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A screen archive of Asian bros: casting masculinity and performing stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

This article examines theatrical and screen casting practices through the figure of the Asian bro. Whether or not the Asian bro is a resistant figure – one which challenges stereotypical depictions of Asian (primarily American) masculinity – or a reactionary one, has been the subject of popular debate in recent years, connected to ideas of Asian masculinity that have been rehearsed since the beginnings of the Asian American movement in the 1960s. This article contributes to these discussions by building on (and departing from) discourses of Asian male emasculation. We explore what the Asian bro tells us about the study of men and masculinities, specifically how masculinity studies might move beyond the compulsion to identify men and masculinities according to types (e.g. toxic, tender, marginal, etc.). We do this by extending the theatrical practice of casting to social relations and the ways they manifest across media and through Asian male actors who have troubled simple types often demanded by casting notices. The article concludes with an example of social casting that involves self-casting, even as it plays on and with stereotypes.

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Introduction

Asian men – or more specifically cishet, buff, himbo, bro-ey Asian men – are having a bit of a moment. From the mid-2010s, the emergence of what entertainment critic Eric Francisco (2018) calls the ‘first generation of “Asian bros”’ in television and cinema challenged prior representations of Asian men ‘as socially inept, dorky, and sexually repressed as they are sexually repellant.’ In 2021, Marvel’s *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* was notable not only for portraying their first East Asian superhero but also for the fact that Simu Liu’s title character is a millennial slacker, gym-built, goofy, and hot, in other words, an Asian bro of a piece with the character Jung that Liu plays on the Canadian sitcom *Kim’s Convenience*. In turn, Shang-Chi and Jung are part of a larger screen archive of Asian bros that includes Steven Yeun’s Glenn (*The Walking Dead*) and

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later Danny (*Beef*), Vincent Rodriguez III's Josh Chan (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*), and Manny Jacinto's Jason Mendoza (*The Good Place*).

Whether or not the Asian bro is a resistant figure – one which challenges stereotypical depictions of Asian (primarily American) masculinity – or a reactionary one has been the subject of popular debate in recent years, connected to ideas of Asian masculinity that have been rehearsed since the beginnings of the Asian American movement in the 1960s. This article contributes to these discussions by building on (and departing from) discourses of Asian male emasculation (see Eng 2001) that continue to circle back to Frank Chin's 1972 play *The Chickencoop Chinaman*. Like the Asian bro, Chin's protagonist Tam Lum looks for representative models of heroic masculinity in a genre dominated by white masculinity, the Western. However, our discussion of the Asian bro, or more accurately, *bros*, demonstrates the abiding force of homosociality in whether one is or is not perceived as a 'bro', opening up a fluid, rather than oppositional, relationship between whiteness and Asian masculinity.

At the same time, we explore what the Asian bro tells us about the study of men and masculinities, specifically how masculinity studies might move beyond the compulsion to identify 'recognizable character type[s]' (Harrington 2021) such as those marked by numerous articles, edited volumes, and monographs on the topics of 'hybrid masculinities', 'digital masculinities', 'branded masculinities', 'female masculinity' and most famously, 'hegemonic masculinity' and its seeming close relative 'toxic masculinity' (see Alexander 2003; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Connell 2005; Gough 2018; Halberstam [1998]2018; Harrington 2021). Connecting with the theme of this special issue, we suggest that these scholarly lenses most clearly resemble the process of theatrical and screen casting, setting certain people and their range of behaviors into certain roles and, concomitantly, delimiting and defining those roles. And doing so in ways that make it possible for others to see themselves in them to either embrace or avoid such behavior.

Casting is a theatrical problem with implications beyond the theatre. Whether sociological or not, casting demarcates frames of recognition and identification. Casting requires the actor to imagine themselves in the role described in the casting call and then to convince someone else that they are correct for the role, a process of self-objectification and alienation Smith (2020, 36) calls 'identity work.' Casting is a mechanism at the intersection of theatrical representation and social behavior.

In understanding the bro not as a character type but a social relation, the Asian bro becomes a rich discursive site to examine how homosociality interacts with ideas of race. While bros are typically associated with certain signifiers, including whiteness, the Asian bro suggests also that the homosocial structures of bro-iness are capable of absorbing endless signifiers and identity markers. The bro's association with whiteness is analytically useful inasmuch as it enables us to consider any bro-like formation's association with power – rather than being a cultural trope. In this configuration, for example, the 'bro' functions often as a shorthand character type for white, cishet toxic masculinity. Thus, a relational analysis of Asian bros must consider both the individual actor's performance and (often) his diegetic relations to other characters (often his bros). That is, by taking seriously the figure of the bro as it is shaped and defined by its social relations and especially as it comes to ironically and earnestly stand in for the worst aspects of homosocial, masculine toxicity, we uncover divergent modes of performance

that offer opportunities to play with and within the role one has been cast. Thinking through the intersection of the bro and race reveals the culturally contingent and arbitrary signifiers upon which this shorthand rests. Moreover, we see the abiding force of representation in its making, with casting being the material and industrial practice of representation.

Thinking relationally, for us, means thinking in relation. We take a kind of mid-distance reading across time and various pieces of media. And we do so in part as a way of engaging the actors and their roles across performances and social reality to see how the Asian bro materializes and comes to figure as another node among relations. This is in parallel with others like Brian Herrera, who describes following ‘a given actor from the stage, often to screens large and small and, just as frequently, to the ostensibly nontheatrical realms of politics, community organizing, or education’ (Herrera 2016, 409). Herrera refers to this as his ‘actor alibi’ for explaining why he is studying things sometimes well beyond the theatrical stage, especially to those in the fields of theatre and performance studies. Our approach here, given the subject matter might read to some as a kind of bro-y engagement, riffing across significant and obscure cultural touchstones, setting down in one place only to pick up and engage with another. In doing so, we think this work centers the relational qualities of masculine homosociality, an approach that is fitting for this project and for its coauthors. It is only possible to describe one of us as Asian. But the two of us are bros. One author is half-Filipino, half-Chinese, grew up in Canada, and lives and works in the UK and the other is white, grew up in Minnesota, and lives and works in New York. One is in a relationship with a man and one is married to a woman. We write and research together as bros – our study of homosocial relations is driven by a homosocial relation. In an article on disciplinary formations, Broderick asks the field ‘to recognize that we may have competing desires, because I believe that in friendship (which is not the same as being an “ally” or “accomplice”), we can come to an understanding of what happens next’ (Chow 2023, 496). That is, the future will unfold from relations built in mutuality – like friendships and, perhaps, like bros. There is ample room in the field for such relations to guide research and to consider the intersections among us that avoid extractive practices of one person writing about another group without being in relation to anyone in that group.

