

THESIS

THE VERNACULAR RHETORIC OF AND AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO *THE DEBUT*

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ABSTRACT

THE VERNACULAR RHETORIC OF AND AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO *THE DEBUT*

In this thesis I look at an early Filipina/o American film, *The Debut* (2000). As one of the first of its kind *The Debut* was written, starred, directed, supported, produced, and created by and for the Filipino/a community (Ginsela 2003a; Ginsela 2003b). The marginalized Filipina/o American community has little power and little say within contemporary U.S. society and as a result, they are rarely acknowledged in U.S. economics, politics, culture, history, and society (Cordova 1983; Espiritu 2003). The silencing of the Filipina/o American community has resulted in creating a population of people who appear to have been erased from the public memory of the country they inhabit. The erasure and silencing has repercussions for the identity of the Filipina/o American community and issues surrounding identity. To explore Filipina/o American identity, I employ a dual methodology. The first is a critical analysis of the Filipina/o American film *The Debut* (2000). Using a theory of vernacular rhetoric I argue *The Debut* showcases several identities which consist of a *both/and* quality that allows the Filipina/o American community to maintain an identity at odds with itself. The second approach is an audience analysis of Filipina/o American college age students who discuss the relevance of the experiences depicted in the film to their own lives. In the conclusion I discuss that we need to continue educating the public about representations on screen; there needs to be more research done on vernacular discourses, ethnic audiences, and focus groups; there needs to be a cultivation of appreciation in the Filipina/o American community for film as art; for the time being, instead of more research being done by scholars what we actually need is for the Filipina/o American community to create more films.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE VERNACULAR RHETORIC OF AND AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO *THE DEBUT*

The human race has been using storytelling to teach and talk about shared feelings and experiences of our lives. Many of us can relate to tales dealing with the awkwardness of growing up, the loss of innocence, and the joy and/or burden of family. Movies are but one way to continue talking about these shared experiences. While movies can be a beautiful and powerful way to explore and teach these truths there may be some unintentional messages audiences may walk away with as well. Sometimes in our stories an audience, such as a U.S. audience made up of White members and other ethnicities, may walk away with the stereotypical message that White men are heroes and Black men are villains instead of the age old story of good versus evil; ethnic women need to be rescued from ethnic men in conjunction with a tale of true love; cultures different from US American identity need to be saved from themselves in a drama about determination and fortitude. In the process of telling a story a movie audience may walk away with views, ideas, and opinions that have been shaped by what they have seen on film because they have no other point of reference or have an extremely narrow one. Critical media scholar bell hooks brings up the point that “[w]hether we’re talking about race, or gender, or class popular culture is where the pedagogy is, it’s where the learning is” (Jhally, 1997, p. 2). The audience walks away learning the villain is not just the villain because s/he is evil; the villain is evil because they appear to be inherently different. In the process of telling a story the filmmaker may exoticize and magnify the differences of the villain’s ethnicity and culture to draw comparisons with the hero, but this leads to villains not only being personally feared and hated but their culture as well. Yingjin Zhang (1997) says, “[r]epresentations of ethnicity,

therefore, usually involve an impressive array of boundary-constructing devices which tend to stereotype other people, evoking images of the Other only to distance or differentiate it” (p. 76). Within typical Hollywood films minorities are easily identifiable because of the ways they are stereotyped. The differentiation of the minorities in the film from other characters around them come at a cost of being portrayed because there is an erasure of their community’s rich cultural complexities and histories. Historically, mainstream Hollywood films have represented minorities in homogeneous and essentialist ways such as de-sexed comedic sidekicks, villains, exotics, and a variety of other unsavory characters. Images of cultural minorities are being consumed by audiences including the White American mainstream community, and these images (unconsciously and possibly consciously) teach these audiences that minorities are like the villains and clowns seen on screen. Carlos Cortes (1984) makes the following observation: “Considered within an educational framework, filmmakers function as teachers (intentionally or unintentionally), films serve as their resulting textbooks (effective or ineffective), and viewers are the selective learners (consciously or subconsciously)” (p. 67). In order to take control of their stereotypical portrayals, some minority communities have started releasing their own films. By creating and producing films by and about themselves minority communities are able to raise issues that resonate within their community and teach viewers that they are more than just what typical Hollywood films portray.

In order to gain a better understanding of issues thatIn order to gain a better understanding of issues that resonate for ethnic minority communities I look within the Filipina/o American¹ community and the Filipina/o American movie *The Debut*. To get an idea of one such issue of consequence to the Filipina/o American community is an example that takes place in one particular scene of *The Debut*. The scene overtly speaks to what can be seen as a local

condition and concern for Fil-Ams and is one example of what makes the movie vernacular. The scene involves a spat between two Filipina/o American siblings, Ben and Rose, over the fact that Ben is leaving Rose's debut, a debutant ball/18th birthday party (since their family cannot afford to have a big lavish coming out ceremony it is more of a big party for her), early. Even though the scene is about Ben leaving, the scene conveys more by initiating a subject of importance to the Filipina/o American community, that is, assimilation and race. In the scene, Ben makes a phone call to some friends. He is standing outside of a school gymnasium at a pay phone. He is tense and snaps into the phone that his friend should just pick him up. Ben's sister, Rose, comes up behind him dressed in her debutant regalia. She asks in an almost accusing tone what Ben is doing. Ben then responds back with a question, "What's it look like?" Rose presses on and has an expression of anger and disbelief growing on her face and says, "So, you're just going to leave?" Ben shrugs at her and claims that he has better things to do. Hoping to emotionally strike a chord, Rose reminds Ben that the party in the gymnasium involves him because his family is present. When this tactic does not work and Rose sees that Ben is making no attempt to rejoin the family festivities Rose angrily glares at Ben as he avoids her gaze. She then accuses Ben of thinking that he is better than the rest of the people (i.e., ethnic family) at the debut. Rose moves and tries to get into Ben's line of vision, but he looks away. She then points out to him "Just 'cause you hang out with White boys and want to study art in college? You think you're the shit, am I right? Finally, making eye contact with Rose, Ben angrily glares back and spits out "So, what?" Holding his gaze she says, "Wake up little brother. 'Cause you know what? You're just as brown as the rest of us."

On the surface, the argument seems straightforward enough with Rose getting angry at her brother for leaving, but the argument then takes an interesting turn: Rose specifically

confronts Ben on the subjects of assimilation and race. By bringing up the subject of assimilation (“You actually think you’re better than all us...Just ‘cause you hang out with White boys and want to study art in college?”) and race (“you’re just as brown as the rest of us”) in an emotionally tense scene, one gets a sense that both subjects resonate within the Filipina/o American community. Through the scene discussed, the audience gets a glimpse into one of the larger conversations being held and its importance within the Fil-Am community: “who can belong to this nation [the United States], and on what terms” (Bonus, 2000, p.163). Trying to figure out who you are when you are neither completely one nor the other becomes complicated as demonstrated in the scene featuring Ben and Rose. Ben and Rose’s argument scene about assimilation and race reveals a real and prevalent topic of concern to the Fil-Am community and an effort by the Fil-Am filmmakers to address these issues.

Before continuing further with this look into the Filipina/o American community it is necessary to get a preview of what is to come and the direction of this study. Within this first chapter I give a brief synopsis of *The Debut*, discuss the film’s significance, and review critics’ reception of the film. The next section is the literature review that updates the reader as to where the current conversation is among scholars on the subject of Filipina/o Americans in film, more broadly Asian Americans in film. The literature review also introduces vernacular rhetoric as the theoretical framework. The segment following the literature review presents the research questions guiding this study. After the research question are posed the methodology component lays out how I plan to use the theory of vernacular rhetoric and audience analysis. Finally, my last part of this chapter gives a brief overview of what can be expected in the rest of this study, including analysis and discussion.

***The Debut*: Film Synopsis, Significance, and Critical Reception**

To get a better idea of *The Debut* this section briefly discusses the plot of the film. It also considers the significance of the film as the first feature-length Filipina/o American film to reach a broad audience.² In addition to the plot and significance of the film I look at its connection to the Filipina/o American community and to me as the researcher. Lastly, I discuss the film reception of the film by critics.

According to the Internet Movie Database (2014b), *The Debut* premiered in California at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival on May 18, 2000. *The Debut* is a film about a Filipino American teenager, Ben, who is struggling with his identity. Ben is a dark-skinned Filipino who has assimilated into a White society. He has generally rejected his Filipino heritage and knows very little about it. When surrounded by other Filipinas/os he feels or is made to feel out of place by other Filipinas/os. In turn, although he feels that he shares more with White individuals he is not completely accepted into their company because he does not look White. An important sub-plot of the film is that Ben is an all around intelligent and talented young man. He has dreams of pursuing a life as an artist, but his father wants him to pursue medical school instead. Ben's struggle with his identity and dealing with the pressure from his father all comes to a head at his sister's debutante ball, also known as a debut.

The Debut is the first of its kind in that it is a full-length feature film created, *by*, *about*, and *for* Filipina/o Americans that became successful enough to be well-known within the Fil-Am community.³ Making the distinction that the film is *by*, *for*, and *about* (also referred to as “the trinity”) the Fil-Am community distinguishes *The Debut* from other images created outside of the Fil-Am realm which often “other” Filipina/o Americans. The use of the trinity is a way to think about the images being consumed, to question the origins of the images and their

implications. *The Debut* is about a Fil-Am experience created by, featuring, and supported and funded predominantly by Fil-Ams. Reportedly, *The Debut* accumulated a gross of about \$1.7 million in the United States while it played in theatres from March 2002 until November 2002 (Internet Movie Database, Inc. 2014a). One can assume that the film is relatively unknown within the U.S. because during the time it ran in theaters it brought in about \$1.7 million. Compare \$1.7 million to the \$305 million George Lucas' *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*, released around that same time of year (Internet Movie Database, 2014a). If money represents people, and in this case it does, the figures that Lucas's film brought in are representative of the number of moviegoers who saw *Star Wars* as opposed to *The Debut*. Despite making less than \$2 million at the box office *The Debut* is the first relatively successful feature-length film about a Filipino/a American experience. There are a handful of other Filipino/a American films that answered the need to see Filipina/o Americans on screen and to give voice to their community, these include student films such as *Diary of a Gangsta Sucka* (1993) by John Manal Castro, short films such as *Back to Bataan Beach* (1995) by Ernesto M. Foronda, Jr., or documentaries such as *The Filipino Immigrant* (1974) by Leonardo Ignacio. I make the distinction between feature-length films and student and short films since the latter are not easily available to a larger audience and are seen mainly on school campuses or are in film festivals, which are often attended by a limited representation of the larger general population. Short films are not often seen by audiences because "[t]here are few opportunities for theatrical screenings of short films...Ask yourself when was the last time you went to the cinema and saw a short...A common adage is that no one goes to see the short film—they go to see the feature" (O'Donovan, 2003, p.184). The potential for reaching audiences greatly differs for feature-length films because they are distributed to movie theatres and film rental stores, kiosks, and websites that are

frequented by the general populous that have a desire to see such things. The same distinction could be made between feature-length films and documentaries since many major theaters did not show them due to the fact that “[h]istorically, documentaries were box office poison, and most Americans spelled documentary d-u-l-l” (Mintz, 2005, p. 10).⁴ Additionally, Fil-Am documentaries were “primarily [about] male immigrants” and therefore solely the experience of first generation Fil-Ams (Tolentino, 2002, p. 119). Even though these smaller films were not watched by large numbers of people, they should not be discredited because they paved the way for *The Debut* and are evidence that there was a growing appetite to see more films about the Filipina/o Americans experience.

The second reason the film is significant is because it relates to one of the largest Asian groups of people in the United States. *The Debut* is a Filipina/o American film that was not created by the typical mainstream film industry (whose goals are to appeal to mass audiences). The filmmakers chose the experience of a marginalized community and featured actors and actresses who do not represent the general population of the United States. In other words, the film was not made to gather the largest general mass audience possible. By having a film created by Fil-Ams and starring a mainly Fil-Am cast, and providing details about a Fil-Am experience, it appears the filmmakers took strategic steps to appeal to the Filipina/o American community. While Filipina/o Americans compose about one percent of the United States population they make up the second largest groups of Asians in the U.S.⁵ In fact, they make up the second largest group of Asians with 3.4 million Filipinas/os living in the U.S. as of the year 2010 (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, and Shahid, 2012, p. 15).⁶ Even though they are numerically small in comparison to the rest of the population in the U.S., 3.4 million people are not exactly something to scoff at. Filipina/o Americans are the second fastest growing Asian group, they are a part of

the reason why the Asian population was the fastest growing ethnicity within the U.S. between 2000 and 2010, and therefore are a large part of the U.S. population in general (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez, 2011, p. 4).⁷ Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop (1995) make the appeal that discourse from within marginalized communities, such as the Fil-Am community, are of importance because such texts “gird and influence local cultures at first and then affect, through the sheer number of local communities, cultures at large” (p. 19). By being a part of the U.S. culture, the Fil-Am community through their numbers can have an impact on the larger American community. Unfortunately, their impact on the larger U.S. society seems to be slowly progressing because while there are a couple million people who claim this background, Filipina/o culture seems almost nonexistent in the U.S. It seems that the reason the Fil-Am community has been stripped of its voice is because Filipina/o Americans are masked by groups people often consider as Asian Americans namely, Chinese,⁸ Japanese,⁹ and Korean¹⁰ (Hoeffel et al., 2012, p.14). Like the Thai,¹¹ Cambodians,¹² and Vietnamese,¹³ Filipinas/os lumped into the category of Asian American subsequently are rarely acknowledged by the mainstream American population (Hoeffel et al., 2012, p. 14). As Ji Hoon Park (2005) writes:

[T]he internal distinctions asserted by different Asian subgroups are not acknowledged in the western discourse. Though Asian subgroups are diverse in terms of language, culture, religion, ethnicity, and nationality, the mainstream culture has shown little appreciation of the subgroups differences, and has treated them as if they were all the same. (p. 5)

While there are a variety of groups comprising the category of Asian American, few distinctions are made and these diverse sets of peoples get ignored. As a marginalized group Filipina/o Americans are stripped of their significance and displaced in the larger U.S. community. As if that were not enough they are lost in the Asian American community as well and have been labeled as “forgotten Asian Americans” (Cordova, 1983, p. ix). Filipina/o Americans are lost and forgotten because, as Park (2005) mentioned before, subgroups within the Asian American

community are treated the same and are seen as all being the same in the eyes of mainstream culture. In addition to being “forgotten,” Filipina/o Americans have a national identity shaped through almost four hundred years of colonization (by Spain and the United States) that pushed the people of the Philippines to be like their colonizers. Mendoza (2002) states, “[i]n a national life where the doxa is that of a racialized colonial ideology, assimilation becomes the only logical mode of survival (or so it seems)” (p. 10). The Filipina/o American community seems lost and forgotten even to themselves. Displacement and marginalization of Filipina/o Americans echoes not only through their own community, but through the larger communities they inhabit as well. For Filipina/o Americans marginalization occurs three times over: “first marginalized vis-à-vis the mainstream White majority, second, marginalized vis-à-vis the larger Asian community, and third (still) vis-à-vis their own (internalized) racist ideological reckoning of themselves in the aftermath of U.S. neocolonialism in the Philippines” (Mendoza, 2002, p. 10). It has been mourned that Filipina/o Americans are almost marginalized into silence. Their/our community is drowned out by the larger lumped sum of the Asian community and they are lost in the White mainstream. The film is important because it is a product of the historically oppressed Filipina/o American community; since the Filipina/o American population composes part of the larger Asian American and American communities the film’s message can be heard within the larger communities as well as within the Filipina/o American community. By showing the larger population that the Fil-Am community is paying attention to a text, they can indicate to the larger U.S. population that there is something of value to be seen in *The Debut*. By examining a text from a smaller community one can avoid “indirectly call[ing] attention to these [corporate mainstream Hollywood] texts as worth consuming” (Ono, 1998, p. 209). By

placing their viewership elsewhere it shows the community being portrayed is consuming representations of their images elsewhere besides the mainstream.

In trying to negotiate an identity that is not just one of assimilation *The Debut* seems to be a way within the Fil-Am community to discuss the identity crisis the community seems to be struggling with. In addition to that, the importance of the film to one of the largest, but most invisible Asian American communities in the U.S., is that it simply acknowledges the existence of Fil-Ams. The film is a place the Filipina/o American community can look to see that they stand out and they are not being overshadowed by the larger U.S. and Asian American communities. *The Debut* shows the community that while they are in the midst of an identity crisis there is still something for them to cling to and identify with as Fil-Am.

As a rhetorical/media critic of the film the third feature that makes this film significant is its meaning to me. I can relate to the movie because I am someone who avows to the cultural/ethnic/racial identity (re)presented in the film. Growing up I did not have positive images of Filipinas/os to look to because there were/are not a lot of Fil-Ams on film and television. I thought I had to be blonde to be pretty and I had a difficult time correlating my dark brown skin with beauty. The nonappearance of Fil-Ams on screen made me think there were not many of us in the U.S. and my local Fil-Am community was but a societal quirk. Although there was an absence of Fil-Ams on screen it had not occurred to me that there was a need to rectify this problem--that is, until I saw *The Debut*. The way I thought about Filipina/o Americans and film changed one evening while perusing the wall of new arrivals at a movie rental store many years ago. I was visually wading through all of the newest titles and film covers when I came across *The Debut*. The cover had a picture of the main characters on it and seeing the characters made me stop in my tracks. I had never seen anything like that DVD cover. The faces on the

DVD looked like mine and they had features that were familiar to me. Seeing the cover was a strange situation for me because I had not seen one like that before. I rented *The Debut* and when I was done watching the film I wondered why I had never seen anything like it. The film brought up the issue of cultural identity and it was reassuring to know that I was not the only one struggling through and questioning the issues of identity as well. Lisa Flores, who writes about the Chicana/o experience, wrote something that resonated with me as someone who self identifies with being a Filipina and United States citizen. Flores (1996) wrote “[l]iving with the unique experience of being a border culture between Mexico and the Southwest part of the United States, Chicanas/os find themselves with a foot in both worlds. The sense of being neither truly Mexican nor truly American often results in feelings of isolation, where Chicanas/os may find that they do not belong in either land” (p. 142). As a Pinay, a Filipina American, I am often not perceived to be a “true” American and I am not a “true” Filipina and growing up I felt that I did not belong and was unwanted in either camp. Upon introduction it is still not unusual for people with whom I interact to ask: “where are you from?” Responding with the answer “California” does not seem to satisfy them nor does any other response having to do with the fact that I was born, raised, and have only ever lived in the United States, so I then tell them I am Filipina. This response usually garners a head nod of approval now that the enquirer learns that in heritage I am “from” the Philippines. I am at a loss to understand why anyone would feel it is their right to know my ethnic heritage just to satisfy their personal curiosity about where they believe I am “originally from” and to (be it intentionally or unintentionally) make me feel like I am not a true American despite the fact it is the only life I have ever known. My interactions with Filipinas/os who have been born and raised in the Philippines are not any better. When native Filipinas/os speak to me there is a hint of disapproval, disdain, and sometimes pity in their

accented English words, and almost always the proclamation that I am not really Filipina/o when they discover that I do not speak Tagalog. This type of exchange is followed up with an interrogation as to why I do not speak the language and questioning how my parents raised me. I feel that native-born and raised Filipinas/os have neither the right to judge me for not speaking the language nor the parenting skills of my parents. Yet when it happens I feel the need to justify why I am not fluent in a language of a country I was neither born nor raised in and have only briefly visited once. Seeing certain scenes in *The Debut* spoke to me by hailing my cultural identity and my experiences in a manner that rang true to me.

For the most part, I view *The Debut* in a positive light, but that does not mean I do not take issue with the film either. There are many parts and pieces I appreciate in the film. A few of the many things I enjoyed from the film were cultural displays and the Fil-Am-centric story and cast. Simultaneously there were some features I found to be disquieting such as the fact that a debut is a coming-of-age party for a young woman, yet the story is centered around and driven by the male characters. Additionally while the main women of the film are strong and intelligent they are only seen in relation to the men in the film and talk about the men. I also believe there were some scenes that were more heavy-handed than they needed to be, such as Rose's confrontation with Ben. While these are just a few of my grievances against the film I believe my role as a critic is to help reveal the local issues and concerns coming from the community, to act as a defense against essentialism and stereotypes, and to question the dominant ideologies being advocated and reproduced if there are any.

