Why Consider this Book for Your Class?

For students of Media Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Asian American Studies, *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* goes beyond criticizing media representations of Asian Americans to help readers understand what actions are being taken to contribute to social change in this important area. Written in approachable language that will appeal to scholars, activists, and mainstream audiences, it begins with a cultural history of media activism by Asian Americans. But it also integrates up-to-date analyses of how Asian Americans are adapting to today’s digital media and streaming television opportunities.
Introduction:
The Role of Asian American Media Activism

SUMMARY

The book opens with a story about the television show The Mindy Project, starring Indian American actress Mindy Kaling. In pointing to the varied and contradictory responses to the show from the Asian American community, we can already begin to see the difficulties of fighting for improvements in the representation of Asian Americans. Scholars have long worked to articulate criticisms of the way that Asian American are stereotyped and left out of entertainment media, but what has been missing from this narrative is any mention of the way that Asian Americans have fought back —joining together to protest offensive imagery, support Asian American actors and industry workers, and make their voices heard. In this introductory chapter, Lopez situates her ethnographic project within two key frameworks—the problems that scholars have established as most harmful in the way that Asian Americans have been represented in the media, and the way that Asian Americans have struggled to become full citizens in the U.S. In connecting these problems together, we can begin to see that struggles over media representations are actually deeply connected to issues of citizenship—in particular, a kind of cultural citizenship that can only be fought for at the level of the collective.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are some of the ways that Asian Americans have historically been represented, underrepresented, or misrepresented in mainstream entertainment media? How have these problems changed over time?

- Why is cultural citizenship an important frame for considering media representations? What does “cultural citizenship” mean, and how does it contrast with legal citizenship? How have Asian American specifically grappled with the concept of citizenship in the U.S.?

- What does it mean to do an ethnography? How does an ethnographic approach help us to understand the way that activism works?
Chapter 1: The Limits of Assimilationism within Traditional Media Activism

SUMMARY

Chapter 1 explores the history of Asian American advocacy organizations devoted to the problem of Asian American representation, beginning with activists from the realm of theater in the 1970s. Organizations such as the Oriental Actors of America, Brotherhood of Artists, and the Asian/Pacific American Artists (amongst others), have long worked to address inequalities in the realm of representation. But the main focus of this chapter is on the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA), an all-volunteer media watchdog organization based in LA since 1991. In this ethnographic account of their work, we can better understand the strategies that provide the foundation for their activism. For instance, some of their main goals are to challenge stereotypes and be represented as full Americans, or no different from white actors and characters. They recognize that Asian Americans are being treated differently, and they demand roles and representations that challenge stereotypes or show power and authority. This is what we might call an “assimilationist” perspective, which is that Asian Americans are not outsiders or foreigners.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the five primary strategies of traditional media activism organizations? What kinds of situations would be best suited to each strategy? What are the limits of each strategy?

- What does it mean to fight for cultural citizenship in terms of being treated “just like everyone else”? Do you think Asian Americans should fight to be seen as assimilated, or are there alternative ways to gain equality in representation?

- What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of stereotype analysis in terms of media activism? How might Asian Americans resist the easy categorizations of “stereotypical” and “non-stereotypical”? 
Chapter 2:  
Leveraging Media Policy for Representational Change

SUMMARY

Chapter 2 looks at the way that activists have attempted to create policies around representational change. This is a complicated task, given that many forms of legislation around media practices have been weakened due to governmental deregulation. For instance, while the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) has historically been able to punish media producers who fail to show both sides of an issue, they no longer enforce these tenets of the Fairness Doctrine. Moreover, fears of government censorship can make communities anxious about any limitations on the artistic decisions of creative professionals. Yet this does not mean that activists have given up in their mission to more systematically intervene into the diversification of media industries and their products. Rather, what we see is that they have become focused on building partnerships with corporations. This has included the historic creation of Memorandums of Understanding with the television networks—ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX—promising that there will be yearly meetings between Asian American activists and the top network executives, who must produce statistics on how many Asian Americans they have hired in the past year. Similarly, Asian American activists have fought to be recognized and represented by the Nielsen Company, whose television ratings and audience studies determine the value of television shows and other products. Without this kind of data, it is nearly impossible for Asian American media activists to make long-term gains. Yet the forging of relationships with corporations can also be politically fraught, as we see in the case of the merger between Comcast and NBC Universal in 2010. Given that media consolidation is often harmful to minorities, many minority groups publically voiced opposition to the merger. But Asian American activists who had been working to build alliances with media corporations ended up supporting the merger. This was because they were able to create a new MOU that demanded that the newly merged companies would honor their previous diversity commitments, but also that they would create a new video-on-demand channel called Cinema Asian America and a new Asian American channel. These complex partnerships reveal what makes policy work difficult in terms of activism. An activist’s definition of citizenship might demand trying to find a long-term strategic way to get change to happen from the inside through these kinds of policies. For them, it is only through these more official and legitimized discourses that Asian Americans can gain recognition as full members of American society. But for activists who are trying to break down these kinds of oppressive institutions, such partnerships can seem dangerous and counterproductive.
Chapter 2:
Leveraging Media Policy for Representational Change