So, together, in this article we draw connections between studies of masculine typology and representational casting practices, which lead us to consider the screen archive of the Asian bro, especially as it has manifested since the late 1990s. We consider this through the actors playing these roles, from Keanu Reeves as a precursor for the emergence of John Cho as Milf Guy #2 in *American Pie* to Manny Jacinto’s more recent prominence through *The Good Place*. The trajectory of Asian bros is encapsulated in Marvel star Simu Liu’s experience. As a guest on the 2024 television show *Chrisy and Dave Dine Out* (2024), Liu talks about his first role in 2012 as Hong Kong Desk Cop, which he also describes elsewhere: ‘I spoke English with a Cantonese Accent and I had two lines’ (Kim’s Convenience 2019). Show co-host Joel Kim Booster and Liu describe the various racist casting calls stretching back to the early 2000s. Booster notes that in 2011 he ‘got called in to be a Chinese Food delivery boy five different times across many different mediums.’ (Booster is not Chinese.) Noting how things have changed, Booster describes recently receiving a script that was ‘looking for a “Simu Liu type”.’ On the one hand, this speaks to Liu’s immense success and, on the other, it marks a significant shift

in casting practices across two decades, of new relations in casting calls. Liu went from playing stereotypes to becoming a type. The Asian bro points us toward the issues with social and theatrical types as well as the possibilities for autonomy and agency within the various systems of casting that proliferate in theatre, film, and television, and related social performances.

Gendered performance as character breakdown

Arguably, the most influential theorization of masculine gender performance in the past thirty years is Raewyn Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell, drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony', proposes 'hegemonic masculinity' as a way to understand the 'cultural dynamic by which a group [men] claims and sustains a leading position in social life' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 77). Hegemonic masculinity is the 'configuration of gender practice' (in other words, the performance) that embodies 'the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy' (Connell 2005, 77). Connell proposes a model in which relations of power, production, and desire form a structure in which certain practices and behaviours come to occupy the hegemonic or leading position. The performance and activation of such hegemonic practises by bodies we read as 'men' produces a gendered performance Connell calls 'hegemonic masculinity', which is not universal or fixed, but rather the 'currently accepted' hierarchy that positions a certain set of characteristics at the top, with other forms of masculinities playing subordinate and complicit roles as others are marginalized (77). The form of masculinity that occupies a hegemonic position is always contestable.

Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity was intended as a counter to the idea of gender and sex 'role expectations or identity', and not intended to be a descriptive but rather a relational and historical understanding of gender hierarchy, Connell and James W. Messerschmidt in their revisiting of the concept admit that there has been a tendency of analyses using the concept to imply a 'fixed character type, or an assemblage of toxic traits' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 854). Connell's model of masculinity contains its own typology: hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, and marginalized masculinities. It is easy to see how such a structure, when matched against signifiers and behaviours, would move from dynamic analysis to fixed type. In addition to hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, and marginalized masculinities, the field of men and masculinities studies has seen a steady growth of work in 'x masculinities': hybrid, digital, inclusive, toxic, etc. as well as research proposing typologies of men, such as John M. Hagedorn's 'typology of gang masculinities' (Hagedorn 1998) or Robert Heasley's 'typology of queer masculinities' performed by straight men (Heasley 2005). While the acceptance of masculinity as plural and varied is welcome, its ominous shadow can be seen in various online communities of men casting themselves and offering advice on how to recognize various male types, such as dominant alphas, subordinate betas, or mysterious thetas (see 'APA Pro' 2019; Bharti 2021). This tendency to focus on the 'character breakdown' of masculinity moves away from questions of how power and violence is reproduced. Connell and Messerschmidt (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 839) themselves argue that how the concept has been deployed in the social sciences has sometimes problematically reified power and toxicity. Furthermore, the concept has also been challenged for

neglecting local and intersectional variance or how, as Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley (1999) note, hegemonic masculinity might be strategically taken up by men depending on their circumstances. In other words, a concept intended to challenge attempts to define masculinity in its execution has become sometimes guilty of becoming a definition itself – associated with bro-ish characteristics: risk-taking and thrill-seeking, physical strength, and athleticism.

Michael Moller writes: I'm particularly suspicious of the way Connell's argument that gender relations are structured by a 'pattern' of hegemonic masculinity seems to find ready expression in such a huge range of social and cultural contexts. [...] What effect does the use of Connell's model have on the way researchers come to know specific practises of masculinity, at least those of others? (Moller 2007, 268). Moller points to the way hegemonic masculinity becomes a heuristic that enables the 'type' to be repeatedly recognized, even among people who might not understand themselves through the type. As Lucas Fosberg points out, in his on-the-ground work with, for example, young men, 'men seldom recognize themselves in the hegemonic masculinity figure that a typologized use of Connell's framework evokes. [...] For such men, the hegemonic masculinity figure has become a character distant from their own experiences' (Fosberg 2010, 3). Such disavowal can lead to a reification of patriarchy, rather than self-examination and change.