As stated before, I view the film positively, but at the same time there were things I did and did not like about the movie and this situation is not any different for film critics either. With criticism of the film, those who disliked the film still found good things to say about it.

Null (2003) noticed that “Cajayon [the director] succeeds in drawing good performances from his novice actors, something most indie directors struggle to do and fail. He imbues his film with lots of Filipino soul, but unless you grade *The Debut* on its merits as a history lesson it's difficult to love.” The critics who gave the film negative reviews felt that the storyline was clichéd and was on the verge of seeming like a made for TV movie or an after school special, but despite what they saw as an overplayed story, they thought that the actors were fresh faced and memorable (Lumenick, 2002; Sinagra, 2002; Thorsen, 2001).

While the story of struggling with one's identity and shaking off parental expectations feels familiar, many critics thought the filmmakers approached the story in a compelling way. Roger Ebert (2002) noticed that “*The Debut* is familiar in its story arc, but fresh in its energy and lucky in its choice of actors. Filmed on a low budget, it looks and plays like an assured professional film, and its young leads are potential stars” (2002). Critics not only enjoyed the new actors and actresses playing on the screen, but they also thought the familiar coming-of-age story was done well (Axmaker, 2002; Blackwelder, n.d.; Guthmann, 2001; Karten, 2000; Rhodes, 2001; Scheck, 2002; Thomas, 2001; Van Gelder, 2002; Williams, 2002). Critics also enjoyed the film noting that the situations and experiences the film showcases are true to life. McDonagh (2002) wrote “[t]hat it [the movie's story] feels so predictable is, ironically, a tribute to the universality of the experience it explores: For all the Filipino-specific details, it recalls dozens of similar films about Mexican-American, Indian-American, Greek American and other hyphenated families” (movies.tvguide.com). In addition, the film offered praiseworthy characters and humor: “Mostly the situations, albeit compressed, ring true; the characters are admirably multi-dimensional, and there are welcome doses of humor that compensate for any contrivances” (Scheck, 2002). A couple of critics also acknowledged that *The Debut* has a

special place in film history as the first feature-length Filipina/o American film (Ebert, 2002; Karten, 2000). The Filipina/o American community is seeking to use their often silenced voice through film and this occurrence is not only being acknowledged by the Filipina/o American community but by film critics too.

In order to reverse silencing, Filipina/o American filmmakers are trying to make themselves heard and to carve a niche of recognition for their community within the United States. *The Debut* is the debut of Filipino/a American feature-length films. It is not only a message for the Filipino/a American community, but one that strives to give a more realistic idea of who Filipino/a Americans are to themselves to a larger community.

Reviewing the Influential Literature

In order to understand the issues concerning Filipina/o Americans and film one must be familiar with the voices of past scholarship in order to appreciate the current conversation on the subject. Specific scholarship on the issues surrounding the subject of Filipina/o Americans in film is sparse, but it is within the larger Asian American community that a richer understanding can be gained. Within the Asian American community subjects of sexualization of females and desexualization of males, representation and identity, and White hegemony have been and currently are the points of concern, and all these subjects at one point or another finds a point of intersection with the others.

Sexualization/Desexualization

The sexualization of Asian American women and desexualization of Asian American men are topics of concern because these representations are internalized by members of the community and those outside of the Asian American community as well. The portrayals of Asian American women in film have tended to represent Asian women as “the submissive Lotus

Blossom [who] projects a more welcoming image of exotic differences and erotic possibilities (Kang, 2002a, p. 72). The second representation that Asian American women occupy is as the dragon lady. Shimizu (2007) explains that “[t]he dragon lady uses her ‘Oriental’ femininity, associated with seduction and danger, to trap white men on behalf of conniving Asian males” (p. 59). While the lotus blossom figure is setup to be the romantic interest of a White male protagonist the dragon lady is meant to stand in direct contrast to the morally superior and innocent White woman (Shimizu, 2007, p. 62). The most distinctive quality of the submissive Asian woman stereotype is that she is “positioned in an interracial relationship with the white male protagonist” (Kang, 2002a, p. 72). The problem of the sexually submissive stereotype is that it spills over into reality. Marina Heung (1995) brings up the point that “[n]ot only does the general population accept stereotypes of Asian women as truth and then projects them onto us [Asian women] without our consent, but we ourselves have incorporated the same images into our self-imaginings” (p. 83). This self-imagining is a form of internal colonization, with the voice of the colonizer/dominant shaping the identity of the dominated from the inside.

The sexualization of Asian women in film has an additional consequence attached that is, the desexualization of Asian men. The desexualization of Asian men tend to make them into rapists or make them into figures lacking masculinity and allows the White male on screen to provide all the elements of attraction to the Asian female character (Wong, 1978, p. 27). In order to create the possibility of romance between the Asian female and White male, the possibility of romance with alternatives are killed off, in turn, the Asian male is desexed (Marchetti, 1993; Nakayama, 1994; Park, 2009; Wong, 1978). The desexualization of Asian males is to keep them in the role of Other. Movies that sexualize Asian females and desexualize Asian males work to maintain the White hegemonic structure and the White hegemonic structure is able to maintain

its power because of these debilitating images (Ho, 1998; Kang, 2002a; Kang, 2002b; Marchetti, 1993, Park, 2009).

Representation and Identity

The issues surrounding representation and identity such as the desexualization of Asian American men, the sexualization of Asian American women, the simplification of many co-cultural groups/subgroups into one homogenous sum in part stem from White mainstream Hollywood films. These films have represented Asian Americans in ways that do not allow, teach, or give viewers room for alternative ways of thinking about and/or viewing these images. The images viewers take in are repetitions of what a group outside of the Asian American community has defined to be “Asian.” Stereotypically being an Asian American on a film screen carries the markers of having slanted eyes and speaking with an accent or deploying pidgin English and is sometimes accompanied by buckteeth and/or haircuts with bangs cut bluntly across the forehead and being skilled in the martial arts (Chung, 2013; Chung, 2006; Petersen, 2013). Asian Americans are being constructed by an outside group and are being defined by characteristics that are not necessarily true about them, such as Asians being all more or less the same (Park, 2005). “Asian” gives the impression that there is just one type of people, one language, one culture, but in reality the label encapsulates a variety of communities and groups who have been branded by a label that fails to address the complexities and differences of the people saddled with the ethnic term. Since the Asian American community is seen as homogenous, a common Hollywood practice is to pass one Asian for another, for example a film might have a Korean American actor pass as Japanese or Chinese (Chung, 2006). In her study of Korean American actor, Philip Ahn, Chung (2006) lists several Asian American actors and actresses and points out these are “men and women whose different ancestral languages,

cultures, and family immigration histories formed their screen personalities and testify to the heterogeneity that often gets lost in Hollywood's continuous reinvention and reinterpretation of the Oriental other" (p.40). The need to exoticize and other Asian Americans limit the roles Asian American actors and actresses can play. The homogeneous nature of Asian American characters in a film reifies the racist images and beliefs held about Asian Americans and implies they can only play certain roles despite their desire for well-rounded realistic portrayals (Chung, 2013; Chung, 2006; Diffrient, 2011; Petersen, 2013). The lack of opportunity to play roles outside of being just the Asian American character of a film does not allow audiences to see the diversity and talent of the various peoples within the Asian American community. Asian American actors and actresses are caught in a bind where they are mainly offered roles that reinforce racist notions, but if they want to work in their profession they need to work with what they have (even if they do not agree with the image they are being asked to portray) (Chung, 2013; Chung, 2006; Petersen, 2013). When it comes to battling racist portrayals it has been observed that "every would-be star of color must seemingly blaze that path again, fighting a seemingly endless battle against the generalized racial logic that continues to guide so much of the industry" (Petersen, 2013). In reaction to the roles they may play and to compete with the foreignness they have been assigned in mainstream culture some Asian Americans may bring a subversive element to a role, they may be critical of the film industry when being interviewed, or they may take matters into their own hands and bring their talents elsewhere (Petersen, 2013).

In order to combat the otherness and foreignness of Asian American images, Asian Americans have taken up arms in the form of their own cinematic productions. The Asian American community has taken a step towards controlling what gets presented on screen, how it gets presented, and the problems/difficulties encountered in taking this action. Peter X. Feng

(2002) articulates the issue of representation and identity for the Asian American community and says:

Movies are always inadequate renderings of identity, renderings whose artificiality may be revealed if we turn our attention to the process of projection, which provides a vantage point from which we can illuminate identity. By employing the cinematic apparatus to conduct this investigation, Asian American filmmakers and videomakers attempt to seize control of a discourse that historically had projected stereotypical representations of Asian Americans, reminding us that the wall of representation that obscures Asian American identity is constructed not just by filmmakers but by the cinematic apparatus itself. (pp. 1-2)

Marina Heung (1995) along with other scholars (Chung, 2013; Chung, 2006; Hamamoto, 1994; Hamamoto, 2000; Kawai, 2005; Park, 2005; Wong, 1978) posit that the problems of representation lie with the fact that “identities are the products of how others have already seen a represented us [Asian Americans]” and that the identities being proffered are continually competing (p. 85). There is a competition among the identities being given to the audience and it is a competition among all the different entities creating these images. Asian American filmmakers who create films about Asian Americans are putting their texts in the running alongside mainstream Hollywood studio films; these studios have their own texts and their own way of viewing Asian Americans which is different from how Asian Americans represent themselves (Fuller, 2010). In addition to images currently being produced these contemporary representations are also competing with past Asian American images such as the acquiescing Suzie Wong and Charlie Chan and the murderous Dr. Fu Manchu.¹⁴ Representation of Asian Americans is cause for concern not only for Asian Americans but for the larger population consuming these images because “appearances are deceptive; and appearances—to be visible, to be embodied—are sinister precisely by being able to hide, to distract from their often duplicitous, contradictory, fabricated, and ideologically tinged foundations” (Kang, 2002b, p. 91). These images should signal alarm because they give viewers misconstrued ideas of how the world and

people within the world act. The images are teaching that there is nothing more to the communities being portrayed on screen than what the audience is actually seeing. When trying to understand where these racist images are stemming from one must understand that stereotypical representations of Asian Americans work for a larger ideology present within U.S. society.

White Hegemony

Many of the scholars on the subject of representation see the stereotypical images of Asians put out by a White mainstream Hollywood serving the purpose of the larger White hegemonic sphere (Chung, 2013; Chung, 2006; Diffrient, 2011; Fuller, 2010; Hamamoto, 1994; Heung, 1998; Ho, 1998; Kang, 2002a; Kang, 2002b; Kawai, 2005; Locke, 2009; Marchetti, 1993; Nakayama, 1994; Park, 2005; Petersen, 2013; Wong, 1978). This hegemonic dimension naturalizes Whiteness as the norm and in films featuring Asian American characters along White characters, the White (usually male) character is continually refocused as the strong virile center. Thomas Nakayama (1994) observes that when White heterosexual masculinity is challenged it uses what it needs politically, economically, and culturally “to rearticulate its own mythology and reclaim its universal space” in relation to the depicted other (p. 176). Marchetti (1993) makes the argument that the sexual stereotypes of Asian men and women come out of the “fundamental crisis of Anglo-American culture desperately trying to reconcile its credo of ‘liberty and justice for all’ with its insistence on white, male, bourgeois domination of the public sphere” (p. 219). Even when the film is about Asians the representations are still placed in the realm of the White hegemonic sphere due to the use of yellowface and Hollywood’s “system of portraying Asia and Asians without leading Asian actors” (Fuller, 2010, p. 27). Casting White actors and actresses in yellowface for Asian centered films bolsters a “sense of racial superiority”

which believes “it takes a white person to portray a real Asian” (Fuller, 2010, p. 28). The poor excuse of being too Asian or not Asian enough for a role imparts the idea to the audience that Asian Americans lack the ability and skills to tell their stories. According to Hamamoto (1994), these representations reveal “a white supremacist complex that establishes the primacy of Euro-American cultural practices and social institutions [and] serves as the principal mechanism of subordinating or excluding those groups that do not conform to the normative profile” of White Euro-American male culture (p. 2). The excluded group, also referred to as “the other,” can be typified for Asian Americans as Orientalism. Lee (1999) proclaims that “Orientalism, like other theories of domination and difference, relies heavily on establishing authority over the Other through knowledge of and access to the Other’s language, history, and culture as a privilege of the colonial agent” (p. 114). Depictions of Asian Americans in stereotypical ways and roles played by non-Asians are in reality, just another form of control. M. Park (2009) makes the observation that Hollywood’s representation of Asians serve a larger purpose for White hegemony and the privileges it protects because “[t]he images of popular media, including film, often accomplished what the law was unable to always do: influence and reinforce dominant attitudes about race and masculinity” (p. 25). For Isaac (2006), the islands and the people of the Philippines are an “operative trope to resolve internal anxieties of national integrity” (p.82) when it comes to American films whose stories take place there. Lee (1999) looks specifically at how Asian Americans, immigrant or native-born, are continually constructed as Other in pop culture and how the Otherness of Asian Americans is defined as Oriental (p. xi). Asian Americans as other in films where they are a foil to White roles emphasizes their difference and when there are other ethnicities performing alongside Asian and White characters the otherness of the Asian is emphasized even more. Locke (2009) notices in “Orientalist buddy films” that when there is a

portrayal of a relationship between Black and White characters it comes at the expense of a third party by emphasizing their otherness and making them the most racist characters in the film (p. 6). “[P]ortraying the Asian as an abject figure, a monstrously inhumane character who lacks the core values of personhood...dissolves the differences between white and black so that the two buddies may emphasize what they share and diffuse tensions between them” (Locke, 2009 p. 5). By featuring a character more racist than the White main character, who is inscribed with being American, the White main character displaces the racist role onto the Asian. Locke (2009) referring to Wiegman’s (1995) work analyzing race and film makes the assertion that “[t]he representation of a seemingly more extreme racism and oppression,’ ...practiced by somebody else...produces a ‘disavowal of internal racial hierarchies’ by implying that American racism exists solely ‘as part of an errant past’ or at the extremes of white society” (Locke, 2009, p. 6). In this manner a film communicates that the White person is not the problem when it comes to racial conflict and tension, but the third party in all of its otherness is. For most Hollywood films, be these films buddy films, dramas, comedies, or romances, the Asian, even if they are Asian American, is forever a foreigner, never a true American, and typically depicted as both pejoratively other and Oriental. Hamamoto (1994) sees the construction of “otherness” as debilitating for the Asian American community because “the social construction of Asian American ‘otherness’ is the precondition for their cultural marginalization, political impotence, and psychic alienation from mainstream American life (p. 5). By creating Asian American films and critiquing Asian images agency is given to those trying to expose the ways power works.

The current issues that appear to be the most prevalent in the topic of Asian American film concern three main subjects. The first matter is about the ways Asians are sexually represented on screen. The second subject within the conversation is the importance of

representation and identity. The third and final topic is White hegemony-- the reason stereotyped images of Asians exist at all. The current conversation about Asian Americans and film motivated the research questions that guide my research of *The Debut* and led me to the use of vernacular rhetoric. Before moving into the research questions it is best to look at what vernacular rhetoric is, its parts, and how it is used.

Vernacular Rhetoric

To analyze the film the use of Kent Ono and John Sloop's (1995) "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse" helps to get at the fact that *The Debut* was made by, for, and about Fil-Ams since the film was created by and starred Fil-Ams in the representation of the Fil-Am experience. Vernacular discourse is defined as "speech that resonates within local communities...vernacular discourse is unique to specific communities" (p. 20). The two parts that qualify a text to be a piece of vernacular discourse are cultural syncretism and pastiche. Cultural syncretism "affirms various cultural expressions while at the same time protests against the dominant cultural ideology" (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 21). In other words, the marginalized group gets to express themselves and present the positive things about their culture while at the same time speaking against the roles and stereotypes the majority group has created for them. The second part to vernacular discourse is pastiche. Using Ono and Sloop's (1995) definitions once again, pastiche "implies that vernacular discourse may borrow from, without mimicking, popular culture" (p. 23). Another way of defining pastiche is that the marginalized community borrows from the larger dominating community and reinvents it to be something uniquely their own. One of the most common examples of pastiche is rap. Deejays and emcees sample songs and create new ones. These types of artists take already existing songs and recreate them into something almost unrecognizable from their original form. The creation of new works by

rehashing what has already been done makes it seem as if the original object has become something completely different and new.

By looking at *The Debut* as an artistic product of vernacular discourse one must look at how the members construct a representation of their community and how it operates. These members of the community are creating an identity that speaks mostly to the Filipina/o American community, but one should keep in mind that “[i]dentities are not located in movies themselves, but in the cinematic apparatus—which is to say, identities are ultimately mobilized within the spectator” (Feng, 2002, p. 3). The creators of the film cannot control audience reaction and it is the viewer who has the last say in what identity is being portrayed. The importance of critiquing *The Debut* as a piece of vernacular discourse is that the movie comes from within the Fil-Am community and is designed to represent the Fil-Am community. Having a piece of discourse that is produced from a marginalized perspective is of value because it gives insight into the lives of those who live on the fringes, however, the virtue of the film coming from within a historically oppressed community alone does not merit *The Debut* to be free from criticism. As Ono and Sloop (1995) point out: “Unless critical attention is given to vernacular discourse, no new concepts of how community relations are interwoven and how communities are contingent is possible. Without a critical framework, description occurs without self-reflection; hence, ideological presuppositions unconsciously may be reproduced” (p. 21). Critique from within the community is a safeguard against essentialism, stereotypes, and other ideals that prove to be harmful to the image of those being oppressed.

Research Questions

The questions that guide my research have grown out of the current academic conversation of Asian Americans in film. The scholarly work from Asian Americans and Fil-

Ams in film in conjunction with the relevancy of *The Debut* has led me to questions concerning vernacular text and identity. Approaching the film as vernacular, I ask how does *The Debut* function as a vernacular text for both critics and Fil-Am audiences, specifically Fil-Am university students? Also, what is the identity of Fil-Ams being advanced in the film? What are the ways identity is made to be persuasive? These questions shape my research, but in order to answer these inquiries I look to Ono and Sloop's theoretical framework known as vernacular discourse and combine it with the use of audience analysis in the methods section.

Methodology

In order to respond to the research questions of *The Debut* functioning as vernacular text, its communication of identity, and the persuasiveness of the identity being advanced in the movie my methodology is two-fold. The first part of my method is a critical film analysis of *The Debut* and to examine how the film functions as a vernacular text. The second part of my method is an audience analysis using the responses from a university student focus group.

Film Analysis and Vernacular Rhetoric

In order for a text to be vernacular there are certain qualifications it should meet in order to be unique speech that reverberates within a specific community. While two of the most pertinent components of vernacular rhetoric are pastiche and cultural syncretism there are two additional characteristics that make something vernacular. One of the points of critiquing vernacular rhetoric is to be respectful of marginal communities by acknowledging their mutable nature and the way they may deliberately form their representations, characterizations, and identities apart from dominant culture (Ono and Sloop, 1995, p. 27). With this point in mind it is crucial that the discourse come from a community that has historically been marginalized in order to try to redress and correct the disregard the community has normally dealt with.

Critiquing dominant culture reveals how power works but critiquing discourse from those who have been historically ignored is a step towards rectifying the “avoidance of discussions of people struggling to survive” and “is necessary to render power relations among subjects visible” (Ono and Sloop, 1995, p. 21). The text is vernacular if it is pastiche with the addendum that it is continually in flux because of the problems and conditions shaping it and the emphasis of “invention, and organization and reconstitute[ion of] discourses within specific racial cultural, gendered, and ethnic communities” (Ono and Sloop, 1995, p. 23). This means a community can borrow textual forms from dominant culture without being considered mimicry because it is more than mere imitation or parody. To be vernacular rhetoric a text must also be culturally syncretic. A text must embrace its culture. Cultural affirmation is not just negation of the way a community has been represented in the hegemonic culture but an expression of who the community is. A marginalized community does not just exist as a composite of opposites to what the dominant culture believes about them. The text may speak out against misrepresentations but that does not necessarily mean that protest is the basis of a text’s existence. It has the possibility to be both but generally the text is one that can be seen as affirmation of a people. One of the last pieces that I feel is important to analyzing whether a text is vernacular discourse or not is if the text actually stirs up a reaction in the ignored community. If the people engaged with the text this means the text resonated within the community and there has been an impact. Vernacular rhetoric does not work without its audience because it is rooted in the culture and people it arose from.

