NARRATIVES OF SUCCESS AS CLAIMS TO BELONGING

Always Be My Maybe *(2019) and* Minari *(2020)*

Sherry Wang

Abstract. This essay examines narratives of success within two Asian American-directed films that saw mainstream recognition in the wake of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018): *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) and *Minari* (2020). Specifically, I focus on how these two films present conflicts over the meaning of success, and ultimately what compromises, either with the self or with personal relationships, must be made in its pursuit. I argue that these films balance the need to frame Asian Americans through cultural difference to achieve mainstream legibility with desire to inhabit a racially neutral space. In doing so, these films frame their protagonists in opposition to ideas of whiteness as American culture but embrace the privileges of incorporation into neoliberal capitalist and imperial frameworks, inheriting imagery and positions of power traditionally dominated by whites. In attempting to center Asian American experience in their imaginaries, these films rely instead on Asian American participation in projects of neoliberal, American capital to be read as universal and thus racially neutral.

INTRODUCTION

By now the positive impact of the box-office success of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) on Asian American film representation as well as criticisms of the film have

been well talked about. John Chu's all-Asian romantic comedy notably opens with a scene where, faced with racism by the white staff of an upscale hotel, Eleanor Young excuses herself to make a phone call and returns to reveal that she has purchased the hotel. Showcasing the very real racism and classism that Asian Americans face, the scene resolves those issues through the fantastical intervention of obscene wealth—something rarely available to the everyday Asian American. It is an opening that sets the tone for the rest of the film and underlines the criticisms that it has received—that it is "affluence porn,"[1] leaning into ideas of Asians as "honorary Whites" to escape the perpetual foreigner image and centering whiteness in its portrayals of Asian diaspora.[2] The film is a showcase of a particular kind of wealth and success, conscious, perhaps, of its wider, non–Asian American audience.

As I discuss in the next section, the narrative of successful Asians and Asian Americans has continuously featured as a claim of belonging within American society and a marker of how Asian Americans are racialized. While *Crazy Rich Asians* looks abroad to construct its imaginary of Asian ascendency and affluence that surpasses the West, the two films I examine in this essay, *Always Be My Maybe* (2019) and *Minari* (2020), ground themselves in more specific Asian American lived experiences: in the localities of San Francisco and in 1980s rural Arkansas, respectively. Their Asian American protagonists work within a space that allows for the more contradictory nature of diaspora identity and encourages a more racially conscious, strategic presentation of wealth, success, and whiteness than *Crazy Rich Asians.* Although *Always Be My Maybe* and *Minari* find themselves entrenched in similar discourses of representation, the two films' discursive strategies are distinct from their predecessor in how they present the raced difference of Asian Americans. The films create imaginaries where Asian American protagonists can inhabit racially neutral ground, yet these imaginaries remain intertwined with representations of whiteness, American capitalism, and empire.

The two films I take as my case studies were directed by and are about Asian Americans; they came about in an era dominated by a narrative of new Asian American "arrival" within mainstream cinema. *Always Be My Maybe* was billed as a romantic comedy and featured Asian American notables like Ali Wong, Randall Park, and Keanu Reeves. Written by Ali Wong and Randall Park before being picked up and financed by Netflix, the streaming platform reported that the film had been viewed by forty-eight million households within four weeks and had received mostly positive reviews.[3] *Minari* debuted at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. A family-centered independent drama starring Steven Yeun and Han Yeri, the film saw immense critical success, including six Oscar nominations and a Golden Globes award for Best Foreign Film. This designation of the film as

"foreign"—incurred because over half of the dialogue was not in English—was a source of controversy, as critics and audiences argued that it once again marked Asian Americans as outsiders. It raised questions of what made something fundamentally "(Asian) American." Although the films had different distribution, financing, and exhibition channels, they reflect the plurality of approaches to Asian American media production in the current era, where films have multiple, often do-it-yourself approaches to funding and production.[4]

In their marketing and paratexts, both films were simultaneously positioned as about race—as films that had tremendous representative potential and were a step forward for American Hollywood as a whole—and not about race—as films where Asian Americans could exist without their ethnicity at the forefront. Though I certainly do not argue that these films are wholly representative of the post-*Crazy Rich Asians* era of Asian American film, both films' relative mainstream recognition underlines the dual need for Asian Americans to assert both cultural uniqueness and mainstream legibility. They balance being *about* and *not about* Asian America. In this way, an analysis provides useful contextualization for understanding Asian American cultural production in an era where funding, presentation, and visibility has been diversified across many different channels, and racial consciousness is weighed against a desire for racial neutrality.

These films are driven by the notion of success: what their Asian American protagonists dream and aspire to and how the tensions between these aspirations and personal, cultural, and romantic ties are addressed. This essay examines how these success narratives, interwoven with offscreen discussions of representation, form an implicit argument of belonging—an attempt to fit Asian American identities into American society. I argue that these films weave legitimating narratives of Asian American power by framing their protagonists against white characters and white culture, even as their protagonists affirm and pursue traditionally white frameworks and images of success. Leveraging their treatment of success as the central conflict in character-driven drama, these films construct an Asian American imaginary that both highlights their cultural distinctiveness—particularly from white America—and their ability to belong and make it within the broader framework of the modern American neoliberal order.

Crucially, both films create an imaginary centered around specific, grounded Asian American subjectivity, which are homages to the directors' and writers' experiences within the United States. These imaginaries are where the subject of race is incidental—though acknowledged and felt in jokes and small interactions, race is not given particular focus on-screen. This is a space for Asian Americans to aspire and dream, where limitations are defined by something other than their Asianness—by romantic comedy relationship drama, personal troubles, and the impersonal pastoralism of nature. It is also a space, I argue,

where the particularity of Asian America meets the aspirations of a global, colonial American empire; where *Always Be My Maybe*'s nostalgia and love for pre-gentrified San Francisco meet protagonist Sasha's lauded global cosmopolitan entrepreneurship; and where *Minari*'s dream of a Garden of Eden for its Korean American family encounters the troubled space of stolen Indigenous land and participation in empire as a marker of Americanness. What paths for success (and survival) are envisioned within these films—not just for their characters, but for the presentation of Asian American media?

VISIBILITY AND CULTURE AS DIFFERENCE

Scholars have long recognized the limits of representation politics. Rather than provide political empowerment, pushes for diversity and representation may instead produce marginalized groups as new segments for marketing and consumerism. As the 2018 box office success of *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Searching* sparked talk of Asian American cinematic arrival, Melissa Phruksachart cautions that such a narrative reproduces desire for legible forms of power under global capitalism and empire. For Phruksachart, the narrative of arrival represents an attitude of "messianic visibility" that insists that "normative cinematic identification possesses transformative . . . potential," and offers cinema as a site for identification and feeling seen—a political end that invests the marginalized individual as a consumer within global capitalism.[5] Representational politics has led some to question the very purpose and continued existence of "Asian American cinema."[6] If early Asian American film was deeply interwoven with civil rights era political mobilization and state-driven initiatives for minority representation, where does that leave today's mainstream-recognized Asian American film?[7] As contemporary Asian American film moves into mainstream visibility, changes in the audiences it must consider produce differences in how films are presented and read—including the qualities that necessarily make them Asian American.

This is hardly simple: as Soo-Young Chin et. al describe, the nature of Asian American as a political and cultural construction means that Asian American cultural production must emphasize "a unique set of cultural sensibilities, social issues, and consuming patterns that differ from 'Americans'," while also asserting that "Asian Americans are U.S.-identified as part of 'we the people,'" a strategy that shapes Asian American film in a complicated mapping of both resistance and collusion with dominant cultural notions.[8] Such is also the discourse of representation—on the one hand, a fight for visibility and the reflection of specific Asian American stories, and on the other, a visibility that engenders the need to make Asian American stories legible to a broader audience and cultural narrative.

