. This kind of work is arduous and critically challenges our own perspectives. It is encouraged that future researchers interested in this kind of analysis continue working with other scholars and continue an ongoing engagement into critical discourse.

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