Audience Analysis

Audience analysis pursues how an audience perceives a text and how what they have to say reflects something larger about the society in which they live. The scholarship informing my

research specifically had to do with racial-ethnic audiences and media. There is very little work specifically on Asian audiences with the exception of the work done by Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) and Mahtani (2008). Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin's work was not strictly focused on Asians, but included those who are Black and White. In Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin's (2006) study, they studied the film *Rush Hour 2* and used focus groups that related to the main racial-ethnic groups in the film. Since the film featured Black, White, and Asian players, the focus groups were then accordingly separated into groups of Black, White, and Asian audiences and were asked questions to help the researchers "examine the ideological implications of racial stereotypes in comedy" and discovered that "generic conventions and textual devices of comedy encourage the audience to naturalize differences rather than to challenge racial stereotypes" (Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006, p. 157). Mahtani (2008) used two separate focus groups and looked at their utilization of Canadian English-language television news. One focus group was Chinese Canadian and the other was made up of Iranian Canadians and both groups were interviewed to determine how the creation of television news and its consumption influenced the "understanding, beliefs, and perceptions of immigration and 'race'" of the audience (p. 655). Her study revealed that the audience was appreciative of Canadian television news, but wished for "spaces in which they could see their own ethnic, racial, cultural, and immigrant identities reflected against the backdrop of the Canadian multicultural state" beyond what the audience deemed to be puff pieces about ethnic events and celebrations (Mahtani, 2008, p.655).

In order to get a better understanding of racial-ethnic audiences and media I had to look elsewhere (Cooper, 1998; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Mahtani, 2008; Rockler, 2001; Rockler, 2002; Rojas, 2004). The work completed on racial audiences and media has typically focused on

audiences who are Black, Hispanic, and White. I realize that the experience of Filipina/o American audiences and even Asian American audiences are not going to be exactly the same as Black, Hispanic, or White audiences and that no other group can represent the Filipina/o American experience. Still, previous work on racial-ethnic audiences is informative to my research because these racial-ethnic groups have been marginalized just as Asian Americans have. Racial-ethnic groups have been subjected to living in a society which sees White as normative and while their experiences are not all the same, these groups can at least relate to one another in how they experience not being the norm. Approaching audience analysis in this manner is a way for me to get a better grasp on what I may have to deal with when considering a Filipina/o American audience.

The purpose of using audience analysis is yet another method of discerning how ideology shapes society. J.H. Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) nicely explain the importance of audience analysis, citing Radway (1986) who says: “researchers’ critical account of informants’ own interpretation of a text is a crucial task because audiences ‘live ideology...they are produced by it to accept a particular limited view of their situation’” (p. 166). Audience analysis is encouraged because it reveals ideology at work within people’s lives.

When doing audience analysis one should keep in mind that audiences, across the board, do not decode the text the same way. Hall (2006) proposes that the decoding of images, the ways an audience reads visual texts, is done in three hypothetical ways, or codes, and is known as: the dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated code, and oppositional code (pp. 171-173). The dominant-hegemonic position is when a viewer takes “the decoded message in terms of the reference code in which it had been encoded” (Hall, 2006, p. 171). This outcome is when one reads the text in the manner the hegemonic structure has taught them to. With the negotiated

code, one negotiates the text. There are some things that the viewer accepts and other things that the viewer does not accept. Finally, with the last position, the oppositional position is when one reads the text in a “contrary way. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (Hall, 2006, pp. 172-173). An oppositional position reads the text in a manner that is different from what the original purpose of the text was. Hall (2006) has called for these positions to be “empirically tested and refined” (p. 171). One of the ways these positions have been empirically tested and refined is through audience analysis.

When using audience analysis scholars have pursued the revealing of ideology in audiences in different ways. Approaches to the analysis of audience responses have been guided with ideas such as relevancy (Cooper, 1998; Rojas, 2004), use of Kenneth Burke’s terministic screens (Rockler, 2002), transmission paradigm (Rockler, 2001), spectacle/performance paradigm and the development of resistance performance paradigm (Atkinson & Dougherty, 2006), by offensiveness and perception of stereotypes (Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006), purpose in everyday life (Schröder & Phillips, 2007), and racialized group perceptions (Mahtani, 2008). By looking through the work of the above scholars, one sees a variety of ways audiences decode the message of the text and what audiences are learning from and doing with the text.

The use of audience analysis work can be rewarding, but it can be problematic as well. The advantages of doing audience analysis through focus groups is that time is saved by being able to talk to many people at one time, group dynamics can be looked at, homogenous groups can be compared, follow-up questions can be asked, and members of the group might feel more free to speak (Rockler, handout, September 15, 2006). The disadvantages of taking up the task of audience analysis with focus group are things such as scheduling, the difficulty of group

dynamics, the lack of detailed responses from people, and when in a group some people speak less freely (Rockler handout, September 15, 2006).

While the use of audience analysis seems to be mainly a positive thing, there have been cautions about pursuing this line of work. Audience analysis scholars caution researchers to be wary of essentializing members of an audience and not to conflate the experience of their subjects with different audiences. When performing an audience analysis the researcher needs to keep in mind, first and foremost, “the goal of interview research method is not to generate generalizable, statistical evidence about the attitudes of a demographic group, but rather to create a discursive text of audience members speaking about a media text, and analyze the text rhetorically and/or ideologically” (Rockler, 2002, p. 406). Additionally, because answers found in audience analysis are not possible to generalize, one must deal with the fact that no definite conclusions can be drawn.

The purpose of this study is to discover what the audience is learning from *The Debut* and what their answers reflect. Thus, participants were asked questions such as (for a complete set of questions see Appendix A): What did you like about *The Debut*? What did you dislike about *The Debut*? What is *The Debut* saying to Filipina/o Americans? What is *The Debut* saying to non Filipina/o Americans? What does the film mean to the Filipina/o American community?

The Focus Group of the Audience Analysis

Coordinating a focus group in order to get the data for the study required good deal of time and preparation. The following section is an account of how the focus group participants were recruited and how the event was run. In the “Participants” section I go into detail about the groups I approached for recruiting, qualification necessary for a person to participate, and the

reasoning behind the qualifications and recruitment groups. The final section, “Procedure and Context,” lays out how the actual focus group event was run.

Participants

Capturing responses to the film was done by conducting a focus group, which had to be approved by the human research committee. Once approved, advertisements were sent out to the larger undergraduate Colorado State University (CSU) population and to campus organizations identified by the Primary Investigator¹⁵, hereafter referred to as P.I. and myself (hereafter referred to as the co-Primary Investigator or co-P.I.). The P.I. and I chose organizations we thought would have the most connections to the Fil-Am college student community.

Advertisements were sent through electronic means such as emails to CSU's on-campus organizations Club Kulturang Pilipin@ (KP) and Asian/Pacific American Student Services (A/PASS). KP was selected because it maintains a membership largely composed of Fil-Ams through which I hoped to secure participants. A/PASS was chosen because of their connections to Fil-Am students as well. I asked the organizations to share my recruitment flyer with their membership in the hopes of gaining participants via word-of-mouth.

To be a participant in the focus group volunteers had to meet the criteria of being a Fil-Am and a college student.¹⁶ The composition of participants were Fil-Am students who are members of the Fort Collins, Colorado community and students from Colorado State University (CSU). I sought Fil-Ams because I was interested in the responses of a historically marginalized community to a film *by, about, and for* themselves. Vernacular discourse after all “is unique to specific communities” (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 20) and Fil-Am students are a specific community responding to discourse created within their own community. I thought the additional standard of being a college student would not only help narrow down the pool of volunteers to a

manageable size, but I also thought the film would strike a chord with a set of young adults since the main characters of the film are in high school or ready to enter college.

Procedure and Context

The participants who were able to make it to the focus group came to a one time meeting consisting of an 88 minute long film and discussion that lasted about 90 minutes. The meeting took place in a classroom of the Eddy building (which contained the appropriate technology to conduct the evening's events) on the Colorado State University campus because of student familiarity with the campus and the convenience of the location for students without transportation. During the evening, the researchers were introduced and the research process itself for the focus group explained.¹⁷ Following this, the participants were given a cover letter that met HRC guidelines and was read aloud (see Appendix B). Verbal consent was acquired from all participants who then self-selected pseudonyms to protect their identities. I informed participants that the dialogue session was going to be recorded and that by participating they were giving me permission to use their comments. I asked if anyone had questions about participation and since there were none I started the film.

After viewing the film and taking a short break, but before moving into discussion, participants were reminded that they could quit if they wanted to and participation was voluntary. With all the participants still willing to continue the conversation was handed over to the P.I. who guided the rest of the evening with a set of predetermined questions and questions that had arisen while watching the focus group members watch the film (see Appendix A). The questions moved from general questions about what type of films participants enjoy watching to more specific questions to what they thought *The Debut* to be conveying. While the P.I. facilitated the conversation with the audience, I audio recorded and typed audience reactions.

After audience participation, I took all that had been recorded and transcribed them.

There was no reward for participating in the focus group. Participation by the audience was done of their own free will. My hope is that focus group members gained some satisfaction in understanding that their participation may pave the way for further research on Fil-Am audiences and they value their contribution to a larger body of knowledge produced about Fil-Am identity and representation.

Chapter Preview

In looking ahead at the chapters to come I strive to answer the research questions posed in this chapter. In Chapter two, “Locating Identity in *The Debut*,” I examine the film as vernacular rhetoric, consider critic reviews, and argue that there are three identities played out in the film. The first identity is one of being both a model minority and a thug. The second is an identity of being assimilationist, acculturalist, and rejectionist. Finally, the third one is an othering other. The identities described in chapter two reveal the navigation of an identity negotiating being both/and.

The third chapter, “The Audience and Vernacular Rhetoric,” details findings from the audience analysis. The third chapter also articulates how the audience perceived the film. I organize my findings gleaned from the audience responses according to the co-existing identities of model minority/thug, assimilationist/acculturalist/rejectionist, and othering other. Additionally, the third chapter takes into consideration unexpected responses and insights I received from the audience. Finally, the fourth chapter, “Conclusion: Making the Invisible Visible,” is a reflection on all that has been come across in the previous chapters. The last chapter summarizes what has been revealed in the other chapters and offers up a call to arms not only for academics, but for the Asian American community, and more specifically the Filipina/o

American community. The “Conclusion” also reveals what this work has taught me in terms of knowledge, experience, and personal growth.

CHAPTER TWO

LOCATING IDENTITY WITHIN *THE DEBUT*

What happens to someone when they are trying to deal with maintaining a separation of conflicting, yet coexisting identities within themselves? What of/about a community with conflicting, yet coexisting identities among its people? *The Debut*'s narrative and the way the scenes engage the issue of identity shaped the preceding questions. The preceding questions have grown out of watching *The Debut* and following how the narrative and scenes initiate the issue of identity. One such scene portrays Ben [Dante Basco], the main character, struggling not only with his identity of being a Filipino in a surrounding White world, but literally keeping separate the two worlds with which he identifies. Ben struggles to get his White friends out of his house and hurries to push them out the front door after they comment about the smell of his home and laugh at some of the cultural décor. Ben wants nothing more than to get his friends out of his home because he is ashamed of how embarrassingly different his family and home are. He finally forces them out, shutting the door separating his Fil-Am home, a realm in which only brown people reside, from the outside White world. Like the scene of Ben physically separating two different worlds with which he identifies, some of the most striking moments in the film are explorations and reflections of identity related tensions.

The Debut calls attention not only to the struggle the characters have in negotiating identities, but the film also portrays the constant push and pull of seemingly inconsistent identities found within the Fil-Am community. The identities most prevalent within the film are the coexisting model minority and thug, the connected other and othering other, and the collision of the assimilationist, acculturalist, and rejectionist. The identities advanced within the film

seem to be at odds with each other at times because they can be characterized as existing between simultaneously contradicting identities—they exist not as one or the other but as both/and. The co-existing identities give insight into the Fil-Am community and their own struggles with identity within broader society.

This chapter is a critical analysis of *The Debut*. In the next section I examine the film's reception by critics and the hopes the filmmakers had for the film. Following, I critique the film, and explore why the film is vernacular rhetoric and the identities advanced within it. The sections that follow vernacular rhetoric center around the types of Fil-Am identities being advanced and how those identities are made to be persuasive.

Reception of the Film by Critics and the Hopes of the Creators

Although *The Debut* was the first feature-length film to explore the Fil-Am experience and was made by, for, and about Fil-Ams, the film was not overwhelmingly supported by mainstream critics. Instead film critic reviews were mixed. Some admired the timelessness of the coming-of-age tale told through a Fil-Am lens. Other critics found that the Fil-Am elements were not different enough to make the film exceptional. Yet others believed the film relied too much on in-group awareness to make sense of some of the jokes and scenes. The reason for the range of difference in these mixed reviews is due to the fact that some critics, I assert, did not understand the film because of some of the vernacular aspects which rely on insider knowledge of the Fil-Am community (and were included because the film is catering to a specific audience) and forgetting that elements of the film should not feel completely unfamiliar and foreign because it is an American story being told with Americans who happen to be different from the mainstream representations.

As of 2014, the rating of *The Debut* on the film review website Rottentomatoes.com¹⁸ currently sees the critics giving the movie a 74 percent out of 100 percent and website users rating the film at a 72 percent. Critics who gave negative reviews tended to dislike the film because of the story and the earnestness with which it was told. Most of the negative reviews took issue with the story of the film noting that its narrative seemed to tread familiar ground as a coming-of-age tale. Thorsen (2001) of Reel.com saw the film “[a]s well-meaning as an after-school special and only slightly more inspired.” The feeling that the film was too earnest was also backed by *The Village Voice*’s Sinagra (2002) who claimed “[t]he film has a sweet low-budget quality that sometimes slips into TV-movie schmaltz.” Null (2003) of AMC’s Filmcritic.com wrote that the film’s Fil-Am perspective was not unique enough to make it outstanding, it had too many inside jokes, and used outdated humor: “The fact that his [director Gene Cajayon’s] characters are from the Philippines doesn’t make the movie unique enough to really thrill you. And unfortunately, *The Debut*’s jokes are almost unilaterally flat -- relying on insidery Filipino gags or ages-old humor that might have worked a decade ago.” The only critic who gave the movie a negative review yet saw the film as an important milestone for Fil-Am films was Anderson (n.d.) of the website Combustible Celluloid who found fault in the storytelling saying it was “overwritten,” “overexplained,” and as a “story has been borrowed from decades of white Hollywood carbon copies.” For some critics (Null, 2003; Lumenick, 2002; Sinagra, 2002; Thorsen, 2001) the film did not meet their standards of being accessible to all, having a completely new and unique story, and not trying hard enough. The idea of the film as nothing more than a coming of age story and the fact that it is specifically Fil-Am does not seem to excite critics (Null, 2003; Lumenick, 2002; Sinagra, 2002; Thorsen, 2001) because they are not a part of the community and as a result being a Fil-Am film is not an issue of

significance. This viewpoint is exemplified by Null's (2003) critique of the film, he writes "relying on insidery Filipino gags" and "characters from the Philippines doesn't make the movie unique enough to really thrill you". The "unique" in Null's quote seems to signify that a Fil-Am story is not different and/or exotic enough to justify interest because it seems familiar. Null does not take into account that many of the characters are not just from the Philippines, but from the United States as well, and being a Fil-Am would imply there are threads of familiarity. The highlight of the film is not that the story comes from a people outside of the U.S. (and it is not from outside the U.S. as Null seems to think), but that *The Debut* comes from the invisible Fil-Am community within the U.S. The conflation of Filipinas/os and Fil-Ams in Null's quote shows that the Fil-Am community is still being marginalized and grouped under a larger group of Asians—a group with which they share roots, ties, and similarities but, are not identical to and should not be confused as one in the same. Filipinas/os and Fil-Ams experience the world differently because they come from different countries with different cultures, societies, and economies. For example, if you are Filipina/o and in the Philippines you would not be an ethnic minority, whereas Fil-Ams in the U.S. are a minority within a larger and predominantly White population. Critics such as Null, among others (Null, 2003; Lumenick, 2002; Sinagra, 2002; Thorsen, 2001), seem to not get the film because the film mainly speaks to the Fil-Am community. For someone with no interest in and/or knowledge of the Fil-Am community the idea of *The Debut* as "speech that resonates within local communities" and is born out of the "local condition and social problems" (Ono & Sloop, 1995, pp. 20, 23) of a silenced community is lost on them.

For critics who gave *The Debut* positive reviews it was this same exact story and earnestness which won them over. Those who gave the film positive reviews praised the

predictability of the story. Thomas (2001) of *The Los Angeles Times* wrote that *The Debut* was “[a] universal coming-of-age story as illuminating as it is entertaining.” MacDonald (2002) from the *Seattle Times* praised the film because it “[c]elebrates community and family, and does so in such a warm-hearted way that its formulaic nature is easily forgiven.” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*’s Axmaker (2002) thought that “[f]or all its familiarity, *The Debut* (an unfortunately bland and vague title) is a film from the heart.” Harvey (2001) for Variety.com understood who the film is serving by explaining it “could do nicely connecting with its underserved target demo” and notices the film was a community effort noting that “[s]hould one doubt “The Debut” was a community labor of love, pic ends with the longest thank you scroll in recent memory.”

Reflecting on its Rottentomatoes score of 74 percent from critics and a freshness rating of 72 percent from the website’s users one would think the film could be considered a fairly moderate success. Yet, according to the standards of Hollywood, the film was a flop because it made a little over a million and a half dollars. Janet Wasko’s (2003) book on the movie industry quotes film critic Emanuel Levy “[W]e used to think a[n independent] film was a success if it grossed over \$1 million [in the 1980s]. Now, it’s not even a success if it grosses over 5 or 10 million” (p. 78). Despite being seen as a flop through the eyes of Hollywood and making just enough money to break even, the creators see the film as doing even greater work than simply turning a profit.

After all of the effort put into creating and distributing the film the director, Gene Cajayon, had high expectations for the awareness the movie would create about Fil-Am films. Cayajon hoped *The Debut* would make the Fil-Am community aware of Fil-Am films, and more broadly, Asian American films. He wanted the Fil-Am community to understand and be aware

that films created by Asian Americans (Fil-Am included) are not conjured out of thin air and to realize the struggle it takes to put self-made representations of themselves on screen. Cajayon states:

We grossed almost \$2 million in the box office and sold all these t-shirts and they [Fil-Am community] think that we're all rich. But the reality of the matter is every single city was a struggle just to break even. That's the reason people need to understand that they can't take movies about our communities for granted. They just don't pop out of nowhere. (Ginsela, 2003a)

By taking on this project, those involved with *The Debut* would like to think their film was not made in vain. The director continues:

We're trying to empower our community: the Filipino American community, the Asian American community, people of color in general. We're making a statement with *The Debut*. However small this little movie is and, you know, 300,000 tickets in the grand scheme of things is not that much, but given that we had so little resources to work with, hopefully it's a small little statement that we're here, we demand to be counted, and we want to see more movies about us. (Ginsela, 2003a)

For those involved in the making of the film, the point was not to create a picture/film anyone and everyone would enjoy and understand, but to create a film which could be an example of what Fil-Am film could be and demonstrate the need for more Fil-Am movies.