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are some of the ways that media activists have worked to create policies for regulating media industries? What are some of the possibilities and the limitations of these “cultural policies”?

- What are some of the dangerous alliances that have formed between different activist groups around the topic of media censorship and control over media images? Do you think anyone should be able to censor media images?

- If you could make a media corporation do whatever you wanted them to do, what would it be? How might you coerce them into following these demands?

- Why is it so difficult to make an “Asian American show” that appeases media activists? Have you ever seen a TV show that focuses on Asian Americans? What did you think of it?
Chapter 3:
Social Change through the Asian American Market

SUMMARY

Chapter 3 considers the way that Asian American media activists have worked to impact change through economic or consumer power. In particular, it focuses on Asian American advertising agencies, who play a key role in documenting the market strength of Asian Americans and using that data to influence the way they represent Asian Americans in advertising. This strategy is based on an understanding of cultural citizenship as connected to consumer citizenship, which is the kind of participation that is premised on voicing your perspective through choices of what to buy or financially support. Despite the fact that advertising agencies are primarily creating media as a way for corporations to accrue profits, it is important to recognize the political contributions of this work. Advertisers are image creators, and it is their job to create authentic messages that resonate with real Asian American audiences, eschewing stereotypes and other offensive content. While their advertisements are originally created for placement in ethnic media, they also have the potential to cross into the mainstream market—an occurrence that has long served to diversify the advertising realm.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the roots of “consumer citizenship” and how can buying something contribute to social change? What role do you think corporations should play in social change efforts?

- What are some of the ways that Asian American advertising agencies can be understood as media activists? Have you ever seen an advertisement that you thought could contribute to activism?

- How does the “myth of the model minority” complicate the way that Asian Americans are seen as ideal consumers?
Chapter 4:
Asian American YouTube Celebrities Creating Popular Culture Networks

SUMMARY

Chapter 4 focuses on the rise of Asian American YouTubers, who have been massively successful and dominate popularity charts in terms of subscribers and views. Lopez connects the politics of creating and sharing YouTube videos to the rise of the Asian American cinema movement, where independent artists used media representations to bring light to their previously ignored narratives and histories. Digital platforms like YouTube and other online social media have increased the availability and accessibility of these kinds of stories, and allowed for the development of figures such as Michelle Phan, KevJumba, Nigahiga, Wong Fu Productions and Clara C. Although their works span a diverse range of genres—including makeup instruction, comedic performance, dramatic narratives, music, and others—together they comprise a new generation of Asian American celebrities who are hypervisible and beloved. Yet their work is not automatically “activist” simply because they are producing Asian American stories—in fact, many of these celebrities have been criticized for failing to explicitly use their platform for antiracism, or for only addressing their Asian American identities after being forced to. Despite their reluctance for political engagement, however, they do sometimes mobilize their fans to support charitable causes. Moreover, their work veers even closer to media activism when they band together to work on collaborative transmedia projects. All of the celebrities examined here extend their work far beyond the confines of their own YouTube channel; they are often seen partnering with Asian Americans from independent media and mainstream media. These collective endeavors—including participating in group blogs, live performances, feature films, video contests, game shows, and others—create synergistic impacts that benefit from their celebrity. But more importantly, they work together to create a larger Asian American audience who can move between these different media offerings and potentially be called upon for collective action.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How are today’s YouTube celebrities similar to filmmakers from the Asian American political movement? How are they different? Do you think that they are “activists”?

