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The Problem with Apu, Whiteness, and Racial Hierarchies in US Media Industries

Hari Kondabolu's 2017 documentary, *The Problem with Apu* (Michael Melamedoff), revolves around the Indian American writer's mission to resolve what he conceptualizes as the derogatory representation of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, the Indian immigrant character on the animated Fox television comedy series, *The Simpsons* (1989–). The problem is threefold. Apu is a racist stereotype of South Asian Americans; despite or perhaps because of that, Apu is a beloved and iconic character in mainstream American culture; consequently, Apu's legacy is oppressive as it continues to shape US media industries' expectations of South Asian American representations, people, and culture. As Kondabolu sees it, the only way to make peace with his decades-long struggle with the Apu stereotype is to interrogate the context of its production.¹

This essay focuses on Kondabolu's production-related challenges—notably his (ultimately futile) efforts to get Hank Azaria, the white voice actor playing Apu, to be a part of the documentary—as well as the post-release responses from *The Simpsons*' team. Drawing from them, I argue for the urgency of centering the category of race in media production studies and, relatedly, for examining how racial hierarchies are operationalized and maintained in production cultures. Kondabolu's film takes aim at the politics of a highly influential mainstream, white American television show

1 Apu made his debut in season one, episode eight, "The Telltale Head" (original airdate, February 25, 1990) and has been a recurring character since.

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and arrives at a time when the lack of racial diversity in mainstream media industries continues to be a problem, despite the recent trend of diverse casting.

Over the last decade, US media industries have attempted to reframe their investments around race. Such efforts include racial diversity initiatives in the media workplace, casting decisions that consciously avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes, and targeting the key demographic groups of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans.² But most of all, the reframing of the industries' relation to matters pertaining to racism, erasure, underrepresentation, and misrepresentation is a strategic ideological move. Here, the rhetoric that the twenty-first-century media industries' ethos is one of inclusivity, offering correctives to existing inequities and giving historically marginalized voices a proverbial seat at the proverbial table, is employed widely and often. In turn, it generates and maintains a narrative that is focused on the industries' intentions (often for the future) and individual practices (looking at casting on one show, for example). Such rhetorical moves function to obfuscate the structural factors that maintain racial hierarchies and recuperate whiteness as an institutional norm.³ My brief study of *The Problem with Apu* exemplifies the challenges racial minorities, including South Asian Americans, face in their efforts to engage the industry on its diversity platform and to offer their critical perspectives on the industries' Anglocentric production culture.

Kondabolu, who wrote and stars in the documentary, draws on the reception of Apu by interviewing his family members and South Asian American celebrities. He focuses mostly on actors, comics, and writers, but problematically foregrounds male perspectives. In characterizing Apu as a stereotype, Kondabolu essentially revisits a long-standing critique about the representation of Apu.⁴ Critics have long pointed to the considerable evidence that Apu is a stereotype. The character owns a convenience store Kwik-E-Mart; is a devout Hindu; has an arranged marriage and eight children; is a "good" immigrant who espouses the values of hard work, tolerance, and not disrupting the status quo; and utters phrases like "Thank you! Come again!" in an exaggerated "Indian" accent. Shilpa Davé's groundbreaking theoretical formulation of "brown voice" posits that the production and repetition of a distinctive "Indian" accent in US popular culture functions as a racializing trait.⁵ She notes that the performance of this accent, or brown voice, is entangled with the racist histories of ethnic vaudeville humor and brownface performances.⁶ She argues that brown voice, as exemplified by Apu's "Indian" accent, ultimately "reinforces a static position for South Asians regardless of their status or occupation in the United States."⁷

In the opening moments of *The Problem with Apu*, Kondabolu reasons that while it is necessary to talk to *The Simpsons*' writers and producers to understand their thinking behind creating Apu, it is imperative to get Azaria to be a part of the documentary. Kondabolu includes a clip from his 2012 appearance on *Totally Biased*

2 "The Multicultural Edge: Rising Super Consumers," Nielsen, March 18, 2015, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/report/2015/the-multicultural-edge-rising-super-consumers/>.

3 See Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

4 See, for example, Amit Rai, "The World According to Apu: A Look at Network Television's Only Regular South Asian Character," *India Currents* 7, no. 12 (1994): 7; and Manish Viji, "The Apu Travesty," *The Guardian*, July 16, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jul/16/theaputragedy>.

5 Shilpa Davé, "Apu's Brown Voice: Cultural Inflection and South Asian Accents," in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, ed. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 313–336.