Vernacular Rhetoric as a Theoretical Framework

A text like *The Debut* is born out of a context for reasons that differ from texts created in the mainstream for mainstream audiences. When one works with vernacular discourse they are devoting themselves to exploring the work of an otherwise silenced community that is not necessarily recognized by the mainstream. When I make the claim that a community is not necessarily recognized I am referring to the fact that a community may be viewed as a part of and yet subordinate to larger communities and does not wield much power. The silence surrounding the community renders themselves and their contributions to culture and society invisible to the general population. The silenced communities are viewed as members of the

larger community—nothing more and nothing less, with nothing to say and nothing to contribute. Being silenced yet being counted as a part of the larger community is known as “differential inclusion”:

the process whereby a group of people is deemed integral to the nation’s economy, culture, identity, and power—but integral only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing. Edward Said has described such outcast population as people whose existence always counts [for a nation’s economy, culture, identity, and power]¹⁹, though their names and identities do not; they are valuable precisely because they are not fully present. (Espiritu, 2003, p. 47)

Filipinos have their place in the country, but not at an equal level. In Bonus’ (2000) ethnography on Filipina/o Americans in California he picks up from interviews that Filipino Americans are “racialized and gendered laborers and service workers” who “fuel the U.S. economy but who are otherwise considered “ ‘dispensable’ or ‘unimportant’ ” (p.8). When looking at vernacular rhetoric one sees the silenced community not only as an “outcast population...whose existence always counts” (Espiritu, 2003, p. 47), but as a community with a name and identity that a critic seeks to reveal. Fil-Ams have a history of being a colonized people who have not only been silenced by their former colonizers (Spain and the United States), but have become invisible members of the larger U.S. American community. They are remembered in the history of the United States as infants in need of parental guidance and as a footnote in America’s history. The difference between infantilization of Filipinas/os as opposed to Native Americans and African Americans is that when the control of the Philippines was given back it was under the expectation to govern themselves the way the U.S had. Ruling themselves the way the U.S. had meant accepting what was believed to be their inherent inferiority and lack of civility (Werrlein, 2004, p. 31). In order to become “civilized” Filipinos were taught that to be Filipina/o was to be uncivilized. This erasure was/is done by having Filipinas/os see themselves as Other. “The ways we have been positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were a

critical exercise of cultural power and normalization...They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’” (Hall, 1996, p. 213).²⁰ Filipinas/os were asked to erase this “otherness” from themselves in order to govern themselves. “Filipino invisibility is a symptom of this unique colonial history and its erasure” (Werrlein, 2004, p. 31) and has contributed to the silencing and invisibility of the Fil-Am community because this type of thinking has been carried from the Philippines into the U.S.

The importance of works coming from marginalized communities is that they may consciously or unconsciously display their community’s identity and the influencing factors surrounding them in a concrete and visible manner. An artistic endeavor put out by the community is “vernacular rhetoric [because it] is cultural production, visible through symbols, artifacts, and textual forms of materiality. They [Ono and Sloop] see vernacular discourse as critique because it makes visible power relations among subjects by exploring the textual fragments of a culture” (Calafell & Delgado, 2004, p. 6). The point of looking at works created by marginalized communities and revealing the power relations they are involved with is to do a critique of vernacular discourse and the purpose of critiquing vernacular discourse is to “illustrate other possible realities” (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 26). Vernacular discourse that has been critiqued has come from marginalized communities and has mainly dealt with print media (Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Ono & Sloop, 1995). The analyses by both sets of authors are able to see possible realities being offered in the texts examined about Japanese Americans and Latinas/os, which reveal an affirmation of “particular identities and senses of community, even when these are on the margins” (Calafell & Delgado, 2004, p. 7). The scholarly work of Ono and Sloop and Calafell and Delgado have been influential in my own work when looking at the possible realities being offered up in *The Debut*. Application of vernacular rhetoric as critique

can contribute to the revelation of power relations that have impacted the Fil-Am community's constructed identity and how the constructed Fil-Am community functions.

The Creation of *The Debut* and its Roots as Vernacular Rhetoric

Those who participated in creating *The Debut* can relate to the old and oft repeated adage “if you want something done, you’ve got to do it yourself.” The following section looks at the events surrounding the creation of *The Debut* and not only highlights the film’s origins, but illustrates the *by*, *about*, and *for* I see as being closely linked to determining whether a work is vernacular or not. The events that seem most pertinent to the creation of the film have to do with pre-production and production, distribution and advertisement. Looking at these four film components in relation to *The Debut* illustrates the difficulties of portraying a story that comes from a marginalized community. The following shows how hard a historically silenced community has to work in order to be heard even within the local scale of their own community.

Pre-production and Production

As independent filmmakers the creators of *The Debut* were hands-on with many levels of the film from pre-production to distribution. Contextualizing the beginnings of the film answer the *by* and *about* of Fregoso’s (1993) trinity. Tracing the origins of the film shows how members of the Filipina/o community were involved in every level of the creation process and shows how the film was a group effort and labor of love. Looking at the *by* and *about* reveals the local conditions and social problems the film grew out of and was responding to while at the same time showing the film as vernacular since it comes from a marginalized and silenced community.

According to the documentary *The Making of The Debut* (2003b), Gene Cajayon, the director, executive producer, and co-writer of the film, developed the idea for the movie while he was in film school at UCLA (Ginsela, 2003b). He was tired of the same stereotypical

representations of Asian Americans in Hollywood film and he wanted to create a film that told a story from his own community. While in school he wrote up a script for a short film version of *The Debut* and sent it off to those who he thought would help sponsor his project and help turn the short film into a feature-length film. Unfortunately, he received no responses. Instead of abandoning the project, Cajayon joined forces with John Manal Castro (co-writer and associate producer), another student filmmaker, and together they wrote the feature-length script while trying to raise funds for the film as well. They had decided to create the film despite the lack of financial support by a studio—*The Debut* was made without the green light.²¹

Technically, *The Debut* was in development hell. The film was receiving little to no financial support and a green light was not only denied, it did not exist because there was no one to give them approval for the film. The film had no approval since they had no studio to back it and there was no studio to back it because it lacked commercial viability. Even though there was little to no financial support, Cajayon and Castro continued to see their film from the ground up and began to put together a cast and crew.

Besides being one of the first feature-length films about Fil-Ams, *The Debut* was also one of the first films to have a predominantly Fil-Am crew and cast. Eventually Cajayon and Castro finished their script and started looking for a cast. Through some connections in the film industry they were given access to have casting calls with famous actors and actresses from the Philippines. They were able to get Tirso Cruz III, Eddie Garcia, and Gina Alajar who are well-known entertainers in their own country.²² Casting the lead role of Ben brought forth many Filipino Americans who auditioned, but when the filmmakers had to make a final decision they went with a fairly well-known Fil-Am actor. Wasko (2003) says “the industry tries to eliminate ... uncertainty in various ways—by focusing on blockbusters featuring well-known stars and/or

by basing films on already recognizable stories and characters” (p. 55). One of the ways the creators of *The Debut* eased their own uncertainty for their film was to cast Dante Basco in the lead role of the film. Basco is best known for his role as Rufio in Steven Spielberg’s *Hook* (1991) and because of that role he is a well-recognized face in the Fil-Am community. Moreover, Cajayon claimed the other reason Basco was picked was because of his experience and they needed someone experienced because they were pressed for time and money (Ginsela, 2003b). As small independent filmmakers, Cajayon and those who joined him were trying to maximize their resources, one of their resources being their actors. Besides the cast, the crew of the film was mainly Fil-Am as well. Lisa Onodera, one of the film’s producers, said that having a mainly Fil-Am crew was intentional and they modeled themselves after director Spike Lee who is known for using a mainly African American crew when he films (Ginsela, 2003b). Their intentions were to give opportunity to a group who is rarely given opportunities. By choosing a cast and crew that was pre-dominantly Fil-Am and crafting a Fil-Am story, the makers acknowledged the local condition and social problem subsequently reflecting pastiche of the lack of Fil-Am films and the lack of Fil-Ams being given work in the film community both on screen and behind the scenes.

One of the biggest hurdles the creators of *The Debut* faced was funding. The funding for the film was held up not only by lack of investment from movie studios, but from within the Fil-Am community (and broader Asian American community) as well. Even though the Fil-Am community’s portrayals on screen have been miniscule and the broader Asian American community’s portrayals have been stereotypical, the opportunity to rectify these social problems did not dawn on the wealthier community members. The members of *The Debut* were disheartened when the wealthier members of the Asian American community and, more

specifically, the Fil-Am community failed to help them even though they were best equipped to do so. Cajayon recalls:

They were saying its [the film] got Filipino kids cursing, its got Filipino kids acting Black, oh my god you're showing poor Filipinos. This is the very first time White people are gonna see Filipinos on the big screen and you're showing them this? So many of them told me, that they didn't feel that the movie was going to appeal to the Filipino American community. (Ginsela, 2003b).

These wealthier members had the ability to help mobilize culturally syncretic representations of Asian Americans as opposed to the racist images created by White Hollywood, but they decided not to pursue funding since the images on film did not cater to placating White audiences (even though the film is geared toward the Fil-Am community). Unfortunately, for the creators of the *The Debut* “the Asian American community only recognizes Asian American achievement after validation by white society” (Xing, 1998, p. 181). The colonized mindset of the wealthy were embarrassed and ashamed of the range of representations that were less than perfect and did not follow the model minority myth. The donors who walked away from the movie were more concerned by what they believed White society would judge them over as opposed to what their community needed to see and hear.

Besides creating images that would make White audiences feel comfortable it seems that many in the Asian American and Fil-Am community have a difficult time considering film to be art. Wealthier members of the Fil-Am and broader Asian community had the chance to help make Fil-Ams visible to audiences and to show Asian Americans in a light different from historically stereotypical representations. *The Debut* as a film and as a part of the arts “provides[s] a platform for seeing things in ways other than they are normally seen” (Caruso, 2005, p.77). David Magdael of Visual Communication (VC) explains the hesitancy of supporters within the Asian American and Fil-Am communities by pointing out that these

communities do not seem to understand that they need to support their own filmmakers and the rich individuals within the community seem to have trouble grasping that film is art (Ginsela, 2003b). One of the few investors in the film, Mike Hsieh, from Celestial Pictures was told by his father that he was throwing his money away by supporting Asian American filmmakers (Ginsela, 2003b). It seems people within the Asian American community do not realize that like any other art medium, film has the ability to allow one to see the world differently and as a part of “the arts [film] can awaken us to alternative possibilities of existing, of being human, of relating to others, and of being other” (Caruso, 2005, p. 76). Despite having little funding and not receiving the financial support they needed the film’s producers continued to assemble the movie out of the fear of not being able to regroup their cast and crew if they shut down filming. To make up for their lack of financial support Cajayon funded a large part of the film with his own credit cards; the cast and crew took large pay cuts and continued to fundraise (Ginsela, 2003b).

Even though the film was not finished, the members of the film worked to promote the film. Eric Ilustrisimo, one of the film’s webmasters said, “I think the big thing also was to build up support in the community for the film-- kind of a grassroots level” (Ginsela, 2003b). By making appearances at community festivals and showing the little clips of film footage they had, people became more interested in helping to fund the film. Cajayon claimed that the film was able to finally be finished because of “small one thousand dollar, two thousand dollar, five thousand dollar investments in the film coming from working class blue collar Filipino Americans. It was that money that really got us across the finish line” (Ginsela, 2003b). In a way, the film is not just a piece of vernacular discourse from one source, but it is the cumulative work of the Fil-Am community when one considers the amount of support the film was given by members of the community, aside from the rich and affluent.

Distribution and Advertisement

After going through the trials of funding and making *The Debut* the creators had the problem of distributing the film. By looking at the distribution end of the film's creation one gains insight into *for* of the trinity mentioned by Fregoso. The film is vernacular rhetoric which means that it is "speech that resonates within local communities" therefore *The Debut* is *for* the local community (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 20). Yet in order for the film/speech to resonate with the local community, Fil-Ams had to know the film was out there. The only option being offered to them by distribution companies was to have their film go straight to video instead of run in theatres. The creators conducted their own market research and created their own film marketing strategy (Ginsela, 2003a). The creators knew that distributing their film would be difficult as they lacked the power, budget, and/or resources possessed by major distributors. By showing their movies in theatres they would have to compete against films that were being advertised nation-wide. Cajayon noted "[E]very single weekend there's another two or three major Hollywood movies coming out as well as another half dozen independent films coming out...How do you make your movie stand out from all the rest?" (Ginsela, 2003a). By focusing their energy on this core group they condensed marketing criteria by premising it primarily on a city's Fil-Am population—a base of 20,000 Filipina/os or more determined the film's release in a city, with resulted in 15 U.S. cities (Ginsela, 2003a).

While trying to advertise and distribute the film, the creators of *The Debut* had little to work with in terms of budget. Wasko (2003) says "distribution agreement terms are influenced by power and clout" and since the creators of *The Debut* had no power or influence they in turn also had no budget for advertising and they had no support from Hollywood (p. 86). Films that are connected to major distributing companies have marketing departments that spend millions

of dollars to promote and create an appetite for movies. “Advertising for a film can be more than the cost of production and...[has] grown dramatically over the last few decades. The Motion Picture Association America (MPAA) reported that the average for new feature films by member companies was \$27.3 million in 2002” (Wasko, 2003, p. 195). Those working with *The Debut* had no such luxury. Those involved with distributing and advertising the film relied heavily upon word of mouth and volunteers. The creators and volunteers did presentations about the film at high schools, specialty colleges, posted posters at stores, and spoke at churches (Ginsela, 2003a). In addition, they drove their own vehicles across the country in order to get to their 15 target cities and stayed in people’s homes because they could not afford hotels. The film’s creators were driven to see their work shared within the Fil-Am community. Their hard work landed their films in theaters and made this vernacular text accessible to Fil-Ams audiences. The film sold out in the theaters they played at and many times was number one at the box office in the particular places they held viewings. If the movie had never made it onto movie screens it could not have been considered vernacular because a vernacular discourse must have a historically silenced audience to engage—the text must have the ability to resonate within the minoritized community. The text born out of the minoritized group must be able to speak/give back to the people it was influenced by and came from. Accessibility via movie theaters, and later DVDs, gave *The Debut* the chance to repurcuss throughout the Filipina/o American populace and to show them that there was a positive film about them and to negate the feeling of being invisible.

The Debut of Filipina/o American Identities

I make the claim that *The Debut* actually *is* vernacular rhetoric and does not merely *function* as vernacular rhetoric. When a text *functions* as vernacular rhetoric it may have several

qualities that make it seem like vernacular rhetoric but it actually is not. For example, a text could be claimed by a minoritized community as affirmative even though it was not directed specifically at that community. When a discourse *is* vernacular it contains pastiche, cultural syncretism; it is also meant for a historically silenced people, originating from them and having significance to them. *The Debut* meets the criteria of being concerned with the local condition and social problems of a minoritized people, using pastiche, being culturally affirmative, and coming from and resonating in the Fil-Am community; therefore it qualifies as a vernacular text.

Being someone who occupies two seemingly different identities simultaneously, a Fil-Am can find themselves dis/oriented. Thomas Nakayama explains the dis/orientation of Asian Americans and brackets the explanation with how he feels about being dis/oriented:

Asian American identities cannot be understood outside of the context of international politics and histories, and Asian American history and politics. Hence, my identification as an ‘American’ seems ineffectual and, I feel, in an ongoing struggle with those who wish to identify me otherwise. These dis/orienting identities always leave me somewhere other than where I think I am. Asian Americans are trapped among larger discourses and histories, which constantly disrupt any claim to a stable identity. (p.17)

Nakayama captures the feeling of not being able to completely identify with being solely Asian or solely American and the constant upheaval of having an Asian American identity.

Having an identity that seems to be in a constant state of flux, Fil-Ams occupy an identity of being both/and. Just as being a Fil-Am means one is seen as *both* Filipina/o *and* American, parts of the Fil-Am identity consist of them being both/and—having an identity of plurality. The identities portrayed in *The Debut* are the identities of being seen as both a model minority and a “thug,” of being an assimilationist, an acculturalist, and rejectionist, and finally the identity of being the other and the othering other. These parts of Fil-Am identity appear to be at odds with one another yet are all a part of the same people and Fil-Am identity being advanced

in *The Debut*. The film implies that these identities create tensions with each other and are a part of the meaning behind being a member of the Fil-Am community.

A Filipina/o American as Both Model Minority and a Thug

Asian Americans, and in turn, Fil-Ams are conceived to be a part of the model minority. To conceive of a whole people striving to live up to the standards of the model minority is a lot to ask of a people, but there are many who do because of the approval and validation they receive from the family and friends who pressure them to conform to this belief that “reifies American ideological tenets that valorize self-sufficiency, persistence, and pluck to achieve the American Dream ideal” (Ho, 2003, p. 149). This model sets up expectations that are difficult to live up to, but the model minority seems to be an identity that plagues the Fil-Am community and is seen in *The Debut*. One of the ways the creators of the film illustrate the pressures of conforming to the model minority is by establishing Ben’s immediate family as blue-collar working class and exploring this issue by pursuing the relationship between Ben and Roland, his father. Besides the fact Roland is a postal worker, Ben’s family is established as blue-collar working class in several shots early in the film. In several of the first shots of Ben with his White friend, Doug [Jayson Schaal], they are seen in seemingly suburban, beach-like settings. As the scenes shift from the outside world to Ben’s home, the viewers are shown scenes with a more urban feel to them. There are busy car-lined streets, myriad telephone wires, and finally a humble one-story home, complete with bars on the windows and, revealed later, a clotheslines in the backyard. These shots reveal Ben’s humble roots, yet illustrate the pressure being put on him to lift himself out the working class setting. The scene where Ben is pressured to be a model minority occurs when Ben and his father, Roland, are sitting with relatives during Rose’s party. Roland is bragging to his own father, Carlo [Eddie Garcia], about Ben being accepted with a

scholarship to UCLA's pre-med program. Carlo claims he would be very proud to have another doctor in the family. Ben later confronts Roland about not wanting to be a doctor and the two get into a heated argument. Roland disapproves of Ben's pursuit of art and reveals that he does not want Ben to go through the struggles he went through. In Roland's eyes, instead of going from supposed "rags to riches" by pursuing a career in medicine, Ben risks the possibility of remaining in "rags" if he pursues art.

Ben is being pressured by his father to conform to the model minority because Roland thinks it would be in Ben's best interest. As a model minority, Ben has qualities which align with "American ideological tenets that valorize self-sufficiency, persistence, and pluck to achieve the American Dream" (Ho, 2003, p. 149). For example, Ben is established as a hardworking Asian prodigy because of his academic achievements and his abilities to attend to work outside of school as well. Ben's character does not necessarily stand in opposition to the model minority stereotype bestowed on him because his work ethic is seen as praiseworthy within the film, yet Ben also embodies the voice of resistance to the model minority. Ben rebels against the model minority stereotype and, early on in the film, he is shown making preparations to attend an art school instead of a pre-med program. Instead of taking the pre-med route which seems like a guaranteed path out of his blue-collar working class roots to something seemingly more prestigious, Ben chooses art, a seemingly unstable path. The model minority stereotype commonly used to identify Asian Americans is borrowed from the mainstream American community and is changed in such a way as that it breaks the minority stereotype and reveals an Asian American who wants to do more than just live up the American Dream assigned to him.

The other character struggling with the model minority identity is Ben's father, Roland [Tirso Cruz III]. Roland is seen as striving to embody the model minority stereotype, but is seen

as a “failure” in the eyes of Carlo because he is a postal worker. Roland’s job as a postal worker contrasts with his brother’s occupation as a doctor. Carlo is pleased to have a doctor in the family. Carlo never says he would be proud to have another postal worker in the family and, by never mentioning it, one can assume that to be a postal worker would not make him proud. Roland also visibly feels like a failure, as clearly established when he is smoking by a doorway during Rose’s party. Leaning against a doorway exhaling against a deep, dark, somber blue background, he is looking out at a parking lot full of teenagers and their cars, some of which are shiny imports. The only one taking in the cars is Roland, wanting what he cannot have. Rose [Bernadette Balagtas] finds him and he reflectively muses on how the kids in the parking lot have better cars than he does. He then apologizes to Rose for not giving her a proper debutante ball. Cultural syncretism is illustrated by showing that Roland only wants to be a model minority in order to care better for his family—he is not necessarily striving to make nor affirm the American Dream as his reality. There is an affirmation in striving to become a model minority if doing so is associated with being able to take better care of the family. Pastiche is shown by taking the model minority created by the mainstream and showing that the stereotype does not fit all Asian Americans and Fil-Ams. The film shows the model minority stereotype not fitting all Asian Americans and Fil-Ams because Roland’s portrayal is of someone failing to fit the stereotype despite wanting to live up to the expectations surrounding it..

