Animating Race

The Production and Ascription of Asian-ness in the Animation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*

Francis M. Agnoli

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)
University of East Anglia
School of Art, Media and American Studies
April 2020

Abstract

How and by what means is race ascribed to an animated body? My thesis addresses this question by reconstructing the production narratives around the Nickelodeon television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-08) and its sequel *The Legend of Korra* (2012-14). Through original and preexisting interviews, I determine how the ascription of race occurs at every stage of production. To do so, I triangulate theories related to race as a social construct, using a definition composed by sociologists Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer; re-presentations of the body in animation, drawing upon art historian Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of the bodyscape; and the cinematic voice as described by film scholars Rick Altman, Mary Ann Doane, Michel Chion, and Gianluca Sergi. Even production processes not directly related to character design, animation, or performance contribute to the ascription of race. Therefore, this thesis also references writings on culture, such as those on cultural appropriation, cultural flow/traffic, and transculturation; fantasy, an impulse to break away from mimesis; and realist animation conventions, which relates to Paul Wells' concept of hyper-realism. These factors contribute to world-building and the construction of cultural signifiers, which in turn can project identities onto animated bodyscapes. This thesis is structured around stages of production, including art design, writing, storyboarding and directing, martial arts choreography, music and sound design, voice casting and acting, and outsourcing final animation. At each stage, below-the-line personnel make creative decisions that result in the ascription of race. My findings challenge John T. Caldwell's conceptualization of how production cultures operate, identifying multiple interlinked groups instead of just one. They expand upon the concept of the bodyscape to account for aural components in the construction of a racial identity. Finally, they build upon Maureen Furniss' definition of animation as a continuum between mimesis and abstraction to incorporate the impulse toward fantasy.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

As I near the end of this journey, I look back at the many people without whom I would have been lost.

To my supervisors, Dr. Rayna Denison and Dr. Frederik Bryn Køhlert, thank you for pushing me farther than I thought I could go, for recognizing in me the potential I did not always see in myself. I will always strive to meet your expectations and will be better for it.

To faculty at this and other universities, organizers of and attendees at various conferences and symposia, thank you for welcoming me into your world. To Dr. Eylem Atakav, thank you for your guidance as I adjusted to UK teaching, for continuing to help me long after you were obligated to do so. To Dr. Christopher Holliday, thank you for co-editing my first publication, for your continued support, and for always ensuring that I felt like I belonged.

To my fellow PGR students, to Dean Bowman, Duncan Breeze, Tanja Jurkovic, Zahra Khosroshahi, James Mclean, and Stewart Williams, thank you for the past three years of friendship, of long writing sessions, delicious meals, and memorable movie nights. And to those I did not have the pleasure of knowing for as long or as well, thank you. A PhD can be a lonely task. You all made it less so.

Finally, to my family, thank you for helping me on this journey, for supporting me and inspiring me, for being my constants as the rest of my world drastically changes. I never could have done this without all of you.

And to anyone I forgot to name, know that your omission will haunt me until my dying days.

Introduction

Race does not exist in animation. It must instead be ascribed. A gap exists in animation studies for how we can and should address racial representation within the medium. This thesis seeks to remedy that lacuna by using the U.S. television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-08) and its sequel *The Legend of Korra* (2012-14) as case studies.[1] In this polarized moment in history, it is apparent that we do not live in some sort of post-racial society where race can be treated as a thought experiment. How we define this symbolic category remains a vital subject of study. Due to its illusory and constructed nature, animation affords untapped opportunities to approach this topic. Therefore, I ask: How and by what means is race produced and ascribed to animated bodies? By extension, how can animation scholars begin to answer this question? How can we determine which production processes are involved? How can we identify which other factors are at play? This line of inquiry provides a blueprint not only for additional studies of race in animation but also of other types of identities in different kinds of mediums.

The most direct way to answer these questions is to ask those responsible. For this project, I conducted interviews with above- and below-the-line personnel involved in every stage of production. Doing so places an emphasis on the individual artists, their creative decisions, and their actions. Their testimonies are complemented by additional sources. This approach is not quite production studies, although it is influenced by writings from that field.[2] Historically minded scholarship, especially regarding television animation, is more applicable.[3] By building on these types of works, I formulated a

---

[1] Henceforth, the titles of these two shows will be abbreviated as *Avatar* and *Korra*, respectively.

[2] John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Vicki Mayer, "Studying Up and F**cking Up: Ethnographic Interviewing in Production Studies," *Cinema Journal* 47.2 (2008): 141-48; Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, editors, *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, editors, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009); David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries* (London: Routledge, 2011); Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Amanda D. Lotz and Horace Newcomb, "The Production of Entertainment Media," *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies*, ed. Klaus Bruhn Jenson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 71-86; David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE, 2013); Miranda Banks, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer, editors, *Production Studies, the Sequel!: Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Mark Deuze and Mirjam Prenger, editors, *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

[3] David Rosen and Peter Hamilton, *Off-Hollywood: The Making & Marketing of Independent Films* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990); Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions*

contextually-driven and interview-based study that was tested against textual analysis. The specifics are detailed in the relevant section below. Through this approach, I also developed an alternative way of understanding how animation is produced.

As a result of my research, I have formulated a planetary model of interlocking production cultures (Appendix 0.01). Other media scholars utilize a similar allegory. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott use the term "textual meteorites" in their study of the James Bond franchise.[4] In his definition of paratexts, Jonathan Gray writes about how they "orbit" texts.[5] Thomas Austin describes how "satellite texts" circulate around and impact the meanings of films.[6] My research has revealed an equivalent pattern with production cultures, with different processes circulating around and impacting the final product. There is a central planet or primary site of production subdivided into separate continents or groups. There are orbiting satellites – consultants, freelancers, and remote workers – that contribute to but are not integrated into those communities. Finally, there are lunar bodies or geographically distinct secondary sites of production, such as overseas animation studios. Visual, aural, and narrative components travel between these locations. This planetary model has also informed my understanding of the construction and ascription of race in animation.

In order to describe how and why, I adopted and adapted Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of the "bodyscape" into the "animated bodyscape."[7] I elaborate on these terms in the key concepts section below and more extensively in the literature review. For now, animated bodyscapes are created by the above planetary model. I define the term as a complex of signs, comprised of visual, aural, and narrative components, distinct from its physiological equivalents and those from other types of artistic re-presentation, in turn possessing qualities inherent to animation – namely, non-indexicality, iconicity, and plasmaticity.[8] These individual components – and therefore these animated bodyscapes –

---

from Bosko to Bart Simpson (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006); Miranda J. Banks, *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

[4] Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (Basingstoke, UK: MacMIllan Education LTD, 1987), 44.

[5] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 22.

[6] Thomas Austin, *Hollywood Hype and Audience: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1980s* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002), 24.

[7] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity, and the Ideal Figure* (London: Rougledge, 1995), 3.

[8] Andrew Darley, "Bones of Contention: Thoughts on the Study of Animation," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2.1 (2007): 69-70; Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 30, 43; Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda, trans. Alan Upchurch (London: Methuen, 1988), 21.

were created by a range of individuals adapting and building upon each other's work across various production cultures. Their efforts resulted in the construction of identity, in the ascription of race. Furthermore, I have made use of Kathryn Hume's dual impulses of mimesis and fantasy as well as Maureen Furniss' continuum between mimesis and abstraction.[9] By combining these two sets of concepts, I am able to better describe how these components interacted in the formation of an identity. I expand upon how and why in the literature review.

Key Concepts: Defining Animation, Race, Asian-ness, and the Bodyscape

As Nichola Dobson notes, the "very fluid nature of the form" precludes the establishment of a singular, agreed-upon definition of animation.[10] In the first chapter of her book *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, Maureen Furniss nevertheless searches for one.[11] She references Charles Solomon, who identifies two qualifications – "(1) the imagery is recorded frame-by-frame and (2) the illusion of motion is created, rather than recorded" – and she cites Norman McLaren, who writes: "Animation is therefore the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between the frames."[12] After acknowledging this shared focus on movement, Furniss ultimately proposes a continuum between mimesis – the reproduction of reality – and abstraction – the reduction of visuals to their purest form – on which both animation and "live action" could exist.[13] Paul Wells and Samantha Moore undergo a similar journey in *The Fundamentals of Animation*. They reference a widely circulated quote by animator Gene Deitch, who describes cinematic animation as "the recording of individually created phases of imagined action in such a way as to achieve the illusion of motion when shown at a constant, predetermined rate, exceeding that of human persistence of vision."[14] While imperfect, these definitions – especially with their common emphasis on the illusory and constructed nature of the medium – are applicable to this project. My analysis of the

---

[9] Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 20; Maureen Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*, Rev. ed. (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey, 2007), 5.
[10] Nichola Dobson, *Historical Dictionary of Animation and Cartoons* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 209), xxxvii-xxxviii.
[11] Furniss, 4-5.
[12] Charles Solomon, "Toward a Definition of Animation," *The Art of Animation* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1987), 10; Georges Sifianos, "The Definition of Animation: A Letter from Norman McLaren," *Animation Journal* 3.2 (1995): 63.
[13] Furniss, 5.
[14] Paul Wells and Samantha Moore, *The Fundamentals of Animation*, 2nd ed. (London: Fairchild Books, 2016), 7.

production and ascription of race in *Avatar* and *Korra* also places emphasis on these attributes.

Like movement in animation, race is illusory and constructed. To describe race as a social construct without scientific validity is hardly a new stance. However, it is an important one to reiterate for this project and does not invalidate the study of such constructs. I explore the concept of race in greater detail in the literature review. For now, in both their article "What Is Racial Domination?" and their book *Race in America*, sociologists Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer offer a succinct definition. Race is "a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category".[15] With this description, the authors highlight the core characteristics of race. It is constructed, is based around phenotypes or visual characteristics, and is affected by external factors. This definition also helps inform discussions of depictions of race. Both are constructions, and both are distinct from reality, even though they are often confused for reality. For example, Michael R. Winston writes about how film, television, and radio construct stereotypes as substitutes for reality.[16] On this topic, Donald Bogle employs a "square boxes" analogy where Black performers have had to fit into white-created archetypes.[17] Similarly, Nancy Wang Yuen describes Asian American actors partaking in equivalent negotiations with stereotypical roles.[18] In contrast, Richard Dyer highlights how white people have historically had greater control over definitions of themselves than other racial groups.[19] There is another way to approach this topic. This project stresses that such depictions are comprised of various components, emphasizing how they are produced and assembled. Furthermore, as animation, *Avatar* and *Korra* and their depictions of race differ from live-action equivalents. There has been some writing on race and animation, usually stressing the visual components.[20] A few address the

---

[15] Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, "What Is Racial Domination?" *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 6.2 (2009): 336; Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, *Race in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016), 32.
[16] Michael R. Winston, "Racial Consciousness and the Evolution of Mass Communications in the United States," *Daedalus* 111.4 (1982): 176-77.
[17] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 4.
[18] Nancy Wang Yuen, "Performing Race, Negotiating Identity: Asian American Professional Actors in Hollywood," *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*, eds. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (New York: Routledge, 2004), 251-68
[19] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), xiii.
[20] Irene Kotlarz, "The Birth of a Notion," *Screen* 24.2 (1982): 21-29; Richard Neupert, "Trouble in Watermelon Land: George Pal and the Little Jasper Cartoons," *Film Quarterly* 55.1 (2001): 14-26; Sianne Ngai, "'A Foul Lump Started Making Promises in My Voice': Race, Affect, and the Animated Subjct,"

impact of sound. Among these exceptions, Daniel Goldmark and Joanna R. Smolko write about how Black-ness can be conveyed through musical styles and instruments – jazz and banjos, respectively.[21] Shilpa Davé and Alison Loader touch on the impact of "brown voice" and "yellow voice" on animated depictions of Asian Americans.[22] This project emphasizes that both the visual and aural components – including those related to music and the voice – affect the construction of a racial identity.

In the cases of *Avatar* and *Korra*, their productions constructed and ascribed not only race but more specifically "Asian-ness." Composing a single definition of Asia is a difficult and fraught task, one that risks erasing national, regional, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural distinctions. As Kuan-Hsing Chen observes, even a self-definition of Asia within the age of globalization is problematic given the long unexamined histories of colonialism and imperialism in the region.[23] Writings on Asian cinema resolve this dilemma in two ways. First, they treat "Asia" as a principally geographic concept, as confined to a specific continent.[24] Second, they emphasize the similarities in how "Asian

---

American Literature 74.3 (2002): 571-601; Michael A. Chaney, "Coloring Whiteness and Blackvoice Minstrelsy: Representations of Race and Place in *Static Shock*, *King of the Hill*, and *South Park*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31.4 (2004): 167-84; Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Shilpa Davé, "Apu's Brown Voice: Cultural Inflection and South Asian Accents," *East Main Street: Asian Popular Culture*, eds. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 313-36; Hugh Klein and Kenneth S. Shiffman, "Race-Related Content of Animated Cartoons," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 17 (2006): 163-82; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Presentation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007); C. Richard King, Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, editors, Animated Representations of Blackness [Special Issue], *Journal of African American Studies* 14.4 (2010); Alison Loader, "We're Asian, More Expected of Us: Representation, The Model Minority & Whiteness on *King of the Hill*," *Animation Studies* 5 (2010); Xavier Fuster Burguera, "Muffled Voices in Animation. Gender Roles and Black Stereotypes in Warner Bros. Cartoons: From Honey to Babs Bunny," *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov* 4.2 (2011): 65-76; Phil Childester, "'Respect My Authori-tah': *South Park* and the Fragmentation/Reification of Whiteness," *Critical Studies in Media Communications* 29.5 (2012): 403-20; Joanna R. Smolko, "Southern Fried Foster: Representing Race and Place through Music in Looney Tunes Cartoons" *American Music* 30.3 (2012): 344-72; Joon Yang Kim, "Animated Interracial Romantic Fantasies: Japanese Male and Non-Japanese Female Characters," *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives*, eds. Masao Yokota and Tze-Yue G. Hu (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013): 223-41; Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015); Jobia Keys, "Doc McStuffins and Dora the Explorer: Representations of Gender, Race, and Class in US Animation," *Journal of Children and Media* 10.3 (2016): 355-68.

[21] Goldmark, 80; Smolko, 353.

[22] Davé, 314-15; Loader.

[23] Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2-4.

[24] Dimitris Eleftheriotis, "Introduction," *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide*, eds. Dimitris Eletheriotis and Gary Needham (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 1; Anne Tereska Ciecko, "Introduction to Popular Asian Cinema," *Contemporary Asian Cinema*, ed. Anne Tereska Ciecko (Oxford,

cinema" is approached and consumed by scholars and the general public in both Asian and non-Asian contexts.[25] As Anne Tereska Ciecko writes: "'Asian' has been used – to different ends – to convey shared cultural attributes or experiences, geographic origins and/or race."[26] Thus, for her, "There is no one Asian cinema" even as films, filmmakers, and audiences cross traditional borders.[27] This attitude is reflected in how she and other scholars divide their publications by region or nation.[28] Stephen Teo challenges this trend and proposes that Asian cinema is "a vast complex network of film industries connected to each other through a shared narrative."[29] He argues that those smaller categories obscure commonalities.[30] For this project, "Asia" and "Asian" refer to the geographic place or to the cultures, nations, peoples, and artifacts from within its nebulous boundaries. However, with *Avatar* and *Korra*, I am not primarily writing about the continent of Asia. These are not Asian television shows, although I do complicate that claim in the conclusion. They are not set in Asia but instead in a wholly constructed fantasy world. Yet elements of these shows connect and relate them to a real-world Asia. I amend my language to reflect these distinctions.