Thus, films like *Always Be My Maybe* and *Minari* are framed within a conversation about their "representative qualities," where they are simultaneously specific, culturally resonant, and intimate, while being groundbreaking films for Asian American storytelling.[9]

I read *Always* and *Minari* in the context of this collusion and resistance—as films that try to make sense of Asian Americans' changing and contradictory place within American and transnational diasporic contexts. To do this, I focus on what these films have to say about the nature of success and "making it." Success and the American Dream have formed a fundamental part of the imagery of what an American is, and its specific Asian American appropriations have always been a crucial marker of Asian Americans' claims to belonging, a way of making Asians legible within the American racial framework.

THE RACIALIZED NATURE OF SUCCESS

In 1971, *Newsweek* famously ran the headline "Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites" for an article that reported that, by conventional measures, Japanese Americans were more successful than most Americans. The article is by no means singular for its reporting of Asian American success, as only a couple years earlier, sociologist William Petersen wrote a piece for *The New York Times* titled "Success Story, Japanese American Style."[10] What is striking about the *Newsweek* article is how explicit it is: success is linked to whiteness and, therefore, only whites can traditionally be thought to succeed. Japanese Americans are not notable for their achievements on their own—they are notable in that they have somehow, unthinkably, *outstripped* whites.

In the most recent edition of their seminal *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe the concept of the "racial project" as one that simultaneously defines what race means and how everyday experiences and societal resources are racially organized. Every racial project is "both a reflection of and a response to" broader racial patterns and structures within society: they may be carried out on an individual level but, nonetheless, reflect contemporary constructions of race.[11] The modern neoliberal racial project is one of colorblindness, which relies on "the immigrant analogy": the assumption that racially identified groups and individuals could reduce hierarchical differences by adapting to new circumstances and customs. Claire Jean Kim argues that the "triangulation" of Asian Americans as between whites and Blacks—valorized for their success compared to other minorities—has undergone only cosmetic changes post 1965 civil rights reforms.[12]

The notion of success has always played a significant role in the racialization of Asians within the United States. Tracing the historical conceptions of the model minority myth, Ellen Wu demonstrates how World War II and Cold War politics incentivized Asian American elites to conform to and help build an image of Asians in America as upstanding, "model" citizens.[13] That Asian Americans are uniquely successful because of their intrinsic Other culture has marked them as forever foreigners,[14] and has been embraced by some Asian immigrants and eschewed by others. Historically, some Asian immigrants have attempted to use their success and relative acceptance within the United States to argue that they should legally be considered white.[15] This has driven a more complex meaning of whiteness that is obscured as economic fitness and incorporates immigrant success within its narrative. Mia Tuan articulates the concept of "honorary whiteness" to discuss how the model minority myth aligns Asian Americans with whiteness, even as they remain racialized as foreign.[16] Narratives of aspiration and success, economic mobility and anxiety, and expectation and failure remain prevalent in Asian American–produced media and become how Asian Americans as a group are produced within popular American consciousness.[17]

As the Asian American success narrative continues to be reworked as a marker of cultural and racial difference, I examine what "success" looks like in *Always Be My Maybe* and *Minari*, and the tension of making films where Asian Americans are seen both by their own communities and outsiders. It is not a foregone conclusion that films that achieve mainstream visibility must conform to dominant cultural paradigms. Although *Always* and *Minari* endorse and even celebrate Asian Americans replacing the roles of white elites in frameworks of neoliberal capitalism and imperialism, their discursive strategies make conscious efforts to distance themselves from forms of whiteness as dominant "American" culture, defined in opposition to specific Asian American subjectivity. In this way, they reflect how racially neutral frames of class are produced through the distillation of race into cultural difference. As Susan Koshy notes, minoritized groups may disidentify with whiteness as culture, using it to demarcate a superior ethnic and cultural identity, but they may nevertheless identify with whiteness as power, obscuring an overall identification with whiteness within a neutral framework of class aspiration.[18]

In the case of *Always Be My Maybe*, the film satirizes a white-coded form of affluence, including high culture and haute cuisine, but nonetheless celebrates its Asian American protagonist's wealth and her ascension into a capitalist elite. By contrast, Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* is a quiet existential drama of an immigrant family starting a farm in rural Arkansas. The film embraces Korean American hybridity and initially positions its subjects against their white neighbors, and it transposes and identifies the family onto classic images of the American

frontier, agrarian idealism, and settler colonialism. *Always* and *Minari* consciously distance their subjects from whiteness as culture (whether material—fashion and style—or symbolic—rationality, authenticity, and presentation) by framing them against wealthy white elites and rural farmers. But the films play into an idea of Asians inheriting positions of power within a capitalist framework—thus belonging comes from economic and political incorporation, rather than cultural. Their success narrative is a claiming of Americanness for their Asian American protagonists—bringing what was traditionally considered outside of Asian American identity into its fold and arguing that they can inhabit the neutral space of whiteness and white success as well as their counterparts.

ALWAYS BE MY MAYBE AND THE SEMI-SATIRICAL FARCE OF WEALTH

Directed by Nahnatchka Khan of *Fresh Off the Boat* fame and produced by Ali Wong and Randall Park, *Always Be My Maybe* follows two leads, Sasha and Marcus. Though they are childhood friends, they become estranged after the death of Marcus's mom and a bad fallout when they are teenagers. Sasha is now a successful celebrity chef with a chain of restaurants. Marcus remains in their same hometown San Francisco neighborhood, living with his dad and playing in his high school band, Hello Peril. They meet again by coincidence: Sasha has rented out a luxury house in San Francisco for the opening of her new restaurant, and Marcus, working with his dad as a repairman, comes by to fix her air-conditioning unit. Though Sasha and Marcus initially have other relationships, including Marcus's local activist girlfriend and Sasha's rich celebrity boyfriends, they inevitably fall back in together.

Picked up as a Netflix exclusive, *Always* was marketed primarily as "the Asian American romantic comedy." Though explicit in its homage to *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), the film was described as "doing it for the Asians," "a portrait of contemporary middle class Asian America" where cultural specificity fills in the general template of a romantic comedy film.[19] At the same time, the film was noted specifically as *not* having "ethnicity as a central plot"—in other words, Asian America presented without the need to explain itself.[20] These seemingly contradictory impulses highlight how the film's representation lay in its ability to reflect the contemporary lived experiences of Asian Americans in a produced, racially neutral space, where race exists incidentally as cultural difference, not as racial animus.

As a romantic comedy, *Always* sticks to the tried and true "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back formula."[21] There are two main conflicts at the heart of the film. The first is a personal conflict. Sasha is restless and ambitious, while Marcus shuns change, preferring the familiar places that he frequents. Sasha's lifestyle as a celebrity chef means going to high-end, chic eateries and catering for Netflix parties,[22] while Marcus is a regular at small neighborhood dim-sum. Sasha feels comfortable performing a certain kind of personality, an inauthentic outgoingness, that fits right in with upper-class society, while Marcus looks down upon performativity and says what he thinks. The second conflict in the film is a class conflict: Sasha's stylish, new money capitalist entrepreneurship and Marcus's working-class, non–college educated, stoner lifestyle.

We are introduced to present-day Sasha with upbeat pop music, wide, sweeping shots of Los Angeles skyscrapers, and dramatic close-ups of the kitchen of Knives + Mercy, Sasha's successful restaurant. The film draws attention to the spectacle and affluence of Sasha's life; wide shots show Sasha and her food-mogul fiancé, Brandon Choi, in their modern, minimalist home. It contrasts with the intimacy of Marcus's home, where the camera foregrounds Marcus and his father eating in their kitchen. Marcus's room is cluttered with nostalgic memorabilia, like the shelf of CDs and the decade-old record player the camera lingers on. The aesthetic of affluence that *Always* associates with Sasha is tasteful, modern, and clean. When cutting between the two leads, *Always* often features the exterior of Sasha's San Francisco rental home, a three-story seaside mansion decorated with sleek furniture and a large pool (which Sasha gloats about in a moment of loneliness—"you know who doesn't have a pool? Marcus."). Wide enough to capture the breadth of Sasha's house, these simple transitions highlight the nature of Sasha's lifestyle.