Besides having the stereotype of the model minority to live up to, Fil-Ams are also seen as thugs or bad Asians. Oishi (2000) describes bad Asians as those who live up to racist assumptions and claims “[g]ood Asians embody the images and behaviors prescribed to them by white society. They are conservative and quiet supporters of the status quo...Therefore, any Asian American who makes noise, acts nasty, or in any way flouts the expectations of racist

stereotype is a Bad Asian” (p. 221). In other words a bad Asian is someone who seems uncivilized and embodies all the negative traits racists believe them to naturally hold. The thug identity is related to being an aggressive type of bad Asian. A thug is typically defined as an “an aggressive and violent young criminal” and is seen as a nasty person.²³ Nasty is just another word for bad as defined by Oishi’s (2000) explanation that “[an] Asian American who makes noise, acts nasty... is a Bad Asian” (p. 221). The thug or bad Asian within the film is embodied in the character of Gusto [Darion Basco], a former childhood friend and supposed opposite of Ben. Where Ben embodies the stereotype of model minority, Gusto embodies the thug/bad Asian by flouting the stereotype of being savage and uncivilized. Gusto “makes noise, acts nasty,...[and] flouts the expectations of racist stereotype” (Oishi, 2000, p. 221) because he is seen brandishing a gun, bullying an ex-girlfriend, being unnecessarily aggressive and loud during a basketball game, and is cast in mainly negative light.

The common stereotype of Fil-Ams from “both official and popular discourse [have] racialized Filipinos as less than human, portraying them as savage rapists, uncivilized beings, and even as dogs and monkeys” (Espiritu, 2003, p. 51). Seeing Gusto portray the characteristics of being aggressive hails the old racialized stereotypes of Fil-Ams being savage and uncivilized. Yet, Gusto’s individual experience appears to be culturally syncretic because his behavior is affirmed, more exactly explained, because he is given more depth than being just a thug/bad Asian. Gusto’s history is revealed as tragic underneath his thuggish exterior because his father died when he was young and his mother gives all of her positive attention and praise to her second husband, a condescending White male. Taking a savage-like stereotype and adding Gusto’s background adds depth to who he is and it makes one realize that someone could be acting out as a thug/bad Asian for reasons other than to stir up trouble and because that is just the

way they are. The character of Gusto advances one of the stereotypical identities of being a Fil-Am which is associated with being a thug/bad Asian who does not live up to the stereotype of being a model minority.

Being Fil-Am means that one has to negotiate the identity of both being asked to live up to the standards of being a model minority while also still being seen as a thug/bad Asian. According to Cajayon (2001), the purpose of creating these two opposing characters was to illustrate their similarities and show that “Gusto and Ben are basically the same character, you know, they’re both Filipino American men who have, in a sense, sold out themselves to different aspects of popular American culture.” Ben and Gusto are portrayals of what the larger U.S. population expects them to be. *The Debut* uses pastiche and cultural syncretism to change what one may typically expect a Fil-Am to be by giving the characters depth. Tensions between model minority and thug in Fil-Am identity are enhanced by the fact that Fil-Ams deal with assimilating and acculturating to the U.S. cultural norms as well as rejecting the norms and the identities being ascribed to them by outsiders in their daily lives. That is, Fil-Ams work daily to be considered equal to the majority of the U.S. population, but at the same time, they reject being exactly what the majority wants them to be—a completely subordinate people.

A Filipina/o American Identity is One of Assimilation, Acculturation, and Rejection

In attempting to identify the identity of Fil-Ams one can see the collision of an identity that is assimilationist, acculturalist, and rejectionist because it reflects a community afflicted with differential inclusion. One of the scenes where we see the filmmakers display an act of assimilation, acculturation, and then rejection is most apparent is Rose’s debut party. Debutant balls, also known as cotillions, are of European origin, but the filmmakers change things up by making the ball less formal. Fil-Ams have adopted the European custom of having a debut due

to assimilation. The filmmakers move beyond assimilation into acculturating the custom of a community coming together to celebrate the transition of a female from girl to woman. Finally, in the film there is the rejection of the normalized European custom of having a waltz. In place of waltzes there are traditional Filipina/o dances that take center stage of the debut party. The replacement of Euro-centric/White traditions with Filipina/o traditions functions as syncretic because of the affirmative place Filipina/o cultural expressions are given and their placement in the film is a protest against dominant White colonial ideology. Pastiche is seen in the taking of a party that has distinctly European roots and making the debutant ball something completely new and original to the Fil-Am community. The European cotillion had been reinvented as Fil-Am in *The Debut*.

Assimilation and acculturation is seen most clearly in characters of Ben and Gusto. Assimilation can be described as a mode “of survival and adaptation to the dominant White norm” (Mendoza, 2002, p. 142). Ben and Gusto assimilate in different ways and to different norms. Ben is associated with being a sell-out to the White race due to friends being mainly White, his shame of his family whom his friends do not visit, and his ignorance of his Filipina/o heritage. These characteristics of Ben are established in several ways. In the very opening scene the camera pans across a variety of pictures all featuring young White people and Ben drawing them. The picture then transitions into a pair of brown eyes surrounded by brown skin looking at Whiteness being displayed. Ben’s eyes see a White world to which he desires to feel a part of. The friends who accompany Ben throughout the movie are/or appear to be White. Ben has assimilated into a White world as he is shown knowing little about his heritage, speaking no Tagalog, lacking knowledge about cultural norms about blessing elders, and not being familiar with the traditional Filipina/o dances being performed at the party. In addition, Ben admits to

Annabelle [Joy Bisco], a female friend, that he at one time desired have a nose like Jason Priestly²⁴ so he slept with a clothespin attached to the end of his nose. The assimilation of Ben is associated with the identity of being a model minority. As a model minority, one bends to the status quo, but Ben's growth as a person in the film shows assimilation can pave the way for something more than continued assimilation. Cultural syncretism and pastiche are visible in the transformation of Ben's assimilation because he is able to break the mold of model minority stereotype, a type of assimilationist strategy, and he negotiates a new identity by embracing parts of being Fil-Am and his willingness to learn about it more from people like Annabelle (her explanation about large parties and relatives, his awe of her ability to speak Tagalog, her teaching Ben how to cha-cha, a dance not seen at Sheldon's party and is therefore a dance associated/accepted as a part of the Fil-Am community).

Another version of assimilation and acculturation is exemplified by Gusto. While not as much of the story follows Gusto, it is established that Gusto is a sell-out to the Black race. When Gusto first appears on screen along with his friends, Rommel [Dion Basco] and Nestor [Conrad Cimarra], these young men are dressed in baggy clothing which is associated with hip-hop fashion. The purpose of having these characters dressed in such a manner is to signal aggression:

Hip-hop fashion, furthermore, has the dual strategy of aggression and containment. By this I mean that with men the multilayered, oversized clothing, the bandanas, and the baggy pants revealing boxers are fashionably aggressive in their appropriation of "street" and *couture*, celebrating the accoutrement of prison and gang culture with the sophistication and timeliness of a *prêt-a-porter*....The resulting image is of an aggressive, combative, urbane, tightly held masculinity. (Harris, 2006, p.101)

In the character commentary about Gusto, Castro says, "Some say [Gusto is a] stereotype. We like to say archetype because everybody knows a few thugs in the Asian American [community]" (Cajayon, commentary, 2000). The archetype of being a thug must be modeled on

stereotypes of what is perceived to be Black because Gusto and his friends wear baggy clothing, speak in slang, and are seen with a gun. Gusto and his friends draw from the hip-hop culture which has been stereotyped as violent in the media. Denizen (2002) points out that in “the popular media black (and brown) youths are symbolically defined as threats to the social order. Their seemingly senseless rage and violence are directly connected to rap and hip hop culture” (p. 48). One can come to the conclusion of Gusto’s thug-like character being aligned with what is considered Black because of the use of hip-hop culture and its ties to African Americans: “Hip-hop music [and culture] is black form, given the involvement of African Americans in its creation, and because its concepts of authenticity are so tied to the roots of its culture” (Hess, 2005, p. 375). While Gusto did not assimilate to the dominant White norm, he could be seen as assimilating to what the perceived White norm of Blackness is.

Rejectionism is conveyed by Sheldon’s party and stands in contrast to Rose’s debut. Noting the differences between the parties is interesting because what one rejects the other affirms and vice versa, “[H]umans are defined by the negative, there is the sense that every affirmation is simultaneously a negation” (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 22). If Rose’s party can be coded as being Fil-Am because of the Fil-Ams attending her party, the traditional dances and break dancing, and the foods, then one can expect Sheldon’s party would contain the absence of those same things. At Rose’s party the teenagers are doing traditional dances and break dancing while at Sheldon’s party there is a mosh pit with White teenagers jumping up and down. Since the mosh pit is not seen at Rose’s party, moshing is implicitly rejected as a dance not associated with the Fil-Am community. The assimilationist, the acculturalist, and the rejectionist are parts of the Fil-Am identity simultaneously trying to include Fil-Ams to work at inclusion that is more than just differential.

The Other and the Othering Other

One of the most notable features about representations in the film is that while Fil-Ams are othered by White people, Fil-Ams engage in the same practices within their own community. The identity of the Fil-Am community is one of both other and othering other. The scene in which Fil-Am identity gives a nod to being othered is in the character of Ben and the characteristics of the two parties portrayed in the film. In one scene, Ben is at Sheldon's party with primarily White people surrounding him. The party is coded as being the opposite of Rose's debut because the party has nothing that Rose's party has. In turn the White house party is a rejection of what the Fil-Am community identifies with. Rose's debut party exists outside of the realms of the house party and can be viewed as other. At the raucous house party there are no families, teenagers are drinking, and no one who can physically be identified as anything other than White, besides Ben. At the house party, Ben physically stands out as different from everyone else around him. In addition to not physically looking like everyone else, he is made to seem like he does not belong at the party and is not wanted there when one of the girl's at the party utters a racial slur at him.

During Sheldon's party, Ben is sitting at a round table with his two closest friends, Doug and Rick [Brandon Martinez], and two White girls, Jennifer [Mindy Spence], the one he has a crush on, and Susie [Nicole Hawkyard]. The camera pans in on a circle of people at the table, creating a predatory sense. The group is playing a drinking game called *I Never*. Someone is supposed to say "I never--" and then add an experience at the end. If the person is guilty of participating in the experience they are required to take a drink from their cup. The game among the teenagers starts off perverted and to get back at a sexual innuendo made by Ben, Susie says "I've got one for you. I never—ate dog!" She laughs, gives Ben an insincere apology, and then

says “I never ate a cat!” Susie hysterically laughs. Meanwhile, all of the other people at the table tell her that she is not funny. Susie snaps back, “All those Orientals do it,” and proceeds to take a drink. When the others tell Susie she has had enough and attempt/try to take her cup she gets mad. Ben is the one to finally grab a hold of Susie’s cup, but she pulls the cup back and spills the drink all over herself. Susie then quickly stands up and yells at Ben, “I’m soaked you fucking chink.” Everyone else sits in silenced shock while Ben quietly replies more to himself than anybody else, “I’m not Chinese.”

This scene not only touches on the racism and othering that is experienced by the Fil-Am community, but it also touches on their invisibility and how outsiders of the community assume them to be part of another ethnic community. The racism experienced by Fil-Ams is one that has to do with Asian Americans being perceived as foreigners. Nakayama (1997) explains that “the histories of Asians in the United States are often difficult to find. Ignorance of these histories leads many Americans to assume that Asian Americans are recent immigrants” (p. 16). Asian Americans, and more specifically Fil-Ams, are easy to physically identify as immigrants, making them prime targets for racism. The reason Fil-Ams are easily marked as immigrants is because they look different from the majority of the White U.S population and that means “Filipino and other Asian Americans are discursively produced as foreign, they carry a figurative border with them. This figurative border marks them as linguistically, culturally, and racially ‘outside’ the national polity, and as targets of nativistic racism” (Espiritu, 2003, p. 211). The brownness and culture of Fil-Ams marks them as foreigners in the United States which has a “national culture that has been defined necessarily as white” (Espiritu, 2003, p. 211). As a result, the U.S. and the majority of its population can break its “promise of equal rights” since Filipinos have “‘failed’ integration [due] to their inability or unwillingness to assimilate” (Espiritu, 2003, p. 211). In

other words, it is okay to be racist towards Fil-Ams because they are foreigners who deserve it. Furthermore, Fil-Ams have been made invisible by being lumped into the larger category of being Asian American. Being of the Asian American category essentializes all Asians to be one and the same, as exemplified by Susie's claim "All those Orientals do it." As members of the Asian American community, Fil-Ams are subjected to stereotypes and representations which have "a history that ignores cultural differences and presumes essential racial identities. This history treats all Asians as if they belonged to the same ethnic, religious, and national group" (Denizen, p. 34). In the commentary to this scene, Cajayon claims, "This is essentially what this whole movie is about. It's responding to that kind of racism and making sure our community has a voice in America now."

In contrast to being othered is the act of othering others being identified in the film. This act of othering people within their own community is seen in the way Rommel, Gusto's friend, treats his cousin, Nestor. Rommel continually others Nestor by pejoratively calling him a "FOB" (fresh off the boat), mimicking his accent, and calling into question his actions (such as when Rommel and Gusto gang up on Ben, but Nestor holds back because it would not be fair). Nestor is made to feel unaccepted and othered within his own community and his own people. This part of the Fil-Am identity seems to highlight a troubling spot in the identity of being Fil-Am. One can be Fil-Am, yet not completely accepted because they have not been assimilated or sufficiently acculturated into the dominating norms, which include Whiteness, upper and middle class, speaking English, and not having an accent. Rommel wants to erase parts of Nestor's identity in order for Nestor be more like himself. Rommel takes the othering that has been aimed at Fil-Ams as being uncivilized and aims it at someone of the Fil-Am community. It is a prejudice act on Rommel's part to treat Nestor as less worthy of his respect and underserving of

being heard and acknowledged as equal just because he believes Nestor is not “American” enough as a Fil-Am.

Filipina/os are the other yet, at the same time, they can engage in othering people from their own community. Being seen and treated as other highlights the fact that Fil-Ams suffer from differential inclusion and are forever seen as foreigners. At the same time, othering people within their own community gives the appearance of trying to leave foreign qualities behind in order to be released from the condition of differential inclusion.

Identifying the Identity of Filipina/o Americans

The identity of Fil-Ams advanced in *The Debut* is one of contradictions. The identity contains the contradictions by being flexible because it is an identity of both/and. These contradictions of simultaneously being both model minority and thug, the assimilationist, acculturationist, and rejectionist, and being othered and othering others are seen through vernacular rhetoric’s pastiche and cultural syncretism—they reveal the complications surrounding the identity of the community. As vernacular rhetoric *The Debut* takes a step towards making the Fil-Am community visible and “illustrate[s] other possible realities” (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 26) by presenting multi-dimensional Fil-Am characters on screen. Filipino males are masculine and desirable as exemplified by Annabelle’s attraction to Ben and her former attraction to ex-boyfriend, Gusto; the Filipino can win the love of the Filipina as portrayed by Ben and Annabelle’s first kiss; Fil-Ams pursuing a career outside of white collar jobs by showing Roland as a hardworking postal worker and Ben striving to be an artist is nothing to be ashamed of; Filipinas as more than just lotus blossom or a dragon lady can be seen in the strong, funny, and smart characters of Rose and Annabelle; Fil-Ams and Asian Americans in general can be more than extras in the background, the sidekick, or a villain to be beaten. This identity

of both/and reveals a flexibility in Fil-Am identity and makes it possible for Fil-Ams to break out of their assigned American Dream, their roles designated by the majority, their subordination, and their otherness and complicate how Fil-Ams (and Asian Americans) can be understood in opposition to past representations which have been understood to be actual reality by the U.S. population (Asian Americans included). These past representations and portrayals of Fil-Ams, and in general Asian Americans, as sexualized females and desexualized males, as foreigners, as all Asians being one in the same, as other, as squinty-eyed, as exotic, etc. are the current “reality” being touted by mainstream media which have been used to maintain White hegemony. While Fil-Ams may still not be visible to the larger U.S. American community they inhabit, they are now affirmed and acknowledged in a film which helps undo their own erasure which is “their own (internalized) racist ideological reckoning of themselves”(Mendoza, 2002, p. 10). *The Debut* gives audiences (Filipina/o American and non-Filipina/o American) an alternative way of perceiving Asian Americans, and more specifically Fil-Ams, as opposed to the one-sided racist images and identities manufactured and placed on them by their colonizers.

The mix of identities and representations portrayed in *The Debut* offer up characters and images that unseat the typically flat portrayals of Asian Americans. The film’s offering of alternative portrayals of Fil-Ams, and in turn Asian Americans, can be viewed and displays identities that are at odds with each other because Fil-Ams live in a condition of differential inclusion where Fil-Am “existence always counts, though their names and identities do not” (Espiritu, 2003, p. 47). Fil-Ams are viewed as other and view themselves as other because of a colonized past which resulted in damaging “‘people’s belief in their names, in their language, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves’ and made them see their past as a ‘wasteland of

non-achievement''' (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 16). Fil-Ams are made to feel like they are foreigners and not of the country even though they may be born and bred in the United States:

The process of differential inclusion, then, is not about closing the physical national borders but about creating borders within the nation. In this sense, the border is everywhere. These borders within—bolstered by political and cultural mechanisms designed to restrict the membership in the national community—set clear but imaginary boundaries between who is defined as a citizen and who is not (Espiritu, 2003, p. 211).

As a result of differential inclusion and, in a manner, being on the outside looking in, the Fil-Am community is seen to have an identity that is both/and. This identity wants to be included and counted *in* the larger U.S. community as important and equal to the majority of the citizens while at the same time not wanting to be *of* the primarily White majority. They want to be counted as Americans, “but in ways that will not erase their identities as Filipinos” (Bonus, 2000, p.28).

The Debut works to subvert differential inclusion because it moves Filipina/o Americans from their “subordinate standing” and being “not fully present” in film and puts the spotlight on them. Instead of being just othered in the film or having another Asian group stand in for them Fil-Ams and their experiences are the main attraction. The film’s tension of containing the identity of model minority, assimilation and acculturation, and othering versus the thug, rejection, and other show a negotiation of trying to gain entrance and acceptance into U.S. culture, but at the same time a rebuff of complete and total absorption of it as well. Filipina/o Americans want to be both/and. The both/and quality gives flexibility to the community but troubles its identity at the same time.

The Debut as vernacular rhetoric is discourse that resonates within the Fil-Am community. The movie is Ben’s story and the Filipina/o American community’s story of trying to negotiate an identity that carries the burden of being both/and and figuring out a way to reconcile the seemingly different parts of one’s world. Since a film has only so much time to

discuss issues and tell a story there is a limit to how much can be represented and conveyed to an audience. As a consequence to these limitations of filmmaking not everyone within the community and audience may ascribe to the identities pushed in the film, but they can relate to the fact of having “a foot planted in both worlds” (Flores, 1996, p. 142) by being both Filipina/o and American.

CHAPTER THREE

THE AUDIENCE AND VERNACULAR RHETORIC

The need to include the audience in this study is to account for the fact that while the creators of *The Debut* may have certain intentions with their film, there is no control over what an audience will do with a text and how they will read it. To gain a better understanding of how *The Debut* functions as vernacular rhetoric for audiences I supplement my research with the responses of a focus group. As stated in chapter one, by conducting a focus group and analyzing audience responses “researchers’ critical account of informants’ own interpretation of a text is a crucial task because audiences ‘live ideology’” (Park, Gabbodon, & Chernin, 2006, p. 166). The use of a focus group allows the critic to identify “other possible realities” (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 26), *The Debut* may be offering outside of typical Hollywood representations constructed by the dominant ideology of Whiteness, the identities proposed in chapter two, and additionally what I may have overlooked

Within this chapter, I make the claim that *The Debut* is relevant to the Fil-Am community and the identities in the film are persuasive because of the familiarity of the situations and experiences being displayed in a text from the Fil-Am community which works in a syncretic manner and affirms the identity and place of Fil-Ams in a film. The qualitative research carried out both substantiates and supports the previously stated claim. Additionally, in the area of audience responses to films, Fil-Ams are a group requiring further study; therefore, this research project contributes to rectifying such a gap.