"Asian-ness" then broadly refers to the idea of being represented as Asian in either a cultural or racial sense rather than a geographic one.[31] More specifically, by adding this suffix, I emphasize that distance between fiction and reality. Fantasy can offer an extreme example of this relationship, as addressed in the literature review. Furthermore, this term Asian-ness highlights both its constructed-ness and the intervention of an artist. This formulation conjures the specter of Orientalism. As Edward W. Said proclaims: "Orientalism is a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[32] A similar dynamic is at play when an artist

---

UK: Berg, 2006), 4; Stephen Teo, *The Asian Cinema Experience: Styles, Spaces, Theory* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2-3. The designation is imprecise, as the above scholars incorporate liminal film industries – those of Turkey, Israel, the Pacific Islands, and the global diaspora – into their writings on Asian Cinema.

[25] Eleftheriotis, 1; Ciecko, 4; Teo, *Asian*, 2; Abé Mark Nornes, "The Creation and Construction of Asian Cinema Redux," *Film History: An International Film Journal* 25.1-2 (2013): 175-87.

[26] Ciecko, 4.

[27] Ibid., 5-6.

[28] Aruna Vasudev, Latika Padgaonkar, and Rashmi Doraiswamy, editors, *Being and Becoming: The Cinemas of Asia* (New Helhi, India: Macmillan India, 2002); Dimitris Eleftheriotis and Gary Needham, editors, *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); Anne Tereska Ciecko, editor, *Contemporary Asian Cinema* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2006); Tom Vick, *Asian Cinema: A Field Guide* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

[29] Teo, *Asian*, 1-2.

[30] Ibid., 2-3.

[31] Like with Asian Cinema, Asian-ness can be further broken down into its specific regional and national equivalents. For this project, "Chinese-ness" and "Japanese-ness" are the most frequently employed.

[32] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3.

constructs, ascribes, and thus defines Asian-ness. Citing Said, Gina Marchetti and Hermant Shah recognize the power of Hollywood narratives in representing and re-presenting Asia and Asian groups.[33] Marchetti writes: "They [Hollywood filmmakers] create a mythic image of Asia that empowers the West and rationalizes Euroamerican authority over the Asian other."[34] The analysis of these types of media depictions focus on stereotypes, ones that – despite being marked by varying degrees of threat, impotence, and inscrutability – always stress foreignness.[35] Signifiers of Asian-ness are present in such re-presentations. Yellowface performances, featuring "signs and meanings that purportedly convey 'Asian-ness'", offer explicit examples.[36] Visual components – such as exaggerated skin color, slanted eyes, and buck teeth – as well as aural ones – namely accents – construct a racial Asian-ness that is then ascribed to the non-Asian bodies of the performers.[37] It is not real, but it can stand in for reality. Therefore, the term "Asian-ness" highlights both the depiction's distance from reality as well as its constructed-ness. When I say that "Asian-ness" has been constructed and ascribed, I am referring to a process of creating and combining visual, aural, and narrative components into unified wholes. To better describe this phenomenon, I employ the "bodyscape."

In the literature review, I unpack this concept and its ramifications in depth. However, to expand upon my earlier definition, Mirzoeff argues that:

> The body in art must be distinguished from the flesh and blood it seeks to imitate. In representation the body appears not as itself, but as a sign. It cannot but represent both itself and a range of metaphorical meanings,

---

[33] Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 6; Hemant Shah, "'Asian Culture' and Asian American Identities in the Television and Film Industries of the United States," *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 3.3 (2003). Here and elsewhere, I utilize Gayatri Shakravorty Spivak's distinction between "representation" in the political sense and "re-presentation" in the artistic sense, as explained further in the literature review.

[34] Marchetti, *Romance*, 6.

[35] Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 77; Yuen; Stephanie Greco Larson, *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 67-80; Catherine A. Luther, Carolyn Ringer Lepre, and Naeemah Clark, *Diversity in U.S. Mass Media*, 1st ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 130-51; Ashley Isola, "Yellowface, the Yellow Peril, and the Rise of the Kung Fu Master," *TCNJ Journal of Student Scholarship* XCII (2015): 1-4.

[36] Sean Metzger, "Charles Parsloe's Chinese Fetish: An Example of Yellowface Performance in Nineteenth-Century American Melodrama," *Theatre Journal* 56.4 (2004): 627.

[37] Luther, Lepre, and Clark, 138-39; Karla Rae Fuller, "Creatures of Good and Evil: Caucasian Portrayls of the Chinese and Japanese during World War II, *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesotra Press, 2001), 281; Amanda Rogers, "Asian Mutations: Yellowface from *More Light* to the Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Orphan of Zhao*," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24.4 (2014): 452; Davé, 316; Loader.

> which the artist cannot fully control, but only seek to limit by the use of context, framing and style. This complex of signs is what I shall call the bodyscape.[38]

Mirzoeff primarily uses this term to differentiate between physiological bodies and artistic re-presentations, specifically the construction of the ideal body in opposition to that of the Other in painting, sculpture, and photography. Additional scholars employ this term before and after Mirzoeff's book on the subject, usually in the service of feminist critiques in art history and film studies.[39] Some do expand the concept for discussions of idealized bodies in other fields, such as in anthropology, biology, and medical practice.[40] However, of these implementations, Mirzoeff's is the most relevant. His definition foregrounds the constructed-ness of these re-presentations, in turn highlighting the presence of an artist, one who crafts but never fully controls the meanings of these complexes of signs. However, in his examples, Mirzoeff's artists are solitary figures – the lone painter, sculptor, or photographer – whereas animation is typically the product of delegation and collaboration. By using this term, I am bestowing the title of artist to all personnel involved in my case studies. Their creative decisions affected the meanings of these complexes of signs, sometimes in ways beyond their control or knowledge. While Mirzoeff focuses exclusively on the visuals of gendered and racialized bodyscapes, mainstream contemporary animation is principally an audiovisual and a narrative medium. Therefore, the animated bodyscape is also comprised of visual, aural, and narrative components, impacting the identity of the bodyscape. I expand upon how and why in the literature review, where I discuss the significance of the voice and of fantasy world-building. Animation also possesses its own set of distinct qualities, specifically non-indexicality, plasmaticity, and iconicity. In the literature review, I define these terms and detail their effects on the ascription of race. Taking these observations into account, I propose a succinct definition for the animated bodyscape. It is a complex of signs, comprised of visual, aural, and narrative components, distinct from its physiological equivalents and those from other types of

---

[38] Mirzoeff, 3.

[39] J. Douglas Porteous, "Bodyscape: The Body-Landscape Metaphor," *The Canadian Geographer* 30.1 (1986): 2-12; Giuliana Bruno, "Spectatorial Embodiments: Anatomies of the Visible and the Female Bodyscape," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 10.1 (28) (1992): 238-61; Isabel Santaolalla, "Bodyscapes of Silence: The Figure of the Mute Woman in the Cinema," *Journal of Gender Studies* 7.1 (1998): 53-61.

[40] Fernando Santos-Granero, "Hybrid Bodyscapes: A Visual History of Yanesha Patterns of Cultural Change," *Current Anthropology* 50.4 (2009): 477-512; Pamela L. Geller, "Bodyscapes, Biology, and Heteronormativity," *American Anthropologist* 111.4 (2009): 504-16.

artistic re-presentation, in turn possessing qualities inherent to animation – namely, non-indexicality, iconicity, and plasmaticity. The individual components – and, by extension, the final results – are constructed by artists at every stage of a text's production. Those responsible for the animated bodyscapes in *Avatar* and *Korra* operated within specific industrial and historical contexts, which impacted how they conveyed Asian-ness.

Transnational Threads: U.S. Television, Nickelodeon, and the Anime Boom

As examples of 2000s and early 2010s U.S. television animation, *Avatar* and *Korra* are the products of specific historical trends. Accounting for this background allows for a greater understanding of these two series as well as how they construct and ascribe race. As many historians and scholars have noted, early U.S. animation perpetuated the stereotypes, traditions, and iconography found in blackface minstrelsy. These characteristics could be found in both the visual and aural components of those cartoons.[41] This legacy has persisted into contemporary productions. As seen in the popular discourse around the videogame *Cuphead* (2017), for example, the evocation of those early cartoons taps into those connotations regardless of the intentions of the creators.[42] Returning to Mirzoeff's definition of bodyscapes, artists are never in full control of the meanings of their constructions.

Television further complicates matters. Following the antitrust case *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.* (1948) – commonly referred to as the "Paramount Decision" – theatrical animated shorts were no longer viable, encouraging a change in exhibition strategies. Generally, animation scholars and historians view the subsequent decades as a dark time for the medium. Tom Sito describes this era – 1952 to 1988 – as a "lost generation" for what appeared to be a dying industry.[43] According to Wells, with the rise of television, the dominating view became that animation was no longer an art form but was instead something exclusively for children.[44] Similarly, both Jason Mittell and M. Keith Booker see the shift from primetime animation – as represented by *The Flintstones*

[41] Lehman; Sammond; C. Richard King, Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, "Animated Representations of Blackness," *Journal of African American Studies* 14.4 (2010): 395-97; Fuster Burgeura, 72; Smolko, 353.
[42] Samantha Blackmon, "Pickanninnies and Pixels: On Race, Racism and Cuphead at E3," *NYMG* (17 Jun. 2015); Yussef Cole, "Cuphead and the Racist Spectre of Fleischer Animation," *Unwinnable* (10 Nov. 2017).
[43] Sito, 213, 217.
[44] Paul Wells, *Animation and America* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 74; Paul Wells, "'Smarter Than the Average Art Form': Animation in the Television Era," *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, eds. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (London: Routledge, 2003), 24-25.

(1960-66) – to "Saturday morning cartoons" as one of becoming exclusively children's programming.[45] In part because of this shift in audience demographics, writings on race and television animation often focus on the effects of media depictions – be they negative stereotypes or positive representation – on a child's development.[46] While *Avatar* and *Korra* are children's shows, I do not adopt this approach in my analysis of them, preferring to discuss race and animation outside of a reductive good/bad dichotomy.

Animation's reputation did not improve in the 1980s, when U.S. President Ronald Reagan and his FCC Chairman Mark Fowler oversaw the deregulation of the film and television industries. Cable soon became saturated with animated shows that were essentially toy commercials. Within and in reaction to this environment, Nickelodeon – the future home of the *Avatar* franchise – was established.[47] According to accounts of the cable channel's history by Heather Hendershot and Sarah Banet-Weiser, network president Geraldine "Gerry" Laybourne wanted to create a library of original animation programming with long-term rerun potential instead of licensed, toy-based ephemera.[48] Linda Simensky, a former employee, recounted how Laybourne appointed Herb Scannell to lead the newly established animation department and to foster a creator-friendly development process.[49] Rather than adapt existing properties, the studio invited pitches for original ideas and produced short pilots to be audience tested, an expensive practice then unique in television animation.[50] Out of the eight original pilots, three were developed into full shows – *Doug* (1991-94), *Rugrats* (1991-2004), and *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991-95).[51] In 1996, Scannell succeeded Laybourne as president and – according to Banet-Weiser – continued expanding the animation department.[52] He oversaw the premieres of some of the network's biggest successes, including *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999-present), *The Fairy Odd Parents* (2001-17), and *Avatar*. At this time,

---

[45] Jason Mittell, "The Great Saturday Morning Exile: Scheduling Cartoons on Television's Periphery in the 1960s," *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, eds. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (London: Routledge, 2003), 45-46; M. Keith Booker, *Drawn to Television: Prime-Time Animation from the Flintstones to Family Guy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), x.
[46] Klein and Shiffman; Keys.
[47] Banet-Weiser, 17.
[48] Heather Hendershot, "Introduction: Nickelodeon and the Business of Fun," *Nickelodeon Nation: The History of Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*, ed. Heather Hendershot (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 9; Banet-Weiser, 63.
[49] Linda Simensky, "The Early Days of Nicktoons," *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*, ed. Heather Hendershot (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 93.
[50] Ibid., 87-88.
[51] Ibid., 102.
[52] Banet-Weiser, 61.

Banet-Weiser identifies diversity as part of Nickelodeon's brand identity, tying in with themes of inclusivity and empowerment.[53] She positions the incorporation of Black and Latinx characters in supporting roles in the channel's animated programming as signifiers of coolness and authenticity in a supposedly post-racial economy.[54] With their quasi-Asian fantasy setting and characters, *Avatar* and *Korra* were also part of that mandate for diversity, one less interested in confronting systemic inequality than in commodifying racial difference. While Black-ness and Latinx-ness were indicative of urban-ness, the Asian-ness of the *Avatar* franchise recalled another media trend from that era.

These two shows are the results not only of decades of U.S. animation but also of a recent anime boom. There has been a long history of cross-pollination between the animation industries of the United States and Japan. Many scholars – including Giannalberto Bendazzi, Susan J. Napier, Rayna Denison, Tze-yue G. Hu, Brian Ruh, Jonathan Clements, Ian Condry, Michal Daliot-Bul, and Nissim Otmazgin – have already written on the subject.[55] Ruh provides a helpful timeline of this influence by dividing the importation of Japanese animation to the United States into a series of "waves." The first was in the 1960s and was disseminated through broadcast television, the second appeared in the 1970s and 1980s and was spread by VHS, the third took place in the 1990s and was defined by early Internet fandom and cable syndication, and the contemporary one features distribution via downloads and torrents.[56] Following these designations, *Avatar* was pitched and developed in the aftermath of the third wave, which had introduced U.S. audiences to *Sailor Moon* (1992-97) in 1995, *Dragonball Z* (1989-96) in 1996, and *Pokémon* (1997-present) in 1998.

---

[53] Ibid., 145.
[54] Ibid., 152-58.
[55] Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*, trans. Anna Taraboletti-Segre (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); Susan J. Napier, *Anime from* Akira *to* Howl's Moving Castle*: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005); Rayna Denison, "The Global Markets of *Anime*: Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* (2001)," *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*, eds. Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2007); Rayna Denison, *Anime: A Critical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Tze-yue G. Hu, *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image Building* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Brian Ruh, *Adapting Anime: Transnational Media Between Japan and the United States*, Dissertation (Indiana University, 2012) 102; Jonathan Clements, *Anime: A History* (Basingstoke, NH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Michal Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin, *The Anime Boom in the United States: Lessons for Global Creative Industries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
[56] Ruh, *Adapting*, 102. The author adds: "Of course these waves are only abstract and concretized periods of time and were in reality more continuous and interrelated."