Michael Messner suggests that a multiplicity of masculinities emerges in the 1980s as scholars:

Grappled with a puzzle: how to take seriously and centrally the feminist critique of men's global power over women, while recognizing both the 'cost of masculinity' that many men pay, as well as the existence of vast inequalities among men—inequalities grounded in social class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and international relations. The answer that most scholars settled on was to think of masculinities as multiple. (Messner 2004, 75)

Building on Messner's intervention, the literary scholar Jonathan Allan rejects the typological turn in masculinity studies. 'What is so striking about these "types" of masculinities', he writes, 'is that they are diagnostic, that is, they are assigned by a scholar who seemingly knows better than the people to which the identity is being assigned' (2023, 44). This diagnostic theorizing, he argues, is an example of Eve Sedgwick's paranoid reading; a strong theory that puts its faith in 'exposure', as if by marking masculinities in this way we might anticipate all of the ways in which men might (or might not) behave and therefore 'know' how patriarchy operates (Allan 2023, 44–5). For Allan, this circular logic does not get closer to an understanding of the relations that define patriarchal society and in fact leaves no room for 'the voices, theories, methods, and ideas that are foreclosed, abandoned, or censored because they do not fit the modus operandi of the existing models' (47).

It is in its intersection with race that the typological approach to masculinities becomes most problematic because the diagnosis of a 'type' easily becomes a form of racial essentialism. If we were to consider the subject of this article, the 'Asian bro', from a typological point of view, one might list, through empirical study, the types of (negative) behaviour and characteristics performed by Asian men who are identified as Asian bros against a certain, pre-existing bro-y framework of masculinity (typically defined by whiteness). In doing so, we would not be far from the

discourse of MRAs (Men's Rights Asians), a misogynistic, mainly online discourse of men reclaiming Asian (heterosexual) masculinity (see Mak 2021). Such an analysis would not, ultimately, tell us more about bro-y Asian masculinity and would furthermore ignore the important function of marginalization, which Connell suggests 'is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group' (2005, 80). Connell uses the example of Black male athletes, who may be exemplars of hegemonic masculinity, but whose relative marginalization is sustained through white supremacy, which includes systemic issues of labor and economics. In a similar way, stereotypes of Asian American masculinity, like other stereotypes of Asian-ness, gendered or otherwise, were formed as marginal to the dominant white hegemonic masculinity across time and especially in relation to immigration and labour (see Chambers-Letson 2013; Park 2013; Shimakawa 2002).

As one characteristic of the 'bro' is a rejection of responsibility, the 'Asian bro' is easily set in opposition to the more familiar stereotype of Asian Americans, the 'model minority.' The myth of the model minority is a trope of supposed liberal assimilation, which at the same time functions as a white supremacist tactic of 'divide and conquer' between Asians and other racialized minorities. While, as Paul Nadal (2023, 80) points out, the precise nature of this stereotype has shifted over time (today becoming a spectre of neoliberal economic personhood manifest in the idea of an ascendant China), performance scholars including Shimakawa (2002) and Rivera (2022) have theorized how performance both reproduces and challenges the myth. The work of literary critic and theorist erin Khuê Ninh unites the social and theatrical dimensions of the model minority. In her book *Passing for Perfect* (Ninh 2021), she deploys examples of Asian American Ivy League 'imposters' (those pretending to be students or graduates of elite universities) to explore the social weight of an internalized stereotype when performed in the world. She writes: 'Where I come from, the model minority is not a myth. [...] I define the model minority as an *identity*: a set of convictions and aspirations, regardless of present socioeconomic status or future attainability' (Ninh 2021, 4–5). Ninh's work shows that even though a stereotype might be a reductive and false set of signifiers and gestures, it is nonetheless coded as an identity that social actors bear in the world.

If Ninh redefines the model minority as a 'framework for personhood, such that to be socially viable as Asian American [...] is to live by its terms' (Ninh 2021, 5), its emergent opposite, the bro-ey Asian dumbass might also constitute the same. What happens when casting calls shift from a 'Gedde Watanabe type' to a 'Simu Liu type'? By considering the act of casting in screen performance, an interpretive and material practice, we can examine how the elaboration of a masculine type (the 'breakdown') leads to its reproduction. Casting reveals the abstraction of bodies and their performances into signifiers and capacities, and how this creates a self-perpetuating cycle by which the script is already established for the performer to inhabit, in a similar manner to Butler's analysis of the performativity of gender (Butler 1990). Furthermore, performance is a lens by which those 'negative affects' of Asian masculinity might not be marked in a paranoid manner as toxic, subordinated, or resistant, but considered within a larger relational web of forces including patriarchy and white supremacy.

Material casting

On the British casting website Spotlight, actors must fill out a number of categories to determine their suitability for being cast in roles. The purpose of such categorization is to enable immediate recognition by decision makers (agents and casting directors) of the apparent suitability of the actor for a particular role. The first categories include location, gender, disabilities, playing age, and height. Further (optional) details enable the actor to specify their nationalities, 'appearance' (a coded way of describing race), eye colour, hair colour, hair length, and weight. Aside from 'location', gender is top of the hierarchy of casting details. This hierarchy is replicated by casting calls themselves, which are mainly broken down by 'importance of role, gender, age', i.e. 'supporting, male, 35+'. While the option of specifying 'non-binary' is available to both actors and casting calls, these mechanisms demonstrate the primacy of gender as a force of both representation and recognition. This is not surprising since patriarchy is also a central structural force in society; however, in casting calls and actor profiles we see a material practice by which a reciprocal process between social forces and their mediation in language takes place. A generous defense of these typological practices might hold that such representational decisions are merely a 'reflection of society' and the ultimate reception of representations is always *constructed* by viewer and artist, the imbalance of power in casting's material practice (an attempt to fix representation *and* reception even before the performance takes place) demonstrates that – at least at this stage – representation is weighted towards the *intentional* (see Hall 2013, 25).

Far from a neutral and objective mechanism for finding the 'best person for the role', casting is determined by larger structures of power. As Brian Herrera explains, 'casting is always simultaneously an act of interpretation and an allocation of resources' (Herrera 2019, 49). Whereas the moment of casting (the aesthetic choice that one body will stand in for another) can be considered through the interpretation of the text, casting itself is a set of practices and structures that, as Ashley Thorpe states, produce 'bodies in relation to dominant discursive modes and to particular socio-political and economic modes in history' (Thorpe 2014, 441). In being cast, the actor and character are joined in numerous ways. And that joining is not necessarily on the terms of the actor. As Shontelle Thrash writes: 'The casting process can be even more confining than rehearsal, because actors have less control in the room. The casting director or director usually has a clear picture of what they are looking for in an actor, and that vision often equates to a type' (Thrash 2022, 115). To even get into the room, actors must choose and respond to the call for a certain type that will be recognized by the casting director, a process that has many taking on roles that range from commonplace stereotypes to callbacks to minstrelsy itself.