In this chapter the methods used to gather the audience, the focus group event, and audience responses are discussed. In the first section, “The Focus Group,” I describe how

participants were recruited and selected challenges in organizing a focus group, and the running of the focus group. The next section, “Focus Group Responses,” discusses the method used to analyze audience responses and the analysis of audience responses. I categorize the responses in conjunction with the identities I saw being advanced in the film such as model minority and “thug,” collision of assimilationist, acculturationist, and rejectionist, along with other and othering other. The one category I add to the ones already listed is a category which contains unexpected, yet revealing and important, responses to the film.

The Focus Group

The participants in the focus group are Fil-Am college students because I thought the film would resonate with them since *The Debut* is a story of a young second-generation Fil-Am preparing to enter college. Because of the use of human subjects in the study approval had to be granted by the university’s Internal Review Board. The use of human subjects in a focus group was approved as protocol 06-298H in December of 2006. Participants for the audience analysis were recruited through advertisement such as email and sent to Colorado State University organizations that had connections to Fil-Am students. There were several responses to the advertisement, but there were only three people who were able to work the focus group project into their schedules. On the evening the focus group was held the participants were given a cover letter (see Appendix B), which was also read aloud, that explained their participation, obligations, and rights as human research subjects. After the cover letter²⁵ and picking pseudonyms for themselves that would preserve their anonymity (they chose the names 7, Elle, and Vanessa) the participants watched *The Debut* and were involved in a dialogue which, by itself, lasted about 90 minutes. This 90-minute conversation was recorded and transcribed to create the text the audience analysis of chapter three is based on. The focus group’s responses

were well worth the time and effort needed to organize the event. Their answers to my questions proved to be useful in revealing ideology at work.

Focus Group Responses

The purpose of doing audience analysis is “not to predict how all people will respond...but to explicate viewers’ film experiences” (Cooper, 1998, p. 223). Consequently, after holding the focus group I transcribed the evening’s conversation in order to analyze the audience’s dialogue as a text. Rather than coding the data and engaging in quantitative analysis, I focus on the transcribed text. The method I used to do this is termed as “relevancy.” Brenda Cooper (1998) legitimates relevancy by quoting Jodi Cohen and claims:

Research explicating the ‘relevant moments of meaning’ occurring at the intersection of spectators’ cultural subjectivities and mediated texts is critical to identifying and understanding the interpretation processes used by spectators because ‘[t]he concept of relevancy does not separate what the text does to viewers from what the viewers do with the text’. (p. 208)

Relevancy thus encourages a critic to discern experiences and/or identities, for example, that resonate amongst the participants. In the case of this study, I concluded that the identities named and discussed in the previous chapter coincided with identities detected by participants based on what they viewed onscreen, found as relateable, and what “hit close to home.” In addition, I explored unexpected responses I received from the participants which indicated issues of significance that may not be accounted for in the identities listed in chapter two.

The connection between relevancy and vernacular rhetoric can be seen through the fact that vernacular rhetoric is “speech that resonates within local communities” (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 20). If speech resonates within local communities this implies that the community sees significance and meaning in the speech. Therefore seeing meaning in a speech that resonates within the local community signifies the speech to be relevant to their lives. Cooper (1998)

confirms “[t]he relationship between mediated texts and viewers is reciprocal, as media narratives merely provide frameworks for possible interpretations, and viewers individually and creatively use media texts to fit their individual life experiences and cultural subjectivities during their process of interpretive reflection” (p. 210). Cooper’s explanation alongside with Stuart Hall’s (2006) theory that audiences can read a text as a dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated code, or oppositional code accounts for the fact that while people may be members of the same community they may or may not see the same thing while interacting with the same text (pp. 171-173). As a result I argue that while there can be no generalizable answer about Fil-Am audiences, a film such as *The Debut* is relevant to the Fil-Am audience and the identities presented are persuasive because of the significance of familiarity with the situations and experiences. The relevancy of these situations and experiences being displayed in a text from the Fil-Am community work in a syncretic manner and affirms the identity and place of Fil-Ams in film.

Model Minority and Thug

As Asian Americans, Fil-Ams are not immune to being confronted with the notion of family and peers “to emulate and embody the Asian Model Minority characterization” (Ho, 2003, p. 149) in order to be seen as successful and praiseworthy by these same people. The relevance of this identity was something that some of the participants could relate to. The fact that the model minority and thug were something the participants could relate to means that the film was able to speak to the participants on some level. Being able to touch on the model minority and thug shows there is relevance of these in participants’ life experiences.

The first participant to touch on the model minority identity was Elle. Elle could identify with pressure Ben was feeling from his father when it came to deciding on his college career. In

the film Ben's father, Roland, wanted him to pursue a medical career with the outcome of being a doctor. Elle's reality of being held to the model minority standards, and her brother as well, are reflected in her reply:

I really identified with the wanting to go to medical school, because my parents were that way. And as with me there-- it was nothing other than a doctor, lawyer, or astronaut. One of those. They picked my major when I came to school. I didn't have a choice (I)²⁶ My parents chose for me. And luckily for my parents, I ended up really liking it, and I ended up getting into the research aspect of it, instead of med school. But for my brother, they picked his major as well, in microbiology, but he hates it. He, but he went through with it. He's getting ready to graduate, but he can't stand like a day in it. And you know, you can't say no to your parents. Not to my kind of parents.

Besides relating to the pressures of conforming to the model minority standards, Elle was expecting to see a model minority stereotype in the film. In the statement cited above, Elle does not seem to personally see herself or her brother as being pushed to model minority standards, but the connection between the identity in the film and the familiarity of the pressures is something that she can relate to. She may not count herself as a model minority or may not see her parents encouraging the model minority lifestyle because she sees such a thing as a broader Asian American stereotype and the strict enforcement of education as more cultural. Elle says:

I thought there would be, but it might not be a Filipino (VC) stereotype, more of like an Asian American stereotype. I thought it would be like that one characters whose straight-A student, super nerd, good at math... You know, but I (I) a more Asian stereotype than a Filipino, but education is still strictly enforced—you have to do good in school.

Elle does not question the cultural motivation for being well-educated and seems to take it for granted that "you have to do good in school."

As with Elle, 7 could relate to the model minority as well. 7 saw *The Debut* not as perpetuation of the model minority characterizations instead 7 asserted that the film was opening up more doors to the possibilities of what and who Fil-Ams can strive to be:

[I]t also brings the fact that (VC) we are Asians, and you know we have the subcategory of Filipino, that we can do everything (I) You know, my parents want me to be doctor,

some might want me to be lawyer, something of higher status. We are able to branch out and should become like, I guess, Dante Basco, actors. You know, we have the abilities to act as well. We have the abilities to dance. We have the abilities to be independent—we shouldn't be specified to one area.

7 seemed to be saying that the film was giving Fil-Ams more options to what they can plan to do in their lives besides being a “doctor, lawyer, or astronaut” as Elle had stated. An illustration of other possible realities is a characteristic of vernacular rhetoric and in *The Debut* an alternative reality as to who Fil-Ams are and can be is something that 7 can see.

The other side to the dichotomy of the both/and identity is the thug. The participant who saw thuggishness in some of the film characters was 7. However, 7 did not necessarily see the representation of a Fil-Am thug as a representation of Fil-Am identity. 7 reflected “the bad guys were more thuggished out” and that “[t]hey [Gusto, Rommel, and Nestor] seemed to follow the stereotype of--If they want to be bad they're going to follow (VC) the gangster lifestyle.” There was relevance in the portrayals of the thug for 7 because he could relate the “gangster lifestyle” to his own friends who seemed to “go down that path.” 7 could not personally relate to being a thug but he could see a relation between what he saw on film with some of his own friends. It is interesting to note that 7's answer reflects that when one wants to be “bad” they follow a gangster lifestyle, like 7's own friends. 7 hesitated to call Gusto, Nestor, and Rommel stereotypes associated with the Fil-Am community and my guess is due to the fact that a gangster look is associated most with Black and Hispanic stereotypes.

While the identities of being a model minority or a thug were not identities the participants claimed, they could relate to them and being able to relate to them suggests the persuasiveness of the identities. Elle and 7 did not identify as model minorities, but the situation experienced by Ben to be doctor was one that spoke to them. There was no questioning as to the motivation for the Fil-Am community's need to see their children succeed outside of the fact that

it was something they had to do. The fact that a situation such as stringent education and nothing less than success remaining unquestioned is unsettling, because it only further embeds White hegemony. White hegemony “valorize[s] self-sufficiency, persistence, and pluck to achieve the American Dream” and as result holds other people to the same standards and those who do not meet these standards are not “true” Americans (Ho, 2003, p. 149). As to the identity of thug this was an identity that may not have been something participants saw as directly relevant to their own lives, such as 7 and the thug identity of his friends, but they could see it working in the lives of others. The both/and identity of being model minority and thug is persuasive because of the relevance in the participants’ lives.

Assimilationist, Acculturationist, Rejectionist, Other, and Othering Other

There is a pressure to conform, assimilate, and acculturate to White cultural norms and stereotypes of who the White population perceives Asian Americans to be. There is a pressure to conform because conforming would mean acceptance and having the same privileges as the White populace. This pressure felt by Asian Americans, and more specifically Fil-Ams, is present due to the invisibility of Whiteness and the structures through which it maintains its dominant position and being other as a result of differential inclusion. It is interesting to note that while I saw rejection and othering within the film none of the focus group members noticed or at least mentioned these observations. While rejectionist and othering other were not discussed, assimilationist and acculturationist along with being other was spoken about. Dealing with being viewed as other and the issues of assimilation and acculturation was an experience that participants could relate to and saw as relevant in their lives, hence suggesting the persuasiveness in the identities portrayed.

One of the participants who touched on assimilation was Vanessa. While she may not have labeled her experience as assimilation, Vanessa mentions her own history of not speaking Tagalog:

I feel similar to Ben because I didn't grow learning Tagalog, I didn't grow up learning (I) with the language, or history. (I) for my parents and (I). I certainly felt that struggle of with being kind of stuck in the middle of the two.

Vanessa mentioned that she was raised speaking only English in her family. One can sense some frustration in her words because she feels “stuck in the middle” since she is a Filipina who cannot speak Tagalog, but is a non-White U.S. American who speaks English. Like Ben, she resides in the borderlands of identity, more specifically not being completely Filipina/o and not being completely American in terms of social acceptance. Vanessa also reveals that she gave the appearance of assimilating to U.S. American culture at times. She mentions feeling discomfort in revealing or behaving in way she deems to be more Filipina in front of non-Filipina/o Americans because of how non-Filipinas/os question her. This questioning in a way seems to have curbed what she will or will not do in front of those who do not share a Fil-Am background. Vanessa mentions how she can relate to Ben when it comes to sharing her background:

For Ben, I think that the way in which he was sort of ashamed of his background and his family, I think that part was kind of stereotypical, because I—I do know, like I guess, some of like my sisters and I have (I) that. And, I think (VC), maybe some of our cousins and friends. There are certain parts of our family background we kind of felt we couldn't show to, I guess, non-Filipino.

While it is not explicitly stated, the front of assimilation could be read as a rejection of complete and utter absorption into White American culture. The statement can be seen as a form of rejection because her answer implies that if she did not behave in a Fil-Am way in front of non-Fil-Ams, then one can assume she behaved as a Fil-Am when non-Fil-Ams were not around.

When asked about Ben and Gusto being stereotypes, 7 stepped in with a reply that Ben seemed normal. When pressed to define normal, 7's answers seem to imply assimilation into White cultural norms as being normal. 7's attempt at describing normality:

More normal—more just like—not more normal, but I guess you could say, like, he assimilated to the U.S. culture. (VC) It looked like he was his—I mean, you could tell he was his own individual. He's an artist. An artist (I) and sense of individuality. You could tell by his room, it's completely different. You don't see (VC) anything from that's from the Philippines to—I mean, it's everything that's what he has in room is his own indie (I), he created himself. (VC) Sense of style was not thuggish like his friends, his (VC) or his child friends (I). (VC) His hairstyle was (VC), like, I can't even think what it looked like, it's not diff—but it's not, like, out there, it's not bizarre or anything. (VC) His grammar, I mean, he seems really properly educated. So, (VC) he like a typical American guy. (VC) I can't find anything that's not typical of him.

P.I.: In that regard, is he—in describing him as a typical American kid. Is he only Filipino, do we only see him as Filipino because we know he's Filipino?

7: (VC) Well, trying to bring that up (VC). Just knowing that (VC) he's Filipino, like, it makes me curious. (VC) That's a hard question actually. (VC) I don't know. I'm just—I don't know (I).

7's response is interesting because it seems to indicate an acceptance of assimilation into the U.S. American culture as normal. 7's answer seems to imply that to assimilate is to normalize oneself into the Whiteness of the general U.S. American population.

Participants touched on the subject of being other in relation to their experiences growing up. Vanessa revealed that she tried to hide being Fil-Am and 7 could relate as well. 7 discussed things he could identify with in the film and saw as relevant. 7 saw relevancy between Ben and himself such having predominantly White friends and being embarrassed of being Filipino American:

And, in a way I guess, you could say that when I was growing up I viewed myself different from other kids because of my background and when I would go over to their house and see how their family was structured was completely different from mine. In a way, I was a little embarrassed to have them over, but then as I started growing up and (VC) realizing I'm different in a way and they just kind of accept it that I became comfortable allowing my friends coming over to my house, not being embarrassed.

Later in the conversation the topic of being other was raised again. This was reflected again in one of 7's and Elle's responses touching on assimilation, acculturation, and rejection:

7: Even though you are born and raised in America you shouldn't forget about your roots. I mean, you're going to wake up every morning, look at yourself in the mirror, and you'll notice that you're not completely—you're not the majority, you're of minority status and as much as you don't like it you're going to be viewed differently.

Elle: [I]t just kind of, it reminded me of other movies like *Bend it Like Beckham*. Have you guys seen that one? It's almost kind of like the same thing. Only it's an Indian American—Indian British and you know, and how she kind of assimilates to that culture as well as stay true to her own heritage.

Both responses from 7 and Elle are concerned with being a part of the larger population yet remembering one's ethnic heritage and Ben's experiences of being other, being embarrassed, and trying to hide is something the participants could relate to. 7 mentions that "you shouldn't forget about your roots" while Elle speaks about staying true to heritage, both statements imply that one should not completely accept assimilation and acculturation. If one is not being assimilated and acculturated into the dominant norms, then rejection of roles, portrayals, and images purported to be Asian American (by the dominant population), to a certain degree, is being negotiated. Instead of trying to forget one's ethnic heritage or trying to live up to expectations placed on them by outsiders one can reject the idea of behaving in either of these ways and be oneself. In turn, one should not completely buy into the Hollywood representations and identities being passed off as Asian American, and more specifically Fil-Am, in popular culture. Additionally, in the above response, 7 speaks about being different, therefore other and to be other and/or different is to be a part of the minority and to be in the margins of a larger society. The persuasiveness of the mentioned identities are a result of the film intersecting with what the participants have seen and experienced themselves, be it being othered, assimilated, or acculturated.

Unexpected Responses

There were issues in the conversation I did not expect. One such issue is the use of stereotypes of the Fil-Am culture. I can understand stereotypes as an issue for concern due to past representations of Asian Americans in one-dimensional roles and the belief that all Asian cultures are one in the same as evidenced by past portrayals of Asians in the media. Stereotypes seemed to be of concern to the participants because they saw them as being dangerous in the continuation of one-dimensional images of Fil-Ams such as all Fil-Am homes smelling funny, containing a barrel man, a big fork and spoon, and a picture of *The Last Supper*, or all Fil-Ams knowing traditional dances, or Filipina mothers who continually want to feed people, etc. While these supposed stereotypes were relevant to the participants' lives and they could identify with them, there was worry that all Fil-Ams are one in the same, and diversity within the culture could be passed over. Another issue that the focus group touched on indicated an awareness of the invisibility of Fil-Ams to the larger U.S. population. This response surprised me. This awareness indicates that participants are familiar with the feeling that the Fil-Am community suffers from invisibility and that there are societal and cultural actions at work maintaining the invisibility.

When discussing their concerns about stereotyping in the film, all three focus group participants identified what they believed to be stereotypical portrayals, such as the "typical" Fil-Am home, the gossip, and the Filipina mother. As a critic I am not agreeing with them because what they identify as stereotype I see as identification of cultural elements. These are the elements that hail us as Fil-Am viewers because we know these signs and understand them. The disjuncture between our differing views come from the fact that we are approaching the film from different places. I am looking at the film from a different perspective, as vernacular rhetoric, whereas the focus group participants seemed to be viewing the film as a representation

not from a minoritized ethnic community, but just as another film where Fil-Ams and Asian Americans are being boxed in by what is displayed on screen . Participants tended to agree that the stereotypes were things they could identify and relate to:

7: I think, [*The Debut* is] an almost independent type of movie or trying to hit mainstream because it's hitting every culture—it's hitting, like all the stereotypes of Filipinos where you've got the gossip in the family, you have (VC) the mom who always wants to feed your friends, the barrel man (VC) the traditional dancing.

There is no indication if these stereotypes are good, bad, or both, but these images in the film are signaling something familiar to the audience. For Elle and Vanessa the film “hits close to home” because of these stereotypes and the stereotypes carry relevance since as Vanessa states “it's almost like somebody went into my house growing up. Like a documentary about my life and a lot of things (I) like from speaking Tagalog in the home to the big wooden fork and spoon at my aunt's house or something.” As to the stereotypes, Vanessa also adds “they [the filmmakers] touched on a lot of stereotypes or just common things. I think some stereotypes are actually kind of true.”

There was some comfort and entertainment to be had by the participants in seeing what they saw to be stereotypes of Fil-Ams and markers and symbols of what can be associated with Fil-Am culture. Despite the fact that participants were able to mutually agree that to see Fil-Am film was affirming, there was some hesitation in fully embracing these stereotypes (or as Vanessa states “common things”) because to accept these images as representative of Fil-Ams would be to conflate all Fil-Am families as one and the same.

Besides discussing stereotypes of Fil-Ams, the focus group members spoke about typical stereotypes they saw of Asian Americans in film and their absence in *The Debut*. Participants explicitly named stereotypes of Asian Americans, such as the dragon lady and martial artist, which they felt limited and entrapped representations and portrayals of Asian Americans. For

the participants, this lack of stereotype was refreshing and new for getting an audience to think about roles Asian Americans can play without resorting to a character who's only memorable quality is their roundhouse kick. 7 explains:

I mean if you look at other films and (I) Lucy Liu, Jackie Chan, they're all stereotypes of marital arts, (VC) the dragon lady—all that stuff. I mean with *The Debut* it was more of like they were just themselves. They weren't, you know, stereotyping all of them in martial arts. Dante can draw, he's a good artist. (VC) Angelina can dance. (VC) It was a pretty interesting role that shows that we can play different roles besides stereotypical roles, that we have that ability. (VC) It's quite different from other movies like *The Fast and The Furious* and all that stuff.

For Vanessa, the lack of martial arts in the film had her question the relation of race to stereotypes and whether non-Fil-Ams could tolerate a film that portrayed Asian Americans who performed no martial artistry whatsoever. She states:

I'm wondering because while this movie, like if we all come from Filipino backgrounds or (I) that we know enough to know about what stereotypes or what typical or common cultural things to look out for, you know, certain things versus certain Asian stereotypes in general or certain things that we usually would associate with Asian race as a whole. Because I think—I think sometimes, when people have an idea of what a certain race is and they see that in films and other media and it's like "oh, okay." We know all about we're considered racially like martial artists. Like a lot of people love martial arts. And so, (VC) you know, there's a lot of films that portray Asians as the like expert martial artists and, you know, they're action packed. (I) But this didn't have any of that. This-- No martial arts. I mean, there was a fight though, but it wasn't, you know, that kind of fight. And (VC) I hope with-- if you took (I) with a typical U.S. American audience—if you made them go through this movie, would they be happy to see the non-stereotypes or would they be discussing "how come there's no martial arts? How come, you know, this or that?" So, I think there might be mixed reactions.