These syndications had a noticeable impact on U.S. television animation in the late 1990s and 2000s, specifically in the form of what Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin call "anime-inspired cartoons." The authors define this type of programming as "an effort by a non-Japanese studio to produce an animated show that refers to, reproduces, and even emulates that particular (rather elusive) something found in anime".[57] Sometimes, these products imitate visual and generic anime conventions while still centering on primarily white or white-coded characters, as seen in Cartoon Network's *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005) and *Teen Titans* (2003-07). Other times, these shows feature East Asian content and leads while mostly retaining U.S. stylistic norms, as seen in Cartoon Network's *Samurai Jack* (2001-04) and *Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi* (2004-06), Kids WB's *Jackie Chan Adventures* (2000-05) and *Xiaolin Showdown* (2003-06), as well as Disney Channel's *American Dragon: Jake Long* (2005-07). Nickelodeon, however, did not jump on this particular bandwagon until *Avatar*. Like these other animated products, *Avatar* and *Korra* featured content coded as East Asian, and they emulated the stylistic and narrative conventions of anime. These two tendencies affected how these productions ascribed race to animated bodyscapes.

The Production and Reception of Avatar *and* Korra

The world of *Avatar* is divided into four nations – the Water Tribe, the Earth Kingdom, the Fire Nation, and the Air Nomads. Select individuals have the ability to manipulate or "bend" their nation's respective element through martial arts. Only the Avatar, a mystical being reincarnated every generation, can control all four elements. After a hundred-year war in which the Fire Nation wiped out the Air Nomads, Water Tribe siblings Katara and Sokka discover the new Avatar, a young Airbender named Aang. Across three seasons and sixty-one episodes, the last Airbender and his new companions travel the world as he masters the four elements in order to defeat Fire Lord Ozai (Appendix 0.02). Over the course of the series, they are accompanied by Earthbender Toph and are pursued by the Fire Nation, especially the banished Prince Zuko, his uncle General Iroh, and eventually his sister Princess Azula.

Co-creators and executive producers Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko were joined by other creative voices for this production. Aaron Ehasz served as head writer, overseeing a fluctuating writing staff. A duo known as the Track Team –

[57] Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 112.

comprised of composer Jeremy Zuckerman and sound designer Benjamin Wynn – handled much of the show's soundscape. Andrea Romano served as voice director. The series also hired outside consultants to both ensure and signal cultural authenticity. As the calligrapher and translator, Siu-Leung Lee has been consistently framed as an expert in his field. In the end credits, his name is accompanied by a PhD, and the official art book spotlights his work in a way that stresses his range of knowledge.[58] He is presented as possessing both the native knowledge of a first-generation Chinese American as well as the acquired expertise of an academic. Cultural consultant Edwin Zane functioned differently. The former Vice President of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) was hired to provide feedback on production artifacts.[59] Rather than an expert in Asian culture, he served as a representative of an Asian American audience. Most prominently, there was the martial arts consultant, credited as "Sifu Kisu of the Harmonious Fist." A Black American born in Morocco, Kisu does not have a genealogical claim to Asian culture like Lee and Zane do, yet he has been positioned as an expert. Paratexts highlight his knowledge of various Chinese martial arts, and the end credits include the title "Sifu."[60] The full extent of these three individual's roles, responsibilities, and impacts is discussed in greater depth in the first, second, and fourth chapters, respectively. For now, they each demonstrate how Asian identities have been dispersed in a U.S. context, from recent immigration to diaspora to appropriation. Finally, the animation was completed overseas by the South Korean studios JM Animation, DR Movie, and Moi Animation, whose involvement on *Avatar* was likewise highlighted in promotional materials.[61] Like with the three consultants, their presence signaled authenticity. In addition to these people, various below-the-line crewmembers made impactful creative decisions. Their names and titles are specified in the subsequent chapters when relevant (Appendix 0.03-0.16).

Set seventy years after its predecessor, the sequel series follows the next reincarnation of the Avatar, the eponymous Korra. For four seasons and fifty-two episodes, she contends with her role in a rapidly modernizing and fractured world

---

[58] Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Art of the Animated Series* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2010), 126-29.
[59] Edwin Zane (3 Mar. 2018), phone interview.
[60] "Behind the Scenes Kung Fu Featurette" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006); "How *Avatar* Gets Its Kicks," *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2006): 42-43; "The Essence of Bending with Bryan Konietzko and Sifu Kisu" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2007).
[61] DiMartino and Konietzko, 34-37.

(Appendix 0.17). Whereas *Avatar* centered on a single conflict, *Korra* has a new antagonist each season. First, she – along with Mako, Bolin, Asami Sato, and her mentor Tenzin – face off against the anti-bender terrorist Amon in the cosmopolitan Republic City. In the second season, she tries to keep the peace between the Northern Water Tribe ruled by her uncle Unalaq and the Southern Water Tribe ruled by her father Tonraq. In the third, she begins rebuilding the Air Nation while being hunted by a group of anarchists led by Zaheer. For the final season, she confronts the military dictator Kuvira, who has seized power in the Earth Kingdom.

This fragmented structure was in part due to the show being originally developed as a twelve-episode miniseries. As a result, *Korra* also started with a smaller stateside crew than *Avatar* had. Co-creators and executive producers DiMartino and Konietzko returned, this time entrusting oversight of the directing and storyboarding to a team of producers – Joaquim Dos Santos, Lauren Montgomery, and Ki Young Ryu. Without Ehasz, DiMartino and Konietzko co-wrote every episode of the first season and were subsequently joined by *Avatar* veterans Tim Hedrick, Joshua Hamilton, and Katie Mattila. The Track Team, Romano, and Lee returned to their previous positions. Kisu's role was more limited, and his work was supplemented by that of other martial arts consultants, most notably stuntman Jake Huang. The overseas animation was handled almost entirely by Studio Mir in South Korea, with a few episodes being animated by Studio Pierrot in Japan. Even with a smaller crew, *Korra* was the product of numerous less-visible workers. As before, their names and titles are specified in the subsequent chapters when relevant (Appendix 0.18-0.33).

During its original run, *Avatar* resonated with audiences. It was consistently one of Nickelodeon's most watched programs, with the series finale reaching 5.6 million viewers.[62] The show also won an Emmy, multiple Annie Awards, and a Peabody Award.[63] Perhaps most significantly, though, the success of *Avatar* resulted in the

[62]Jon Lafayette, "Nick Continues Saturday Streak; Cable Net Rules Daypart for Eight Consecutive Season," *Television Week* (6 Jun. 2005), 7; Denise Martino Hollywood, "Nick Sticks with 'Avatar' for 3rd Season," *Daily Variety* 293.57 (21 Jun. 2006), 8; Carly Mayberry, "Nick Makes Room for More 'Avatar'," *The Hollywood Reporter* (15 Sep. 2006); "Nickelodeon Is Top Basic Cable Network in 3Q, Scores 54 Straight Quarters at Number One; Nickelodeon's Kids and Family Portfolio Posts Solid Gains for the Quarter," *PR Newswire* (1 Oct. 2008).

[63] Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Animation (Sang-Jin Kim, 2007); also, nominated for Outstanding Animated Program (2007). Annie Award for Storyboarding in an Animated Television Production (2006), Character Animation in a Television Production (2007), Directing in an Animated Television Production (2007, 2009), and Best Animated Television Production for Children (2009); also, nominated for Best Animated Television Production (2006), Writing for an Animated Television Production (2006). Peabody Award (2008).

network ordering a sequel series. Nickelodeon saw franchise potential. *Korra* was relatively less successful than its predecessor. The first episode was watched by 4.5 million people, but the later seasons were released on Nick.com, suggesting either declining viewership or shifts in viewing habits.[64] *Korra* also won an Emmy and multiple Annie Awards, although not as many as the first show.[65] Both series remain undervalued within academia. Scholars and historians largely ignore or dismiss the franchise.[66] The few exceptions – such as Lori Kido Lopez and Adolfo Aranjuez – do not engage with the shows directly, instead writing about fan reaction to the first live-action adaptation or about using the sequel series as a teaching tool, respectively.[67] Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin do repeatedly cite *Avatar* as one of the most successful examples of anime-inspired cartoons, but they do not discuss the show in great depth and do not mention *Korra*.[68] Therefore, an additional goal of this project is to solidify this franchise's place within the history of U.S. television animation.

Methodology: (Re)Constructing Production Narratives via Production Studies

For my contextually-driven and interview-based study, I sought a mixture of methods. First, I turned to production studies.[69] This field considers producers of media to also be producers of culture, specifically through the formation of production communities.[70] Such scholarship can help guide my attempt to understand the people and actions that created *Avatar* and *Korra*. For this type of research, interviews are

---

[64] "Debut of Nickelodeon's 'The Legend of Korra' Draws 4.5 Million Viewers," *TVbytheNumbers* (17 Apr. 2012); Adam W. Kepler, "New Animated Series Makes Inroads in Ratings," *The New York Times* (14 Sep. 2012); KORRA NATION, "Book 3 Moving to Digital Release!," *Tumblr* (24 Jul. 2014).

[65] Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Casting in an Animated Series or Special (2013); also, nominated for Outstanding Directing in an Animated Program (2013), Outstanding Casting for an Animated Series or Special (2015), and Outstanding Sound Mixing – Animation (2015). Annie for Outstanding Achievement, Production Design in an Animated TV/Broadcast Production (2014) and Outstanding Achievement, Storyboarding in an Animated TV/Broadcast Production (2015); also, nominated for Best Animated Television Production for Children (2013, 2014, 2015), Best Character Design in an Animated Television Production (2013), and Outstanding Achievement, Directing in an Animated TV/Broadcast Production (2014).

[66] David Perlmutter, *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 325-26.

[67] Lori Kido Lopez, "Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15.5 (2012): 431-45; Adolfo Aranjuez, "'The Legend of Korra' and Minority Representation," *Screen Education* 78 (2015): 24-27.

[68] Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 21, 49, 114, 119.

[69] Caldwell, *Production*; Mayer, "Studying"; Holt and Perren; Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell; Hesmondhalgh and Baker; Mayer, *Below*; Lotz and Newcomb; Hesmondhalgh,; Banks, Conor, and Mayer; Deuze and Prenger.

[70] Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, "Introduction: Production Studies: Roots and Routes," *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2; Caldwell, *Production*, 2.

privileged.[71] However, scholars note the dangers of relying too heavily on them, most notably the risk of spin and faulty memories.[72] Hence, scholars use a variety of sources for cross-referencing. John T. Caldwell gathers data from trade and worker artifacts, original interviews, direct observations, and economic/industrial analysis in order to study "the industry's on self-representation, self-critique, and self-reflection."[73] Similarly, Amanda D. Lotz and Horace Newcomb recommend supplementing interviews and observations with material from relevant trade presses.[74] In keeping with these approaches, my method also prioritizes original interviews and emphasizes cross-referencing. However, there is also a historical component, and production studies is designed for contemporary subjects.

Next, I turned to television studies.[75] Simply put, the field analyzes what distinguishes television from other types of media.[76] This project regards *Avatar* and *Korra* primarily as animation because of how the various components are constructed and interact in ways specific to the medium. However, the television format does impact both the production processes and the final product. Across both series, characters are added, locations change, and cast and crew fluctuate. Therefore, I make use of television theory that defines such shows as "evolutionary entities" or "texts-in-flux" that can adapt and change over time.[77] Mostly, though, I rely on literature related to animation studies, referencing work specific to television animation when possible.[78]

The studies that most closely resemble this project are *Off-Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of Independent Films* by David Rosen and Peter Hamilton, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* by Tom Sito, and *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild* by Miranda J. Banks.[79] All three weave together original and preexisting interviews in order

---

[71] Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 7.
[72] Caldwell, *Production*, 375; Jennifer Mason, "Qualitative Interviewing: Asking, Listening and Interpreting," *Qualiative Research in Action*, ed. Tim May (London: SAGE, 2002), 237.
[73] Caldwell, *Production*, 4, 5.
[74] Lotz and Newcomb, 75, 79.
[75] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987); Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson, editors, *Television Studies: Textual Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1989); Christine Geraghty and David Lusted, editors, *The Television Studies Book* (London: Arnold, 1997); John Corner, *Critical Ideas in Television Studies* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1999); Toby Miller, editor, *Television Studies* (London: BFI, 2002); Jonathan Bignell, *An Introduction to Television Studies*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013).
[76] Charlotte Brunsdon, "What is the 'Television' in Television Studies," *The Television Studies Book*, eds. Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (London: Arnold, 1997), 95, 105; Bignell, 2.
[77] Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson, "Introduction," *Television Studies: Textual Analysis*, eds. Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger, 1989), 3.
[78] Mittell; Booker; Hendershot; Benet-Weiser; Dobson.
[79] Rosen and Hamilton; Sito; Banks.

to create narratives and uncover hidden histories. However, while these authors chronicle large stretches of time, this project limits its scope to two productions. It is also guided by a specific thesis question. How and by what means is race produced and ascribed to animated bodyscapes? To answer this query, I have adopted a mixed method informed by the above writings. The project gathers and combines information from a range of sources, as detailed by Caldwell, Lotz, and Newcomb. I detail the different types below. Nevertheless, as they emphasize, the focus remains on interviews conducted at every level of production.[80] This approach has led me to individuals who would otherwise not be considered part of a production culture. By recording their voices, my research reveals the aforementioned planetary model, informing my understanding of the production and ascription of race. I elaborate on my method and rationales below.

I had initially planned to limit my project to archival research and original qualitative interviews, in keeping with two out of the four registers outlined by Caldwell.[81] The field research would have been conducted in Los Angeles, California, from July to September 2017, during which time I would have visited the Nickelodeon Archive and Resource Library as well as the Margaret Herrick Library. While there, I would have scheduled face-to-face interviews with relevant actors and crewmembers. As the scope of my project expanded beyond character design and as logistical challenges led to the cancellation of the research trip, I revised my plan. First, because the Nickelodeon Archive and Resource Library was closed to outside researchers, I instead studied officially released production artifacts, such as the designs and storyboards published in art books by Dark Horse as well as animatics and reference footage included as supplementary material on home video releases. As Chris Pallant and Steven Price note, while these types of resources can be valuable, there are always dangers when consulting "authorized" collections. Often comprised in service of a studio agenda, they can elide critical commentary and incongruity.[82] Therefore, I employed original academic interviews and textual analysis for cross-referencing. Second, I make use of personal online archives and biographies that various crewmembers have produced. I discovered that a number of artists from *Avatar* and *Korra* featured their work in online portfolios or on social media accounts. These documents reveal not only aspects of the

[80] Caldwell, *Production*, 4; Lotz and Newcomb, 75, 79.
[81] Caldwell, *Production*, 4.
[82] Chris Pallant and Steven Price, *Storyboarding: A Critical History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 21-22.

production processes but also how Nickelodeon and select individuals framed them. I then complement these sources with interviews.

The core of my research is original qualitative interviews with below-the-line personnel conducted from 2017 through 2018. Irving Seidman recommends qualitative over quantitative interviewing as a way to understand "the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience."[83] For this project, those individuals can be described primarily as "below-the-line." Derived from budgetary delineations, the categories of "above-the-line" and "below-the-line" typically refer to different types of personnel. Those above-the-line are generally considered to be authors who perform creative or intellectual labor, while those below-the-line are crewmembers who perform technical or manual labor.[84] It would be a mistake to assume this distinction is absolute; all members of a production make impactful creative decisions. As Caldwell argues: "negotiated and collective authorship is an almost unavoidable and determining reality in contemporary film/television."[85] *Avatar* and *Korra* are not exceptions, which is why I have chosen this method.

