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Glee's American Dream: the Racial Politics of "Asian F"

In 2009, Fox's *Glee* premiered its third ever episode, "Acafellas." *Glee*, a musical dramedy about the members of a high school glee club, had been popular since its beginning, catching the tailwinds of popular music-centered programs like American Idol; its pilot episode averaged 9.62 million viewers on its first airing. The episode "Acafellas" features one of the show's flagship moments—when the character of Kurt Hummel comes out as gay to his friend, Mercedes. This scene, and the plotlines that follow it, have been noted for being some of the first instances of positive queer representation on network television, and garnered *Glee* the image of a progressive, forward-thinking show—paving the way for further representation of queerness in mainstream media. *Glee*'s showrunners would commit themselves to this image, going on to address other contemporary social issues with their trademark inclusive and liberal perspective. Various plotlines across *Glee*'s six-season run tackled topics ranging from homophobic bullying to eating disorders to interracial dating. However, after *Glee* came to a close and people started to revisit or watch the show for the first time, now with the benefit of hindsight, more and more critiques have been made of the show's approach to representing issues facing marginalized identities—particularly when it came to race. *Glee*'s open embrace of Obama-era racial politics, which bought into the idea of a post-racial America free of racial prejudice or preference, seemed like a lacking approach in retrospect, as discussions of race began to address the ways in which racism ran deeper than individual attitudes about people of color. In some cases, ignorance of the

systemic and institutional factors of racism came to be reductive to *Glee*'s goal of promoting equality and inclusivity. One case study to demonstrate *Glee*'s oversimplified representation of race is the character of Mike Chang Jr., specifically in Season 3 Episode 3 "Asian F." The episode's main storyline follows Mike as he tries to balance his parent's expectations with his desire to pursue the performing arts. While the episode aims to flesh out a neglected side character while touching on the Asian American experience, Mike Chang Jr.'s storyline in "Asian F" as well as in *Glee* in general, is indicative of the ignorance of *Glee*'s larger post-racial message. The show presents Asian American stereotypes at face value while ignoring the larger systemic reasons behind them, instead attributing them to "Asian cultural values," further perpetuating the narrative that stereotypes are actually self-perpetuated and the only 'real' racism is intentionally malicious actions done by individuals. Additionally, the way that Mike Chang Jr. transforms from a background character to a full-fledged one implies through the show's musical logic that assimilation to whiteness is the ultimate goal for people of color in American society.

Mike Chang, for the first two seasons of *Glee*, remained a fairly minor character. He begins the show as someone who, as a player on the football team, is supposedly hesitant to join the glee club—a club mainly composed of social outcasts. And yet, on-screen he is unflinchingly enthusiastic about dancing in the background of glee club performances. Unlike Finn and Puck, two white characters on the football team who are given much more screen time devoted to their conflicting feelings about joining the glee club, any internal conflict Mike might have over being socially ostracized for being in the glee club is looked over; he is, for the most part, a smiling and wordless background dancer. Behind the scenes of the show, Mike Chang Jr. played trained dancer Harry Shum Jr., was a character slotted into the show to supplement the main cast, who had little dancing ability. Unlike the main cast, however, whose actors' performance abilities

translated to their on-screen characters, Mike's interest in and ability to dance is left largely unaddressed. The very purpose of Mike's character—his dancing—being vague and unexplained causes a sort of tension that is noticeable from Mike's debut episode, Season 1 Episode 4 "Preggers." The episode primarily follows the character Kurt as he joins the football team to impress his father. Mike Chang, supposedly a player on the team, isn't visible for the first few scenes featuring the football team. He is absent from the sidelines when Kurt tries out for the team, and absent from the locker room when glee club director Will Schuester suggests that the team learn how to dance to help boost their athletic skills. Mike does appear, however, at the forefront of a gaggle of begrudging and displeased football players as they learn the choreography to Beyoncé's "Single Ladies." Mike is visibly the most active, performing the choreography while the other football players barely go through the motions. Later in that same episode when Mike, Puck, and another football player Matt walk into the glee club room for the first time as members, Mike smiles easily alongside Matt. In contrast, Puck shows visible reluctance, putting his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders. Unlike Puck, whose complex feelings about joining the glee club are constantly being communicated through the character's words and actions, Mike is never shown to have any sort of inner conflict or ambivalence about being a football player and a glee club member, something that is reinforced by how rarely Mike shows up or speaks in scenes centering the football team—he is merely inserted into a scene when I character needs to dance, only to be taken back out immediately afterwards, without any focus on his character's interests or motivations. In ensuing episodes, like "Vitamin D," Mike's proficiency in dance is shown but not really talked about—there is no clear explanation given for how he developed these dancing abilities, or what his motivations for joining the glee club are. It isn't until "Throwdown," three episodes after this character is