For Elle, the lack of martial arts stereotype signaled a shift in how the current Asian American generation is represented in film. Elle claims to see a "shift away from that classic stereotype to more, like, something a younger crowd likes or going to highlight (VC) this generation that's coming up and things that they like and are really popular" such as hip-hop which encompasses anyone who wants to be involved in it. Additionally, stereotypes that participants saw or looked

for was the nerd, the thug, being a thug just for show, and the possibility of thug being a stereotype.²⁷

Another unexpected response that cropped up frequently was the portrayal of Filipina/o traditions and culture and, in particular, the lack of Catholicism shown as well as the minimal amount of time spent finessing what an actual debut is all about. The participants expected more religion, specifically Roman Catholicism, to be displayed in the film because they see religion tightly woven into the Fil-Am culture and in their own lives as well.

Elle: The part that I thought was kind of (VC) funny that, well, I'm not sure, but I know most Filipino are Catholic and I didn't feel like they didn't put a lot of the Catholic aspect into the movie. In my family we are very very Catholic. And that plays into how we act, and how you're seen, and everything like that.

Vanessa: (VC) I've heard that—I think that the religious part (VC) (I) is that that the other family didn't touch up as much on the religious aspect (I) Roman Catholicism. I thought that most of the (I) my family (I) I heard that a majority of the Filipino population is Catholic.

7: (VC) I know that like when you're younger it's really, really enforced more of the time. Like going to church (VC) saying your rosary. Like all that. It really surprised me that they didn't at least add some sort of like a prayer for the dinner.

In discussing what they would have added to the film there was mutual agreement amongst all that more religion should have been added. This can best be summed by Elle: “You know, it's just so ingrained into the culture, (VC) for my family. So, I would have put something more like that.” Vanessa wished to see more the religious aspect not only because she felt it was a big part of the culture, but she was interested in how Filipinos practice their religion “I think I agree with Elle and 7 about more religious aspects they could have incorporated because (I). (I) More Roman Catholicism, but I know that the way how Catholicism is practiced there can be different from maybe countries here, in other countries (I). Well, how do Filipino celebrate their religion?”

The religious component and debuts are connected because as indicated by the answer from 7, there are religious elements in a Fil-Am debutante ceremony. 7 felt that integration of Roman Catholicism into Rose's party within *The Debut* would have lent the party a more authentic feel:

The dinner when they, like had all the food set up, before the dancers. Usually they all get together and they bless the food and then they eat it and party. But I guess it's not in there for budget reason, but, (VC) I can see that, the whole religious side (I) For the Filipino culture it's just not displayed as much in *The Debut*.

The reasons behind the participants wanting to see an authentic portrayal of a debut varied. For example, Vanessa wanted to see the filmmakers capture an authentic debut because she had never attended one, and in contrast, 7 had been to several debuts and felt the filmmakers were not portraying Rose's party to the most complete degree possible (this lack of completeness, such as the inclusion of religion, led to the feeling that Rose's debut was not authentic).

Vanessa: I never grew up knowing anything about a debut. (VC) I just seriously found out about it last year (I) I guess, for some people over here, it's like the cotillions (I) I don't know if any other Spanish speaking countries down in Mexico, like a quinceñera—that kind of tradition or similar. (VC) But, I—I guess I was sort of expecting more of the traditional way. I mean, I really have no concept of what people can do on that kind of occasion. I really don't know, but I was kind of hoping they would really show that (VC) you know, how do Filipinos celebrate this significance? How old is she turning? That kind of thing. But to me, it looked more like a typical Filipino gathering. It would be like what my family does. They get together and you know some people dress up, if they want to. I was kind of hoping that I would see more of the traditional type of celebration (I).

7: Rose. Rose. Seeing Rose in a more like a white gown. A more sophisticated gown (I) a white one. And then you have—is it 18 guys, 18 girls or 9 guys 9 girls. It's supposed to signify the age or whatever. And it can be the girls are supposed to be in a different color and guys in a barong for the formal attire, but they weren't in it. So, it was kind of surprising that (I) Usually there's a symbolic gift as well as a speech. And then (I) None of that was there. It was more the food, the entertainment, and then yeah. I think that's what really missed in *The Debut*. They missed the whole essence of it.

While I see why participants believe the film incorrectly portrays what a debut is I think it is important to make the point that Rose's birthday party was never an actual debut. The film's

title is misleading in this manner because one would assume the big event is a debut, but there is a small scene where Roland apologizes to Rose for not being able to give her a proper coming out party and she tells him the party is more than enough. Also, the focus group participants were not privy to the fact that the writers did not intend for Rose's party to be a traditional debut because of its Eurocentricness. Besides the group wishing there were more accurate portrayals of a debut and its religious significance another response that stood out was how the conversation danced around the topic of differential inclusion.

While the identities I identified in chapter two and used to categorize responses in this chapter are what I believe to be a result of differential inclusion I did not expect to hear direct addressment to the invisibility differential inclusion causes. I found this in several of Vanessa's responses:

I think, that, for me it [*The Debut*] seems to be an introduction of the Filipino culture to the States. Because I've heard that (VC) Asians in general, they don't get really (I) Or nobody really thinks about them as, you like, the stereotypes, or discriminated, or not even just that. I mean we just don't really seem to be (VC) I guess in real racial cultural dialogues. I don't know because I hear a lot about (VC) like Hispanics or Latinos, or African Americans, or, (VC) Caucasians and Europe or European or Middle East—that kind of thing. But it's very rare for me just in general, that generally you hear about Asians. It seems we tend to be (VC) not included (I) As Filipinos I think it's an introduction to another side of the sort of different type of Asian. And usually when most of the people think of Asian they think of more, really, the Far East: China, Japan, India, Taiwan. And we're kind of more (VC) Pacific Asian and more around the area of Malay—Malaysia. And so, I think that's really interesting.

Vanessa's responses implies that she is aware of the lack of Fil-Ams being involved in larger conversations within society and indicate an awareness to their invisibility. A later response from her reveals more about Filipinas/os being referred to for purposes that build up the esteem and image of the larger hegemonic culture. Vanessa sees portrayals of Filipinas/os that paint them in dire straights or performing acts of violence. When Vanessa sees Filipinas/os in the media it is "either on the news because of (VC) two U.S. soldiers were beheaded in the

Philippines or...[a] storm hit the Philippines and there's a lot of broken houses, and torn families, and a lot of deaths" or there is a joke "about nine-year old Filipino boys making rugs or something in sweatshops."

Chapter Summary

All of the participants saw *The Debut* as important for the Fil-Am community. There was approval because it brought representations that were not typically seen and they saw the film as a celebration of their culture.

Vanessa: (VC) I do think that this film is important and I would like to see more films and more other types of media portraying Filipinos because I think that not only does it help to not only entertain U.S. and (I) other cultures about Filipino Americans and Filipinos and our culture and our country. But I think also, for me, I think it would be good to see (I) other types of Asians besides what we are used to. And, I'm not saying that the way how we (I) is bad, I don't think it would be (I). I just think it's just kind of a nice change from some of that.

Elle: I think everyone likes to see their culture celebrated and out on film (I) a film that got put out on DVD. I mean that about pretty great for me being able to see a movie about Filipino culture and (I) I can relate to so much. So, I would say yes.

As vernacular rhetoric, *The Debut* was read with possible realities by the focus group participants and made them feel that their historically marginalized community was heard. Even though what was said may not have been meant for the consumption of the mainstream and "does not exist only as counter-hegemonic" (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 22) they saw the film as important because it culturally affirmed them.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION: MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

This thesis was not a physical journey, but a mental and emotional journey for me because of what the film and my research has illuminated for me in terms of representation, identity, and invisibility for Filipina/o American peoples. The filmmakers took into account how “Asian Americans suffer from both misrepresentation and invisibility in the media” (Park, 2005, p. 1) and attempted to redress these issues with their movie. As a member of the core audience the moviemakers were communicating with the film brought to the surface thoughts and questions that had plagued me much of my life. Growing up as part of a ethnic/racial minority community in the United States, which is more or less invisible to the general population, I wanted to know why other people did not know who Fil-Ams are, I wanted to understand why people seemed to always ask me where I am from, I wanted to learn why I felt like I was not a “true” Filipina or a “true” American and why I was often not accepted as either. *The Debut* made me think about invisibility, representation, and my identity while my graduate classes gave these thoughts shape and a working vocabulary.

As a graduate student I was new to the level of this type of research and dedication. The other graduate students and I were told to choose a topic that would keep us interested for about a year. After watching *The Debut* countless times I still enjoy the film and the subject of Fil-Am identity continues to intrigue me, in large part because I am a Filipina American. Before I started my thesis project there were things I wanted to say, yet did not have the language to express. There were experiences I had and could not label. There were thoughts that I had and speculated if I was alone in thinking these things. As a Filipina American graduate student my

work here at Colorado State University has allowed me to answer the questions I have been asking myself most of my life.

As I have worked on this project and conversed about the time, effort, and commitment required completing it, I have been asked (by my sister, by those who have never written a thesis, and first year graduate students) if you could go back in time, would you have done this project again? My answer is yes. When this question was posed to me early on in the project my answer was “no” with an emphatic head shake to support my answer; I was overwhelmed and I was unfamiliar with how to proceed. While the level of this work was not something I was used to the knowledge gained is invaluable. The answers I have come across from reading the work of other scholars has given me the language to express myself, given me the names to label my experiences, and have given me the reassurance that I am not alone in trying to figure out the world around me. I can now explain how and/or why I believe that the Fil-Am community suffers from invisibility due to differential inclusion. I can discuss that Asian Americans are seen as strangers and as perpetual newcomers to the United States because of an ignorance of the history of Asians in America. I can now talk about being neither “truly” American nor “truly” Filipina and how I am okay with being Filipina American instead and how being a Fil-Am means that I am occupying the inbetween-ness of Filipina/o and American. Being a Fil-Am means one occupies a “liminal” persona—where one exists as a paradox because they are physically present yet are not recognized or acknowledged outside of that (Turner, 1979, p. 237). After working on this project, I now know what I want to say and how to say it and this thesis is an example of that enabling knowledge.

The title of this chapter indicates the intentions I have with this thesis. I wanted to give attention to the Fil-Am community which has had a history of being marginalized by the larger

U.S. population and has been subsumed by the larger monolithic-like category of Asian Americans. I align myself with Ono and Sloop's (1995) view that critics should "look at discourse that resonates within and from historically oppressed communities" (p. 20). I believe in the significance of texts from silenced communities, but also for the reason of being someone from the marginalized Fil-Am community. I focused my sights on *The Debut*, a vernacular work which is an attempt to not only present the Fil-Am community in a historically different way, but to also showcase them as distinctive from other Asian Americans. The film's portrayal of Fil-Ams and the effort to make them distinctive in turn helps the larger Asian American community as well because *The Debut* challenges the stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans and opens up the category of who Asian Americans supposedly are and tried to rectify these problems within *The Debut*.

As the film deals mainly with Fil-Am identity and tensions surrounding it, I posed several questions such as how does *The Debut* function as a vernacular text, for both critics and audiences? What is the identity of Fil-Ams being advanced in the film? Finally, what are the ways that identity is made to be persuasive? I have attempted to answer these questions throughout this thesis and in this chapter I return to what my studies have revealed and my efforts to make an invisible community visible.

Summary of Findings

Chapter one laid out my reasons for studying *The Debut* and its significance. I opened the chapter by touching on how stereotypical media representations teach audiences to view minorities and explain that *The Debut* is trying to get beyond typical Hollywood portrayals. As Kent Ono states, "We should not forget that there is a very long history of dominant (and some local) texts that have helped bring us the media representations we have now" (Ono, 1998, p.

219) and as a result Asian Americans have been narrowly represented (Fuller, 2010; Park, 2005). The importance behind my study of *The Debut* is that it is the first feature-length Fil-Am film, it centralizes one of the largest marginalized groups of people in the United States, and it resonates in my own life as well as focus group participants. I also discussed where I currently saw the conversation on Fil-Ams, and more broadly Asian Americans, in film. Such a conversation is currently focused on three main issues. First, the sexualization of Asian American females and the desexualization of Asian American males, second, the representation and identity of Asian Americans in film and its effects, and third the maintenance of White hegemony by presenting Asian Americans in films as desexualized males, sexualized females, and the use of stereotypes. “Critical scholars assert that racialization in cultural discourse and representation is one of the most effective strategies of the American mainstream to subjugate people of color and to perpetuate racial hegemony and power hierarchies in the United States” (Park, 2005, p. 4). Racist and stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans are tools used to maintain the status quo. Whiteness, consciously and/or unconsciously, resorts to exoticizing, villainizing, infantilizing, and sexualizing in order to preserve White privilege and to justify European American males as the yardstick against which all others will be judged. The conversation of Asian Americans, and more specifically, Fil-Ams in film generated the following research questions: How does *The Debut* function as a vernacular text, for both critics and audiences? What is the identity of Fil-Ams being advanced in the film? Finally, what are the ways identity is made to be persuasive? To answer these questions my methodology consisted of using vernacular rhetorical theory and audience analysis to critically examine the movie.

In chapter two I contextualize the film and critics’ responses to it, delve further into what is vernacular rhetoric, and identify the three identities communicated in the film. The identity of

the Fil-Am community within the film is an identity at odds with itself. The identities shown in the film were identities which contained the uniqueness of being both/and that provides flexibility to what seemed to be contradictory. I make the claim that there is a contradiction in identities because the Fil-Am community wants to be on an equal footing with the majority of the population and in order to do so they take up the identity of being a model minority, the collision of the assimilationist and acculturalist, and the othering other in order to be accepted by the White populace. Despite this want of acceptance there is also a part of the Fil-Am identity which is a thug, the rejectionist, and the other that maintain Fil-Am distance and keeps them from being subsumed into the White population in the way Irish, Italian, and former non-White groups have. For the most part, the film was given good reviews because of the familiarity of the coming of age story and the actors and actresses. Critics (Null, 2003; Lumenick, 2002; Sinagra, 2002; Thorsen, 2001) who did not enjoy the film appear to be outsiders to the Fil-Am group and their understanding of the film and story indicates that their viewing lens and focus are different from an insider's when it comes to reviewing *The Debut*. Being of a different ethnic location from the film critics my review and analysis is able to appreciate the film as speech is focused towards a specific silenced community. Appreciation tempered with critique is a vital and valuable source for vernacular discourses to draw upon because it recognizes the need for vernacular discourses and at the same time safeguards against troubling representations such as essentialism. The conditions surrounding the creation of *The Debut* justify the film's classification as vernacular text. I go into more depth about vernacular rhetoric and its components of pastiche and cultural syncretism and how I use it to critically analyze *The Debut*. The movie exhibits the both/and quality of Filipina/o American identity as exemplified by the model minority in Ben and the thug in Gusto who are both forming ethnic identification outside

of their ethnicity; assimilation, acculturation and rejection as exemplified by the characters of Ben and Gusto, European debuts versus Filipino debuts versus Rose's debut, and differences in the two parties Ben attends; finally the other and othering other where Ben experiences other as a recipient of racism and in a different scene where Rommel constantly others Nestor despite their shared ethnicity. Within these characters and scenes we see the use of pastiche as the filmmakers borrow the stereotypes and turn them into the culturally affirming characters who perform against typical portrayals of Fil-Ams.

In the third chapter, the content is about the focus group and the audience analysis. In chapter three I argue that identities displayed within *The Debut* are persuasive because of the relevance of experiences and situations being displayed. As a result, the relevancy of the moments being displayed on screen carry weight in the lives of Fil-Am audiences because they can relate to what is being shown. Since the movie contains moments of significant relevance for a Fil-Am audience this means that the film qualifies as speech that resonates within the Fil-Am community. As stated by Ono and Sloop (1995), resonant speech grows out of the concern for social conditions in the community, more specifically the Fil-Am community (p. 20). Since the film is relevant to the lives of Fil-Ams the film works vernacularly to affirm the place of Fil-Ams in society. While there were images of affirmation and they were relevant to the Fil-Am community, this does not necessarily mean that the portrayals "function solely as oppositional to dominant ideologies" (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 22). In addition to these claims, I discussed the methods I used to gather participants, the running of the focus group, and challenges I encountered while trying to get the focus group up and running. Chapter three also includes a critical assessment of the text created by the focus group. In the movie they identified one of the both/and identities of model minority/ thug, and the assimilation/acculturation from the

assimilation/acculturation/rejection trifecta, and the focus group participants saw other, but not the othering other, specifically [this co-cultural group] othering within the same group of avowed cultural identity. The focus group participants took issue with some parts of the movie such as the inauthenticity of what they believed to be a debut in the film, the lack of Catholicism, what they believe to be stereotypes, and at times they touched on the invisibility of Filipina/o Americans. Despite the issues they had with the film they saw the film as culturally affirming and an overall good thing for the Fil-Am community.

Working with a focus group was rewarding but it had its challenges because there were difficulties in coordinating the event. The difficulties in coordinating the focus group had to do with a variety of things such as time commitments, coordinating of schedules, and/or both. The difficulty I encountered has been described as “a scheduling nightmare” (N.R. Rockler handout, September 15, 2006). While looking at research having to do with audience analysis and Asian Americans, and in general larger racial and ethnic audiences, many researchers did not explicitly state the difficulties had in doing an audience analysis. I received a total of six responses to the ads expressing interest in the project despite the three hour length and a date that was yet to be determined.²⁸ After making contact with the six potential focus group members and trying to get dates and times that would work best for them I ended up with five participants who believed they could all meet on Thursday, March 15, 2007. On the evening the focus group was actually held only three volunteers arrived to participate in the evening’s events. For those who were not able to make it I learned they could not make it because of scheduling conflicts and from those whom I did not hear I assume that they just simply forgot. Regardless of the turnout the focus group and their participation provided invaluable insight and feedback. Their responses to the research questions created a text overflowing with a wealth of information because they had

brought up things I had not considered when watching the film (such as the lack of religion). Coming in contact with differing points of view was priceless because it gave a small display of diversity within the Fil-Am community and at the same time sharing an ethnic heritage established common ground for the participants. Additionally, it gave members of the silenced community an opportunity to be seen and heard and to participate in an event in which their involvement was valued. The focus group was an opportunity to see culture at work and also a way to acknowledge Fil-Ams.

Kung Walang Tiyaga, Walang Nilaga

The title of this section is a Filipina/o proverb which more or less translates to be “if you don’t work for it, then you can’t get it.” To have a better understanding of Fil-Ams and the larger Asian American population we have to work for it. Educators of media studies need to continue to show that what we see on screen is not necessarily what we get and is not necessarily reality, but an altered reality which has been shaped by people behind the camera lenses. By showing there are alternative representations and by exposing how current representation are not necessarily true or limiting, educators can take a step closer to “illustrat[ing] other possible realities” (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 26). Educating people that representations can be used as tools of control for status quo can lead to more conversation, more studies, and more research.

For academics in the field of media studies there should be more research done on vernacular texts and there should be studies and research on different audiences. Academics need to look at more vernacular texts in order to reveal power relations, because the issues being dealt within the smaller minoritized and silenced community feed into the larger community and vice versa. Additionally, more research needs to be conducted with a variety of audiences in focus groups. In my research of audience analysis and focus groups, those who were studied

were mainly avowed as White, Black, and Hispanic. There should still be research inclusive of these audiences, but there should also be inclusion of other groups of people as well for focus groups, such as Asians, Native Americans, and other groups which are seen to be a part of large homogeneous categories of peoples.