The emphasis on below-the-line personnel has another advantage. Caldwell writes about an "inverse credibility law" – "the higher one travels up the industrial food chain for insights, the more suspect and spin-driven the personal disclosures tend to become."[86] By focusing on below-the-line personnel, I mitigate but do not fully neutralize that concern. After all, while most of these people are not experienced interviewees, they still work or worked in the image-conscious film and television industry. For example, with one exception, every interviewee spoke positively about their experience on *Avatar* or *Korra*. Even with that one exception, they were careful to not directly criticize Nickelodeon or any specific person. Their continued careers depend on maintaining those good relations. I also conducted and referenced interviews with above-the-line personnel in the interest of constructing as complete of a production narrative as possible. Cross-referencing their narratives with those of below-the-line crewmembers helped reduce the risk of spin.

---

[83] Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 3.
[84] Mayer, *Below*, 4; Matt Stahl, "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds: Copyright, Collective Bargaining, and Working Conditions in Media Making," *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 58; Bastian Clevé, *Film Production Management: How to Budget, Organize, and Successfully Shoot Your Film*, 4th ed. (New York: Focal Press, 2017), 6.
[85] Caldwell, *Production*, 199.
[86] Ibid., 3.

Even though these people make creative decisions that result in the construction and ascription of race, no one in academia has been asking them about this subject. Centering them and their testimonies is an important and overdue intervention in scholarship on race and animation. As Brett Mills writes, "In failing to engage with practitioners, we are neglecting to put on the record a significant aspect of industrial history that will be useful research material for the future."[87] The knowledge that can be obtained from original interviews is slowly fading from the memories of potential participants, as Jennifer Mason warns.[88] Already, specifics regarding the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* are being forgotten, heightening the urgency of this kind of project. Furthermore, unlike ancillary or supporting sources, original academic interviews offer greater structure and direction.

Initially, before expanding the scope of my research, I planned to interview at least three character designers, the voice director, two casting personnel, and four voice actors. Ultimately, I conducted interviews with the following fourteen individuals:

- Tom Dankiewicz, background designer on *Avatar*
- Aaron Ehasz, head writer on *Avatar*
- Elsa Garagarza, background supervisor on *Avatar* and background designer on *Korra*
- Tim Hedrick, writer on *Avatar* and *Korra*
- Jake Huang, martial arts consultant on *Korra*
- Siu-Leung Lee, calligrapher and translator on *Avatar* and *Korra*
- Juan Meza-Leon, storyboard artist on *Avatar*
- Angela Sung, background designer on *Korra*
- Emily Tetri, background painter on *Korra*
- Steve Tushar, sound designer on *Korra*
- Olga Ulanova, assistant director on *Korra*
- Janet Varney, voice actor on *Korra*
- Edwin Zane, cultural consultant on *Avatar*
- Steve Ziolkowski, 3D modeling and rigging on *Avatar*

Out of these participants, five worked exclusively on *Avatar*, six worked exclusively on *Korra*, and three worked on both, allowing for a spread of data and the possibility for

[87] Brett Mills, "After the Interview," *Cinema Journal* 47.2 (2008): 152.
[88] Mason, 237.

comparisons. Because of the disproportionate representation of certain areas over others, some sections do not feature as many original interviews and instead rely more on preexisting accounts by pertinent personnel.[89] When possible, I used official channels to contact prospective interviewees by acquiring information on their agents or managers through IMDb Pro. However, this tactic only yielded results for voice actors. While I did receive some responses, none of those communications led to an interview. The one participating voice actor was contacted through her official website. I had greater success communicating with potential interviewees through social media. When planning, I had envisioned utilizing Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. However, I discovered that more potential interviewees were active and responsive on LinkedIn. While I had expected a snowball effect to take place following the interviews, one did not occur. Some interviewees did make recommendations, but none provided contact information or made introductions.

In preparation for these interviews, I considered the ethical ramifications of my method, seeking and acquiring approval from the University of East Anglia's General Research Ethics Committee in 2016 (Appendix 0.34). I also reviewed various writings on the topic. John W. Creswell describes an interview as "a hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical power distribution between interviewer and interviewee."[90] Mills grapples with how – as a researcher – he has a responsibility to not exploit his interviewees, to accurately represent their responses, as well as to fulfill his academic needs.[91] When interviewed by Caldwell, scholar-practitioner Erin Hill spoke about how she negotiated this tension:

> When I speak to a subject I take great pains to make sure that (a) I'm accurately contextualizing what they've said and understanding what they meant, and (b) they're protected if they're not in positions of power. For these reasons I usually send them drafts of what I'm writing so that they can look over their statements and the text surrounding them. I've never changed an argument or conclusion I've made based on a participant's reaction to a draft, but I have revised when I've misinterpreted a quote or

[89] For a full breakdown, chapter one has the greatest concentration of excerpts from original interviews, featuring testimony from Dankiewicz, Garagarza, Lee, Sung, Tetri, and Ziolkowski. Chapter two has Ehasz, Hedrick, and Zane. Chapter three has Meza-Leon, Ulanova, and Zane. Chapter four has Huang, Meza-Leon, and Ulanova. Chapter five has Tushar. Chapter six has Varney and Zane.
[90] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), 140.
[91] Mills: 150.

> included a detail that might compromise the anonymity of a lower-status worker.[92]

For this project, I strove to emulate Hill's approach. However, due to the highly specific nature of this project and the small pool of potential interviewees, anonymity was not a possibility. Therefore, I took the acquisition and retention of the fully informed consent of participants very seriously. This attitude was necessary because we were discussing the sensitive topic of race. The interviews were conducted in 2017 and 2018, by which point popular discourse on the subject had shifted from when *Avatar* and *Korra* were produced. In this environment, the interviewees required assurance that I would not misrepresent their views or endanger their career prospects. After all, I possess power over the interviewees by being able to select and edit their quotes to suit my arguments. Therefore, I took steps to treat the participants as collaborators rather than as objects of study. Interviewees were required to sign consent forms prior to the interviews and to verbally confirm their consent at the beginning of the audio recordings (Appendix 0.35). At any point during the interview, they had the option to ask me to turn off the recording software or stop. They also reserved the right to pull out of the project at any point prior to submission. During the writing process, they had access to interview summaries, transcripts, and rough drafts should they wish to clarify or retract a statement. Their responses would be incorporated into the finished project. While Hill asserts that she never changed an argument or conclusion based on feedback from one of her subjects, I find that policy to be restrictive and counterproductive. If my conclusions are derived from misinterpretations of the testimony of an interviewee, then I should revise those conclusions.

While I had originally planned to conduct the majority of these interviews face-to-face in Los Angeles, logistical limitations resulted in them all being done remotely. The ethical concerns for remote interviews are the same as face-to-face ones. The most significant difference is the greater flexibility afforded all parties involved.[93] This method resulted in two types of interviews: (1) audio- and (2) text-based. The audio-based interviews – conducted live over the phone, Skype, or Google Hangouts, depending on the participant – were preferable because of my preparations for face-to-

---

[92] John T. Caldwell, "'Both Sides of the Fence': Blurred Distinctions in Scholarship and Production (a Portfolio of Interviews)," *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 224.

[93] Roksana Janghorban, Robab Latifnejad Roudsari, and Ali Taghipour, "Skype Interviewing: The New Generation of Online Synchronous Interview in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 9 (2014): 2.

face meetings. The interviews themselves are "semi-structured," which Mason describes thusly: "The style is conversational, flexible and fluid, and the purpose is achieved through active engagement by interviewer and interviewee around relevant issues, topics and experiences during the interview itself."[94] This approach also helps establish a trusting rapport and encourages greater nuance in the responses.[95] While I still had questions specific to their position, this style permitted the interviewee to direct the discussion. My questioning broadly centered around three main topics:

- What did you do that ascribed race to an animated body?
- Why did you do that?
- How does the production of this show compare to that of others?

While we scheduled an hour for interviews, in practice our recorded conversations averaged around thirty minutes, leaving time for housekeeping and establishing a rapport. Text-based interviews – conducted over email – were necessary either when the interviewee's schedule was irregular or when they preferred to spend more time on their responses. Like with the live interviews, I had a set of questions specific to their position. Upon receiving their answers, I sent a list of follow-up questions. Some, but not all, of the responses to these prompts were short and lacked specifics compared to those from the audio-based interviews.

Afterward, I reflected on how to best incorporate these testimonies into my analysis as well as the potential impact of spin and faulty memories. As previously mentioned, spin is a constant concern with this type of research. I was already focusing on below-the-line personnel with the expectation that they would be less practiced at being interviewed than their above-the-line counterparts. Cross-checking the interviews was the most effective way to ensure accuracy and consistency. Faulty memory was a more apparent issue. Interviewees would offer general overviews of production processes but rarely volunteer specifics. Attempts to jog their memory with particular examples were often in vain. Regardless, these responses suggest a consistency in these production processes that had resulted in imprecise memories. Therefore, I combine their testimonies with my analysis of the published production artifacts as well as of the completed series. Nevertheless, to complete this research, I needed more sources to both cross-reference the original interviews as well as fill in gaps.

---

[94] Mason, 225.
[95] Mason, 225; Anne Galletta, *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publications* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 2.

Because the scope of the project had increased from my original plan and because of the disproportionate distribution of interviewees from the different departments, I supplement the original interviews with testimonies from other sources. In addition to their often promotional nature, these interviews are not as directed as academic ones. However, they were typically conducted closer to the time of production allowing for more precise recollections. These secondary sources can be divided into three main categories: (1) studio-produced paratexts, (2) third-party publications, and (3) social media posts. Depending on the setting, the interviewer, and the intended audience, the interviewee's attitude and responses could vary.

The first category of supplementary evidence is comprised mainly of the materials packaged with home video releases, commentary in the aforementioned art books, and cross-promotional material published in *Nickelodeon* magazine. In keeping with Gray's definition of paratext, they are "both 'distinct from' and alike" the main text – in this case, the two television series – as well as constructing and affecting the meaning of that main text.[96] "Secondary texts" – which are "distinct from" but share an "intertextual relationship" with "primary texts" – and "satellite texts" – which "do not directly determine the meaning of any film text [but] may provide perspective viewers with background information and interpretative frames" – would also be apt descriptors.[97] However, for clarity, this project employs "paratexts." When referencing this type of material, I remain cognizant that the content was approved by Nickelodeon and that the veracity of the statements should therefore be viewed with some skepticism. After all, their purpose is either to promote the *Avatar* franchise to potential viewers or to reinforce brand loyalty. On the other hand, because of the assumption that the majority of readers or listeners are already established fans, the participants tend to be less guarded when discussing matters related to race.

The second category – comprised of interviews and podcasts – can be subdivided into two groups: (1) show-centric and (2) artist-centric publications. The show-centric pieces generally appear in popular presses, were published to coincide with and promote a special event or anniversary, and featured above-the-line personnel, usually co-creators DiMartino and Konietzko. These interviews typically avoid specifics – as they could constitute spoilers – and provided positive coverage of the show, of its production, and

[96] Gray, 6.
[97] Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, "The Digital Auteur: Branding Identity on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD," *Western Journal of Communication* 69.2 (2005): 111; Austin, 24.

of Nickelodeon. After all, even if the studio did not directly control the content, the third party still had a vested interest in maintaining good relations with them. Artist-centric pieces are more likely to appear in podcasts and on fansites, were usually not timed with a specific date, and are more likely to spotlight below-the-line personnel. Due to this focus, these interviews often contained greater technical details, but they also covered other projects in addition to *Avatar* or *Korra*. Once again, in these cases, the interviewer sought to foster a positive rapport with the interviewee. Therefore, when referencing either type, I retain awareness of the favorable spin being applied to the questions and responses.

Finally, I reference social media posts and announcements made by personnel who worked on *Avatar* and *Korra*. While the other two categories tend to favor above-the-line and recognizable interviewees, social media allows any crewmember to directly communicate with the public. This lack of obvious oversight would suggest that the individual is not acting under the direction of their current or former employer, but some companies do have policies regarding private Internet use. They may also wish to maintain a good professional relationship. Furthermore, former crewmembers may be using their social media presence for self-promotion, which carries with it the risk of self-mythologizing.[98] Like the other kinds of supplementary sources, social media posts are often written with the assumption of a friendly reader, be they peers or fans. Rarely are they composed with other audiences in mind. All three of these categories have their own strengths and weaknesses as sources for this project. In keeping with the spirit of Caldwell, I check these statements and testimonies against each other, my original academic interviews, the analysis of production artifacts, as well as the content of the finished shows. Through this approach, I construct production narratives in order to recapture a moment in animation history and to determine how race was constructed and ascribed to animated bodyscapes in *Avatar* and *Korra*.

Chapter Breakdown: Constructing and Ascribing Race to the Animated Bodyscape

This thesis opens with a literature review that triangulates theories related to three of the major themes of this project: (1) the construction of race, (2) the animated bodyscape, and (3) the voice. It also examines additional factors that impact how these three concepts intersect: (1) culture, (2) mimesis and fantasy, and (3) mimesis and

[98] Caldwell, *Production*, 375.

abstraction. From there, this project is structured around the different production processes as well as how individuals made creative decisions that resulted in the construction and ascription of race in *Avatar* and *Korra*. The following six chapters are broadly divided into two parts. The first four explore the visual and narrative components while the last two shift focus to the aural ones.

In the first chapter, I examine how the art department appropriated and adapted real-world referents into fantastical and animated backgrounds, props, and calligraphy. Character design is addressed separately. In the building of a fantasy world, these processes constructed signifiers of cultural Asian-ness that in turn complement and reinforce racial significations. When choosing which visual elements to preserve, erase, or alter, the art department balanced various interests related to mimesis, fantasy, and abstraction. To what degree are the designs authentic? Do they contribute to a believable setting? Are they streamlined enough for animators to efficiently reproduce? Are they internally consistent with the rest of the diegesis? For background design and painting, I discuss the development of the Fire Nation architecture in *Avatar*, from its origins as an adaptation of a specific Chinese temple to its eventual blending with other referents. Through this mixing, the resulting images are prevented from becoming direct translations of real-world cultures. The theme of transculturation continues in my overview of the Metal Clan from *Korra*, which looks at the selection of inspirations used to convey connotations beyond and in addition to Asian-ness. As a result, the referents are reduced to signifiers of a quality other than their cultural specificity. In the next section, I look at prop design, specifically Piandao's swords from *Avatar* and how production narratives highlight the perseveration of details from authentic referents. For *Korra*, for example, the siege weapons of the Earth Empire were designed to evoke fascist iconography, again communicating identities other than Asian-ness. The chapter ends with an analysis of the development and implementation of proper names as well as of Chinese calligraphy. These conveyed attributes are all in turn projected onto corresponding animated bodyscapes.