introduced, in a scene where Will asks what songs the glee club would like to perform, that there is any verbal reference to Mike having any particular dancing ability:

> WILL: Anything else?
>
> MIKE: [raises hand] I can pop and lock?
>
> WILL: Not really what we're going for, Mike, but…noted, noted, yes.
>
> ("Throwdown" 00:02:12–00:02:20).

Again, Mike's ability to dance is not fully explained within the story; the audience is only told that he can dance, and wants to showcase his skills in a glee club number. However, Will's taken-aback response, played for a joke, suggests that Mike declaring his explicit interest in showcasing his abilities in hip-hop styles of dance is in some way strange, out of the blue. This is despite the fact that Mike's competency in these styles of dance have been showcased in previous episodes, just not explicitly addressed or talked about (And while Will's startled response is in part to signify Will's unwillingness to perform more contemporary music numbers, it is still noteworthy that Mercedes's suggestion of doing "more Black music" is met with a more measured attitude than Mike's suggestion, which is met with one of befuddlement). As explained in Mina Yang's analysis of the representation of Asian Americans in hip-hop dance culture, in which she draws on Harry Shum Jr.'s career as an example, hip-hop music and dance is linked to specific, often narrow cultural understandings of Blackness and masculinity, and as such "Asian Americans have not fared well in the past, having to contend with the stereotype of the perennially foreign model minority that runs against the grain of hip-hop discourses around street cred and authenticity" (Yang 30–31). As an Asian American character, Mike's hip-hop dance skills run counter to stereotypical understandings of Asian American men, and must "contend with the formidable challenge of performing in front of audiences who come with certain

expectations that have been shaped by pernicious stereotypes of Asian (non)manhood…[the stereotype of] the nerd, in particular, who is all brain and no body (or at least no sexuality), is especially problematic for those involved in a dance genre that is based on overt displays of masculine swagger and power" (Yang 28). While Mike's competency in dance, particularly hip-hop styles of dance, is clear, the showrunners are hesitant to assign that skill too explicitly to his character, and avoid fleshing his character out beyond his status as a secondary member of both the football team and the glee club. Instead they have Mike featured prominently in the glee club's choreographies, a skilled—and wordless—dancer during performances, only to slot him back into the role of a background character with little backstory or individual motivations once the performance ends. Mike's status as an Asian American character means that even though his dancing ability is clear, making his dancing too much of a defining trait risks stepping out of the bounds of what the writers and much of the audience imagine an Asian American male character to be. Even Mike being a football player is deemphasized—he rarely shows or speaks in scenes set in the locker room, training room, or on the football field, and unlike Finn or Puck his being on the team never seems to grant him popularity among the other students. In order to stay within culturally understood definitions of Asian American masculinity, Mike's proficiency in hip-hop styles of dance, or his status as a football player, is rarely explicitly referenced, in order to maintain expectations of less masculine, perpetually foreign Asian American male characters. Even though Mike Chang has interests in things like football and dance, which don't fit into stereotypical understandings of Asian Americans being nerdy academic overachievers or perpetual foreigners, these traits are underemphasized in Mike's character, reinforcing to *Glee*'s audience what people typically assume to be true about Asian Americans.