For actors racialized as Asian, the casting types into which they must sort themselves are often only loosely disguised stereotypes. Drawing on Judith Butler's conception of stereotype as a sort of 'oversaturation of the visual field' (quoted in J. Lee 1997, 89) Josephine Lee suggests that:

[Stereotype as] a field of perception, of course, is more than simply visual; its historic perception is particularly relevant to the theater. When the racialized Other must deal with self-representation in the theater, the performative language he or she has recourse to is haunted by stereotype, and this performative language is not only verbal but has to do with the language of the body as well. (90)

The industry practice of ‘casting’ might be seen as a form of what Louis Althusser calls interpellation, the mechanism enabling ideology to be reproduced. Casting enables, or rather, *enforces* the attribution of certain characteristics upon some bodies and not others, for example, bodies racialized as ‘Asian.’ Before, or co-produced with, the interpellative hail in everyday life, casting is a kind of racializing hail that determines whether a racialized body will be legible, or not, as a representative of a social formation. Casting notices call on one to imagine oneself into the role – to complete the interpellative gesture before it has begun.

Casting is therefore performative in the truest sense. Thorpe argues ‘that casting produces the materiality of the actor, and, further, that casting functions as a discursive performative speech-act that connects theatre with performance in the everyday’ (Thorpe 2014, 436). Being cast as an Asian bro makes you, the actor, an Asian bro. In the act of casting, immaterial social relations congeal in such a manner that both the character and the actor are now in some way the other. Actors come to embody, physically manifest, the character. And their characters are remembered in performance through the embodiment of the actor. Professional actors also then rely on that character for their material needs – their labour and wages are intertwined with the character as are their prospects of future work. Thus, even as the actor embodies the otherwise imaginary character, the act of casting itself materializes the actor in social reality. This moment has particular material implications on the actor’s career and livelihood, but also on the way that the actor and the production itself are perceived. As Donatella Galella reminds us: ‘Although both theater and race are imaginary, they have real impacts’ (Galella 2019, 190). Indeed, actors form an important bridge between the fictional and the social, shaping representation both in and beyond the roles they play.

Despite the abiding force of casting as an industrial and ideological mechanism, we might explore what spaces are available for actors, as workers and artists, to reimagine and even alter the terms of their labor and representation. Especially in recurring roles, the actor has agency in how that role is portrayed. That is, even as actors must imagine themselves into the roles for which they audition, there remains room within the labor of acting for autonomy. Or to adapt the words of a well-known theorist of labor: ‘Actors play their own roles, but they are not cast as they please; they do not play their roles under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.’ And we can continue that quote from Marx without inventive paraphrase: ‘The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living’ (Marx 1852). Indeed, the given circumstances of casting (and acting for that matter) are very often a nightmare, especially in the ways that stereotypes and tropes are leveraged by industries that define and shape the cultural imaginary locally and internationally. However, such relations can be reshaped and, we argue, played with and through by those who actually perform the labor of those relations.

The problem of Asian bros

The Asian bro is undeniably a ‘trope’ in the modern sense of a frequently recurring theme or motif, yet his identification as such also reveals an underlying network of relations of bodies, acts, and the structural forces of patriarchy and white supremacy. The genealogy of dumb, hot, and defiantly *not* model minority Asian dudes can only be understood as

produced in relation to the racist stereotypes of the model minority and Asian male effeminacy. But simply because the Asian bro is a reaction to such racist stereotypes does not mean the figure necessarily challenges such structural and systemic forces in an effective way. In a more paranoid reading, we might question whether the Asian bro even reinforces existing racial stereotypes.

For a minoritarian subject to put on or perform characteristics of so-called hegemonic masculinity is often read as a challenge or provocation to dominant norms. For example, writing about the sitcom *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, journalist Jada Yuan (2016) calls the casting of Filipino actor Vincent Rodriguez III as the show's love interest Josh Chan, 'its most subversive act'; while entertainment reporter Susan Cheng (2016) argues it has 'subtly dismantled the stereotypical portrayals of Asian men.' Cheng writes: 'It's an unusual portrayal of an Asian-American as the dude next door, the guy who's hot and sociable – and he gets laid' (2016). For these writers and others, it is the combination of the Asian bro's rejection of the model minority myth and his sexual desirability that challenges the subordinated stereotype of Asian American masculinity.

As David Eng (2001, 2) suggests, 'the Asian American male is materially and psychically feminized within the context of a larger US cultural imaginary', a stereotype formed through a long history of legislative acts and regulations. Expansion in the American West during the nineteenth century led to male Chinese workers being initially welcomed, then resented by white settlers. Chinese immigrants were viewed as robotic, expendable, untiring, and perpetually adaptable, hence capable of replacing white workers, leading to targeted acts of racist violence by whites (the 1871 Chinese massacre in Los Angeles, for instance) and legal discrimination including anti-miscegenation laws and immigration bans on family members. Chinese and other Asian men were often forced to take up self-employment in supposedly feminized professions: cooking, food service, and laundry (Park 2013, 11). Michael Park argues that this 'racialized gendering' created a stereotyped view of Asian men.

Like all stereotypes, however, this racialization is inconsistent and often contradictory. Robert G. Lee (1999) suggests that Asian men are represented as both emasculated *and* oversexed, the yellow peril *and* the assimilationist model minority, sexually deviant and queer *and* overly traditionalist. However, overall, the subordination of Asian American masculinity takes place through the positioning of Asian men as other to an 'authentic' American (read: white) masculinity, not simply through overt difference but rather through systemic violence (see Park 2015, 199). These stereotypes and systems of social control perform what Eng describes as 'the various ways in which Asian American male is materially and psychically feminized within the context of a larger US cultural imaginary' (2001, 2). Such stereotypes were perpetuated through the ongoing reproduction of casting types on stage and screen: from 19th century yellow face portrayals such as Fu Manchu to *Sixteen Candles*' Long Duk Dong and *The Hangover*'s Leslie Chow.