This is how Marcus and Sasha meet again in the present: Marcus is accompanying his father to install air conditioning in Sasha's rental home. Marcus invites Sasha to a local show his band is playing, where she meets his hippie girlfriend Jenny. Sasha receives a call from her fiancé Brandon, who is currently abroad after suggesting they take a six-month break. Brandon begins to talk about expanding her global branding and making her food "transcontinental," at which point Sasha breaks up with him, realizing that he sees her as more of a business partner and financial investment. At the same time, Marcus realizes he may still have feelings for Sasha. As he prepares to confess, she excitedly reveals that she has a new boyfriend.

What follows is arguably the most talked about segment of the film: an absurd, surreal sequence that satirizes the excesses of affluence.[23] Marcus brings Jenny on a double date with Sasha and her new boyfriend, who turns out to be Keanu Reeves. Looking around at the trendy, upscale restaurant Maximal, Marcus

finds that he stands out in his old prom tuxedo. Rich people are done with fancy clothes, Sasha tells him: "now it's all thousand-dollar T-shirts that look like they were stolen off the homeless." It is a moment that emphasizes that, despite their shared childhood origins, Sasha's current status means she is comfortable with the norms of these upscale places, no matter how nonsensically comedic they may seem to Marcus or the assumed audience.

Maximal is all style over substance. In a satire of pretentious haute cuisine, the four are served increasingly absurd dishes, such as "the flavor of Caesar salad" and "clear asparagus soup extracted with a centrifuge." Each is presented first in a social-media worthy snapshot, before the camera pans up to Marcus's face showing increasing discomfort and dubiousness. During the main course, an all-black platter paired with headphones that play audio of the animal being served, Marcus looks around the table in disbelief. He sees Reeves, in tears, painstakingly bringing the fork to his mouth, before he sees Sasha, who is aggressively cutting into her meal and seemingly not caring about the audio at all. It is a moment that suggests they are the only two who feel the absurdity of the dining experience. The surreal quality of the sequence in Maximal is buoyed by the light blues and violets of the background décor, a color palette that contrasts with the realistic lighting and cityscapes of the rest of the film. The exaggerated, absurdist nature of the comedy, including Reeves's theatrics, creates a sense of separation between affluence in this form—completely out of touch, ridiculous, and wasteful—and the more subtle, tasteful affluence of Sasha's life.

The counterpoint to Reeves's pretentious celebrity is Jenny, Marcus's current girlfriend, who is completely swept up by Reeves's charm. Up until this point, Jenny has been depicted as an airhead and overly affectionate hipster—attention is immediately drawn to her wearing dreadlocks as an Asian woman—but Marcus continues to emphasize her compassion, her work with the community center and underserved children, and her activism. Jenny mirrors Reeves's exaggerated theatrics. She tears up when she meets him for the first time, and beamingly names Martin Luther King Jr. as her childhood crush in response to Reeves's Mother Theresa, once again to Marcus's disbelief. When the tension between Reeves and Marcus devolves into physical violence during a post-dinner game, Jenny tells Marcus that she's staying with Reeves. "You can't change the world without influential people," she says. Jenny's local activism is ultimately written off as performative—concerned with the image of being subversive, rather than substance. Further, this performative activism gives way to a sycophantic pursuit of celebrity and wealth. By contrast, although Sasha is more concerned with the branding of her restaurants than political activism, she is wealthy through her innovation, and is honest and straightforward, unabashedly "owning" what she

does, even if it's not necessarily "who she is." The importance here is placed on the authenticity of the self, rather than the characters' actions.

The affluence *Always* unabashedly satirizes is associated with the wealthy white clientele of these kinds of trendy, high-priced restaurants. It is shallow, pretentious, and concerned with aesthetics. Later, when Sasha discusses the menu of her new San Francisco restaurant Saintly Fare, her designing consultant comments that they could make the print look like handmade calligraphy. "Print it on rice paper," Sasha responds, "White people eat that shit up." A certain kind of wealth is the target of the film's satire, associating absurdity and over-the-topness with affluent whites. By initially presenting the aesthetics of the ultra-wealthy in this way and making them the target of its humor, *Always* strategically laughs with its audience about the upper class. In the film, the wealthy are unrelatable, pretentious, and white, thereby emphasizing the cultural distinction from its successful Asian American businesswoman and celebrity-chef protagonist. Race in *Always* is an implicit frame of reference, but it is one where the existence of Asians within America is never challenged. Instead, this acknowledgment reinforces the protagonist's identity as authentically true and worthy, and later justifies her incorporation within the larger neoliberal capitalist order.

Although Marcus and Sasha are initially happy together after becoming a couple, Marcus fumbles through the opening event of Sasha's new restaurant. If earlier he failed to conform to the hipster dress code of the trendy restaurant, here he accidentally forgoes the blazer and suit that is expected of a red-carpet event, emphasizing his discomfort in such a setting. "Don't worry, they'll just think you're a Kpop star," Sasha says, a joking reassurance that separates Sasha from the rest of the event's attendees. The assumption is that the wealthy attendees will attribute Marcus to a racialized stereotype, while Sasha understands who Marcus really is.

In the third act of the film, Sasha plans to move to New York after opening her San Francisco restaurant, and Marcus and Sasha part ways after Marcus refuses to go with her. Sasha is once again moving onto the next big thing, while Marcus doesn't want to leave his hometown. Earlier, Sasha brings up the hope that Marcus will come with her to New York, but there is otherwise no prior discussion of the move. The film makes clear that part of what's holding Marcus back is his own hesitation, his own fear of change. At the same time, it has demonstrated very real incompatibilities in their lifestyles: Marcus feels out of place in the wealthy circles that Sasha runs in; the disparity between them is not just in their financial situations, but the cultural markers of his dress, mannerisms, and tastes.

When it comes to this conflict, *Always Be My Maybe* puts aside all its jokes at the wealthy's expense in favor of focusing on Marcus's fear of change. When Marcus asks Sasha when she plans to come back to San Francisco, she simply says, "I wasn't." Because Marcus has such low stakes in his life, with nothing but a repairman job and a band that Sasha thinks would hit it big if he applied himself, it should be a foregone conclusion that Marcus would leave with her. Weighed like this, the film implies that Marcus should go with Sasha, that he should uproot his life to be with her, with no questions or conditions. Although Marcus expresses himself rather poorly, he asks: "Should I be there just to be the guy to support you"?[24]

While Sasha drives her career at breakneck speed, focused on the expansion of her business, Marcus clings to the comfort and familiarity of his hometown, withdrawing from the need to pursue anything more difficult than his family business and high-school band. Sasha pushes him, wondering why he doesn't consider making the band bigger and taking it on a global tour, an echo of Brandon's earlier exclamations of making her food "transcontinental." Critical responses to the film highlighted how "groundbreaking" it was that Marcus was a slacker and underachiever, praising his character for expanding what Asian Americans can look like, without being a "joke or embarrassment."[25] Yet his depiction is unflattering. Marcus's lifestyle is the result of lingering grief over his mother's death. Like the memorabilia in his room, his prom tuxedo or his high-school car, so old that he needs to wrench the passenger door open with a sheet of metal, Marcus clings to the past because he is unable to move on from it. Though it may push boundaries by having a character like Marcus on-screen when other films predominantly focus on middle- and upper-class East Asians, *Always Be My Maybe* nevertheless holds a clear preference for Sasha's lifestyle and type of success over Marcus's. The narrative and the people in Marcus's life tell us that he is being a jerk for feeling uncomfortable in the elite society Sasha exists in, and that he is wrong for not following her to New York and for not chasing success in its visible, glamorous form.