In addition to Mike's dancing skills being left largely unexplained, one of the only distinct aspects of how Mike is portrayed are the jokes made about his Asian American identity. This can be seen through the way the show represents his relationship with Tina Cohen-Chang, a fellow member of a glee club with a slightly more prominent role in the show. Him and Tina getting together isn't given its own storyline, and is instead listed off as something that happened over the summer break—during the narrative blank space between Season 1 and Season 2. The one scene they show of him and Tina getting together is set in what Tina's ex-boyfriend Artie describes as "...Asian Camp. They were counselors, in charge of teaching all those tech-savvy Asian kids about the arts" (Audition 00:16:37–00:16:49). Mike and Tina are shown dancing and singing, respectively, in front of a crowd of disinterested Asian kids, who are all typing on their phones instead of paying attention to the performance. Even in this scene, where Mike's shirtless body is shown dancing in slow-motion, comedically indicating how much more conventionally attractive he is than the geeky, wheelchair-bound Artie, it is tempered by the stereotypical jokes being made about Asian Americans being hyper-technological and STEM focused. Rebecca Hamilton-Levi notes in her analysis of *Glee*'s portrayal of race through humor, that often non-white characters have jokes made about their racial identities, as opposed to white characters who are more often mocked for their individual personality traits. Hamilton-Levi specifically points to a moment in Season 3 where there is a voiceover of white cheerleader Becky Jackson's inner monologue, where she criticizes the various male characters of *Glee*. In Becky's voiceover, while white characters "...are critiqued for their appearances (e.g., smile, hair), Mike is critiqued for his race. Whiteness is not discussed because it is normal; non-whiteness is discussed because it is considered different and inferior" (Hamilton-Levi 37). The effect of constantly writing jokes for non-white characters that only seem to reference their race is that these non-white characters

are made to seem 'other,' intrinsically different in some way just because of their race. So, even in this moment where the audience is getting slightly more insight into Mike's personal life, expanding his character past just a background character, jokes made at the expense of his and Tina's racial identity reinforce his status as 'other.'

Mike's storyline in "Asian F" starts when his father, upon finding out that Mike got an A-minus on his chemistry test, has a conversation with the school principal about Mike supposedly being too distracted from his studies. Mike's father lays out his expectations for Mike going to a prestigious school like Harvard University:

> MR. CHANG: My grandmother in China knew three English phrases: 'Coca-Cola,' 'Kiss My Grits,' and 'Harvard University.' Deep in Hubei Province, this old woman knew the best school in the United States. That's where my son belongs.
>
> FIGGINS: But what makes you think he's on drugs? He's one of our best students, a football star, and he can bust a serious move.
>
> MR. CHANG: My son got an A-minus on his chemistry test. An A-minus is an Asian F. ("Asian F" 00:02:59–00:03:23).

In this exchange, Mike's father justifies his expectations of Mike with a story about his grandmother, who knew that Harvard University was the best school in the United States even as someone living in rural China. The anecdote draws a connection between Mike Chang Sr.'s high expectations of his son to his presumably non-American grandmother from rural China, as if prioritization of high academic achievement is something natural to Chinese culture. Furthermore, the fact that Mike's father is the one who claims that an A-minus grade is an "Asian F" suggests again that high academic achievement is a natural expectation within Asian culture, and something that Mike's immigrant father is conscious about. It's also of note that

many of the things Mike does that are contrary to stereotypical understandings of Asian Americans are things that Mike's father dismisses or outright criticizes, such as his interest in performing or his being a football player. The show suggests that stereotypes of Asian Americans are entirely self-perpetuated by narrow Asian cultural expectations of success, and presents this idea without any in-depth understanding of how the high expectations placed on Asian American kids are established and maintained. In a case study drawing on data from both a survey and ethnographic study of 1.5 to 2nd generation Asian Americans, Lee et al. explain that "...Americans often point to Asian culture as the driver of achievement. This cultural fallacy fails to acknowledge the role of US immigration law in determining the class and educational selectivity of US Asian immigrants…who are, on average, both more highly educated than those who do not immigrate and more highly educated than the general US population…The hyperselectivity of contemporary Asian immigrants has intersectional spillover effects, one of which is that Asian Americans—regardless of ethnicity, nativity, or class—are perceived and stereotyped as smart, hardworking, and deserving. Perceptions have consequences: these so-called positive stereotypes affect the way that teachers and guidance counselors perceive and treat Asian American students" (Lee et al. 151). While much of the studies done on the high academic achievement of Asian Americans demonstrate that it is something coded as Asian within Asian American communities, this high standard is in large part created by hyperselective immigration policies, which selectively grants visas to Asian migrants with qualifications in STEM or other prestigious professional fields. Not only that, Asian American students also often feel pressured, not just by their parents and co-ethnic peers, but also by their school peers and school administrators to perform well above average in order to meet expectations. The stereotype of the 'smart Asian kid,' while sometimes serving as a confidence boost to motivate

