And It Was (*Not*) All Yellow: How *Crazy Rich Asians* Has Transformed Hollywood's Rom-Com

"'Crazy Rich Asians' Tops Box Office, Proving Power of Diversity (Again)"

The New York Times

"Is 'Crazy Rich Asians' Asian enough?"

The Washington Post

The barrage of blatantly conflicting headlines following the release of 2018 movie *Crazy Rich Asians* sparked a worldwide conversation about cultural representation in Hollywood. The polarising power of cultural representation immediately dichotomised the movie's audience into two opposing groups: those that appreciated the nuanced representation of the cultural divide on two sides of the hyphen of 'Asian-American', and those that objected to the inauthentic representation of Asian ethnicities and cultural traditions. On one hand, Asian-Americans in the US lauded the film for its revolutionary all-Asian cast after a "quarter century drought" (Ito 1) in Hollywood. On the other hand, large Asian communities around the world (like China and Singapore) heavily criticized the film for not being 'Asian enough'. All I could think of after watching *Crazy Rich Asians* was how great a Rom-com it was, while everyone around me couldn't look beyond the film's all-Asian cast. I was surprised to be the only one thinking about film's use of and impact on the Romantic Comedy genre. I love Rom-coms because, unlike other films, they can make me laugh, cry and hope: laugh away the awkward moments, cry through the hardships and hope for the fulfilment of the pursuit of love. As an Asian and a frequenter of the Hollywood Rom-com, I wish to extend the existing conversation about *Crazy Rich Asians* beyond polarising racial considerations to discuss **how** the movie creates a sense of *belonging* for Asian-

American actors and spectators on Hollywood's big screen through the use of the Romantic Comedy genre. I believe that *Crazy Rich Asians*, by responsibly embracing the genre's tropes like male lead desirability and simultaneously disavowing other tropes like female lead passivity and a one-dimensional narrative, manages to redefine Asian-American representation in Hollywood cinema.

Before proceeding further, I would like to better define the concept of *belonging* on screen. I propose two related definitions for *belonging*: one for spectators, one for actors. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,* renowned feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey claims that the film screen as a metaphorical mirror has the power to "[give] rise to the… identification with others" (10). I extend Mulvey's psychoanalytic concept of 'identification with others' to define *belonging* for spectators as the feeling of acceptance formed subconsciously when a spectator sees a representation on the big screen that they can 'identify' with. I define *belonging* for actors as their ability to create a sense of *belonging* for their diverse spectatorship. The more the spectators can relate to the actors, the more the actors *belong* to the screen. I believe that *Crazy Rich Asians* shows us that the Romantic Comedy genre has the power to create *belonging* for actors, and thus, spectators in its films.

Crazy Rich Asians adheres to the Romantic Comedy genre's archetypal convention of a desirable male lead, in order to challenge the stereotype of "Asian-American male hyposexuality" (Shimizu 3) in Hollywood and to establish the notion of *belonging* on the big screen for all its Asian-American actors and spectators. This Rom-com convention is fulfilled by the male lead Nick Young (Henry Golding), who is seen shirtless on many occasions in the film. These shirtless moments showcase his muscular physique making him desirable according to Hollywood's standards of desirability. In conforming to this convention, *Crazy Rich Asians* groundbreakingly challenges and redefines the historically 'hyposexual'

representation of Asian-American men in Hollywood. Anti-Miscegenation laws criminalising interracial marriages were in force until the late 1960s in the US and affected films of that time by disallowing Asian-American male actors to be romantic leads. Yet, long after their abolition, romantic leading Asian-American actors have remained a Hollywood blue-moon. The 'hyposexual' representation of Asian-Asian male actors encompasses popular Hollywood tropes of Asian men in roles like the *socially unskilled foreign exchange student* (Gedde Watanabe's character, Long Duk Dong, in *Sixteen Candles* 1984) and *desexualised martial artist* (Jet Li's character, Liu Jian, in *Kiss the Dragon* 2001). These 'hyposexual' tropes that have remained even after the abolition of the Anti-Miscegenation laws indicate that Asian-American male actors have been incapable of garnering the romantic adulation that white male actors get from Hollywood's audience, because Asian-American males are considered inferior to white American males. Golding's desirability breaks the stereotype of 'Asian-American male hyposexuality'. Thus, Golding's character creates *belonging* for Asian-American male actors as subjects of romantic desire on Hollywood's big screen, by appealing to the ideals of male sexual appeal in the Rom-com genre of Hollywood.