The second chapter extends these concepts to an analysis of the writing process. Like the art department, the writers' room appropriated and adapted real-world referents into fantastical and animated counterparts. Across both shows, spiritual concepts such as *chakras*, historical figures such as Dai Li, and medical practices such as acupuncture were transformed in order to be integrated into the world of *Avatar* and *Korra*. Nevertheless, they continued to function as signs of authenticity, as signifiers of Asian-

ness. This chapter also pays greater attention to the formation of production cultures as well as how those environments affected both the writing process and the ascription of race. I look at the discourse surrounding the formal and informal ways that the writers' room sought to ensure authenticity and incorporate different perspectives. As a cultural consultant, Zane's involvement was indicative of a highly structured attempt by Nickelodeon to counteract potentially insensitive or offensive content. Alternatively, as head writer, Ehasz suggested a more organic approach in which each crewmember contributed some element of their personal identity to the writing process and, by extension, to the show. The latter formulation frames the writers' room as a "contact zone" – to use the language of Mary Louise Pratt – as a site of transculturation rather than merely of cultural appropriation.[99] Finally, I turn a critical eye to the uncritical use of English dialogue, especially when in juxtaposition to the Asian-coded names and Chinese calligraphy discussed in the preceding chapter. This section questions which world-building elements were considered cultural signifiers as well as which were considered culturally neutral. Regardless of their intention, individuals made creative decisions that resulted in the construction of certain significations that were incorporated into animated bodyscapes.

With the previous chapters establishing the process and effects of fantasy world-building, the third focuses on how cultural and racial markers intersect both in the animated bodyscape and in the formation of an Asian identity. These figures underwent a journey through the different production processes – design, storyboarding, and coloring – with individuals contributing to those complexes of signs as they adapted and interpreted each other's work. Like with the art direction and writing process, the resulting images are the synthesis of a range of perspectives and inputs, the products of contact zones. Because of the style and type of animation featured in *Avatar* and *Korra*, these bodyscapes are both streamlined and malleable in ways that impact the construction and ascription of Asian-ness. The hyper-realist aesthetics amplify certain details, including the aforementioned cultural markers. In turn, these design elements can transform between and even within scenes. Sometimes, those instances are minor or unintentional. However, this fluidity can also be great, as seen both in the use of exaggerated anime-inspired facial expressions as well as in the range of skin tones that a single character can possess over the course of a series. Like with the world-building,

[99] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

character designers and storyboard artists acquired real-world referents and models that were then adapted into signifiers of Asian-ness. These include Asian and Asian American crewmembers as well as designs and conventions from anime. All these visual elements were incorporated into those complexes of signs in order to construct and ascribe an identity.

Because of how many definitions of animation prioritize the illusion of movement, the fourth chapter examines how that movement can contribute to the ascription of race. In the cases of *Avatar* and *Korra*, their productions appropriated and adapted primarily, but not exclusively, Chinese martial arts for the action sequences. Furthermore, by citing these inspirations, personnel linked their work to specific historical and cultural contexts, sometimes in unintended ways. After all, the artist is never in full control of these complexes of signs. More so than the previous chapters, this one emphasizes how paratexts can be used to educate viewers on the relationships between real-life referents and their fantastical and animated counterparts. Issues of authenticity are reintroduced, as I reference how Leon Hunt uses archival and corporeal authenticity in his analysis of kung fu cinema.[100] The former highlights how these production narratives and promotional materials stress the supposed faithfulness of the re-presentation of cultural traditions. The latter is reflected in their emphasis on the physiological bodies of the martial arts consultants performing the choreography, even though the final movements were ultimately filtered through and embellished by technological and artistic mediation. Like the animated bodyscape, the fight sequences of *Avatar* and *Korra* passed through a series of processes – including writing, consultation, and storyboarding – with individuals collaborating in their contributions to the final product. Their creative decisions both tethered the choreography to reality as well as ascribed Asian-ness and other desired attributes to these animated bodyscapes.

The remainder of this project turns to the aural half of these audiovisual texts, with the fifth chapter focusing on how music and sound effects contribute to the construction of a distinctly Asian-coded and grounded soundscape as well as how those identities would impact and be projected onto animated bodyscapes. The voice is covered separately. The first section analyzes production narratives around the composition of the music of *Avatar* and *Korra*, which can be summarized as traditional and Asian instruments performing nontraditional and non-Asian instrumentations. The

[100] Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 29-35, 39-41.

surrounding discourse indicates that the instruments are the sites of cultural identities and are therefore the sources of archival authenticity, which is in turn transferred to the music. The instrumentation then contributes supplemental qualities to their core Asian-ness. Production narratives also recall ideas of corporeal authenticity, with their privileging of live recordings or the imitation thereof. Just as the music tethers the soundscape to specific historical and cultural contexts, so too do sound effects ground these shows to reality. Whether generated through Foley, sound design, or a combination of the two, these sound effects act as agents of mimesis. They emulate what the animated objects or actions to which they were sutured ought to sound like, no matter how fantastical. As a result, they abet signifiers of Asian-ness by constructing a believable world in which they could exist. Both of these aural processes lay the groundwork for discussions of the voice.

The sixth and final chapter analyzes the production of vocal performances as well as how they are sutured with visuals to create animated performances, to complete construction of the animated bodyscape. Akin to the other components, vocal performances underwent a series of processes – casting, recording, and editing – prior to synchronization. Once again, at each stage, individuals made creative decisions that contributed to those complexes of signs. In the cases of *Avatar* and *Korra*, most of those choices were in the service of mimesis or internal consistency, but they could also directly impact the construction and ascription as Asian-ness. For example, while voice director Romano would occasionally have Asian and Asian American voices actors perform Asian accents, she otherwise instructed the actors to affect North American accents. Because of these factors, it would be a mistake to reduce the ascription of race solely to the personal identities of voice actors. They only produce the aural building blocks that are later assembled into coherent wholes. Like the other aural components, vocal performances are cyborgs, the products of technological mediation. Despite this constructed-ness, the link between the physiological bodies of the actors and the animated bodyscapes of the characters are often re-forged. Like with the martial arts choreography, promotional materials spotlight the voice actors, educating viewers about them. The practice of hiring celebrities likewise emphasizes a connection between actor and character as a way to transfer aspects of their star persona to the latter. All these elements contributed to the construction of aural components to be incorporated into the animated bodyscape, in turn affecting the construction and ascription of Asian-ness.

Summary

Animation provides untapped opportunities to analyze definitions of race. In order to understand how and by what means race is produced and ascribed in animation, this thesis adopts and adapts the concept of the bodyscape. Because the animated bodyscape does not have a race, race must be ascribed to it. This phenomenon can be observed in the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra*, together the result of decades of transnational trends in animation. This ascription does not happen automatically but instead as a result of actions taken by individuals at every stage of production. Therefore, this project centers such people by conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews. I supplement these with preexisting testimonies, allowing for the simultaneous study of how Nickelodeon framed the construction and ascription of race in these shows. Through these production narratives, this project demonstrates how various external factors contributed to these processes. The productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* led to the creation of multiple interlocking communities through which components of animated bodyscape passed. Those complexes of signs were comprised not only of visual markers but also of aural and narrative ones. Conflicting concerns related to authenticity, hyper-realism, internal consistency, and streamlining also factored into these processes. As demonstrated by the following chapters, all these elements impacted the construction and ascription of Asian-ness to this franchise and to the animated bodyscapes within it.

Literature Review – Race, Body, Voice

How and by what means is race produced and ascribed to an animated body? In the introduction, I address some key concepts relevant to this question. However, this project involves entering deeper into a complex web of intersecting theories from a variety of fields. The following literature review establishes the definitions of and the relationships between (the construction of) race, the (animated) body, and the (cinematic) voice. How do animated renderings of the body differ from other types of artistic re-representations and how does that affect depictions of race? How does a voice become attached to or incorporated into an animated bodyscape and what does that mean for its identity? How does the voice affect understandings of race and how does race affect understandings of the voice? How can external factors impact the nature of these relationships? These questions have been tackled by numerous scholars from various disciplines. For this project, I triangulate their work in preparation for my analysis of *Avatar* and *Korra*, and I account for how issues related to culture and mimesis can impact those interactions.

Race/Body: Physiological, Artistic, and Animated

Race is a social construct and not a biological reality. The term refers to something invented as opposed to something innate. This is neither a new nor radical stance.[1] In the introduction, I reference Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer's definition of race. They describe the concept as "a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category".[2] The quote succinctly addresses the main aspects of race as a social concept, that these categories are neither natural nor fixed, that they are created. For this project, their definition foregrounds the constructed-

[1] Ashley Montagu, "The Concept of Race," *The Concept of Race*, ed. Ashley Montagu (New York: Collier Books, 1964); Michael Banton and Jonathan Harwood, *The Race Concept* (Newton Abbot, UK: David & Charles, 1975); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1986); Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Audrey Smedley and Brian D. Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993); Robin O. Andreasen, "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?" *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): S653-66; Joseph L. Graves Jr., *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Howard Winant, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2004); C. Loring Brace, *"Race" Is a Four-Letter Word: The Genesis of the Concept* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Universtiy Press, 2005).
[2] Desmond and Emirbayer, "What": 336; Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 32.

ness of race, the malleability of its application, and the importance of physical characteristics in forming those identities. Race – from its pseudoscientific origins to its recognition as a sociohistorical and sociopolitical construct – promotes the idea that visual markers – specifically skin color, facial features, and hair – are external indicators of internal realities. In other words, race is a designation created and ascribed onto a body. Both institutions and individuals produce and maintain these definitions. As a part of this system, artistic re-presentations likewise construct and ascribe identities, codifying commonsensical understandings of race.

Race and Artistic Re-presentations

Artistic works have been establishing and perpetuating racist ideologies and stereotypes since the inception of race.[3] Like other commonsensical and pseudoscientific conceptualizations, artistic depictions construct and ascribe internal attributes and identities to a body through the use of visual markers, of physical characteristics. Stuart Hall emphasizes the role of the body and the biological. Michael D. Harris opens his book stating that "blackness" is primarily visual.[4] Such images – be they painted, sculpted, or photographed – both represent and re-present their referents or models. Gayatri Chakrovorti Spivak clarifies this distinction: they both represent in the political sense – speak for or on behalf of what they depict – as well as re-present in the artistic sense – recreate something from reality.[5] The image and its referent are not the same thing, even when photography is involved. As art historian E.H. Gombrich phrases it, re-presentations reveal less about the biological or physiological subject than they do about the artist's "reaction to it."[6]

This distinction between flesh-and-blood bodies and their artistic re-presentations is a recurring and interdisciplinary theme. As discussed in the introduction, the bodyscape can be a helpful concept for describing this relationship and its various mediating factors. While neither the first nor only scholar to do so, art historian Nicholas

---

[3] Stuart Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media," *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties*, eds. George Brdiges and Rosalind Brunt (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981), 28-52; Winston; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
[4] Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE, 1997), 243; Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 1.
[5] Gayatri Shakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 275.
[6] E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 44; Mirzoeff, 135; Harris, 37.

Mirzoeff utilizes this term to analyze re-presentations of the "ideal figure" as well as of the Other in western art, although he does not use Spivak's discerning hyphen. He defines the bodyscape thusly:

> The body in art must be distinguished from the flesh and blood it seeks to imitate. In representation the body appears not as itself, but as a sign. It cannot but represent both itself and a range of metaphorical meanings, which the artist cannot fully control, but only seek to limit by the use of context, framing and style. This complex of signs is what I shall call the bodyscape."[7]

In the epilogue, he summarizes the concept more succinctly: "The bodyscape does not have a virgin birth but exists in a mediated exchange between the body of the artist, that of the model, and that of the viewer."[8] Mirzoeff is clear that the bodyscape is distinct from its physiological referent or model. It does not exist in a vacuum or "have a virgin birth." The carried meanings are the products of numerous factors including, but not limited to, the agency of the artist, the readings of the viewer, and larger contexts. Mirzoeff's formulation foregrounds the distinctions and relationships between these different elements in artistic re-representations of the body. While the author largely situates this concept within feminist discourse – specifically that regarding the female nude – he also recognizes the importance of race. Mirzoeff writes: "The perfect body in Western culture was sustained and made imaginable by the imperfect body of the racial Other."[9] As examples, he discusses the colonial photography of Herbert Lang in the Belgian Congo as well as the graffiti paintings of Jean-Michael Basquiat in 1980s New York, the latter of which he positions as eliding those differences. Based on these case studies, Mirzoeff views the concept of the bodyscape as applicable to a range of mediums and production practices. By extension, there can also be both a cinematic bodyscape as well as an animated bodyscape, each with their own particular qualities. Part of the goal of this literature review is to understand these distinctions as they relate to the construction and ascription of race.

While they do not generally use the term bodyscape, film scholars have also addressed how predominantly white institutions – such as the U.S. film and television industry – conceptualize and perpetuate commonsensical understandings of race through

[7] Mirzoeff, 3.
[8] Ibid., 196.
[9] Ibid., 135.

artistic re-presentations. Donald Bogle recognizes that racial stereotypes were originally created by and for white performers.[10] Gina Marchetti writes about how cinematic Asian-ness was constructed by and for white Americans, both of whom were less interested in intercultural understandings than in projecting their own exotic and erotic fantasies onto the screen, onto those cinematic bodyscapes.[11] Such scholars understand these ascriptions to be primarily visual and therefore closely tied to re-presentations of the body. Richard Dyer indentifies this white-as-default mindset found even in the photochemical processes of live-action filmmaking.[12] The highlighting of visual markers can also be found in pieces on how race can be implicitly ascribed to nonhuman figures.[13] While voice and accents are occasionally mentioned, the emphasis remains on the visual.[14] With these ideas in mind, the cinematic bodyscape again highlights the distinction between the real and the re-presentation. Even though they must contend with external factors, the role and agenda of the artist is emphasized. While many of these observations still apply, the animated bodyscape is markedly different from its live-action equivalent.

The Animated Bodyscape: Non-indexicality, Iconicity, and Plasmaticity

In the introduction, I describe the animated bodyscape as a complex of signs, comprised of visual, aural, and narrative components, distinct from its physiological equivalents and those from other types of artistic re-presentation. The first part of this definition can be applied to any example from an audiovisual and narrative medium, including the above-mentioned cinematic bodyscapes. How is animation different? Since its infancy, animation studies has been primarily concerned with determining the medium's relationship to and distinction from live-action filmmaking, from the recording of profilmic reality.[15] For this project, I highlight three main characteristics of

[10] Bogle, 2.
[11] Marchetti, *Romance*, 10.
[12] Dyer, 14-15, 24.
[13] Thomas E. Wartenberg, "Humanizing the Beast: *King Kong* and the Representation of Black Male Sexuality," *Classical Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001): 157-77; Gabriel S. Estrada (Nahuatl), "*Star Wars* Episodes I-VI: Coyote and the Force of White Narrative," *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (London: Routledge, 2008): 69-90; Sean Redmond, "The Whiteness of the *Rings*," *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (London: Routeldge, 2008): 91-101.
[14] Norman K. Denzin, *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence* (London: SAGE, 2001), 23; Estrada, 81.
[15] Darley; Furniss, 4-5; Suzanne Buchan, "Animation, in Theory," *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014): 111-27; Wells and Moore, 7.

the animated bodyscape. Namely, it is non-indexical, iconic, and plasmatic. The first relates most heavily to medium specificity. The second is relevant for discussions of art direction and character design in chapters one and three. The final one connects to the analysis of storyboarding and final animation in chapters three and four. All three impact how race and other identities are constructed and ascribed to these bodyscapes. These characteristics primarily relate to the visual components. The roles and impacts of the aural and narrative ones are addressed in later sections.