6 Shilpa S. Davé, *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 19–59.

7 Davé, "Apu's Brown Voice," 315.

with *W. Kamau Bell* (FX, 2012–2013), a show on which he worked as a writer, where he describes Azaria (in his Apu role) as “a white guy doing an impression of a white guy making fun of my father.”⁸ Kondabolu (presumably) is referencing that Azaria models his “Indian” accent, in part, on Peter Sellers’s portrayal of the Indian character, Mr. Bakshi, in *The Party* (Blake Edwards, 1968).⁹ Sellers, a white actor, was in brownface for that role, a detail that neither Azaria nor his interviewers ever bring up while discussing Sellers as the former’s inspiration.¹⁰

Although Kondabolu hopes to engage Azaria in an on-camera conversation about his voice acting of Apu, he can only include clips of Azaria from previous media and taped public appearances. In one clip from a 2007 appearance on *LateNet with Ray Ellin* (Ray Ellin Productions, 2007–), Azaria reveals that *The Simpsons*’ producers “were like, can you do an Indian voice and how offensive can you make it, basically?” Another clip features Azaria delivering a portion of his 2016 commencement address at Tufts University in his Apu voice; Kondabolu uses it to establish the fact that even after becoming aware of criticisms over Apu’s stereotypical voice—and admitting as much in a 2013 interview with HuffPost—Azaria continued to peddle the crude vocal representation outside the televised world of *The Simpsons*.¹¹ The clips are interspersed within a narrative that chronicles Kondabolu’s multiple efforts over the course of 2016 to interview Azaria for his project.

When Kondabolu initially reaches out to Azaria’s team with a request for the latter’s participation in the documentary, Azaria’s agent directs Kondabolu to the very same 2013 HuffPost interview as if to say, “The article speaks for itself.” Kondabolu’s next tactic involves using his podcast, *Politically Re-Active* (First Look Media and Panoply, 2016–), to generate public pressure on Azaria. Urging his listeners to use the hashtag #Apu2016 and tweet @HankAzaria, Kondabolu then launches a Twitter campaign in August 2016, asking “Dear @HankAzaria, please let me interview you for my Apu documentary. It would mean something to a lot of us. #Apu2016.”¹² While supporters kept the social media campaign alive until October 2016, it was to no avail. In the concluding moments of the film, we watch Kondabolu read aloud Azaria’s email message wherein he declines to participate in the film. Azaria writes, “I’m not comfortable . . . throwing myself upon the mercy of your edits. It’s nothing against you . . . as I said, I think what you are doing is great.” The scene ends with Kondabolu wryly pointing out Azaria’s privilege in that “he gets to choose how he wants to be portrayed.” In this instance, Azaria reveals and asserts his privilege—owing to his racial and cultural status, as a white celebrity in mainstream American media—to decline to talk race and representation, even though his role as Apu is a racialized performance and, to some critics, a racist one as well.

Dana Gould, a producer on *The Simpsons* from 2001 to 2008, is the only executive associated with Fox or the show who agrees to be part of the film.¹³ Gould,

8 “Mindy Kaling, Apu & Indian Americans by Hari Kondabolu,” YouTube video, 5:31, posted by “Hari Kondabolu,” November 9, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktQH78FNCfs>.

9 Hank Azaria, “‘Simpsons,’ ‘Spamalot’ Castmember Hank Azaria,” interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, 10:34, June 3, 2005, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4679119>.

10 In the 2005 *Fresh Air* interview, the follow-up question to Azaria’s mention of Sellers’s brownface act as Mr. Bakshi is, “so, you have had to sing as Apu?”

11 Mallika Rao, “Is It Time to Retire Apu?,” HuffPost, September 20, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-simpsons-apu-racist_n.

12 Hari Kondabolu (@HariKondabolu), “Dear @HankAzaria, please let me interview you for my Apu documentary. It would mean something to a lot of us. #Apu2016,” Twitter, August 2, 2016, 7:29 p.m., <https://twitter.com/harikondabolu/status/760663853285900288>.

13 Indian American actor Utkarsh Ambudkar, who voiced Apu’s nephew on one occasion on *The Simpsons*, also appears in the documentary.

who is white, participates on camera only to deflect Kondabolu's questions about stereotyping by talking about the show's comedic purpose and questioning the value of updating Apu's character to make him "less anachronistic." Most remarkably, however, he tells Kondabolu, "Yeah, well, there are accents that by their nature, to white Americans, I can only speak from experience, sound funny. Period." This assertion demonstrates how Gould claims white ownership of brown bodies and normalizes Apu's brown voice.

Kondabolu's challenge in getting *The Simpsons*' team to participate in his documentary continued even after the film was completed. For almost two weeks after the documentary's initial airing on November 19, 2017, neither Hank Azaria nor anyone from *The Simpsons* or Fox made any public comment about Kondabolu's film, despite the press actively seeking them out. On December 1, a reporter for TMZ ran into Azaria at the Los Angeles International Airport and got a comment. Without naming Kondabolu, Azaria admits that the "documentary . . . gave us a lot, at *The Simpsons*, to think about," then issues a general apology to "anybody" that was offended by "any character" and closes by observing that "it is a really important conversation, one definitely worth having."¹⁴ TMZ posted the video to its Twitter page on December 3, 2017, and invited Kondabolu to share his views on Azaria's response. Kondabolu took this invitation as an opportunity to remind everyone about the big picture of "who gets to control their story and who gets cast in what . . . the power of Hollywood, who gets to control what in Hollywood?" (reserving an expletive-filled version of his response for his own Twitter page).¹⁵