What we are presented with is a false binary between Marcus's near-comical rootedness and fear of change and Sasha's entrepreneurial restlessness. Realizing that Sasha has been quietly buying his band's merchandise, a sign that Sasha still loves him, Marcus leaves his hometown. He chases down Sasha during her New York red-carpet event and pledges that he will do anything, even "eat a lot of tiny little things" he hates, just to be with her. Sasha has been right all along, and the only reason Marcus has remained where he is his own insecurity and grief. The substance of Sasha's lifestyle need not be compromised, only the presentation of it; Marcus should and is willing to compromise his. It is Marcus who throws away his previous misgivings in an unconditional romantic declaration, who makes

lifestyle and fashion changes and comical attempts to fit in. It is Marcus who must assimilate and embrace the new framework of capital and upward mobility to reach his true potential and happy ending. At the end, Sasha and Marcus kiss on the red carpet, and the camera does a panoramic zoom around Marcus's head, so the viewer can get a full glimpse of Sasha's expensive, marble-white purse, displayed prominently in her hand as a final reminder of her glamorous, well-begotten wealth.

In *The Color of Success*, Ellen Wu describes how Asian Americans whose politics were most aligned with the dominant consciousness of the day used their exemplary success to overtake and rewrite the subversive and unpalatable elements of Asian America: leftists, communists, draft resisters, and deviants.[26] This pattern holds true not just for the film's protagonists, but its secondary characters as well: Marcus's community activism–oriented girlfriend is an Asian with dreadlocks who ultimately abandons him for Keanu Reeves; she is a performative activist who becomes the target of ridicule. The film rewrites the local, undesirable qualities of Marcus's life with Sasha's aesthetically beautiful ones in a reinvention of the same historical dynamic that Wu describes.

As they reconcile, Sasha brings Marcus to her New York restaurant, where a large pot of *kimchi jjigae* is bubbling in the kitchen, the dish that Marcus's mom first taught Sasha to make. The name of the restaurant is revealed to be Judy's Way, an homage to Sasha's childhood and Sasha's desire to create "food that makes people feel at home." Here, the aesthetics of affluence around Sasha have changed—rather than the sleek, modern design of Saintly Fare and Knives + Mercy, Judy's Way is evocative of an older, rustic establishment. But as the camera pans out to the entrance, the line outside of Judy's Way is populated by well-dressed, white professionals. The most important lesson for Sasha to learn is to embrace her own roots and perform being wealthy the "right way," an Asian American way, rather than the exaggerated excesses of white affluence or taste. Yet no matter how authentic, Judy's Way is the same trendy, gentrifying institution that Marcus and his dad had earlier semi-jokingly disparaged. Despite hinting at undertones of class inequality and gentrification, the film sidesteps these issues in its resolution: Sasha's main problem all along has been a need to be authentic to herself, hewing to an individualist conception of success and fulfillment that centers personal self-image and a few close relationships.

Although Sasha is aesthetically distinguished from the excesses of white affluence, she remains within the framework of an American capitalist elite traditionally inhabited by whites. Like an early joke about Brandon Choi doing an "eat pray love" in India after he and Sasha take a break— evoking a discourse surrounding race, Orientalism, and the Western, privileged romanticizing of the East as a destination for spiritual tourism and supposed self-discovery

journeys—the film hints at an ascendency that places Asian Americans at the top of a new neoliberal capitalist framework, both within America and potentially globally (as Brandon references when he talks to Sasha about expanding her "global" brand). Not only is this capitalist framework what Sasha finds success in , but it is also what Marcus should aspire to. Marcus should not be content with just playing in his band, grounded as it is in San Francisco; he should think about building it up on a national, global, commercial scale.

Always disidentifies with whiteness as culture through distinguishing its Asian American protagonists from the ignorance and excess of white elites, but its resolution envisions Asian Americans taking the position of those same elites within the capitalist system. Sasha's circle of elites embodies a new cosmopolitanism, global elite that take on the roles of gentrifier, entrepreneur, and business broker. The film constructs an Asian American imaginary where Asian Americans obtain success, replacing whites by embracing their unique subjectivities and enjoying these new privileges in a more tasteful, authentic, and thus acceptable way.

The film longs for the old San Francisco of Marcus's and Sasha's childhoods, the city that used to be "free of suckers before the techies came in hummers and colonized the gutters," as Marcus's band's lyrics say; but it is also a vision that is consigned to the past, colored in nostalgia, rather than tangible in the present. It can therefore comment about "artisan roast beef sandwiches in an old record shop" and the gentrification of old neighborhood establishments but avoid acknowledging that Sasha's trendy new establishments are doing the same thing. Because the nostalgic past cannot be recreated, there is no need to reckon with Sasha's new role as part of the wealthy elite who, in some way, completely reshaped the old San Francisco. Marcus's issues with the upscale events and galas he attends with Sasha and his love for locality are part of a grief that he must move on from.

For all that *Always Be My Maybe* makes fun of the wealthy as empty, inauthentic, and shallow, it can't seem to quite shake how enamored it is with wealth and glam. Like Sasha, it simply wants to have everything: it wants to celebrate the affluence and success of its protagonist but satirize the excesses of other members of the same class. There is a sense in which the wealthy only become a problem when equated with whiteness. In response to Marcus's accusations that "you're just catering to rich white people," Sasha, rather than defending herself, asks, "If you think I'm such a sellout, why are you with me?" Like the earlier "white people eat that shit up" comment, Sasha's successful restaurants have been built on selling upscale and "elevated" Asian cuisine to a largely white audience. Conversations like these highlight the implicit racial framing of the film and strategically separate Sasha from being the full target of its satire.

Despite being in the same social circle, Sasha is different from the wealthy rich elite who are normally the target of upscale dining. She is an outsider, but in the sense that she is "above" whiteness rather than beneath it, ordained by an entrepreneurial cleverness that allows her to exploit white expectations of Asian cuisine and aesthetics for her own gain.

The conflict and resolution of *Always Be My Maybe* recalls the aforementioned *Newsweek* headline, "Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites," as it cannot help but continue that dream of being white folks but *better.* The new model of American racial capitalism is one where the privileges of whiteness can be dissembled as class, "capital-compatible" minorities can be incorporated within American society, and ethnic and cultural markers can serve as advantages[27]. *Always* constructs a white American culture around upscale dining that is laughably pretentious, inscrutable, and shallow. It is concerned with the aesthetic of ethnic cuisine and not its substance, in contrast to the authenticity of Sasha's and Marcus's personalities and lived experiences. Sasha, embracing her Asian American identity as the basis for her business success, represents Asian ascendency within a nominally colorblind framework.

A viewer does not expect *Always Be My Maybe* to resolve questions of class, wealth, and gentrification. But as Leger Grindon writes, the "self-deprecating stance" and humorous tone of romantic comedy allows films "to influence their audience while the viewers take little notice of the work's persuasive power."[28] *Always* acknowledges these issues obliquely, using the space of satirical comedy to distinguish Sasha's quiet luxury from the exaggerated hedonism of the white American elite. In doing so, it seeks an authentic, Asian Americanness strategically separated from whiteness, while nonetheless celebrating affluence and the advantages of being incorporated into a project of global capital where cultural difference is welcomed.

MINARI: ASPIRATION AND SACRIFICE

If *Always* leverages the template of the romantic comedy to fill in the specificities of an Asian American story, *Minari* takes a different approach. The conversation and reception surrounding *Minari* emphasized that despite the contextual specificities of its 1980s Korean American family, it was a "universal" immigrant story, one that evoked the American Dream and could resonate with a wider audience. Thus, despite the on-screen ambivalence *Minari* expresses about family patriarch Jacob's dreams of cultivating land and owning his farm, offscreen critical discussion focused on the way the film asserted Asian American belongingness within America.

Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* is an independent drama and semi-autobiographical piece about the Korean American Yi family attempting to start a farm in rural 1980s Arkansas. Financed by Plan B, *Minari* premiered in 2020 at the Sundance Film Festival to critical acclaim; it later saw a theatrical release in 2021 by A24. The film garnered six Oscar nominations, and Best Supporting Actress recipient Youn Yuh-jung became the first Korean to win an Academy Award for acting. *Minari* is quietly understated, a particular immigrant story that captures the tensions between romanticized images of the farmer and immigrant and the difficult reality of the American success story. Unlike *Always Be My Maybe*, whiteness within the narrative appears mostly in its framing and is largely a conspicuous absence, with the force of nature being the primary source of struggle for the characters. The patriarch of the Yi family, Jacob, moves his family to Arkansas. Jacob seeks Eden in his new patch of land, lauding it as a "garden"—"the best dirt in America." When Monica skeptically asks, "So it's a farm, not a garden?", Jacob responds that they are the same thing: "Think of it as growing money." Contrasted to the dim lighting of the chicken-sexing factory where the Yis work under supervision to save up some initial money, Jacob's Eden is vast and bright, a promise of future autonomy. His dream is to be able to quit chicken sexing and start a farm growing Korean vegetables for Koreans in the city.

While Jacob dreams, his wife Monica worries over their finances, thinking of their family and two children, David and Anne. At home, she practices chicken sexing to be as fast as Jacob, thinking that she will need the skills when they eventually go back to California. The distance of their rural Arkansas farm from amenities like hospitals worries her, as David has a heart murmur. Jacob aspires to something greater, seeing chicken sexing as a dead end. "Male chicks get discarded," he tells David. "So we must find a way to make ourselves useful." As the eldest son, Jacob has spent much of the family's money to settle his side of the family and now feels that he has fulfilled his obligations. "In California, we had nothing," he tells David to win him over. Chicken sexing for Jacob is merely a means to settle the Yis more comfortably on the farm. Owning land takes them from working for others, or for a faceless company, to being able to work and aspire for themselves.

To have someone to watch David, Monica's mother Soonja comes from South Korea to live with them. All the while, Jacob struggles with the farm. He tries to dig a well for groundwater irrigation, but it is dry, so he resorts to diverting their household water. He has difficulty finding buyers for his crops. In the film's third act, the family goes to Oklahoma City to take David to the hospital to check on his heart, leaving Soonja behind at the farm. Meanwhile, Jacob thinks about finding a potential buyer in the city and worries about his produce wilting in the car while they're inside the hospital. As they wait for

David's test results in the narrow hospital hallway, Jacob talks about how when he and Monica got married, they said they would go to America and "save" each other. By this point in the film, the family has lost water in their home due to previous diversions of county water for agricultural irrigation. Monica feels that they should leave Arkansas, but Jacob refuses. Going back to California means "chicken sexing until we die," he tells Monica. He expresses a staunch need to succeed, and for their children "to see me succeed at something for once." Throughout the conversation, Jacob faces the wall, looking resolutely ahead, ignoring his children playing silently in the dark hallway. He tells Monica that she can go back to California if she wants, but that he will stay with the farm: "even if I fail, I have to finish what I started."

The doctor tells them that David's heart condition has been improving, and shortly after the appointment, a Korean grocer agrees to buy some of Jacob's produce. While Jacob is ecstatic as things start to look up, Monica recalls their earlier conversation, reminding Jacob that he has again chosen the success of the farm over the well-being of their family as a whole. Jacob says that they can now "make money and live without worries"; Monica replies, "So we can't save each other, but money can?" The line is particularly cutting, and it reveals a contradiction at the heart of the American ideal that wealth and success are within reach for those who work hard. Jacob cannot be happy with sacrifice without success, and Monica cannot understand why he would prioritize the success of his farm above their family. In the end, it is a fire that Soonja accidentally sets that brings the family back together. The fire burns through all their produce, and Jacob and Monica choose to save each other, abandoning the entire season's worth of potential economic gain. At the closing of the film, titular watercress *minari* that Soonja had earlier planted alongside the riverbed is shown to be thriving, representing both the family's resilience and their new roots.

As a success narrative, *Minari* is ambivalent in its resolution. Shot from an intimate perspective, Minari is a film primarily framed through eight-year-old David's eyes. Characters are often seen through doorframes and mirrors, as David lingers in hallways, half-seen, eavesdropping and looking in on conversations between members of the family. David's perspective lends a child's innocence to the narrative, allowing for the textual ambivalence with which the film portrays Jacob's dreams. This ambivalence is mirrored in his sister Anne's question: "Who would you rather live with, mom or dad?", which David answers with "I don't know." Like David, the film does not make clear judgments on which parent is right, whether the dream of Eden should, or even must, come before the family.

WHITENESS IN ABSENCE: AMERICAN RURALISM AND SETTLER COLONIALISM

The image of the hardworking, reliable, salt-of-the earth farmer has long held a prominent space within American imagination. It is an agrarian ideal of the ordinary citizen who cultivates and receives the fruit of the land; yet it is an image that has been inextricably linked with whiteness and settler colonialism. Hearkening back to a Jeffersonian-era agrarian myth, farmers were God's chosen people,[29] who embodied ideals of hard work and individualism and reaped just rewards from the land that they worked. The labor of the earth also came to be one of the popular myths used to justify settler colonialism and the seizure of land from the Indigenous, as it was argued that Indigenous Americans had left the earth uncultivated and unworked. The agrarian ideal has been evoked in modern rhetoric, in forms like Paul Harvey's 1978 "So God Made a Farmer" speech[30] which draws on nationalist discourses to disguise white Christendom as secularism. Thus, the American farmer is an important symbol—a bastion of family values, Christian tradition, and whiteness.

Within *Minari*, it is the Korean American family who are identified with these values. David pours himself a glass of Mountain Dew for breakfast, watched over by the figure of Jesus the shepherd hung over their couch. Monica cleans David's earwax while listening to a Korean hymn and asks her coworker at the chicken-sexing factory, Mrs. Oh, why no one has started a Korean church in the area. Mrs. Oh tells her that the Koreans here left the cities specifically to escape the Korean church. But for Monica, religion is solace, the church a promise of community. The Yi family attends the local First Baptist church instead, where they are welcomed yet treated as novelties by the all-white congregation. "Why is your face so flat?" asks Johnnie, a young white boy who has been staring at David throughout the sermon.

Characters eschew whiteness in the form of what they perceive to be "American" culture. With the film framed from the Korean American family's perspective, it is the white folks who seem alien to the viewer. For example, on their way back from church, the family spots Paul, their neighbor, dragging the cross in his own private ritual of worship, to their shock. White customs are strange and foreign; Korean customs are associated with quiet, intimate domesticity. Jacob looks down on local superstitions of using a dowsing stick to locate groundwater. "Stupid Americans, believing that nonsense," he tells David. "Koreans use our minds." In this positioning, Koreans are *superior* to the (implied white) Americans: against traditional dichotomies of Western rationality and

Eastern irrationality.[31] By framing white folk within the narrative as traditional Others and outsiders, the Korean Americans become the good, salt-of-the-earth family of the American agrarian ideal: industrious, rational, and Christian.

Minari complicates a portrayal of white American culture as solely strange or laughable by weaving positive cultural exchanges that both mark the Yis' cultural difference yet signal their acceptance within the larger community. The Yis are unapologetically Korean American, though each family member assimilates in different ways. Monica feels deeply homesick for Korean community, rejoicing in the *gochugaru* Soonja brings with her, but she also tentatively allows Paul to conduct a cleansing ritual within the house. Despite the earlier "flat face" comment, David and Johnnie become friends, and David even stays over at Johnnie's place. David teaches Johnnie the Korean card game he learned from Soonja, which Johnnie praises as a good game. Billy, Johnnie's father, asks David whether Jacob is "doing things right" and "growin' things good," and tells David he must help Jacob on the farm and not be lazy, an equation of good with hard work that signals an acceptance of the Yis because they embody American ideals. In the film's resolution, Jacob keeps his dream of growing Korean vegetables but cedes his resistance to all local white customs. The family hires a water dowser to locate groundwater for a proper well, which symbolizes both the decisive act of staying and an embrace of the local community—this is the place where they, like the *minari*, will take root. In this way, cultural hybridity both marks their unique subjectivity and symbolizes Korean American thriving within the local community.