Asian American kids to perform better academically, can also make Asian American students feel like outcasts if they don't fit neatly into that archetype. So, even though the remarks made by Mike Chang Sr. about the high expectations he has of his son may seem like observational humor about the strict expectations of Asian immigrant parents, upon closer examination demonstrates a lack of understanding of how these patterns emerge, and in fact perpetuates the same stereotypical understandings that Asian Americans often feel pressured to 'fit' into. Ignoring these important systemic factors influencing Asian Americans students and their behavior, and instead making Mike Chang Sr. a reiteration of the "Asian Tiger parent" archetype, whose high expectations of his son are supposedly motivated by his Chinese cultural values, is an example of how *Glee*'s post-racial messaging diminishes race-related issues to a problem with the ignorance of individuals, rather than the built-in flaws of institutions and systems. This is a pattern that is pointed out and criticized by Rachel Duborfsky in her examination of *Glee*'s approach to representing race, where she states that "fusing race issues to individual character traits…offsets potential for looking at how issues of racism and disenfranchisement might function in the larger institutional setting of the public school system and, in particular, in glee club" (Dubrofsky 89). Although the storyline of "Asian F" presents as the writers' attempt at making up for their so-far lackluster representation of their Asian American characters, this storyline only really manages to suggest that reductive and one-dimensional stereotypes are the fault of the overly strict "Asian cultural values" held by Asian immigrant parents. In doing so, any possible productive discussion about the impact of race on students of color is dismissed, in favor of forwarding the idea that these stereotypical Asian expectations are things that must be rejected in order for Mike to become a full-fledged character, with fully-formed motivations and a role in the cast beyond that of a background dancer.

The resolution to Mike's storyline comes when Tina has a conversation with Mike, reminding him of how much performing means to Mike. Ultimately, he decides to go against what his father wants, skip his remedial chemistry lessons, and go audition for the part of Riff in their high school's production of *West Side Story*. The moment when Mike auditions, singing 'Cool' from *West Side Story*, is notable in that it's the first and only time Mike has a solo singing performance. Even though he has sung a duet before in the second season of the show, it was of him purposefully singing badly for comedic effect, not truly a musical performance. Which means that Mike's first genuine singing part comes in a moment of him rejecting his father's expectations, which have been coded as culturally Asian through the episode's writing. As Yang notes in her observations of Harry Shum Jr.'s career as it relates to representation of his Asian identity, "It is only by disavowing his 'Asian' obligations to his father, a stereotypical Asian tiger parent, and abandoning the model minority path to success via Harvard to instead pursue his own dream of becoming a dancer that Chang is able, at last, to transcend the stigma of Asianness (invisibility, silence) and become a legitimate artist in the world of *Glee*" (Yang 29). In a show where the ultimate prize is getting a solo part, and thus having an almost music-video style sequence in the episode dedicated to the character and their storyline, Mike getting his first solo marks a moment of him truly ascending from being a background character and backup dancer to a part of the central cast. In musicals, the musical performance is often a key way for characters to express themselves emotionally—when the audience is watching a musical performance, they are momentarily suspending their disbelief to engage in the emotional and artistic qualities of the performance, essentially immersing themselves in the emotional state of the singer. As Rachel Dubrosky notes, musical numbers come at a point in the story when characters need to "[convey] emotion that cannot be contained or expressed in another manner, often contrasting with the