Almost five months later, in *The Simpsons*' episode "No Good Read Goes Unpunished" (April 8, 2018), those who control the story of Apu on the show—the *Simpsons*' writers, producers, and showrunners—finally deployed their power to speak on the Apu controversy. In the episode, the progressive Lisa Simpson glances at a picture of Apu while noting, "Something that started decades ago and was applauded and inoffensive is now politically incorrect. What can you do?" Within the context of the episode, Lisa is making this observation about her mother Marge's favorite childhood storybook, a book that, by Marge's own admission, now reads as racist. However, Lisa's comment was widely interpreted as a (non)response to and dismissal of another text, *The Problem with Apu*.¹⁶ Lisa's argument also incorrectly assumes that the book, and Apu's character by analogy, was once inoffensive to everyone, thereby revealing yet again the intended audience—white and mainstream—for both Apu as well as the show's response to the Apu controversy. The standard response issued by *The Simpsons*' producers to the press was and is to "let the episode speak for itself."¹⁷ Longtime showrunner Al Jean nevertheless reminded critics on Twitter on April 9, 2018, that "[r]espectfully Hank won an Emmy for voicing the character in 1998. Only 20 years ago."¹⁸

14 TMZ (@TMZ), "Hank Azaria Says 'Simpsons' Discussing Apu Changes After Racism Allegation dlvr.it/ Q452GV," Twitter, December 3, 2017, 12:58 a.m., <https://twitter.com/TMZ/status/937244541299474433>.

15 TMZ (@TMZ), "'The Simpsons' Need to Give Apu Some Power Says Comedian Hari Kondabolu," Twitter, December 4, 2017, 8:15 p.m., <https://twitter.com/TMZ/status/937898079243657221>.

16 For example, Sopan Deb, "'The Simpsons' Responds to Criticism about Apu with a Dismissal," *New York Times*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/arts/television/the-simpsons-responds-to-criticism-about-apu.html>.

17 Ryan Parker, "'Simpsons' Criticized for Response to Apu Controversy," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/simpsons-criticized-response-apu-controversy-1101070>.

18 Al Jean (@AlJean), "Respectfully Hank Azaria won an Emmy for voicing the character in 1998. Only 20 years ago," Twitter, April 9, 2018, 1:37 a.m., <https://twitter.com/aljean/status/983262547150192641>.

The following Sunday (April 15), in an act of counter-programming, truTV reaired *The Problem with Apu* to coincide with *The Simpsons* telecast on Fox. A week later, *The Simpsons*' creator, Matt Groening, built on the problematic political correctness theme expressed by Lisa in the April 8 episode by insinuating that "it's a time in our culture where people love to pretend they're offended."¹⁹ In a subsequent *New York Times* interview, Groening noted that he loves Apu, finds himself hard-pressed to think of "a better animated Indian character in the last thirty years," and "feels bad" that Apu makes some viewers unhappy, yet thinks that the ongoing conversations and debates over Apu lack nuance.²⁰

Azaria, however, has rethought his position. In January 2020, Azaria announced that he would no longer be the voice of Apu.²¹ Albeit delayed, Azaria's response is in part an outcome of the public backlash he has experienced in the wake of the Apu controversy. Azaria has also yet to directly engage with Kondabolu or the critiques extended in his film. Nevertheless, his decision to quit voicing Apu tells us that it is increasingly untenable for some industry players (like white voice actors on television) to avoid accountability for their role in perpetuating offensive racial characterizations that are written from a white perspective and intended for a predominantly mainstream, white audience. That said, neither Fox nor Groening nor the show's producers have yet felt compelled to interrogate their assumptions around Apu's appeal as a character and additionally appear to brush off Kondabolu's film. It is a stark reminder that for now, white industry heavyweights can resist being challenged to engage in a meaningful conversation about the industry's entrenched practices around race.

At this time, when US media industries are deploying concepts of diversity, racial inclusivity, and multiculturalism to reframe their historical legacies of racism as well as their ongoing investments in the same, it is critical to examine how race functions in media contexts beyond image, representation, and storytelling. Although *The Problem with Apu* failed to get the white accountability it had set out to receive, the decision by Azaria, two years later, cannot be overlooked. At the same time, the documentary does demonstrate the ongoing tradition of mainstream media to assert and defend white privilege even when, by all appearances, racial diversity is an industry priority.

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19 Bill Keveney, "The Simpsons' Exclusive: Matt Groening (Mostly) Remembers the Show's Record 636 Episodes," *USA Today*, April 27, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2018/04/27/the-simpsons-matt-groening-new-record-fox-animated-series/524581002/>.

20 David Itzkoff, "'Simpsons' Creator Matt Groening Says Debate around Apu Is Tainted," *New York Times*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/18/arts/television/simpsons-matt-groening-apu.html>.

21 Fred Topel, "The Simpsons' Star Hank Azaria Will No Longer Voice Apu," *Film*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.slashfilm.com/apu-voice-actor/>.