Though the white folks may have prejudices, they are not the antagonists of the narrative. Rather than a conflict driven by racial animus, the local whites remain incidental to the central conflict and even welcoming. Although cultural difference produces feelings of homesickness and unfamiliarity, the family are largely concerned with more internal matters, especially the conflict between realizing a dream and protecting what they have. If there is an active antagonist, it is something subtler—it is nature, the land itself. Nature dominates the soundscape of *Minari*, with the ambient noises of crickets and frogs in conversations and scenes. Throughout the film, wide shots make the characters seem small, dwarfed by the vastness of the landscape that is both the source of pastoral idealism and of despair. The Yi family are beholden to nature, not just the land, but also regarding David's heart condition. The uniquely human issues they face—racist microaggressions and the monotonous work of chicken sexing—become incidental. Jacob struggles to find Korean grocers in the city who will buy his produce, but more importantly, what he struggles against in trying to make his crops thrive is the land itself—an idea that links success to something outside of the social realm.

What resolves the conflict between Jacob and Monica in the end is not a personal connection or a shared love—it is an act of nature that unites them in conflict and brings them to the resolution to stay. It is Soonja who accidentally sets the fire, which soon burns beyond her control. The film thus never has to resolve its ambivalent stance on the contradiction between family order and domesticity and the sacrifice of pursuing an American ideal of success. Its antagonist is the land itself—beautiful, harsh, and possibly futile.

With *Minari*, director Lee Isaac Chung specifically stated that he did not want an "identity piece"[32] and that he sought to tell an Asian American story that did not have to be in relation to white America. Critics and audiences labeled *Minari* a universal story,[33] one that even non-Asian American audiences could see themselves in. In some cases, this universality was explicitly because of the lack of a culture-clash narrative, an "intentionally all-American story" that did not prioritize identity.[34] *Minari*'s awards season performance drew controversy when it was classified as a "foreign film" in the Golden Globe nominations. Its nomination in this category was based on a requirement that more than half the film be in English. The categorization of an Asian American story as "foreign" led to reassertions by critics and audience members that *Minari* was quintessentially American in its subject matter and imagery. Jeong Eun Annabel We's reception analysis notes how the subsequent praise for the film revealed the way "*Minari*'s virtues hinge on the ways the film is thought to vindicate American settler colonial narratives." Assertions of the film's Americanness repeatedly mentioned how it evokes the image of the frontier.[35] In this way, a large part of *Minari*'s touted universal appeal was its legibility within American cultural images and the American Dream, regardless of its own textual and directorial ambivalence to such a dream.[36]

Though *Minari* is less concerned with conventional culture-clash tropes, whiteness as part of American empire forms a conspicuous, deliberate absence. Most prominent is the absence of Indigenous peoples, dispossessed long before the Yi family arrived. *Minari* follows in the traditions of homesteading narratives like Willa Cather's *My Antonia*.[37] The former presence of the Indigenous Native American is understood tacitly by a viewer familiar with American culture and history yet goes unacknowledged by the film. *Minari* centers the subjectivities of its Korean American family but carefully avoids acknowledging the American empire as a reason for why the Yis can buy land in rural Arkansas. The land is empty, uncultivated, and simply waiting for Jacob to sow his Korean vegetables. The innocence of David's perspective, who plays cowboy with his friend Johnnie, provides ways for the Korean American family to identify with the American aspiration of land ownership without taking on the historical burdens of empire.

David stomps around in his slightly too large cowboy boots, conscious of the space as untamed nature rather than as stolen land.

This innocence also functions as a mechanism of erasure of the settler colonialist legacy within Arkansas, the site, along with eight other states, of the Trail of Tears and the forcible removal of Indigenous peoples. While *Minari* is set long after the historical removal and genocide of the Indigenous, these histories are inevitably entrenched within the idea of American Dream. The earth that Jacob farms is haunted, not just by the failures of its previous owner, but also by the legacy of American empire that has stripped the soil of its history.

Settler colonialism is necessarily a project that relies on the disappearance of the Native, both through violence and narrative erasure.[38] It operates on a logic of elimination, destroying to replace in order to lay permanent claim to land.[39] Evelyn Nakano Glenn has argued that this need to permanently claim land produces settler colonialism as a framework and structure with self-justifications that erase the Native and define peoples within a racialized society.[40] Doctrines of *terra nullius* (empty land) and images of the "savage," "uncivilized" Native were formed in contrast to the settlers who arrived to work hard and cultivate the land. In later generations of frontier literature, such as Cather, the Native goes unacknowledged altogether, as erasing their presence ensures the continuation of the settler narrative. Within Asian American literature, Julia H. Lee has traced the genre of neo-frontier narratives, arguing that the frontier allows Asian American authors to challenge the idea of a perpetual foreigner by severing the link between the need for material Asian presence and history, yet simultaneously continues the erasure of Native presence and perpetuates the idea of a frontier as a meaningful space of national belonging.[41] *Minari*'s Asian American presence is experienced both in its narrative fiction and in its evocation of the stories of real Korean Americans, transforming land ownership into an important claim to American identity.

Functioning opposite the childhood innocence of David is the melancholy and grief that pervades Jacob and Monica's relationship and Jacob's relationship to the earth. We situates *Minari* within a cultural narrative of "minor settler grief," which highlights the tragedy of the diaspora and their relationship to the earth and simultaneously justifies their repositioning within a white settler subjectivity.[42] We highlights the use of nativist earth aesthetics, the Korean "hyangt'o" that "creates a premodern and essential earth-home identity for Korean settlers across the Pacific, who, as subjects of minor settler grief, replace the dispossessed Natives of the land in which they settle."[43] Though the grief of the Korean War is not explicated, it shadows the Yi family history. It is the reason Monica's mother comes to America—Monica's father died during the war. It is the reason Jacob's father lost his farm, which Jacob now is determined to

recreate and make better. Links among American settler colonialism, Hollywood, and the Korean War and American imperialism are disappeared in the narrative, compressed into the antagonistic yet socially removed force of nature. Empire drives grief, and it provides the basis for settlement within that same empire. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Lee Isaac Chung said that when his dad was in junior high, he watched westerns at dollar cinemas in Seoul, which depicted pioneer stories where America was a "miraculous place." Because of the land his family had lost during the Korean War, Chung's father always felt the need to come to the United States to retrieve that land.[44] Though the Yi family's reasons for immigrating are not explicitly stated in the film, Chung's story about his father underline the impact of the romanticization of the farmer and the pioneer narrative as quintessentially American.

Much like Soonja, who is nothing like an "American grandma" that David at one point asks for, *Minari* is lovingly, defiantly Korean American. Grounded in the details of Chung's particular experience, its Korean American hybridity is haunted by historical ghosts and the discourses of American empire. *Minari* seeks to be less of an identity piece and more about the specific pastoral idealism and struggle of a family, but whiteness remains the point of comparison and framing that one is compelled to view the Yis through. The film draws on American images within popular imagination: the frontiersman, the farmer, and the cowboy, but these images of the American West are irrevocably associated with whiteness as a settler colonialist project. The Yi family is transposed on these images. They embody the ideals of American values, and their white American neighbors are strange and Other to them. The film makes the claim that the Yis *belong* on American soil and within American communities, as *minari* takes root wherever it grows; but it never fully concludes what constitutes that America. It draws on hegemonic images of whiteness to carve out a Korean American hybrid subjectivity where Korean Americans belong and cultivate land within the American imperial project.