- Are YouTube celebrities the same as traditional celebrities? What qualities make them “celebrities” at all? Why is it important to think about the work that celebrities do?

- How are Asian American YouTube stars creating bridges between online media, independent media, and mainstream media? What are some of the political outcomes of these bridging projects?
Chapter 5:
Utilizing Skills and Passion to Spread Online Activism

SUMMARY

Chapter 5 continues investigating the digital realm as a space for potential media activism. It specifically focuses on the explicit forms of media activism that Asian Americans have undertaken through Twitter—including #CancelColbert, #HowIMetYourRacism and #NotYourAsianSidekick—as well as the fan activism surrounding the racist casting of The Last Airbender. Rather than asking how effective these digital interventions have been, it looks at the different ways that cultural formations and identities impact the way these specific technologies are taken up within Asian American media activism. In the case of Twitter, it is important to recognize the way that political conversations are easy to generate and inspire participation, but difficult to control. When Stephen Colbert used language that was offensive to Asian Americans in a joke on his show, activist Suey Park used the opportunity to criticize the popular public figure. While the Twitter campaign against racism on How I Met Your Mother (using the hashtag #HowIMetYourRacism) had effectively communicated the critique and resulted in a sincere apology from the image’s creators, the #CancelColbert hashtag became wildly controversial. The conversation that transpired in a chaotic unraveling of 140-character messages lost sight of what was at the heart of all of these debates—that Asian Americans are simply not being seen, recognized, or heard. This also was the primary complaint for the casting of The Last Airbender movie, whose fantastical Asian storylines had been populated with white actors. Fans of the franchise facilitated a long-term, multifaceted intervention that made use of all of the skills that they had developed as fans—including connecting with digital communities, participating in online debates, creating original artwork and videos, staying current through research and scouring the internet for information. Together, they were able to translate these online forms of participation into Asian American media activism that reflected many of the different understandings of cultural citizenship, reminding us of the complexities and contradictions that this concept includes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In what ways does Twitter provide an effective way for combating racism? In what ways is it limiting? What kind?

- What is “racebending” and why is it problematic? What does it mean for a fantastical world to be “Asian,” and why do fans care about the way that it translates into a live action movie?

- In what ways do the skills developed by fans translate easily into media activism? What are some of the differences between the fan activism surrounding The Last Airbender and the Twitter activism surrounding The Colbert Report?
Conclusion:
Producing Citizenship through Activism

SUMMARY
The conclusion of this book reflects upon the different arguments that have been made about connecting cultural citizenship to Asian American media activism. It broadens the discussion to think about some of the real consequences for failing to activate collective networks of support—such as for the individual lives that are at risk through the act of coming out as LGBT or undocumented. But as we see in these cases, documenting one’s story through media is vitally important in contributing to a sense of safety, recognition, and belonging.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
- How would you describe the concept of “cultural citizenship” in your own words, and why do you think it’s an important thing to fight for?
- What strategies for media activism do you think are most effective? Which are the weakest or least effective?
- What are some examples of the way that people behave when they are focused on individuals, or just themselves? How would this be challenged by thinking about the bigger picture of the collective? Explain what is gained when we look at Asian American media from the perspective of the collective rather than the individual.
- Who do you think should count as a media activist? Do you consider yourself to be an activist? Why or why not?
Assignments and Activities

- Pick a recent representation of Asian Americans that you think is problematic in some way. If you were a media activist, what would be your strategy for working to impact change with regard to that representation? Why did you choose that strategy?

- Find an example of recent media activism from the news or that you found online. In what way would you say that they are fighting for cultural citizenship? What definition of cultural citizenship are they using to motivate their activism?

- Look at the advertisements contained in an Asian American or ethnic Asian media outlet. Compare these to a similar form of media that is targeted toward a mainstream audience. What are the differences between them? How can you connect those differences to the idea of Asian American advertising agencies and the activist roles that they take on?

- Look at the YouTube videos on a channel owned by an Asian American. Do you think that they could be considered activists? What do you think is “political” about the way that they tell their stories or represent themselves?