But *Crazy Rich Asians* does not stop at establishing *belonging* for Asian-American male spectators and actors. The film also disavows the Rom-com convention of the passive lead female, by showcasing resilient and complex female characters played by Asian-American female actors. These lead roles played by Asian-American female actors specifically challenge the stereotype of "Asian-American female hypersexuality" (Shimizu 3) in Hollywood, and foster a new feeling of *belonging* for Asian-American female actors and spectators. The leading female Rachel Chu (Constance Wu) challenges film theorist David Shumway's "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back" (157) storyline and redefines it as *girl and boy are already dating, girl chooses to leave boy (so he doesn't have to choose between her and his family), girl accepts boy back*. Rachel is a middle-class, second

generation Asian-American, and is faced with her boyfriend Nick's 'crazy rich' family. Rachel is not fazed by the wealth and stands up for what she believes in against Nick's mother Eleanor Young, who believes Rachel is not the right girl for Nick. Rachel purposely loses the game of Mahjong against Eleanor, giving Nick up so that he will not be torn to choose between his family and her. And Rachel chooses to accept Nick back in the end. Eleanor Young (Michelle Yeoh) redefines the role of the 'villain' in the Romantic Comedy genre. A Rom-com 'villain' is one that crafts obstacles in the relationship of the protagonist couple-to-be for no reason other than malintent, and is never humanised, but rather immediately disliked by the movie's audience. Eleanor does craft obstacles in Nick and Rachel's relationship, but not without her own reasons: she believes that Rachel represents the American part of Asian-American and does not respect Asian culture, and so is not fit to marry Nick. Eleanor, thus, is portrayed as a defender of her Asian culture and a respectable matriarch with hardships and desires of her own. Further, Eleanor is humanised in moments when she faces problems with her own mother-in-law and so is not disliked but rather better understood by her audience, unlike typical Rom-com 'villains'. Therefore, in consciously breaking away from the Rom-com genre's archetypes of passive females and 'villains', *Crazy Rich Asians* challenges the 'hypersexual', fetishized representation of Asian-American females and formulates a new sense of dignity and *belonging* for its Asian-American female actors and spectators.

One could argue that the Asian-American female representation in *Crazy Rich Asians* establishes an unrealistic and super-feminised ideal for Asian-American females who are expected always to stand their ground and forgo vulnerability, and hence creates *belonging* of the wrong kind on screen. To this, I'd say that the most effective way to counter the deeply entrenched Hollywood notion of Asian-American female 'hypersexuality' and submissiveness would be to show that Asian-American females aren't objectified

hypersexual subjects, and in fact have the ability to stand up for what they believe in and take control of their narratives. Thus, by crafting such resilient, humanised female characters, *Crazy Rich Asians* breaks new ground for Asian-American female representation in Hollywood, bringing about the possibility to *belong* for its long-alienated Asian-American female spectatorship.

To better qualify my claim that *Crazy Rich Asians* establishes Asian-American *belonging* on Hollywood's big screen, I would like to contend detractors' claims that *Crazy Rich Asians* is guilty of 'whitewashing' its characters despite an all-Asian cast. In particular, I would like to demystify the following claim made by reporter Kennith Rosario for *The Hindu* in his article '*Crazy Rich Asians' review: Asian outside, white inside*: " 'You're like a banana,' says Goh Peik Lin (Awkwafina), while consoling her friend, Rachel Chu (Constance Wu), 'Yellow on the outside, white on the inside.' It's an analogy [from a dialogue in *Crazy Rich Asians*] that can conveniently be stretched to describe [the entire film]… — an archetypal Hollywood romcom packaged with Asian casting…" (1). I acknowledge that the film's adherence to white archetypes of the Hollywood Rom-com provides some truth to Rosario's belief of 'whitewashing'. However, I argue that establishing *belonging* for Hollywood's dominantly white spectatorship can only be done by catering, in part, to Hollywood's predominantly white standards. I feel that the white conventions adopted by this film are *limited* and *consciously* employed to make the film *(Not) All Yellow*, so that it can establish *belonging* for its non-Asian Hollywood audience. The film's *conscious, partial* adherence to the 'archetypal Hollywood romcom' create the possibility for Hollywood's dominantly white spectatorship to empathise with. This dominantly white audience feels *belonging* through 'yellow' Asian and Asian-American actors. Hence, I believe that it is an unfair oversimplification to allege that the entire movie is merely 'yellow on the outside' and mainly 'white on the inside'. By contending Rosario's claim that blames *Crazy Rich Asians*

for ‘whitewashing’ its characters, I make the case that the film establishes *belonging* for the whole Asian-American community on Hollywood’s big screen, even in the minds its non-Asian spectators.