CONCLUSION

That Asian American representation in film is still reckoning with the contradictions of a desire to showcase a particular kind of Asian success or to demonstrate Asian American belonging by transposing them into traditional American images is not a new notion. Where *Crazy Rich Asians* was blatant in its desire for spectacle, going overseas to seek a global, affluent Asian elite superior in standing to whites, both *Always* and *Minari* ground their narratives in the local.

Though they build an imaginary where Asian American experiences are centered and whites are treated as incidental, their protagonists embrace incorporation within larger American frameworks of success to win recognition and personal fulfillment. While depictions of cultural difference give nods to racially conscious positioning, these frameworks of success—the neoliberal entrepreneur and the pioneer farmer—are celebrated and presented as racially neutral. The films and the discussions surrounding them separate the protagonists from the deeper historical contexts which inform their actions within a political project of whiteness, empire, and capitalism.

Asian America has existed in an awkward, triangulated place within American racial politics: the economic success of the Asian immigrant has become stereotype, political wedge, and imposed expectation. What makes films like *Always Be My Maybe* and *Minari*—films that are Asian American directed and have received mainstream recognition—interesting are the ways they acknowledge and attempt to obscure this awkwardness. *Always* and *Minari* manage their on-screen depictions of race by centering specific Asian American cultural details, distinguishing themselves from cultural elements perceived to be white. Both films depict, in some ways, Asian Americans' pursuit of success and spaces traditionally relegated to white Americans. *Always Be My Maybe* mocks pretentious cuisine and the wealthy white elite while resolving its protagonist's personal issues without compromising the affluence she benefits from. It is a film that acknowledges issues of gentrification and class disparity, yet sidesteps these deeper questions for an individual, emotionally focused resolution in a longing simply to see its protagonist succeed and live her dreams. *Minari* uses a subtler emulation of this whiteness, reframing a traditional story of the white American farmer with a Korean American immigrant family. The Korean American perspective is centered, and the protagonists are framed against strange white customs. But the film necessarily also participates in settler colonialist tropes, disappearing Native Americans and ties to American imperialism and privileging the idea of land ownership as a means of true success. In the end, even that success is difficult to achieve. The conflict between family obligations and individual dreams is resolved through narrative intervention—the hand of nature, rather than wholly through the agency of the characters.

Reconsidering the way narratives of success place Asian Americans within larger American society, the film protagonists inhabit an entrepreneurial role as capitalists, rather than beholden to capital. These films challenge a simplified model of oppression where whites dominate minorities of color, suggesting new ways of incorporation into dominant American projects. They navigate what Asian Americans can be seen to do, what is true to themselves, and what their aspirations should and should not be. In some ways, they stake a claim: their

protagonists are not perpetual foreigners, despite their unique cultural hybridity. Rather, it is because of this hybridity that they are assets within modern America.

Compromises are made to create imaginaries where Asian Americans "don't have to explain themselves" and don't exist solely within "identity pieces,"[45] yet remain legible within the cultural mainstream. Asian American authorship is molded by dominant discourses and marketing processes into the framework of mainstream American culture. The imaginary of Asian Americans as the default, where racism can be incidental, relies on an implicit definition of selfhood in opposition to whiteness as culture in the form of Asian cultural specificity. At the same time, Asian Americans inherit positions of whites and take on dominant projects of neoliberal capital and empire in order to be understood and read as something other than the racial minority. To be a universal story is to be read through the specific American cultural images of the entrepreneur go-getter, the romantic-comedy couple, or the salt-of-the-earth farmer.

I do not highlight the depictions in these films to detract from Asian American breakthroughs in the cinema or to argue for "better representation," but to underline the contradictions at the heart of authorship versus presentation—and the aspiration of wanting to be recognized in both a culturally legible and authentic way. This is partially the burden of representation.[46] Rather, this essay highlights the limits of representation as framing and joins calls to reconsider what Asian American success, aspiration, and futures might look like in an era post representation politics. In *Minari* lead actor Steven Yeun's words: "We want to be an expansion of what Americanness is and already was. It's pizza with kimchi." [47] What does that expansion of Americanness look like in an era where Asian voices and narratives have gained greater visibility, yet where Asian American success is both a marker of difference and a privilege of incorporation, and where cultural exports and ethnic culture are incorporated as neoliberal capitalist entrepreneurship? Is there a way to celebrate Asian American achievement without allowing that success to be defined in relation to whiteness and dominant cultural logics?

NOTES

1 Emily Yoshida, "Crazy Rich Asians Is a Shiny, Affluence-Porn Rom-Com with a Big Immigrant Heart," *Vulture*, August 9, 2018, https://www.vulture.com/2018/08/crazy-rich-asians-review.html.

2. See Mark Tseng-Putterman, "One Way That 'Crazy Rich Asians' Is a Step Backward," *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/asian-americas-great-gatsby-moment/568213/; Terrie Siang-Ting

Wong, "Crazy, Rich, When Asian: Yellowface Ambivalence and Mockery in *Crazy Rich Asians*," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 15, no. 1 (2022): 57–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2020.1857426.

3. Patrick Hipes, "Netflix Reveals Viewer Data For 'Our Planet,' 'Dead To Me,' 'Always Be My Maybe,' More," *Deadline*, July 17, 2019, https://deadline.com/2019/07/netflix-our-planet-viewer-numbers-dead-to-me-always-be-my-maybe-when-they-see-us-1202648047/.

4. See Jun Okada, "Asian American Independent Media," in *Race and Media: Critical Approaches*, ed. Lori Kido Lopez (New York University Press, 2020). In contrast to the primarily state-funded Asian American media productions of the 1970s and 1980s, *Minari* and *Always Be My Maybe* reflect an era dominated by a neoliberal, individualist do-it-yourself model of funding and an era where streaming is another medium to achieve visibility for aspiring films. *Always*, for example, had been a project that Wong and Park had been thinking of for many years, receiving backing and calls for support after Wong mentioned it in a *New Yorker* profile, before being picked up by Netflix in 2017. Although this is not the focus of this essay, the film's production story certainly reflects how digital spaces and networks, including streaming, have become new ways for Asian American media to be circulated and made visible.

   See Ariel Levy, "Ali Wong's Radical Raunch," *The New Yorker*, September 26, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/03/ali-wongs-radical-raunch.

5. Melissa Phruksachart, "The Bourgeois Cinema of Boba Liberalism," *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2020): 59–65, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2020.73.3.59.

6. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, "What Was Asian American Cinema?" *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 3 (2017): 130–35, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44867826.

7. Jun Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements* (Rutgers University Press, 2015).

8. Chin, Soo-Young, Peter X. Feng, and Josephine D. Lee. "Asian American Cultural Production." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3, no. 3 (2000): 270, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2000.0030.

9. Netflix, as I will discuss, touted *Always* as an Asian American romantic comedy, an important genre representation that would redress the traditional notion of Asian American men as unmasculine and undesirable. While *Minari* is an independent film, a genre that traditionally emphasizes the notion of the auteur, its paratexts emphasized its importance as an immigrant drama, a film that "America needs." Brian Hu describes how the idea of the 'prestige" Asian American drama is produced by its independent film distributor and financer A24, a construction that requires both a narrative of sensitive authenticity and one that coheres to mainstream understandings of Asian Americans. In short, although their distribution and financing channels are significantly different, both films saw their place within larger Asian American film discourse actively produced by a push for cultural authenticity, representation, and a desire to be seen. The success narrative within these films—where the individual, authentic Asian American self seeks success in a neoliberal, imperialist order—mirrors the offscreen success narrative being woven by Netflix and studios like A24, seeking to capitalize on the notion that the arrival of Asian American cinema can redress racial injustice.