Animation's relationship with indexicality is fundamental to the nature of the medium itself. Conventional live-action or photographic filmmaking practices always capture some element of a profilmic, if highly manipulated, reality. The tribesmen in Lang's photography or the actors in a D.W. Griffith film were real, and the shadow of their existence was recorded by a photochemical process. Animation – a method of filmmaking one frame at a time in order to create the illusion of movement – is wholly constructed.[16] Thus, Rudolf Arnheim could praise animation as being more artistic than live-action because it affords greater control, like a painting compared to a photograph.[17] Thus, Maureen Furniss could argue that behind-the-scenes representation should be equally important to on-screen representation.[18] Thus, Paul Wells could claim that "animation may be viewed as the most auteurist of film practices" regardless of degrees of collaboration because it requires the greatest amount of intervention by filmmakers.[19] And, thus, Jane Batkin can open her book by saying "The animator gives life to the animated – the two surely cannot be separated."[20] Because of this level not only of interaction and manipulation but also of wholesale construction, animation is defined by its being non-indexical. Conversely, privileging this characteristic in such a manner does exclude filmmaking practices that record real-world movement – such as live-action puppetry (e.g. *The Muppets* franchise), rotoscoping (e.g. *The Lord of the Rings* (1978)), and motion capture (e.g. *The Polar Express* (2004)) – from definitions of animation.[21] However, because neither *Avatar* nor *Korra* engaged in those methods, this project includes non-indexicality as a fundamental quality of the animated bodyscape.

---

[16] Darley: 69-70.
[17] Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1958), 175.
[18] Furniss, 231.
[19] Paul Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship* (London: Wallflower, 2002), 73.
[20] Jane Batkin, *Identity in Animation: A Journey into Self, Difference, Culture and the Body* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.
[21] Doing so also risks discounting the importance of audio recording to the assemblage of animated bodyscapes, as addressed in a later section.

With *Avatar* and *Korra*, I am focusing on 2D animation that imitates traditional cel-animation. The logistics of this method necessitate that certain design elements – including character designs – be simplified and streamlined so that multiple personnel can reproduce them. As described in the introduction, Furniss' attempt to offer a definition of animation is helpful for explaining this quality. Instead of a strict criteria, she proposes a continuum for all filmmaking practices between mimesis – the reproduction of reality – and abstraction – the reduction of visuals to their purest form.[22]Animation tends toward the latter. What does this mean for the bodyscape? Scholars working on adjacent mediums have asked similar questions. For example, Nobuko Anan also addresses the distinction between live-action or "biological" bodies and their equivalents in manga. In language akin to Mirzoeff's definition of bodyscape, she describes these 2D bodies as made up of signs or markers for various attributes related to identity. Her conference paper on *Alien Street* (1980-84) cites abstraction as a defining characteristic for the 2D body, impacting how it re-presents gender and race.[23] Figures rendered in 2D cel-animation and its imitators share these attributes, especially for character design. The animated bodyscape remains defined by its relationship to that real-world, and artists mediate that connection in part through abstraction.

One way to envision the impact of abstraction on the animated bodyscape is through the concept of iconicity, as detailed by Scott McCloud. While he writes specifically about comics, he also references how this idea applies to animation.[24] According to McCloud, removing extraneous details from an illustrated face results in a progressively more iconic and progressively more universal visage. Of this process, he writes: "when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself."[25] An animated bodyscape with fewer specificities could be representative of more people, and the reader or viewer would therefore be more likely to identify with the corresponding character. Building on these statements, Annabelle Honess Roe cites a neuroscience study indicating that the human brain responds more emotionally or empathetically to iconic animated images than to recordings of real people.[26] Along similar lines, Meike

[22] Furniss, 5.
[23] Nobuko Anan, "Narita Minako's *Alien Street*: Performance in two-dimensional manga space," Adaptation, or How Media Relate in Contemporary Japan (Norwich, UK: Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, 7-8 June 2018).
[24] McCloud, 30, 43.
[25] Ibid., 36.
[26] Annabelle Honess Roe, *Animated Documentary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 108.

Uhrig singles out character design – especially that of the face and eyes in computer-animation – as a means of eliciting emotional or empathetic responses. She also credits these visual components for grounding or normalizing the more fantastical elements of animation for the viewer.[27] However, the reception of iconic images is not necessarily straightforward. As Wells writes, animation has the power to either "dilute" or "amplify" meaning.[28] On one hand, as comics scholar Derek Parker Royal argues, iconicity encourages a reader to emphasize with a figure who would otherwise be the Other.[29] On the other hand, as fellow comics scholar Jared Gardner observes, such simplifications risk reducing character designs to stereotypes and caricatures.[30] McCloud acknowledges this aspect of iconicity. The most important components are not only preserved but are emphasized – in his words, "amplification through simplification."[31] For an example, he references Japanese comics and animation, writing about how they generally use iconic designs to encourage identification but that some character or objects are drawn with greater detail, rendering them more "Other."[32] He does not specifically mention racial markers. The concept of iconicity – and its applications within different mediums – demonstrate the effects of abstraction on the animated bodyscape. They are susceptible to greater projection and amplification of meanings. The visual components, the surrounding contexts, and the viewers own sense of self all influence their identities.

In this regard, the concept of *mukokuseki* (無国籍) and its relation to animation proves relevant. Sociologist Koichi Iwabuchi defines *mukokuseki* as meaning "something or someone lacking any nationality".[33] He then describes two applications for this term. The first refers to something transculturally, as having multiple origins. Regarding Japanese animation, this definition can refer to the dominant style's various influences and receptions, a dimension that interests Rayna Denison and Jane Leong.[34]

---

[27] Meike Uhrig, "AnimOtion: Animating Emotions in the Digital Age," *Emotion in Animated Films*, ed. Meike Uhrig (New York: Routledge, 2019), 5.
[28] Paul Wells, *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 3-4.
[29] Derek Parker Royal, "Introduction: Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narratives," *MELUS 32.3* (2007): 10.
[30] Jared Gardner, "Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Works of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim," *Multicultural Comics: From* Zap *to* Blue Beetle, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 136.
[31] McCloud, 30.
[32] Ibid., 43-44.
[33] Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 28.
[34] Rayna Denison, "Transcultural Creativity in Anime: Hybrid Identities in the Production, Distribution, Texts and Fandom of Japanese Anime," *Creative Industries Journal* 3.3 (2011): 226; Jane Leong,

The second suggests erasure, specifically of physical signifiers of race or ethnicity for both Japanese and non-Japanese characters.[35] On this subject, Susan J. Napier quotes Oshii Mamoru, Ueno Toshiya, and Miyazaki Hayao on how Japanese animation consciously de-Japanizes character designs because – according to Miyazaki – "the Japanese hate their own faces."[36] This topic is usually evoked in response to white audiences questioning why canonically Japanese characters look Caucasian. Essentially, they are projecting their own racial identity onto iconic animated bodies.[37] Related to this subject, Amy Shirong Lu conducted a study confirming "Own Race Projection (ORP)" among white viewers of Japanese animation.[38] As McCloud argues, the audience is more likely to see themselves in iconic visages. While tempting to consider these abstractions simply representative of generic or default human bodies, they are hardly stick figures. Terry Kawashima interrogates the tendency to read certain visual cues – such as large eyes or light-colored hair – as indicators of whiteness while ignoring other markers or contexts.[39] Ueno theorizes that hair colors are visual exaggerations meant to differentiate otherwise homogenous Japanese casts in black-and-white manga.[40] Michael Daliot-Bul and Nissim Otmazgin write that such features are used "to convey feelings rather than mark ethnicity."[41] According to Kawashima, any decoding of visual markers to determine race is "a culturally conditioned, trained act" and that to read a race is to produce it.[42] When understanding how identity is ascribed to and within an animated bodyscape, the concept of *mukokuseki* as it relates to character designs in Japanese animation demonstrates the ramifications of abstraction and iconicity. The removal of extraneous details from animated bodyscapes can open them and their identities to alternative readings. However, it should be noted, Lu's experiment only utilized the

---

"Reviewing the 'Japaneseness' of Japanese Animation: Genre Theory and Fan Spectatorship," *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia's Film Journal* 7.1 (2011): 21.

[35] Iwabuchi, 71-72.

[36] Napier, 25.

[37] Frederik L. Schodt, *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2002), 61; Andrew C. McKevitt, "'You Are Not Alone!': Anime and the Globalizing of America," *Diplomatic History* 34.5 (2010): 900; Terry Kawashima, "Seeing Faces, Making Races: Challenging Visual Tropes of Racial Difference," *Meridians* 3.1 (2002): 161; Condry, 102-03; Brian Ruh, "Conceptualizing Anime and the Database Fantasyscape," *Mechademia* 9.1 (2014): 167; Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 123-24.

[38] Amy Shirong Lu, "What Race Do They Represent and Does Mine Have Anything to Do with It? Perceived Racial Categories of Anime Characters," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4.2 (2009): 169-90.

[39] Kawashima, 161-62.

[40] Ueno Toshiya, "Techno-Orientalism and Media-Tribalism: On Japanese Animation and Rave Culture," *Third Text* 13.47 (1999): 97.

[41] Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 124.

[42] Kawashima, 176.

heads of the animated characters, removing other potential markers of Japanese-ness. Secondary factors and contexts continue to play a role in how identity is constructed and ascribed to animated bodyscapes.

Thus far, the literature indicates that the animated bodyscape – especially that produced for 2D cel-animation and its imitators – is wholly a construction that strips away extraneous details. However, this description could also be applied to almost any drawn or illustrated re-presentation of a human, which is why the writings of comic scholars have proven pertinent. Through the processes of storyboarding and animation, this type of bodyscape possesses the illusion the movement. Early film scholars have recognized and underlined this medium-specific instability. Sergei Eisenstein writes of animation's "rejection of one-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form. An ability [he would] call 'plasmaticness'" and that I simplify as "plasmaticity."[43] Similarly, Gilles Deleuze identifies "the cartoon film" as belonging "fully to the cinema... because the drawing no longer constitutes a pose or a completed figure, but the description of a figure which is always in the process of being formed or dissolving through the movement of lines and points taken at any-instant-whatevers of their course."[44]As a result, the animated bodyscape is – according to Wells – "a form constantly in flux" and therefore one that subverts traditional understandings of identity.[45] For Batkin, it is "an elusive 'thing'" that complicates the application of a likewise fluid identity.[46] From the production of storyboards to final animation, the animated bodyscape reveals itself to not be a singular object but instead is a series of static images. It is plasmatic in nature, and its significations are similarly malleable.

Therefore, when discussing the animated bodyscape and its relationship to the ascription of race, there are three key characteristics. First, it is non-indexical, meaning that it was constructed wholly by the artist or filmmaker. As a result, the creators of animated bodyscapes have greater input on the mediation of external factors than their equivalents in live-action would, even if they are never in full control of those complexes of signs. Second, the iconicity of the character designs results in the projection and amplification of secondary factors and contexts. In addition to the amplification of retained details, the animated environment also contributes to the

---

[43] Eisenstein, 21.
[44] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone, 1986), 5.
[45] Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 188, 213.
[46] Batkin, 1-2.

construction and ascription of identity. Finally, these bodyscapes are plasmatic, and their identities are likewise fluid, which augments the importance of consistent design elements as well as of their contexts. In these ways, the construction and ascription of race to an animated bodyscape differs from that to one from another medium. Furthermore, because animation is largely an audiovisual art form, the animated – as well as the cinematic – bodyscape is incomplete without consideration for the voice.

Body/Voice: Physiological, Cinematic, and Animated

To take a step back, the voice refers to a sound produced by a physiological body. A symphony of body parts coordinate to create pressure that temporarily reverberates through a three-dimensional space, most commonly air.[47] While something could exist and be observed without it generating sound, the inverse is impossible. Therefore, ephemeral and intangible vibrations indicate the presence of the object that created them. A voice therefore signals a body. This is not a new observation. Roland Barthes has written on *le grain* of the voice, emphasizing the materiality of a body generating sound.[48] Vocal coaches David Zinder and Sarah Case repeatedly reference the physicality of voice work to their acting students.[49] In live-action and animation filmmaking practices, this relationship is complicated by technological mediation that records, edits, and ultimately projects the voice. Just as the voice is connected to physiological bodies, aural components are incorporated into bodyscapes.

Voice and the Cinematic Bodyscape: Cyborgs and Suturing

The 1970s and 1980s saw a new generation of French and American scholars addressing the nature of cinematic sound, its relationship with the cinematic image, and the primacy of the voice. Jean-Louis Baudry hears an authenticity in the aural that he believes the visual lacks.[50] After all, whereas 3D profilmic reality has to be flattened for 2D screens, recordings of sound retain their dimensionality.[51] Nevertheless, cinematic sound is just as much a reproduction as the cinematic image. The processes of recording,

---

[47] Rick Altman, "Introduction: Four and a Half Film Fallacies," *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 40-41; Edward Branigan, "Sound and Epistemology in Film," *The Journal of Aesethics and Art Criticism* 47.4 (1989): 313.
[48] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977).
[49] David Zinder, *Body-Voice-Imagination: A Training for the Actor* (London: Routledge, 2002); Sarah Case, *The Integrated Voice: A Complete Voice Course for Actors* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2013).
[50] Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus," *Camera Obscura* 1 (1976), 110.
[51] Branigan, 313.

editing, and projecting – which Baudry does acknowledge – manipulate sound too heavily for it to be considered equivalent to the original.[52] The result is a cyborg voice, a product of both physiological bodies and technological apparatuses. For this generation of scholars, the role of technology is paramount.[53]

The visual and aural are separate at every stage of filmmaking. Even if an actor recites their lines in front of a camera and some version of that audio is ultimately synchronized with their likeness, the instruments and techniques for recording the two are fundamentally different. They only appear as one when projected together. Digital filmmaking practices have altered this dynamic somewhat but not in a fundamental way; even if a single device records or plays both audio and visual, it does so using separate apparatuses. For Michel Chion, this is the audiovisual illusion, "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time."[54] For Mary Ann Doane, this is the fantasmatic body, "the body reconstituted by the technology and practices of the cinema".[55] According to Doane, there is a drive within the audience to connect a cinematic sound with a cinematic source, even if they must imagine one off-screen.[56] In this regard, Rick Altman likens sound cinema to ventriloquism. Akin to a dummy sitting on a performer's lap, images are subservient to sounds and distract from their true source: the loudspeaker.[57] Conversely, William Johnson and Edward Branigan caution against overvaluing sound, and there are additional oversimplifications to address.[58] Unlike reality, the cinematic world can support sounds independent of diegetic sources. Johnson, for example, cites "imageable" cinematic sounds such as "room presence."[59] Omniscient narrators, non-diegetic scores, and fantastical elements also round out the list. Regardless, for the majority of cinematic texts, the cyborg voice is sutured to an on-screen bodyscape.