Like Frank Chin's Tam Lum, it is easy to see why the dumb and hot Asian bro would be proposed as a corrective to the devious, emasculated, robotic model minority. However, questions of feminization and its material and psychological effects for Asian men are not simply resolved by a reassertion of normativity, in no small part because the masculinity most often proposed and asserted in such projects conforms to notions of hegemonic masculinity as a type, and the systems of marginalization, complicity, and subordination that lead Asian men to be feminized in the first place. Nguyen Tan Hoang

recounts long standing arguments in Asian American studies regarding efforts of ‘remasculinization.’ Drawing on feminist critiques, Hoang reminds us that ‘Remasculinization is of limited efficacy because it recuperates Asian American masculinity by subscribing to a misogynist and homophobic agenda’ (Hoang 2014, 4). Again, the material stakes of this problem can be seen by the way in which ‘remasculinization’ discourse is activated within the toxic and often violent forums of the online MRazn community.

The bro-y Asian as often represented, might actually be seen as part of the ‘model minority’ stereotype, not offering a corrective to white, toxic, hegemonic masculinity, but playing up to it, and further entrenching what is are historical and contingent correlations (hegemony) as a fixed, biological identity. It is striking that a challenge to stereotype is offered through a pre-existing, fixed set of characteristics – in a sense, another stereotype. ‘Chances are you’re picturing a meaty white bro rather than an Asian man’ suggests one magazine after describing Manny Jacinto’s character in *The Good Place* (Francisco 2018). In effect, the dumb, hot, bro-y Asian guy ‘you never see’ on television operates in relation to an unacknowledged awareness of the dumb, hot, bro-y white guy you *always* see on TV. Jacinto himself positions his performances within popular and academic discourse on Asian emasculation: ‘It really kills me how Asian males are being emasculated, especially in TV and film,’ he says. ‘I’ve definitely been a victim of discrimination and that’s one of the biggest reasons that I stay in this game – so I can change that’ (Mochi Magazine 2017). In another interview, he clarifies his position as a lead actor and screen bro: ‘In the past, [Asian men] have always been considered effeminate, and not like “the Asian male lead.” So I try not to shy away from it too much’ (quoted in Singh-Kurtz 2019). The Asian bro is therefore a ‘problem’ because while he is produced by systemic forces of subordination and marginalization, the figure, as a representation, relies on a kind of historical forgetting or overwriting of these forces.

Sticky casting: recognition and proximity

When Keanu Reeves appeared in 2019 in a small cameo role in Nahnatchka Khan’s romantic comedy *Always Be My Maybe*, starring Ali Wong and Randall Park, it was clear that he was being (re)claimed as an Asian actor. Reeves appears in the guise of an exaggerated, unlikeable version of himself, as the new love interest of Ali Wong’s character Sasha, a Vietnamese American chef. In itself, this would be unremarkable, but *Always Be My Maybe* presents a constellation of Asian actors – Daniel Dae Kim, Vivian Bang, Charlyne Yi, and Karan Soni in addition to its two leads – and therefore has become understood as an ‘Asian American Rom-Com’ (Fan 2019). Thus, Reeves, who Dale Hudson has termed a ‘stealth Asian American,’ is being interpellated in this instance as *recognizably* Asian, a desire that the filmmakers themselves have explicitly stated (Yamato 2019 cited in Middlemost and Thomas 2022, 138). Or as LeiLani Nishimi explains: ‘The primary issue is not whether Reeves is “really” Asian or white or even multiracial, but under what circumstances he is visible (or not visible) as multiracial Asian American – and why’ (Nishime 2014, xv). Indeed, R.L. Rutsky asserts that Reeve’s filmography has ‘exhibited a consistent concern with issues of identity and its instability, with a lack of fixity that is often figured in these films’ emphasis on movement’ (Rutsky

2001, 185). In many cases, for Reeves and the characters he plays, the strength of the relational bonds portrayed on film and seemingly apparent in the actor's life seem to deeply inflect the circumstances under which he is read as white or Asian. Like other Asian bros, Reeves's bro-iness creates sticky racial relations.

Reeves has cut a swath of bro-iness across films of the past three decades and has attracted recent academic attention (Middlemost and Thomas 2022). Reeves has more often than not exuded a sort of affable obliviousness in his roles and interviews. Rutsky suggests that Keanu is often presented as 'inarticulate, lacking the words to speak, lacking even something to say. He becomes little more than a face, a body—without depth, without an interior. More than one interviewer has noted that with Keanu, 'what you see is what you get'—which is, of course, one definition of stupidity. Stupidity, in this sense, is always blatant' (Rutsky 2001, 189). But Rutsky is also careful to note that no matter how apparent that screen stupidity is, it 'cannot be dissociated, in Keanu's case, from his obvious physical beauty. Much of the antipathy toward Keanu – including the perception of his dumbness – seems traceable to the sheer fact of his attractiveness' (189). This leads Rutsky to suggest that 'Keanu therefore seems to fall victim to some of the same stereotypes that have commonly been attached to feminine beauty' (189). Of course it is not just his physical attractiveness that has made Keanu, but a playing on and plying of various bro-y ways of performing. A YouTube video, for instance, collects all of Reeves's 'whoas' in chronological order from the 1980s to the 2010s – it is over five minutes long (Owenenergy 2018). Whoa ... ! The supercut demonstrates a consistency of performance across decades of work, a refined deployment of bro-y wonder and oblivion.