action in the rest of the episode…[numbers offer] insight about a character's home and personal life, giving the character depth so audiences can connect and empathize" (Dubrofsky 90). This effect of closeness between the character and the audience is demonstrated in the scene where Mike auditions: when Mike starts singing, all other diegetic noise dies down as studio-recorded music starts playing—most of *Glee*'s musical numbers aren't live-recorded vocal but studio-recorded tracks played over film footage, and that switch from more realistic sounding voices to the touched-up studio vocals intensifies the immersive effect of the scene. Long moments simply portraying Mike dancing and singing the number are clipped together, with many clips featuring close-ups of his face as he emotes, again concentrating focus on his emotions—all culminating in his ending pose, his face lit up by the stage lights against a dark backdrop, a shot which against centers him and his character, isolating him from any other aspect of the outside world ("Asian F" 00:17:55–00:20:02). There is a sort of singular focus that Mike is able to draw as the solo performer of a musical number, which draws the audience in and directs all their attention on his character and his emotions. The fact that Mike is only able to get to this point in the show as he rejects the Asian-coded expectations his father holds of him, implies that in order to fully actualize as a complex, three-dimensional character in the logic of the show, one must leave behind their racial markers. In Rachel Dubrofsky's own analysis of this episode, which focuses on Mercedes' storyline, she notes how Mercedes' character has changed Season 3, which is particularly noticeable in how Mercedes' audition for the role of María is shot: "In Season 3, Mercedes is constructed as a girl who is maturing—changed and changing for the better—through her ability to emulate qualities needed to contend for the role of leading lady…Viewers see Mercedes onstage, under a spotlight, in a classic black dress, singing beautifully, with tight shots of her emotional face, a style of presentation and camerawork often

used to showcase Rachel's talents…Discussion about her performance center on how different this performance is from previous ones, with talk of how she is finally showing she has what it takes to be a star" (Dubrofsky 96). Mercedes is only taken seriously for a starring role, in the musical and cinematographic language of *Glee*, once she 'matures,' losing the supposedly immature, 'sassy' attitude she had for the first two seasons of the show. These racial markers are depicted as the things holding her back. Similarly, in Mike's storyline, the only aspects of his family's Asian culture that are depicted are the ones that hold him back, and 'other' him in some way. With this conclusion to his storyline, the show suggests that the only way for him to shed the background character status and step into the main character role is to let go of those supposedly restrictive Asian cultural expectations. The ultimate message of "Asian F"—an episode that was supposed to touch on the Asian American experience and flesh out a character who has been so far reduced to jokes at the expense of his Asianness—is that to be a fully developed character of *Glee*, and artist in one's own right, one must reject the traits that mark them as racially 'other,' without examining the deeper systemic reasons for those traits.

Although "Asian F" ends with the promise of Mike being a more central character in the show, once his storyline of his conflict with his father meets its conclusion he once again fades into the background. After Mike auditions his mother sees him practicing in the school's dance practice room, and realizes how much Mike cares about dance, convincing her to support Mike in his pursuit of the performing arts. And after Mike and his mother argue back and forth with Mike's father, Mike's father eventually goes to see his son perform in *West Side Story*, which leads him to realize Mike's talent and passion for performing, and convinces him to let Mike attend a performing arts conservatory. The 'happily ever after' that *Glee* gives to Mike is one where both his parents realize the fault in their 'Asian Tiger parent' ways and unconditionally

support his dreams. Little regard is given to the fact that in reality, Asian American students often feel as much pressure from their school administrators and peers than they do from their parents; it is also left unmentioned how the ways US immigration policy shapes the immigration experience so as to influence Asian immigrant parents to push their kids to the same path as them, a path that may offer less systemic barriers to security and success. In the world of *Glee*, Mike's parents and their strict "Asian cultural values" were the only obstacles to him pursuing his dreams. While this one character and his one storyline don't have to fit into the common trends of the Asian American experience, it's worth nothing that *Glee* always claimed to be a show that didn't shy away from talking about important social issues—and it's also worth noting that when it came to race, their representation was often lacking. Other than Asian Americans, *Glee* has harbored criticism for their uncritical regurgitation of stereotypes of Black and Latinx people, as well as their larger trend of ignoring the ways institutional racism factor in the lives of nonwhite characters. In *Glee*'s post-racial fantasy, any racism is a matter of individual concern, and one's stereotypical racial traits are things that must be left behind in order to maintain their illusion of a simpler world without deep-rooted, complex issues regarding race and racism.

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