Up to this point, I have explored how *Crazy Rich Asians* uses the Romantic Comedy genre in a bid to create *belonging* for its Asian-American cast and Asian-American spectators in Hollywood. I claim now that in employing the Romantic Comedy genre to create *belonging* for its Asian-American actors and spectators, *Crazy Rich Asians* transforms into a fresh lens with which to view the Romantic Comedy genre in Hollywood.

At this point, it is necessary to better contextualize existing perceptions of the genre in the eyes of its scholars and spectators. The Romantic Comedy genre has been habitually disparaged as formulaic, its conventions termed clichés. Shumway’s “boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back” (157) definition of the Romantic Comedy storyline encapsulates the chief tropes of the genre: the overused, oversimplified, one-dimensional, inherently heterosexual nature of the quest for love that is undertaken by the active male lead and always ends *happily-ever-after* with the lasting romantic union of the lead couple. Shumway is definitely not the only denigrator. In her book *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, film studies Professor Tamar Jeffers McDonald states that the “basic ideology the romantic comedy genre supports is the primary importance of the couple… usually the heterosexual, white couple” (13). Media studies professor, Dr. Ewan Kirkland, in his article *Romantic Comedy and the Construction of Heterosexuality* furthers McDonald’s claim by stating that both whiteness and heterosexuality have established cultural hegemony by their perceived normalcy on the Rom-com movie screen, where they are seen as “nothing-in-particular” which is “paradoxically, not [due] to their absence from view, but… [instead to] their constant and pervasive visibility” (1). Additionally, films in this genre have been called ‘chick-flicks’ since 1993 (“Chick-Flicks” Google Ngram), which has made “most

recent scholarship take… as uncontroversial starting point" (Stevens 1) the primary target audience for these films as trivial, mindless women "for whom romantic love is ostensibly a more urgent objective" (Stevens 1). Indian-American actor and comedian Mindy Kaling in her 2011 New Yorker Magazine piece *Flick Chicks* claims that "the [Romantic Comedy] genre has been so degraded in the past twenty years that saying you like romantic comedies is essentially an admission of mild stupidity" (2). Viewers don't want to be associated with Rom-coms because it makes them look like less refined moviegoers. Cis-men, in particular, are threatened by the notion that the genre feminizes them. Like viewers, film theorists have scoffed at the genre for so long, that its essence has been trivialised to inanity.

While I do not condone the existing setbacks of the Romantic Comedy in this essay, I believe that the genre deserves closer scholarly inspection than it is given. I believe that these films have the ability to yield powers because they appeal to viewers' emotions and work subliminally to influence viewer's minds. I call these powers *latent* because they would not be obviously identified at first glance. The first such *latent* power is the psychological power of creating *belonging* on the screen for its actors, and hence for its spectators. The second such *latent* power is the unrecognized power in responsibly, partially embracing and challenging the formulaic tropes of the archetypal genre. *Crazy Rich Asians* manages to wield both powers concurrently. The movie responsibly embraces the genre's convention of lead male desirability to establish *belonging* for Asian-American male actors and spectators and simultaneously challenges the one-dimensional, mainly-white storyline and traditional roles of the passive female and archetypal 'villain' in the Rom-com genre creating *belonging* for Asian-American female actors and spectators.

In light of my earlier claim about *Crazy Rich Asians* being a lens with which to view the Rom-com genre, I further contend that *Crazy Rich Asians* signals a drastic shift in the perception of the genre, that I call the *Double Take Paradigm*. *Double take* is a reaction of

extreme surprise that makes you look for **second** time at something you didn't see in at first glance. I define the *Double Take Paradigm* as a new period that inspires the spectators of the Hollywood Rom-coms and scholars of film theory do a *double take* on the Romantic Comedy genre. Films that I believe to be a part of this paradigm shift are those that concurrently yield the genre's two *latent* powers (1. of creating *belonging* for actors on the big-screen; 2. of breaking the genre's archetypal structure impactfully) that have audiences and scholars both doing a *double take* on the genre. Movies in the *Double Take Paradigm* promise responsible portrayals of gender, race and the quest for love, and herald a closer look into what the genre has to offer to Hollywood. The *Double Take Paradigm* is also revolutionary in that it promises exclusive cinematic space for minorities that celebrates them: a space where their stories are told with optimism and, therefore, establish *belonging* for these stories in Hollywood cinema.