This mode has also impacted his public persona. When Stephen Colbert asks Reeves 'What do you think happens when we die, Keanu Reeves?', one commenter notes that 'The audience laughed at first, because why would Keanu know?!' After a moment, Reeves replies, 'I know that the ones who love us will miss us' (Wong-Shing 2022). The audience produces a collective 'awwww' followed by applause. In another instance, Reeves meets his future bandmate Robert Mailhouse in a grocery store after Reeves starts a conversation about the Detroit Red Wings jersey that Mailhouse is wearing (Pappademas 2022). It's a 'meet cute' in the key of bro. However, for as much as Keanu has been so crucial to the formation of the aesthetic of 'bro,' what he has not been legible as, for most of his career, is Asian. A mixed-race person with Chinese-Hawaiian ancestry, Reeves identifies as Asian and a person of color, though does not see himself as a 'spokesperson' for the community (McKenzie 2020). For most of his career, Reeves has not been cast in roles specific to Asian heritage, or, more plainly, he has mostly been read and cast as white (Hudson 2007, 145).

Scholarly research on Keanu Reeves sometimes points out his racial indeterminacy. For Julian Cha, Reeves 'provided a sense of visibility as he embodied a vague "Asianness" and a definite "Otherness" onscreen. [...] I never had factual information or concrete evidence of his heritage; instead I assumed his explicit Asianness but certain Otherness' (Cha 2012, 49–50). For instance, later roles, like Reeves' most famous role as Neo in *The Matrix* series, have played more with Reeve's racial indeterminacy, yet despite these films borrowing heavily from Asian cinematographic and performance aesthetics in its portrayal of martial arts, they assume the neutral whiteness of Reeves' protagonist. Yet as Liu (2019) notes in *LitHub*, the words used to describe Reeves are not neutral: 'Exotic,

mysterious, enigmatic, wooden, robotic, androgynous. Words that have been used to describe Keanu – so often, for so many years, they’re the tired clichés of any discourse around him. But what’s not discussed in the mainstream is how these are also highly racialized descriptions, particularly around Asian Americans, and Asian masculinities.’

If *Always Be My Maybe*’s constellation of Asian American actors interpellates Keanu Reeves’s racial indeterminacy as legibly Asian, it is instructive to consider his casting in his earlier bro roles to see how they mediate this aspect of his identity. In Reeves’s early roles, the ones so crucial to the formation of bro, his homosocial partner, the half of the couple that makes bro, bro, is a white actor. In *Bill & Ted*, this is Alex Winter. In *Point Break*, it is Patrick Swayze’s Bodhi, along with Bodhi’s gang of surfer bros (or are they dudes?) Nathaniel (John Philbin), Roach (James Le Gros) and Grommet (BoJesse Christopher). In *My Own Private Idaho*, he is paired with River Phoenix; Gus Van Sant’s pioneering piece of new queer cinema is more serious than either *Bill & Ted* or *Point Break* but no less reliant on a central homosocial love story between Phoenix’s Mike and Reeves’s Scott. In essence, these homosocial castings position Reeves within constellations of whiteness that stick to and overwrite his identification as Asian and impact his legibility throughout his career while simultaneously reifying ‘bro’ as white. Drawing from Ahmed (2004), this demonstrates how whiteness is ‘sticky,’ not *only* produced by the structural forces of patriarchy and racial capitalism that surround these performances of masculinity, but a kind of aesthetic or feeling that adheres to the subject. Stickiness, Ahmed writes, is ‘an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs’ (90). We might therefore suggest that, like emotions, casting ‘sticks,’ rendering individuals more or less visible through frames of recognition that are not easily broken.

Released in the same year as *The Matrix*, Paul and Chris Weitz’s *American Pie* brought another Asian bro to prominence, the actor John Cho, who appears as ‘MILF Guy #2’. Aside from Shannon Elizabeth (an actor of mixed-race Arab heritage who is presented as white, specifically of Czech heritage, in the film) and Clyde Kastutsu (who appears in a small role as an English teacher), Cho is the most prominent person of colour in the film. Yet, Cho appears for less than ten seconds as one of two bros who explain the term ‘MILF.’ Yet, unlike Keanu, who can ‘pass’ as white, Cho’s casting does not erase his racialization but rather performs against it, subverting expectations of Asian male characters such as Long Duk Dong who have appeared in other teen comedies upon whose history *American Pie* builds. Cho cemented this casting against expectation in the three *Harold and Kumar* films, parlaying his comedic talent into a new franchise. Cho’s Harold Lee and Kal Penn’s Kumar Patel are two Asian stoner bros who smoke weed and get into wild hijinks in the vein of Cheech and Chong’s stoner comedies.¹ In *Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle* (2003) Harold is first seen fastidiously at his keyboard while leaving his white-collar office job for the day, before flopping on the couch with Kumar and lighting up a bowl. Harold and Kumar postulate the Asian bro as the unexpected other to the model minority, part of the comedy emerging from racialized expectations.

The play on racialized expectations might be read in conjunction with Justin Lin’s independent film *Better Luck Tomorrow*, released the previous year. In this crime-drama, a group of Asian American teenagers study for the SATs by day and engage in gang activity at night. Ju Yon Kim notes that the film shows characters who engage dual stereotypes of Asian males (studious model minority and yellow peril) (Kim 2015, 196–7). Yet in challenging the ‘illegibility’ of Asian masculinity, the film also shows the

way remasculinization discourse ‘revive[s] stereotypes of other racialized [Black, Latino] bodies while casting [the characters’] behaviours as imitations, whether through the voice of another character or through the excesses of the performance itself’ (198). In essence, then, *Harold & Kumar* and *Better Luck Tomorrow* both depict an Asian American homosocial structure in order to challenge stereotypes of the model minority and degraded or effeminate Asian masculinity. However, in casting the Asian protagonists in (for *Harold & Kumar*) largely white or (for *Better Luck Tomorrow*) multi-racial performative contexts, both films cast Asian bros as exceptional or unusual, as imitations, regardless of how successful.