Personally, as a Filipina American, I see *The Debut* worthy of conversation and as a much needed first step toward seeing more Fil-Am films made. Seeing *The Debut* as a step in the progression of Fil-Am and Asian American films, I maintain the hope that movies from the Fil-Am community and larger Asian American community can be made available to more mainstream audiences. With the advent of *The Debut* as the first feature-length film *by, about, and for* Fil-Ams, the film is a touchstone for future Fil-Am films to come. There is an excitement to be had from seeing the growth of the developing Fil-Am film movement, which may be slow, but at least there are films being made.²⁹ In the past I have run across other Filipina/o Americans who have seen the film and they expressed their dislike for the film because it did not display what they believe to be the Fil-Am experience. To fellow Fil-Ams, I say that before we can tear down our films and completely cross off Fil-Am films as worthless it should be remembered that films can only display so much due to time, money, and a number of other constraints. To paint ourselves into a corner saying we cannot make films because we cannot show the full breadth and depth of who Fil-Ams are is extremely limiting and to have/make one film bear the entire weight of representing a whole people is not only a lot to ask for, it is impossible. No one film can truly capture who a people are (and there is no way a whole people would agree on one film to represent themselves) and so I believe the best we can ask of our Fil-Am filmmakers is for them to be true to their community and experiences with the glimpses and pieces they present to audiences. As one of the focus group participants, 7 said, “I

must admit that it must be pretty hard to fit in an hour and a half the (I) Filipino American culture....Other people can relate not just Filipinos.” 7’s words are backed by Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales, of Asian American Studies from San Francisco State University; in *The Making of The Debut* documentary she reminds us that “no film can represent our entire Filipino American experience” (Ginsela 2003b). To think a film can represent all the facets of a people would be foolish and if someone thinks they are seeing a whole people presented on film, they are being fooled by the camera and story being told. On the same panel and from the same university and department as Tintiangco-Cubales, Dan Begonia states “I’m not so much concerned about the accuracy of the depiction, but the accuracy in terms of touching upon those issues that are important.... There’s a certain validation for a lot of people being Filipino American to know that a film is coming out that speaks to them” (Ginsela 2003b). I would have to agree with Begonia for now. We should critique what texts are being produced about Fil-Ams and should always maintain a critical eye, but we should also appreciate the beauty of a text being offered by, for, and about our community because it is a rarity. Critique can be constructive and it should not silence future filmmakers and future stories by making them feel like failures or that their stories are pointless before they are even told.

I believe that before I can even call for more work and attention to be given in the area of critical analysis and Fil-Am film, and the larger movement of Asian American film, there needs to be work available for analysis. I am not saying that there should be more Asian American and Fil-Am films made for the sole purpose of analytical critique, but I am saying that before we can get a better idea of where Asian American and Fil-Am films are going, where they should be going, and what they are indicative of as a movement, we need to nurture and support these films from these communities:

Except for a few highly acclaimed features like Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club*, Asian American cinema, either as a movement or as a group of individual films, is still far removed from the general public. As Duane Kubo, one of the Visual Communication (VC) founders, commented, 'The question is have there been enough Asian American films to be able to really critically analyze them. There have been quite a few Asian American films made, but they are so different and very few Asian American filmmakers are given a chance to fail and to continue and to make better films...most filmmakers, like any writer, need experience, seasoning, a chance to fail, and a chance to succeed' (Xing, 1998, p. 176).

This is the section where I would usually talk about my contribution to the field of Communication Studies by offering ideas and actions to the issue at hand, as well as calling for more research to increase our knowledge on the topic. However, in this case I am not campaigning for more research to be done--at least not at this moment. Instead of asking for more answers to be illuminated through more research I call for more Fil-Am filmmakers to pick up their cameras and to make films, more support from the Fil-Am community for their filmmakers, and for the Fil-Am community and larger Asian American community to let Hollywood know that current portrayals are harmfully unrealistic and will not be tolerated.

The current images of Asian Americans in film will continue to maintain and enforce White hegemony with portrayals of martial artists, dragon ladies, desexualized males, and sexualized females if it is not countered now. We will continue seeing one-dimensional and stereotypical representations "because it [Hollywood] has not encountered a major outcry from Asian American audiences" where "occasional criticism of Hollywood's Asian stereotyping, the voice of opposition or resistance has been marginal" (Park, 2005, p. 9). As a community, Asian Americans need to push for representations and films which can unseat current popular stereotypical notions of how Asian Americans are depicted in film. Hollywood's representation of Asian Americans through film "help create and perpetuate the racialized divisions and stereotypes by disseminating symbols and images in which racist premises and propositions are

inscribed in both explicit and implicit ways” (Park, 2005, p. 4). Dissatisfaction can and should be voiced and *The Debut* is a response to this dissatisfaction. Seeing the ways Asian Americans and Fil-Ams had been represented in films the creators of *The Debut* did something to rectify the problem. Hollywood should know that if they continue to misrepresent communities these communities will take matters into their own hands and will speak for themselves. Kung walang tiyaga, walang nilaga. There needs to be more Fil-Am films for critiquing and in order to motivate this call to happen the films need to be made. These films cannot be made unless they have the support of their community who will financially support and emotionally encourage their filmmakers. Without the generosity and encouragement of the Fil-Am community *The Debut* would have never been made. Currently Hollywood has no interest in supporting a film just for Fil-Ams because it would likely be a financial loss, but if the Filipina/o American community wants to see more than what Hollywood has to show about Fil-Ams and Asian Americans we need to be there for our artists. Additionally the Fil-Am community and larger Asian American community should protest representations and images which continue to support the notion of Asians and Asian Americans as exotics, villains, model minorities, clowns, dragon ladies, Fu Manchus, Charlie Chans, Suzie Wongs, lotus blossoms, martial artists, and forever foreign. The risk needs to be taken because if there is nothing ventured, nothing will be gained.

ENDNOTES

¹ From hereafter, Filipina/o American will be used interchangeably with Fil-Am.

² While my research is about *The Debut, Disoriented* (1997) by Francisco Aliwalas was actually the first full length Filipina/o American film. In fact Aliwalas's film came out several years before *The Debut*. *Disoriented* occupies a unique place in film history for being the first to engage with the local conditions and issues of the Fil-Am community. Unfortunately it did not have the same impact as *The Debut* because it did not move beyond film festival crowds. "[O]utside of the film festival circuit, Aliwalas' dramedy made little impact" (Wang, 2003). Besides being accessible only to select audiences the movie was unable to draw the attention of film distributors. Despite good reviews and film festival awards distributors were not interested in showing the film commercially (Torre, 2001, p. 26). Since the movie did not gather the steam it needed to reach audiences it made little to no impact in its own community therefore rendering it as one of the more obscure Fil-Am movies. *The Debut* did reach a good deal of its target audience, it is one of the earliest Fil-Am films to be made and it is the first Fil-Am movie to be recognized in the Fil-Am community.

³ I am borrowing by, for, and about also known as the trinity from Rosa Linda Fregoso (1993), who writes: "Keeping the 'by, for, about' criteria intact prevented the kinds of distortions that have normalized Chicanos and Chicanas as images of the 'other' in mainstream films" (p. xvii). I see the use of the trinity as useful because I want to make a distinction between the images created by the Fil-Am community and their images as 'other' created by mainstream Hollywood films. Knowing the images are created by Filipina/o Americans, stars Filipina/o Americans, and addresses matters of consequence to the Filipina/o Americans enables *The Debut* to distinguish itself from mainstream films that are not created by the community. Images created outside of the community are instead created by the White mainstream filmmaking industry that seeks to appeal to mass audiences in order to make a profit and has been given no reason to interrupt or change existing stereotypes (Park, 2005, p.8).

⁴ Documentaries were still being seen as box office failures when *The Debut* was released. As of 2007, documentaries as "box office poison" is no longer the case in 2007 because "[t]he most stunning development in movies in the early twenty-first century is the surging popularity of the documentary. In 2004, box office receipts might have declined had it not been for documentaries, which grossed over \$170 million. Seven of the all-time Top 10 grossing documentaries were released in 2003 and 2004, and 18 of the 25 most profitable political documentaries were released since 2002" (Mintz, 2005, p.10). Documentaries are now a popular and viable genre that have proven to be profitable and can drive crowds into theaters.

⁵ The U.S. Census has recorded out of 308.7 million citizens, 17.3 million or a little more than 5.6% of the entire population is Asian American.

⁶ According to data from the U.S. Census (2010), the largest group of Asian Americans is Chinese Americans making up 1.02% of the U.S. population.

⁷ According to the U.S. Census (2010), Asian Americans make up 5.6 % (about 17.3 million people) of the U.S. population.

⁸ According to the 2010 U.S. Census Chinese Americans account for about 4 million people in the U.S. population

⁹ According to the 2010 U.S. Census Japanese Americans account for about 1.3 million people.

¹⁰ According to the 2010 U.S. Census Korean Americans and account for about 1.7 million people.

¹¹ According to the 2010 U.S. Census Thai Americans make up .05% of the U.S. population and account for just over 100 thousand people.

¹² According to the 2010 U.S. Census Cambodian Americans make up .08% of the U.S. population and account for just over 200 thousand people.

¹³ According to the 2010 U.S. Census Vietnamese American make up .43% of the U.S. population and account for just over 1.2 million people.

¹⁴ Suzi Wong is a character who needs to be saved by the White male, or what Marchetti (1993) terms as the “white knight” (p. 109). Suzi Wong-like characters “can uphold both the gender and racial status quo by depicting Asian women as more truly ‘feminine,’ content at being passive, subservient, dependent, domestic, and slaves to ‘love’” (Marchetti, 1993, p. 116). Charlie Chan is the portrayal of Asians as the “good-guy” but is an “unaggressive persona, rendered quaint” and is “symbolic of the harmless and comical” (Wong, 2002, p. 60). Dr. Fu Manchu is one of the most infamous film villains because he is “the epitome of Chinese treachery and cunning...an Asian enemy whose avowed purpose would be the total subjugation of the white race, exposing the exotic and mysterious world of the East” (Wong, 2002, p. 56).

¹⁵ At the time my thesis advisor and P.I. was Dr. Michelle Holling.

¹⁶ I define Filipina/o Americans as people who are born and raised in the United States and are descendants of Filipinas/os from the Philippines. I also define them as people of Filipina/o descent who are currently living in the United States but may not have been born and/or raised in the U.S. for most of their lives.

¹⁷ Colorado State University’s Human Research Committee requires someone with professional training to lead a focus group and my thesis advisor (P.I.) has been trained and is experienced. I on the other hand am new to this type of research and am just beginning to gain experience.

¹⁸ Dr. Jon Lupo, formerly in the Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University, was kind enough to point me in the direction of obtaining information on Rottentomatoes.com as reputable. Such information had to do with Internet traffic and critics.

Rottentomatoes.com's reputation as a site can be accounted for in the amount of traffic the site gets and the criteria for determining who their critics are. According to Flixster, Rottentomatoes.com's parent company, Flixster and Rottentomatoes combined get 20 million unique viewers per month (Flixster, 2014). As one two sites to help garner the 20 million viewers, one can assume that Rottentomatoes.com gets a good amount of traffic from users. The site helps contribute to Flixster's 20 million audience members because one of the things the site offers to users is film critiques from reputable film critics. Film critic responses help generate the film percentage ratings on the Tomatometer. To determine the reliability of their ratings, Rottentomatoes' Help Desk section has a set of criteria for their critics in print (must be a top 100 publication), broadcast (must be national outlet), and online (must receive 500,000 or more unique monthly visitors) to make sure these are professional reviewers and critics and not just fans and movie studios influencing the Tomatometer.

¹⁹ Espiritu's (2003) example of how Filipina/o Americans fit into the outcast population of the U.S. is explained as follows: "[T]he inclusion of Filipinos has been possible, even desirable, only when it is coupled with the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities, and the categorization of them as subpersons of a different and inferior moral status." (p. 47) Fil-Ams are contributing members of the U.S. American population but are not afforded the same privileges and rights as the White majority of the population.

²⁰ The "we" referred to by Hall is directed towards Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean peoples, but I think undergoing colonization and representation by the colonizer is something Filipina/o Americans can relate to. While Filipina/o Americans have a history of colonization by Spain and the United States they should not be confused as to being one in the same with Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean people who were colonized by Britain. Even though their histories are not the same I find the experience of a colonized people whose representation has been controlled by colonizers and has contributed to their continued marginalization and othering is something that speaks to the Fil-Am community as well.

²¹ The term green light is used to define studio approval for a film's production. Wasko (2003) explains the elements that contribute to a film being given the green light as "[w]hen all of these various elements [development deals, film costs/budgets, and financing] are in place (which may take many years)" a film project may get approval from a studio executive and go on to the next step of (pre-) production (p.36). The term for when a script is being developed but fails to raise funds for production is known as development hell (Wasko, 2003, p. 36).

²² Tirso Cruz, Eddia Garcia, and Gina Alajar each have won and have been nominated many times for FAMAS Awards (Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences), FAP (Film Academy of the Philippines) Awards now known as the Luna Awards, and Gawad Urian awards. These awards are similar to the recognitions given by the U.S. movie industry and U.S. critic's circles such as the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes, and the American Film Institute Awards.

²³ thug. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/thug>

²⁴ Jason Priestly is a White actor who became well known because of his role in the television show *Beverly Hills 90210*.

²⁵ This cover letter was approved by IRB on December 12, 2006 (a copy of the notice of approval can be found in Appendix C). At the time my protocol was approved the P.I. and advisor to my study and thesis was Dr. Holling, who was an associate professor for what is currently known as the Department of Communication Studies. Dr. Holling has since moved on from Colorado State University and is now located at California State University, San Marcos. This same protocol was reviewed again for its use because of the time that had passed since I was last in school. One of my current committee members, Dr. Eric Aoki, met in person with an IRB representative to ensure that the prior protocol and data could still be used as it had already been analyzed in the prior iteration of the thesis committee.

²⁶ Transcript symbols: (I) stands for inaudible. (VC) stands for verbal clutter such as eh, uh, um, etc. (L) stands for laughter.

²⁷ Vanessa believed the thug to be a stereotype. She said, “I think what was stereotypical about him [Gusto] was that even though he had this huge tough guy, you know, and was totally violent, disrespectful, and (I) everything, he was really like a little boy when he was talking to his mom. Like he stood up for her, “don’t talk to her like that!” and she (VC) she, his mom, she was slapping him in public in front of everybody and he didn’t do anything. He just kind of sat there with his head down and he started to cry (I). He didn’t say anything, he didn’t do anything. That was actually, like (VC), a very, like (VC), I guess stereotypical aspect of typical Filipino families that, you know, you don’t talk back to the family, you have to listen to your parents, you don’t disrespect family members, that kind of thing, you stand up for your family. (I)” While I can see Vanessa’s point about connecting respect as a stereotype of Filipina/o Americans I classify a thug as a stock character because any person could be put into the role of a tough guy who is soft on the inside.

²⁸ I did not have a pre-determined date for the focus group because I wanted to coordinate a date and time that would accommodate the most people. I felt that setting an exact date and time might have kept some people from responding to my recruitment efforts.

²⁹ Filipina/o American films released since *The Debut* include: *American Adobo* (2001), *Cavite* (2006) *Leave it to Chance* (2005), *Lumpia* (2003), and *The Flip Side* (2001).

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APPENDIX A

Questions for the audience

1. What kind of films do you tend to watch?
2. Name some recent films you have seen. What do you like about those films?
3. Is *The Debut* a film you would typically watch? What did you like about *The Debut*?
What did you dislike about *The Debut*? Was there anything in the film that confused you/something in the film you did not understand?
4. What do you think *The Debut* is saying to Filipina/o Americans? What do you think *The Debut* is saying to non Filipina/o Americans?
5. What does the film mean to the Filipina/o American community? In other words, do you think the film is of any importance to the Fil-Am community?
6. Do you identify with *The Debut*? Why or why not? What are you able to relate to?
What are you not able to relate to?
7. What do you think about the portrayals of Filipina/o Americans? What makes you think that?
8. Did you see the portrayals of characters and situations as stereotypical? What about Gusto and Ben?
9. What themes did you see in the film? What issues were continually brought up?

APPENDIX B

Cover Letter

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Anika Casem. I am currently a graduate student at Colorado State University in the Department of Speech Communication. As a part of my studies, I am being asked to create and do a research project in which I carry out an original piece of empirical and critical research about my area of choice. My area of study is media and race/ethnicity; more specifically Filipina/o images on film and audience perception. To actually do this study your help is needed.

During the fall semester on the Colorado State University campus, I plan on showing the Fil-Am feature-length film *The Debut*. If you participate in the study you will be asked to participate in a focus group in which you will be asked questions in order to garner your reactions to the film. The question and feedback session should take no longer than 90 minutes, which is in addition to the film length and will be recorded. By participating in the focus group session and allowing yourself to be recorded, you are giving me permission to use all and any of your comments in my printed work. If you choose to participate, I ask that you watch the film in its entirety. The film is rated R for language and some violence and is 88 minutes long.

The only known risk of participating in this study is exposure to some vulgar language and the violence of a fight scene. While it is not possible to identify all potential risks in research, but as the researcher, I have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks. Your participation in the study will be anonymous because we will ask participants to select a pseudonym as a way to mask student identity. This pseudonym will be used in the transcription of the focus group discussion and in subsequent writings. Furthermore, your comments will be kept confidential by the primary investigator, who will store all documents in her office.

There are no known benefits offered for participating, but by participating in this study, you will help answer what audiences think about Fil-Am images in film. By responding to the writing prompts and watching the film you have acknowledged your consent to participate in this study. If at any time you wish to stop participating in the study you may do so.

I appreciate your help with this study and the time you will be taking to participate. If you have any questions or would like to contact me or my advisor, Dr. Michelle A. Holling (the primary investigator) to find out the results of my study, contact information is below.

Anika Casem
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Eddy 205
Fort Collins, CO 80523-1783
(970) 491-1107

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Dr. Michelle A. Holling
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Thank you for help.

Sincerely,

Anika Casem

APPENDIX C

Internal Review Board's Notice of Approval



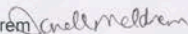
Office of Regulatory Compliance
Office of Vice President for Research
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011
(970) 491-1553
FAX: (970) 491-2293

Notice of Approval for Human Research

Principal Investigator: Michelle Holling Speech Comm., 1783
Co-Principal Investigator: Anika Casem, Speech Comm., 1783

Title: The Vernacular Rhetoric of The Debut and Audience Responses

Protocol #: 06-298H **Funding Source:** N/A
Number approved: 15 participants
Committee Action: **Approval Date:** December 12, 2006 **Expires:** December 6, 2007

HRC Administrator: Janell Meldrem 

Consent Process:

Because of the nature of this research, it will not be necessary to obtain a signed consent form. However, all subjects must receive a copy of the approved cover letter printed on department letterhead. The requirement of documentation of a consent form is waived under § __.117(c)(2). Parental permission for minors has been waived through 116(d).

Investigator Responsibilities:

- It is the PI's responsibility to obtain consent from all subjects.
- It is the responsibility of the PI to immediately inform the Committee of any serious complications, unexpected risks, or injuries resulting from this research.
- It is also the PI's responsibility to notify the Committee of any changes in experimental design, participant population, consent procedures or documents. This can be done with a memo describing the changes and submitting any altered documents.
- Students serving as Co-Principal Investigators must obtain PI approval for any changes prior to submitting the proposed changes to the HRC for review and approval.
- The PI is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the project.
- A status report of this project will be required within a 12-month period from the date of review. Renewal is the PI's responsibility, but as a courtesy, a reminder will be sent approximately two months before the protocol expires. The PI will be asked to report on the numbers of subjects who have participated this year and project-to-date, problems encountered, and provide a verifying copy of the consent form or cover letter used. The necessary continuation form (H-101) is available from the RCO web page www.research.colostate.edu/rcoweb/.
- Upon completion of the project, an H-101 should be submitted as a close-out report.
- If approval did not accompany a proposal when it was submitted to a sponsor, it is the PI's responsibility to provide the sponsor with the approval notice. This approval is issued under Colorado State University's OHRP Federal Wide Assurance 00000647.
- **Should the protocol not be renewed before expiration, all activities must cease until the protocol has been re-reviewed.**

Please direct any questions about the Committee's action on this project to me for routing to the Committee. Additional information is available from the Regulatory Compliance web site at <http://www.research.colostate.edu/rcoweb/>.

Attachment

Date of Correspondence: 12/18/06