---

[52] Baudry, 110; Altman, "Introduction" 40-43; Tom Levin, "The Acoustic Dimension: Notes on Cinema Sound, *Screen* 25.3 (1984): 56-57.
[53] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Colubmia University Press, 1999); Rick Altman, "The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound," *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Atlman (New York: Routledge, 1992): 14-31.
[54] Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.
[55] Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 33-34.
[56] Ibid., 37.
[57] Rick Altman, "Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 67, 69, 73.
[58] William Johnson, "The Liberation of Echo: A New Hearing for Film Sound," *Film Quarterly* 38.4 (1985): 3; Branigan, 311.
[59] Johnson, 3.

There is more to say about how these theorizations impact the analysis of cinematic performances. For Gianluca Sergi, they mean that there are technical aspects of a vocal performances outside of an actor's control, that any performance containing a vocal element is a collaboration with sound editors.[60] For Pamela Robertson Wojcik, they mean that any discussion of film acting must account for these technological mediations.[61] For Starr A. Marcello, they mean that film allows for "dualistic performances" – in which vocal and visual components can either complement or contradict each other – whose extreme is found in animation.[62] Given these relationships between audio and visual, the cinematic bodyscape likewise incorporates vocal performances. These processes, and therefore the final product, are controlled and directed by the artists or filmmakers. They edit and manipulate the sound before synchronizing and suturing the two disparate parts. The result is collaborative as well as cyborg in nature. As suggested by Marcello, all these elements are exaggerated in animation.

Voice and the Animated Bodyscape: Ventriloquism and Transferrable Traits

The non-indexical, iconic, and plasmatic animated bodyscape differs significantly from its live-action equivalent. By extension, so too does its relationship with cinematic sound. There is no profilmic body on the screen that may have been the physiological body whose voice is projected from the loudspeakers. The image is wholly constructed and incapable of producing a voice. Nevertheless, in an act of disavowal, the viewer believes that the figure moving its lips – or, more accurately, having its lips moved by animators – is the source of the voice that they hear. Even the nodding heads of the machinima *Red vs. Blue* (2003-present) are enough visual stimuli to justify suturing. These scenarios call into question the hierarchy between the voice and the image within animation. Which is the determining factor in regard to the identity of the animated bodyscape? After all, with the rare exception, the voice heard in animation was still originally produced by a physiological body, even if that vocal performance underwent subsequent manipulation. How does the flesh-and-blood body of the voice actor affect the final audiovisual bodyscape?

---

[60] Gianluca Sergi, "Actors and the Sound Gang," *Screen Acting*, eds. Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer (London: Routledge, 1999), 36.
[61] Pamela Robertson Wojcik, "The Sound of Film Acting," *Journal of Film and Video* 58.1/2 (2006): 80.
[62] Starr A. Marcello, "Performance Design: An Analysis of Film Acting and Sound Design," *Journal of Film and Video* 58.1/2 (2006): 60, 62.

Writings about the normally invisible voice actor begin to appear in earnest in connection with and reaction to the rise of the celebrity voice actor in the 1990s and 2000s. It is a phenomenon where the audience is encouraged to know the voice's original source.[63] Recalling the language of Altman, Christopher Holliday writes on this practice: "the computer-animated film exploits, rather than resists, the fundamentally ventriloquistic identity of its audiovisual construction by delighting in the recognisable star voice's animated reassignment."[64] This foregrounding of the voice and its source via celebrity casting appears in other types of animation. In her analysis of the English-language dubs of Studio Ghibli films, Denison notes how paratexts can encourage audiences to make these connections.[65] On the subject of star studies, Richard Dyer describes "stars" as the productions of self-commodification. Through the labor of multiple individuals – including filmmakers – the raw material of the original person is worked into a star image.[66] While most scholarship focuses on the visual as opposed to the vocal – the star *image* rather than the more inclusive star *persona* – there are exceptions. Martin Shingler cites David Bromwich on James Stewart, Vicky Lowe on Robert Donat, and Philip Kemp on Claude Raines as examples.[67] Dyer himself has written about Paul Robeson's voice.[68] In animation, each celebrity voice actor carries with them the weight of their star persona, developed over the years through interviews, photo shoots, social media presence, and acting jobs. By synchronizing the voice of an aurally recognizable actor with an animated character, a part of their persona is incorporated into a bodyscape.[69] For Tanine Allison, the celebrity's voice has primacy over the animation as the chief signifier of identity, a cinematic hierarchy of which Altman would likely approve.[70] Conventional voice actors, on the other hand, are cast to

---

[63] Joe Bevilacqua, "Celebrity Voice Actors: The New Sound of Animation," *Animation World Magazine* 4.1 (1999); Marcello.
[64] Christopher Holliday, *The Computer-Animated Film: Industry, Style and Genre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 163.
[65] Rayna Denison, "Star-Spangled Ghibli: Star Voices in the American Versions of Hayao Miyazaki's Films," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3.2 (2008): 137-38.
[66] Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2004), 4-5
[67] Martin Shingler, "Fasten Your Seatbelts and Prick Up Your Ears: The Dramatic Voice in Film," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* 5 (2006).
[68] Dyer, *Heavenly*, 106.
[69] Bevilacqua; Marcello, 63-64; Martin Barker, "Introduction," *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, eds. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (London: Arnold, 2003), 20; Paul Wells, "To Affinity and Beyond: Woody, Buzz and the New Authority," *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, eds. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (London: Arnold, 2003), 94; Holliday, 153-54.
[70] Tanine Allison, "Blackface, *Happy Feet*: The Politics of Race in Motion Capture and Animation," *Special Effects: New Histories/Theories/Contexts*, eds. Dan North, Bob Rehak, and Michael Duffy (London: Palgrave, 2015), 114-15.

disappear into a role, to not be recognizable, so that their vocal performance may be simply sutured to the animation. Nevertheless, based on accounts of the celebrity voice actor, the vocal components of the animated bodyscape can contain significations from the physiological body that originally produced them.

The recording processes of these vocal performances also impact the animated bodyscapes. While he writes specifically about computer-animation, Holliday's account of the voice in animation is again applicable:

> The computer-animated film voice is also a stream of recorded speech purified inside an aurally deadened studio, delivered and archived with a degree of sonic sterility... The computer-animated voice is a clean voice, distilled from audible contamination and conducive to audio-mixing techniques.[71]

The animated voice retains a degree of indexicality in that it involves the recording of a sound produced by a physiological body. Those words were spoken by a real person at some point in history, and a microphone was present to capture them. However, the sterility of that recording scenario is indicative of the degree of manipulation and editing that that sound will undergo. How much indexicality remains in the resulting cyborg vocal performances? While the practice of celebrity voice casting indicates the possibility of transferrable traits between the physiological and the animated, these production processes highlight the constructed nature of animation. Even the voice is mediated and directed by various artists. When those voices were recorded in relation to final animation also helps define the relationship between sound and image. Voice recordings can take place before or after animation. With the former, the visual half of the animated performance can be built either consciously or unconsciously around the vocal half, enabling greater synchronization between the voice and the animated lips.[72] This practice is a literal realization of Altman's ventriloquistic hierarchy. The aural directs the visual. When one records after animation, then the actor must adapt their vocal performance to the existing animated one. Even with the first method, retakes – especially for non-dialogue vocal elements such as grunts or groans – may be required.

Like with the cinematic bodyscape, animation involves the suturing of a voice to an image. However, the distance between the two is greater. A physiological body absent from the screen produced a voice that was recorded and edited in a sterile

[71] Holliday, 144-45.
[72] Furniss, 86.

environment, complicating its indexicality. Through and despite these processes, there remains the potential for certain characteristics to be transferred to the new bodyscape, as demonstrated with celebrity voice casting. Star personas and other qualities may then be highlighted due to iconic character designs, which leave space for greater projection and amplification. With these factors in mind, this project will address how and by what means a racial identity may be ascribed to an animated body via the voice. This train of thought involves determining the relationship between the voice and race, the role of accents in ascribing race, and the practice of mimicry in defining racial identity.

Voice/Race: Accents and Mimicries

The aural component of race has been historically and academically undervalued. There are a few possible reasons for this lacuna. For one, the technology to record and reproduce sounds was developed more recently than that of images. Therefore, definitions and categorizations of race have privileged visual markers. Also, speaking patterns are generally learned rather than inherited. Nevertheless, the field of linguistic profiling has endeavored to bridge the gap between the two. Eric R. Kushins conducted a study to determine how accurately participants could identify the race of a native English speaker based solely on their voice. While he concludes that Black and white speakers were easily distinguished, the Asian speaker was often misidentified as "white."[73] Alternatively, in an earlier study by Michael Newman and Angela Wu, could more successfully differentiate between Asian and white speakers.[74] In both cases, voices are more indicative of class, region, and culture, which can overlap with but remain distinct from race. When not ignored, references to the role of the voice in the establishment and maintenance of racial categories focus on accents.[75]

Whether highlighted as something to fetishize, ridicule, or fear, accents designate their bearers as the Other.[76] As often noted by those who study linguistic profiling, accents play an important role in marginalization and discrimination, obstructing

---

[73] Eric R. Kushins, "Sounding Like Your Race in the Employment Process: An Experiment on Speaker Voice, Race Identification, and Stereotyping," *Race and Social Problems* 6.3 (2014): 237-48.
[74] Michael Newman and Angela Wu, "'Do You Sound Asian When You Speak English?' Racial Identification and Voice in Chinese and Korean Americans' English," *American Speech* 86.2 (2011): 152-78.
[75] Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1954), 131-32; Donald T. Campbell, "Stereotypes and the Perception of Group Difference," *American Psychologist* 22.10 (1967): 825.
[76] For the sake of simplicity and in keeping with common parlance, I am using "accents" to refer to both accents – the pronunciation of non-native languages – and dialects – the pronunciation of one's native language – unless directly quoting someone.

assimilation, classifying people as perpetual aliens, and denigrating intelligence.[77] Within artistic re-representations, performances of accents serve the same function. For example, in her article on media depictions of Judge Lance Ito from the O.J. Simpson trial, Cynthia Kwei Yung Lee explores how a Japanese accent – which the real-life Ito did not have – was used to discredit him and cast him as a foreigner.[78] In these cases, an accent played an observable role in the formation and ascription of the racial identity of a real-life individual, and that constructed identity was used to dismiss and mock him. In her analysis of accents in media, Rosina Lippi-Green concludes that children are being conditioned to respond positively to voices that sound familiar and to be wary of those that sound different.[79] Writing about Disney animation in particular, she observes that characters speaking with accents associated with marginalized groups or specific regions were overwhelming depicted either negatively or at least as possessing limited narrative agency.[80] Similarly, Sam Summers' analysis of *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) pinpoints accents as the primary signifiers of generational difference.[81] By having the conservative and traditional adults speak in Scottish accents while the progressive and modern children speak in North American accents, the film communicated "trust and empathy with the familiar, distrust of the foreigner."[82] Such re-presentations become representative of the groups whose speaking patterns were appropriated, with audiences willing to suture not only the voices but also those identities to animated bodyscapes. In one study, Jeesun Kim and Chris Davis determine that people are more likely to identify an animated figure as Asian when it is synchronized with a voice speaking Japanese or English with a Japanese accent than when it is mute.[83] A nondescript animated

---

[77] John A. Dixon, Bernice Mahoney, and Roger Cocks, "Accents of Guilt? Effects of Regional Accent, Race, and Crime Type on Attribution of Guilt," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 21.2 (2002): 162-68; Cheryl J. Boucher, et al. "Perceptions of Competency as a Function of Accent," *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research* 18.1 (2013): 27-32; Ze Wang, et al. "'You Lost Me at Hello': How and When Accent-Based Biases Are Expressed and Suppressed," *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 30.2 (2013): 185-97; Nicholas Close Subtirelu, "'She Does Have an Accent but...': Race and Language Ideology in Students' Evaluations of Mathematics Instructors on Ratemyprofessors.com," *Language in Society* 44.1 (2015): 35-62.

[78] Cynthia Kwei Yung Lee, "Beyong Black and White: Racializing Asian Americans in a Society Obsessed with O.J.," *Hastings Women's Law Journal* 6.2 (1995): 203.

[79] Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (London: Routledge, 1997), 103.

[80] Ibid., 101.

[81] Sam Summers, "High Fantasy Meets Low Culture in *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010)," *Fantasy/Animation: Connections Between Media, Mediums and Genre*, eds. Christopher Holliday and Alexander Sergeant (London: Routledge, 2018), 233-35.

[82] Ibid., 239.

[83] Jeesun Kim and Chris Davis, "Knowing What to Look For: Voice Affects Race Judgements," *Visual Cognition* 18.7 (2010): 1017-33.

bodyscape can therefore become representative of an entire racial group. Across these examples, the risks and ease of the accent in forming and supporting racial definitions are clear.

Along these lines, mimicry on the part of an in-group can be a powerful tool for codifying and perpetuating so-called commonsensical knowledge of racial out-groups. For Homi Bhabha, mimicry is a display of authority, an act of ostracizing that reminds its targets of their Otherness.[84] Robert C. Toll, Anjali Vats, LeiLandi Nishime, and Amanda Rogers second this view in their writings on blackface and yellowface in artistic re-presentations.[85] Desmond and Emirbayer liken the former practice to "blackness possessed by a white body".[86] Such performances were created by and for white people, divorced from reality and yet creating definitions of Black-ness and Asian-ness. As part of this process, white performers put on makeup and other affects, conveying that such characteristics were aberrations on the default white body.[87] When nonwhite actors would appear in vaudeville – such as Chinese American Lee Tung Foo – their failure to embody stereotypes established by white performers would cause confusion.[88] Recalling the language of Bogle, they could not fit into the square boxes built by and for white men and women. The re-presentation had outpaced the referent in the minds of the white audiences.

Theatre scholar Angela Chia-yi Pao claims that there is too much emphasis on the visual components when discussing racial impersonations and not enough on the aural ones.[89] Rogers does cite accents as an indicator of Asian-ness in yellowface performances, but it is at the end of a list of primarily visual markers.[90] In 19th century America, vaudeville performers constructed how white northerners would define other racial, ethnic, and national groups, how they looked, how they acted, and – relevant to this project – how they spoke. As blackface came to signify a general inferiority, actors with darkened faces started to mimic different accents – including Irish, German, Jewish,

---

[84] Homi Bhaba, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 126.
[85] Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 169-70; Anjiali Vats and LeiLani Nishime, "Containment as Neocolonial Visual Rhetoric: Fashion, Yellowface, and Karl Lagerfeld's 'Idea of China,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99.4 (2013): 230; A. Rogers: 452.
[86] Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 283.
[87] Fuller, 281.
[88] Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850-1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 1-3.
[89] Angela Chia-yi Pao, "False Accents: Embodied Dialects and the Characterization of Ethnicity and Nationality," *Theatre Topics* 1.1 (2004): 357.
[90] A. Rogers, 452.