Post-Harold, the Asian bro prominently re-emerges with Josh Chan of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, played by Vincent Rodriguez III. Critical reception of the show broadly considered Josh a positive representation of Asian masculinity. Josh is certainly bro-y: he is a slacker, skater dude who enjoys CrossFit and sports bars. But while he has a multi-racial group of friends, homosocial interactions are far less present in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* than in any of the previous texts. Josh’s role in the narrative is primarily to be the object of heterosexual attraction (and obsession) of the protagonist. While the show acknowledges that Josh *has* bros, its political intervention is built around the fact that Josh *is* a bro. Yuan (2016) notes that the creators of the show use the term bro several times in reference to Josh while being interviewed. Ashley Thorpe argues that ‘casting an actor into a role means connecting two performing entities [the actor’s body and the ghostly residue of their previous performances] into one performative context’ (Thorpe 2014, 439). In the case of Rodriguez, an actor who was little known before being cast in this show, his performing body is being interpellated alongside two other performing entities: the residue of other representations of Asian men and the residue of the white bro identity that as we have noted was invented by an actor who is mixed-race Asian-American. Thus, the singular performative context of Josh Chan shifts the Asian bro from a relational figure to a character whose adoption of gestures and signifiers responds to other performative contexts for racialized Asian men.

Josh’s bros on the show – Hector (Erick Lopez), Greg (Santino Fontana/Skylar Astin) and White Josh (David Hull) – are defined in their respective narrative arcs by their romantic couplings. However, the character of Father Brah, played by Rene Gube, presents a potential subversion of the Asian bro as identity. Father Brah, as his name suggests, is a bro-y priest who is both Josh’s friend and confessor. He enjoys weed and playing basketball, and speaks with an exaggerated West Coast US accent that strongly resembles Keanu Reeves’s Ted. While the contrast between Father Brah’s social role (and the priestly uniform this entails) and his adoption of bro-y signifiers is part of the joke of this minor role, he is also marked as a bro in *relational* ways. Father Brah appears in the narrative because of his fraternity with Josh, with whom he shares a Filipino cultural and ethnic identity. Combined with the homosociality of his social role (priesthood), Father Brah’s scenes of offering sacramental confession (and weed) to Josh are performances of Asian bros that decenter whiteness.

The character of Father Brah connects the informal homosocial relations of bros with the formalized homosociality of religious orders. After all, what is the difference between priest (or a monk) and a bro? Both have brothers and are enmeshed in homosocial, perhaps patriarchal, relations and environments marked by adherence to particular social codes, languages and dialects, and hierarchies. Manny Jacinto played

both a monk and a bro on NBC's sitcom *The Good Place*. Created by Michael Schur in 2016, NBC's *The Good Place* foregrounds itself as an experiment of moral philosophy actively questioning the premise of what makes someone a good person. The characters are broadly representative of social 'types' and tropes: Eleanor is a self-described 'Arizona trashbag'; Tahani is a wealthy socialite; Chidi is an indecisive academic. Manny Jacinto plays Jason Mendoza, a bro from Florida, who is initially 'mistaken' for Jianyu, a Taiwanese monk. *The Good Place* director Michael Schur explains that this is at least part of the reason it took a very long time to find Jacinto for the role of Jason: 'It was like—we have to find someone who can both look like a silent, beatific monk and then also be a funny dumb guy, which is not the easiest job in the world. There's a lot of bad, funny, dumb-guy characters in the history of television. You can really step in it if you cast a dumb guy who isn't a good actor. That's why it took us so long to find Manny' (Pierce 2017). Contained in Schur's comment is a larger problem of the industry of casting and (in this case) its white supremacist assumptions of visibility and race: Jacinto is assumed to visually 'look like' a Buddhist monk while embodying the role and persona of a (white) Florida bro. This underlines the casting processes at work wherein a casting call asks actors to see themselves in the role and to convince others that they are 'right' for it.

One of the early turns in *The Good Place* is the revelation of the Jason's 'true' identity. In early episodes, where Jacinto plays Jianyu, he is completely silent. In the third episode, Jianyu confronts the show's protagonist, Eleanor, who believes that she is in the Good Place by mistake, and reveals that he is actually Jason, a bro from Jacksonville, Florida who DJs, runs a sixty-person dance crew, and deals drugs with his friend Pillboi. Furthermore, he is not Taiwanese, but Filipino ('That's racist. Heaven is so racist.'). He is fond of sleeveless t-shirts, flat-brimmed baseball caps, and EDM. His devotion to Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback Blake Bortles is as unwavering as his love for his bros Pillboi and Donkey Doug (who is actually his father). The duality of Jianyu/Jason is both part of the show's central conceit (the afterlife as a series of experiments in ethical living) and a way to play on the assumptions of its liberal viewership. The fact that Manny Jacinto can occupy, believably, the role of a silent Buddhist monk, that is, an Asian stereotype, before being revealed as a Florida bro, plays on the supposed fungibility of Asian and Asian American identity ('they all look the same').

Initial critical response to the character of Jason Mendoza positioned the character as a challenge to representations of marginalized Asian American masculinities. For some critics, Jacinto's performances present a combination of the Asian bro's rejection of the model minority myth and his sexual desirability that challenges the subordinated stereotype of Asian American masculinity. The larger intervention of *The Good Place* and the character of Jason Mendoza, unlike other Asian bros in the past, is not only to present an Asian bro as a remasculinizing counter to subordinated Asian American masculinity, but rather, like the laboratory ground of the Good Place/Bad Place itself, to vividly demonstrate the relational and homosocial construction of an Asian bro. Jason as an Asian bro cannot be separated from the relational contexts in which he is made to appear, which include forces of racism, sexism, and misogyny. In this way, his performance in *The Good Place* moves beyond the aspirational premise of greater diversity and inclusion and is a piece of casting that is actually *about* casting itself, and all its attendant politics. The television, film, and theatre industries socially cast swaths of auditioners even as only one

actor will ultimately get the role. In the case of Jacinto, an actor who was little known before being cast in this show, his performing body is being interpellated alongside two other performing entities: the residue of other representations of Asian men and the residue of the white bro identity. Thus, the singular performative context of Jacinto shifts the Asian bro from a relational figure to a character whose adoption of gestures and signifiers responds to other performative contexts for racialized Asian men.