Crazy Rich Asians inspires the audience to do a *double take* on the concept of white coupling in the Romantic Comedy genre. The genre's subliminal impact has made viewers easily fall in love with the leading couple-to-be and root for them to find their love. In the past, this adulation for the on-screen couple has given rise to the demand in the audience to want to see the couple together on-screen again. This demand has then caused the couple to be cast in more movies together, which in turn has given an *ethereal* sense of *belonging* to the couple. We could call these couples *iconic duos* because Hollywood will always remember them. While the phrase, *iconic duos*, has nothing to do with race or gender, *iconic duo* status in the Rom-com genre before *Crazy Rich Asians* has only been earned by white, heterosexual couples like Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan (*Sleepless in Seattle* 1993, *You've Got Mail* 1998), Richard Gere and Julia Roberts (*Pretty Woman* 1990, *The Runaway Bride* 1999), Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence (*Silver Linings Playbook* 2012, *American Hustle* 2013) and Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone (*Crazy Stupid Love* 2011, *La La Land* 2016). The

Henry Golding – Constance Wu duo in *Crazy Rich Asians*, while heterosexual, is not white. Yet, Henry Golding and Constance Wu have found *belonging* as an Asian-American on-screen couple in Hollywood. The Henry Golding – Constance Wu duo is loved by the Hollywood audience and shows promise to gain *iconic duo* status, by being considered for a sequel, *China Rich Girlfriend*. Adulation for this duo proves that *iconic duos* do not have to be white to be iconic. This duo's representation inspires potential for more diverse representations of *iconic duos*. The next great step in this direction could possibly be a non-heteronormative lead couple in a Rom-com. Thus, *Crazy Rich Asians* makes its audience in Hollywood reconsider, and broaden, its notions of romantic white coupling by making them do a *double take* on *iconic duos* through the Henry Golding – Constance Wu duo.

In conclusion, I have shown that there is value in shifting the focus of the existing polarising race-driven conversations about *Crazy Rich Asians* that always involves verdicts of love or hatred for the film, to how the film can simply be appreciated for its skilful use of the Romantic Comedy genre to pave new paths for Asian-American representation in Hollywood. The essay begins with exploring the use of the Romantic Comedy genre as a lens to understand how *Crazy Rich Asians* was able to create *belonging* for Asian-American actors in Hollywood and ends with the film transforming into a lens to view the *Double Take Paradigm* in the Romantic Comedy genre. Thus, the ideal relationship between a film and its genre is a dynamic one, where both can be seen as meaningful lenses with which to view the other. Finally, *Crazy Rich Asians* provides the first step in reimagining a new period for the Hollywood Rom-com called the *Double Take Paradigm* (2018 onwards with films like *Love, Simon* 2018, *To All The Boys I've Loved Befor*e 2018, *Always Be My Maybe* 2019 and *The Half Of It* 2020). This *Double Take Paradigm* will have both spectators and scholars doing a *double take* to realise just how much *latent* potential the genre presents to Hollywood cinema.

Works Cited

Barnes, Brooks. " 'Crazy Rich Asians' Tops Box Office Again." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 26 Aug. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/08/26/arts/crazy-rich-asians-tops-box-office-again.html.

"Chick-Flicks." *Google Books: Google Ngram Viewer*, Google, books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=chick-flicks&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cchick%2B-%2Bflicks%3B%2Cc0.

Chiu, Allyson. "Is 'Crazy Rich Asians' Asian Enough?" *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 10 Aug. 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/08/10/is-crazy-rich-asians-asian-enough/.

Crazy Rich Asians. Directed by Jon M. Chu, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 7 Aug. 2018.

Ito, Robert. " 'Crazy Rich Asians': Why Did It Take So Long to See a Cast Like This?" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 8 Aug. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/08/08/movies/crazy-rich-asians-cast.html.

Kaling, Mindy. "Flick Chicks." *The New Yorker*, 2011, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/03/flick-chicks.

Kirkland, Ewan. "Romantic Comedy and the Construction of Heterosexuality." *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, The University of Nottingham, 2007, www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2007/october-2007/kirkland.pdf.

McDonald, Tamar Jeffers. “Romantic Comedy and Genre.” *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, by Tamar Jeffers McDonald, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 7–17.

Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18., doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

Rosario, Kennith. “ ‘Crazy Rich Asians’ Review: Asian Outside, White Inside.” *The Hindu*, The Hindu, 6 Oct. 2018, www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/crazy-rich-asians-review-asian-outside-white-inside/article25141958.ece.

Shimizu, Celine Parreñas. “Ethics and Responsibility: The Sexual Problems of Asian American Men in the Movies.” *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies*, by Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Stanford University Press, 2012, pp. 1–32.

Shumway, David. “Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis.” *Google Books*, NYU Press, 2003, books.google.com/?id=KdVa73vN1BgC&dq=modern%2Blove%2Bby%2BDavid%2BR.%2BShumway&printsec=frontcover.

Stevens, Kyle. “Romantic Comedy and the Virtues of Predictability.” *Taylor & Francis*, 14 Jan. 2020, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17400309.2019.1664059.