See Brian Hu, "A24 and the Asian American Prestige Film," *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2023): 20–31, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2023.77.2.20.

10. William Pettersen, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," *The New York Times*, January 19, 1966, https://www.nytimes.com/1966/01/09/archives/success-story-japaneseamerican-style-success-story-japaneseamerican.html.

11. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2014).

12. Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005.

13. Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origin of the Model Minority* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

14. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996).

15. Suzanne A. Kim "Yellow Skin, White Masks: Asian American Impersonations of Whiteness and the Feminist Critique of Liberal Equality." *Asian American Law Journal* 8, no. 1 (2001): 89–109, https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38Z58W.; Susan Koshy, "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness," *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (2001): 153–94, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/3329.

16. Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners Or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (Rutgers University Press, 1998).

17. In his survey of post-1965 Northeast Asian American literature, for example, Christopher Fan argues that the modern racial form of the Asian American is as much embodied in class as in race, and that recurring cultural conflicts of the arts and sciences, of parents and children, and of economic anxiety and realism can be linked closely to historical developments of the relationship between the United States and Northeast Asia. See Christopher Fan, *Asian American Fiction After 1965: Transnational Fantasies of Economic Mobility* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

18. Koshy, "Morphing Race into Ethnicity."

19. Jen Yamato, "'Always Be My Maybe's' Ali Wong and Randall Park Are Doing It for the Asians," *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-always-be-my-maybe-ali-wong-randall-park-20190601-story.html; Shirley Li, "The Subtle Subversions of 'Always Be My Maybe,'" *The Atlantic*, June 2, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/06/always-be-my-maybe-netflix-ali-wong-randall-park-nahnatchka-khan/590818/.

20. Terry Tang, "In Asian-Led 'Always Be My Maybe,' Ethnicity Is Secondary," *Associated Press*, June 2, 2019, https://apnews.com/article/8a6ae2c37e50496cb32448b3a7cba826.

21. Leger Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444395969, 8–11.

    Grindon lays out a model of the romantic comedy master plot, a model that *Always* follows; it begins with an unfulfilled desire on the part of the protagonists and ends with a celebratory resolution where the couple reunite after a conflict and subsequent epiphany.

See also Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (Wallflower Press, 2007). Betty Kaklamanidou takes a different approach in her chapter on romantic comedies starring actors of color by analyzing the way these stars manage their public images to be palatable to a neoliberal colorblindness, "transcending" their ethnic origins and approximating whiteness. See Betty Kaklamanidou, "Romantic Comedy and the 'Other': Race, Ethnicity and the Transcendental Star," in *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com* (Routledge, 2013).

22. Sasha's Netflix catering party incorporates her into a global capitalist circuit of media dominance, while performing an ironic acknowledgment of some of the underlying tensions the film attempts to address elsewhere with its accusations of catering to rich white people: the contradictions between existing yet feeling uncomfortable in white spaces, while benefiting from presenting and catering to these same spaces.

23. Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (Manchester University Press, 2009). Deleyto argues for the importance of humor for creating the space of the romantic comedy separate from everyday reality, which allows the space for the leads to find each other. Rather than a fixed ideological component of romantic comedies, the comic aspect is the vehicle through which a romantic comedy expresses its discourse and attitude about romance and relationships. The surreal, comic aspects of the Reeves sequence thus provide space for the leads to discover they are like-minded, the only down-to-earth members of the gathering.

24. Sasha's particular brand of lean-in, girlboss corporate feminism serves to highlight her distinction from whiteness. The conflict between local roots and global branding becomes entrenched in the American cultural idealism of the career woman. Part of what garners Sasha's narrative support is the implicit evocation of these discourses, wherein Marcus *should* be the one to support her career and should be happy to "hold her purse," as the progressive subversion of traditional romantic comedy tropes and gendered norms. Like the go-getter entrepreneurship of Sasha, elevating the image of the globally savvy, ascendant racial minority, the film braids together race and gender in this moment to celebrate its protagonist's representational progressiveness.

25. Jason Shen, "Why Always Be My Maybe's Asian American Underachiever Is Groundbreaking" *Vox*, June 13, 2019, https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/6/13/18661961/always-be-my-maybe-ali-wong-randall-park.

26. Wu, *The Color of Success.*

27. Koshy, "Morphing Race into Ethnicity," 194.

28. Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 2. Grindon argues that the genre "exhibits a wide-ranging capacity for political expression rather than a predetermined ideology" against traditional notions that the romantic comedy's structure inevitably upholds monogamous heteronormative values. Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 81.

29. Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia" (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1954).

Jefferson wrote, "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."

30. Hossein Ayazi, "'So God Made a Farmer': The US Agrarian Imaginary and the Lived Assemblages of Settlement and Empire," *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 16, nos. 1–2 (2018): 43–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2019.1642587.

31. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978); Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Temple University Press, 1999).

32. Brandon Yu and Justin J. Wee, "A Vision of Asian-American Cinema That Questions the Very Premise," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/11/movies/asian-american-cinema.html.

33. Ann Hornaday, "'Minari' Is a Movie about the Immigrant Experience That's Both Universal and Surprising," *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/minari-movie-review/2021/02/09/2d7fb516-6715-11eb-8468-21bc48f07fe5_story.html.

34. Anthony Kao, "Oscar-Tipped Minari Puts Identity Second: That's Refreshing for Asian Americans," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/feb/16/oscar-tipped-minari-puts-identity-second-thats-refreshing-for-asian-americans.

35. Jeong Eun Annabel We, "Minor Settler Grief: Korean Diaspora, Settler Colonialism, and the Pastoral Fantasy in *Minari* (2021)," *American Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2024): 83–101, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/aq.2024.a921581.

36. In a roundtable interview with *The New York Times*, director Lee Isaac Chung noted that critics' evocations of the American Dream "could mean all kinds of things [he] was not trying to get into with this movie." See Yu and Wee, "A Vision of Asian-American Cinema That Questions the Very Premise."

37. See Arun Venugopal, "Lee Isaac Chung Jotted Down Some Family Memories—They Became 'Minari,'" *NPR*, March 3, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/03/03/973262034/lee-isaac-chung-jotted-down-some-family-memories-they-became-minari. The beginning of the film gives a nod to Chung's inspirations, as the moving truck Jacob drives is labeled "Cather Truck Rentals."

38. On Asian Americans' role in settler colonialism within Hawai'i and strategies of "local positioning," see Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i" *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.26.2.b31642r221215k7k; Dean Itsuji Saranillio, "Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters: A Thought Piece on Critiques, Debates, and Indigenous Difference," *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, nos. 3–4 (2013): 280–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.810697.

39. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240.

40. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Settler Colonialism as Structure: A Framework for Comparative Studies of U.S. Race and Gender Formation," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 52–72, https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649214560440.
41. Julia H. Lee, "Asian American Settlers, the Neo-Frontier Narrative, and the Problem of History," *Amerasia Journal* 50, no.1 (2024): 4–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2024.2405420.
42. We, "Minor Settler Grief," 86.
43. We, "Minor Settler Grief," 85.
44. Andrew R. Chow, "Director Lee Isaac Chung on 'Minari' and the Golden Globes," *Time*, March 2, 2021, https://time.com/5943234/lee-isaac-chung-minari/.
45. Tang, "In Asian-Led 'Always Be My Maybe,' Ethnicity Is Secondary"; Yu and Wee, "A Vision of Asian-American Cinema That Questions the Very Premise."
46. Peter X. Feng, "The Burden of Representation in Asian American Television," in *Race and Media: Critical Approaches*, ed. Lori Kido Lopez (New York University Press, 2020).
47. Mia Galuppo, "Making of 'Minari': How Lee Isaac Chung Created a Unique American Story," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 21, 2021, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/making-of-minari-how-lee-isaac-chung-created-a-unique-american-story-rarely-seen-onscreen-4117397/.