Although Manny Jacinto is at the center of much of the discourse around new representations of the Asian bro, as an actor he has little claim to the power structures that make such representations appear. Claire Syler suggests that ‘casting is inherently a political act’ (Syler 2019, 4). By critically examining the practice of casting to think about broader representation on stage (and in television and film), Syler frames casting as a means of offering ‘more access to opportunity and broader representation on our stages’ as ‘an aspirational premise’ (4). The Asian bro, then, is an interesting means of illustrating the problems of casting because he is at once what Claire Syler calls an ‘aspirational premise’ (4) challenging systemic forces of subordination and marginalization, but simultaneously reliant – for its impact – on its racialized distance from what is considered an authentic expression of (white masculinity). In other words, the challenge to the existing stereotypes of Asian masculinity is offered through a pre-existing and fixed set of characteristics and signifiers already associated with whiteness. Yet, associating a political corrective with regressive characteristics threatens to reify a discourse of remasculinization and its association with misogyny and homophobia. Furthermore, the marking of the figure as an exceptional one (Jason like other Asian bros on TV ‘just happen’ to be Asian) reifies the correlation between bros and whiteness.

What this genealogy of the Asian bro demonstrates is the abiding power of representation and its material apparatus – casting – to articulate and construct ideas of Asian men’s proximity to whiteness and hegemonic masculinity. As Karen Shimakawa has argued, in the US American imaginary, Asian Americans are the ‘national abject,’ that which ‘continually must be both made present and jettisoned’ to maintain the nation’s ‘symbolic coherence’ (2002, 3). In other words, the simultaneous visibility and exclusion of Asian Americans is central to the formation of ‘(legal and cultural) US Americanness’ (5). The Asian bros above demonstrate how this abject inclusion/exclusion sticks to the Asian American male subject through prior and historical representations, by being passed along and reproduced in a network of casting practices, which not only assigns bodies to roles, but positions them in a constellation of other subjects, white and racialized. It is when the Asian bro appears in majority white spaces that the trope appears exceptional, dependent on its racial difference from what is perceived to be an authentic expression of white masculinity.

Conclusion: Kevin Nguyen

Casting as an industrial practice underscores the problems of any typological approach, but especially with race or gender. Yet, prevailing accounts of masculinity seem to be locked into developing further and more types even as they are conceived in terms of relational and social configurations. We recognize the irony, of course, in claiming the bro as a social relation even as it might be more readily seen as just another masculine type. But in this case, the relation actually serves to undo the seemingly fixed identity.

This is perhaps a way to approach casting, both social and in the work that actors do. Kirstin Smith explains, 'Whereas being cast alienates actors from themselves and those who share their identity work, decolonising casting necessitates a redistribution of power and alliances between those ordinarily estranged' (2020, 49). Perhaps, we might see glimmers of such a revolution in the ways that performers are already casting themselves – that is claiming the means of identity work and realigning the social and industrial possibilities of casting.

Understanding 'social casting' is to understand that bro is not an *a priori* identity that is necessarily indexed to hegemonic and toxic masculine characteristics, but rather a response to a hail – a call in which one recognizes one's self – whether by a fellow bro or a casting call. This interpellative structure is now being played out in an interesting way on Asian social media. Towards a conclusion, here, we look to a corollary form of social casting of Asian bros, which of course is particular to our present time, but we think will help articulate further the connections among social relations and types or tropes.

A phenomenon of the late 2010's internet, accelerated during the COVID-19 adoption of the Chinese social media app TikTok, 'Kevin Nguyen' is a stereotype defined as 'an online caricature of a young Asian male with bro or frat-like inclinations' (Know Your Meme 2023). The meme is interesting because, like other iterations of the Asian bro, it relies on recognition, hailing, and legibility. But unlike the bro-y characters played by Reeves, Cho, Rodriguez, and Jacinto, Kevin Nguyen is a phenomenon of *self*-casting, a participatory, crowd-sourced playing with stereotype that recalibrates the Asian bro away from its association with whiteness.

Kevin Nguyen is one of the most popular names for Vietnamese men and boys in the United States (Makalintal 2019). As Bettina Makalintal writes in *Vice*, 'Kevin Nguyen is a stereotype, based on nobody specific but also an amalgamation of many, some of whom might in fact be named Kevin Nguyen' (Makalintal 2019). Kevin Nguyen circulates in internet memes in the largely Asian space of the 'subtle asian traits' Facebook group; for example, the 'Kevin Nguyen starter kit' meme includes four squares that are filled with Kevin Nguyen-esque signifiers: party wristbands, Juul pods, gold chains, diamond earrings, an Audi, a Lexus, boba milk tea. The signifiers are endless, but they all add up to Kevin Nguyen.

The theatricality of the Kevin Nguyen meme, which reduces persona to a series of signifiers and gestures, enables young Asian creators to both play within and expand a stereotype. There is no policing of what traits represent Kevin Nguyen – like a bro, Kevin Nguyen is Kevin Nguyen because he is recognized by others as Kevin Nguyen. In contrast to other Asian stereotypes, the Kevin Nguyen stereotype is not externally imposed by the dominant culture (or a casting director) but rather internally invented and circulated within a global Asian culture. The meme, therefore, might be seen as a form of critical play that enables, to paraphrase writer Kevin Nguyen, a discourse to take place about failed and partial assimilation (Nguyen 2019). Like all the Asian bros that have appeared before, Kevin Nguyen exists in relation to larger social contexts. Yet unlike Asian bros that are cast by the larger industry, Kevin Nguyen, on TikTok, at least, enables a form of self-casting where Asian subjects can, through performance, work critically through the processes of racial interpellation. Industrial casting practices, like sociological

typologies, often function through identificatory signifiers taken as preemptive of social relations. Such social and entertainment industry casting do not take into account the relational dimension of shifting frames of recognition – in other words, how one is recognized as a certain type is dependent on communities, which are rarely fixed or static. Evaluating whether an instance of casting is a ‘win’ for representation must therefore go further than how a body encounters a character breakdown, but how the subject moves within and through the various frames of recognition that bring that breakdown into being.

Note

1. The *Cheech & Chong* films star half-Chinese actor Tommy Chong, who, like Keanu Reeves, is both Canadian, and a ‘stealth Asian.’

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