Chinese, Japanese, and Native American – in order to specify which group was being mocked.[91] This underreported and understudied practice clearly establishes the historical importance of the voice in racial mimicry. These aural re-presentations became such potent racial markers that white performers were able to employ an imagined "Negro dialect" for radio performances in order to convey and reinforce a particular understanding of Black-ness sans any visual indicators.[92] On the other hand, with the introduction of synchronized projected sound in the late 1920s and 1930s Hollywood, there was a reevaluation of the role of the voice in these re-presentations. In 1929, journalist Geraldyn Dismond heralded sound film as a great opportunity for Black actors, arguing that white actors in blackface would be unable to authentically and convincingly mimic the Black voice, especially the Black singing voice.[93] Her views would be seconded by later writers, including Bogle.[94] While blackface performances became less common in the 1930s, they did not disappear entirely, and yellowface performances continued for decades unabated. Furthermore, *Amos 'n' Andy* (1929-60) would stay on the radio for decades. Listeners were expected to hear those white actors speak in constructed accents and imagine unseen Black bodies. When writing about the "brown voice" and the "yellow voice" – cousins of the "Negro dialect" – Shilpa Davé and Alison Loader reference contemporary examples, *The Simpsons* (1989-present) and *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), respectively.[95] By reflecting white expectations rather than reality, the vocal performances of Hank Azaria, Toby Huss, and Lauren Tom constructed and ascribed Asian-ness. Just as minstrel performers could convey other marginalized groups despite being in blackface, the accented voice has the power to supersede physiological bodies.

While the voice does not directly connect with race, it does inform and affect racial definitions. However, the act of placing a speaker within a racial category based solely on their voice can be difficult, with their speaking patterns owing more to cultural

---

[91] Toll, 161-62; Joyce Flynn, "Melting Plots: Patterns of Racial and Ethnic Amalgamation in American Darama before Eugene O'Neill," *American Quarterly* 38.3 (1986): 426; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 95.
[92] Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of American Phenomenon* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Viriginia, 1991), 2; Michelle Hilmes, "Invisible Men: Amos 'n' Andy and the Roots of Broadcast Discourse," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10.4 (1993): 308.
[93] Gerladyn Dismond, "The Negro Actor and the American Movies," *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (London: Cassell, 1998), 73-76.
[94] Bogle, 26; Sarah Madsen Hardy and Kelly Thomas, "Listening to Race: Voice, Mixing, and Technological 'Miscegenation' in Early Sound Film," *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis, MN: Univeristy of Minnesota Press, 2001), 415; Alice Maurice, "'Cinema at Its Source': Synchronizing Race and Sound in the Early Talkies," *Cinema Obscura* 49.17 (2002): 32.
[95] Davé; Loader.

and environmental factors. This assertion counters the notion that the race of a non-celebrity voice actor can be transferred to an animated bodyscape. Instead, I have focused on the role of accents. As established by studies in linguistic profiling, accents are often cited as a means to designate members of an out-group. Artistic depictions and mimicries of accents further marginalize, marking them as Others to fetishize, ridicule, or fear. These aural re-presentations define racial categories just as visual ones do. In this way, the voice can aid in the ascription of race to an animated bodyscape.

Through the Lenses of Culture, Mimesis, Fantasy, and Abstraction

The animated bodyscape does not exist within a vacuum. Due to its iconic and plasmatic nature, it absorbs significations from its surroundings, the narrative components. As a result, world-building can complement or complicate the meaning of those complexes of signs. For this project, factors related to the representation and re-presentation of culture, the dual impulses of mimesis and fantasy, as well as the continuum between mimesis and abstraction all impact the construction of bodyscapes as well as how race is ascribed to them.

Culture: Authenticity, Appropriation, and Transculturation

Recalling Desmond and Emirbayer, racial categories are heavily informed by social and historical contexts. As early as 1953, sociologist Gordon W. Allport identified non-physiological factors that contributed to the construction of prejudices, listing dress, religious practices, and food habits alongside established phenotypes.[96] Such artifacts and actions both function as cultural markers and inform racial ascriptions, especially in the absence of other design elements. Hence, the preceding section on race and the voice focuses on accents. In this context, the pursuit of "cultural authenticity" requires unpacking. Desmond and Emirbayer trace this preoccupation back to colonialism, when there was an obsession with seeking out "uncontaminated" and "primitive" cultures untouched by western influences.[97] Mirzoeff also addresses this tendency in his analysis of Lang's colonial photography, which intentionally elides indicators of western-ness in their framing.[98] Similarly, art scholar Jean Fisher writes about how North American art exhibitions favor "authentic" Native American artwork, meaning ones deemed

[96] Allport, 131-32.
[97] Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 314.
[98] Mirzoeff, 158-59.

appropriately "tribal," "primitive," and "uncontaminated."[99] She positions this practice in a longer history of Euro-American forces defining and limiting "Indianicity," privileging their own white perspective in the construction of the Other.[100] This conceptualization relates to how Edward W. Said describes western writers and thinkers as trying to control and establish authority over "the Orient."[101] Such flattening reduces real cultures – real groups of people – into synecdochic series of signifiers. Asian becomes Asian-ness. For such instances for artistic re-presentations, issues concerning cultural appropriation arise.

Cultural appropriation can be most generally defined as when an outsider takes an aspect of an insider's culture.[102] This practice is typically viewed unfavorably, emulative of the outsider exercising power over the insider.[103] More recently, in the context of globalization, some scholars attempt to expand this term into something more neutral and develop their own taxonomies. Art historian James O. Young is concerned with what is being appropriated and offers the following classifications: (1) "object appropriation," referring to the transferring of tangible works; (2) "content appropriation," referring to the copying of intangible works; (3) "style appropriation" and (4) "motif appropriation," both referring to the reproduction of stylistic elements or motifs; and (5) "subject appropriation," referring to when an outsider represents and re-presents insider individuals or institutions.[104] He is especially interested in the final type, noting how outsiders can only "draw on their own experiences of other cultures" and inevitably misrepresent them.[105] Working in media and communications studies, Richard A. Rogers is interested primarily in power dynamics, identifying four categories: (1) "cultural exchange," in which the two parties are equivalent; (2) "cultural dominance," in which the insider is dominant; (3) "cultural exploitation," in which the outsider is

---

[99] Jean Fisher, "In Search of the 'Inauthentic': Disturbing Signs in Contemporary Native American Art," *Art Journal* 51.3 (1992): 44-45.
[100] Ibid., 45-46.
[101] Said, 1-2.
[102] Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, "Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis," *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, eds. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997): 1-27; Richard A. Rogers, "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation," *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 474-503; James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2008); Erich Hatala Matthes, "Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?," *Social Theory and Practice* 42.2 (2016): 343-66.
[103] Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, editors, *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk, editors, *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
[104] J.O. Young, 6-7.
[105] Ibid., 9.

dominant, the commonsensical definition of cultural appropriation; and (4) "transculturation," an alternative framework which will be discussed in greater depth shortly.[106] Sociologists Desmond and Emirbayer emphasize the effects of cultural appropriation and thereforepropose a stark binary. The practice is either (1) racist or (2) antiracist. The former refers to when the outsider whitewashes the history and context of what they are appropriating.[107] The latter refers to when the outsider neither de-racializes nor de-historicizes aspects of an insider culture as well as when that community receives compensation.[108] As U.S. television series, *Avatar* and *Korra* engage in cultural appropriation, primarily style or motif appropriation through the acquisition and adaptation of real-life referents as well as the emulation of conventions from other national media, most notably anime. They mitigate the risk of subject appropriation through collaboration with Asian and Asian American crewmembers as well as Asian animation studios. Production narratives spotlight these contributions as well as the historical and cultural contexts of various referents, suggesting an antiracist rather than a racist approach. Using Rogers' definitions, these shows do perform cultural exploitation, in that they unilaterally select and de-contextualize aspects of other cultures. However, his fourth category of transculturation may be more accurate.

The reduction of global interactions to parties of insiders and outsiders risks essentialism and disenfranchisement.[109] As Chris Rojek writes, cultures are not monoliths.[110] Therefore, neither are cultural texts static or homogenous, especially in the age of globalization. One alternative is to conceptualize these interactions in terms of cultural flow or traffic. The terminology suggests a more neutral spread of artifacts, ideas, and practices while still allowing room for critical observations of unequal power dynamics and tensions. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai coins five dimensions of cultural flow: (1) "ethnoscapes," referring to the spread of peoples; (2) "mediascapes," referring to both the spread of media images and the means to make such images; (3) "technoscapes," referring to the spread of technology; (4) "finanscapes," referring to the spread of capital; and (5) "ideoscapes," referring to the spread of ideologies.[111] An inevitable result of these flows is a cultural mixing and the formation of new objects, a

[106] R.A. Rogers: 477.
[107] Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 310-12.
[108] Ibid., 312-14.
[109] Matthes.
[110] Chris Rojek, *Cultural Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), 105.
[111] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory Culture Society* 7 (1990): 296-301.

phenomenon noted in the introduction to the edited collection *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic*.[112] Rogers offers transculturation as a substitute for cultural appropriation.[113] According to this new paradigm, all culture and all cultural texts are hybrid in nature, even though unequal power dynamics still influence those combinations.[114] Transculturation occurs in "contact zones," which Mary Louise Pratt defines as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out across the globe today."[115] The concept allows for the recognition of transculturation outside of traditional colonial frontiers. Thus, Kim Soyoung adopts the term when analyzing the formation of action genres, and John T. Caldwell uses it to refer to interactions between industry insiders and outsiders.[116] For this project, contact zones describe the interlocking production communities of *Avatar* and *Korra*, framing them as sites of transculturation.

Before continuing to the next section, I wish to clarify the difference between transcultural and transnational, as I use both throughout this project. In his definition of culture, Hall stresses how shared practices produce shared meanings within a group, in turn defining that group's identity.[117] Aside from these shared "cultural codes," the boundaries between such groups are nebulous, especially in the age of globalization where people, and by extension their practices and meanings, travel widely and frequently. In contrast, Benedict Anderson defines nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[118] They may be imagined, but their distinctions are more strictly enforced than those between cultures. The addition of the prefix "trans-" indicates movement across and between cultures and nations. As detailed above, I use transculturation as an alternative framework to discuss the interactions between groups, to describe how artifacts, ideas, and practices travel,

---

[112] Koichi Iwabuchi, Stephen Muecke, and Mandy Thomas, "Introduction: Siting Asian Cultural Flows," *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic*, eds. Koichi Iwabuchi, Stephen Muecke, and Mandy Thomas (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 2.
[113] R.A. Rogers: 477.
[114] Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 14, 148.
[115] Pratt, 6.
[116] Kim Soyoung, "Genre as Contact Zone: Hong Kong Action and Korean *Hwalkuk*," *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, eds. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 101; Caldwell, *Production*, 108.
[117] Stuart Hall, "Introduction," *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE, 1997). 2-3.
[118] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

mix, and are adapted into something new. For this project, transnationalism refers to something else. As various scholars have addressed, films, filmmakers, and capital cross national borders, resulting in a transnational as opposed to a national cinema.[119] The same dynamics appear in animation, with influences and productions crossing borders. The animation industries of South Korea, Japan, and China are all informed by outside forces, as discussed by Joon-Yang Kim, Tze-Yue G. Hu, and Daisy Yan Du, respectively.[120] In addition to international co-productions, this global industry engages in outsourcing. For example, South Korean, Indian, and Filipino animation studios operate largely as secondary sites of production for the United States, Japan, and other nations.[121] Therefore, I use transnationalism to describe the flow of personnel and the collaboration of studios across national borders. Both types of entities are bound by the legal and financial systems of their respective nations to a greater extent than artifacts, ideas, or practices. Of course, the interaction between individuals and institutions across nations can also result in the mixing of artifacts, ideas, and practices across cultures. Transnational and transcultural often go hand-in-hand, although they remain distinct enough to warrant using two terms.

Balancing Conflicting Tendencies: Mimesis/Fantasy and Mimesis/Abstraction

In their adaptation of cultural referents, the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* both imitated and broke away from reality via fantasy and abstraction. A nebulous term, fantasy has been described as a genre, a mode, and an impulse within literary studies.[122] W.R. Irwin defines fantasy as the impossible being rendered realistically, as realist conventions normalize the changes from reality for the benefit of reader immersion.[123] According to Rosemary Jackson, like a camera lens distorts the real world, so too does

---

[119] Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 63-74; Charles R. Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Ciecko, 6.
[120] Joon-Yang Kim, "Critique of the New Historical Landscape of South Korean Animation," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1.1 (2006): 61-81; Hu; Daisy Yan Du. *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s-1970s* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2019).
[121] Hu, 137-63; Hyejin Yoon, "Globalization of the Animation Industry: Multi-Scalar Linkages of Six Animation Production Centers," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 23.5 (2017): 634-51; Joonkoo Lee, "Three Worlds of Global Value Chains: Multiple Governance and Upgrading Paths in the Korean Animation Industry," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 25.6 (2019): 684-700; Feichin Ted Tschang and Andrea Goldstein, "The Outsourcing of 'Creative' Work and the Limits of Capability: The Case of the Philippines' Animation Industry," *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* 57.1 (2010): 132-43.
[122] W.R. Irwin, *Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981); Hume.
[123] Irwin, 9, 189.

fantasy filter reality through "paraxial areas."[124] Kathryn Hume sees all literature as comprised of the dual impulses of mimesis and fantasy, of the desire to imitate reality and the desire to alter it.[125] Across all three scholars, fantasy and reality as not incompatible opposites but are instead bound together. Their observations extend to other mediums.

Film scholars traditionally see film and fantasy as intrinsically linked. George Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin, and Kenneth Von Gunden highlight the presence of fantastical elements since the beginnings of cinema, with Von Gunden linking fantasy with film's ability to "trick the eye".[126] Defining fantasy within this context can be difficult, as discussed by Alec Worley, Katherine A. Fowkes, and James Walter.[127] How do you define fantasy in a way that is neither too broad as to include all of fiction film nor too narrow as to exclude key examples? Fowkes draws a distinction between ruptures from reality in fantasy and exaggerations of reality in other kinds of fiction film.[128] Regardless, there continues to be a relationship between the two; fantasy film remains a version of reality. These authors recognize cinema as containing a mixture of realistic and fantastical elements. Slusser and Rabkin conceptualize film as both naturally mimetic and paradoxically presenting other worlds.[129] Like Irwin, Worley sees realistic conventions as ways to "convince their audiences of the objective reality of the fantasies they depict."[130] He writes: "If a heroic fantasy operates by the same cartoon physics that dictate the fairy tale... the exploits of the hero would become meaningless."[131] Live-action filmmaking, with its visual tricks and mimetic nature, is especially adept at balancing the two. Animation, on the other hand, capable of cleanly breaking from reality via abstraction and "cartoon physics," favors fantasy over mimesis, operating as an extreme version of the sort of cinematic trickery of which Von Gunden wrote. This potential exists even in the most mundane of animated narratives. Recalling the earlier

---

[124] Jackson, 8, 19-20, 42-43.
[125] Hume, 20.
[126] George Slusser and Eric S. Rapkins, "Introduction: Shadows of the Magic Lamp," *Shadows of the Magic Lamp: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film*, eds. George Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), vii; Kenneth von Gunden, *Flights of Fancy: The Great Fantasy Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2001), vii.
[127] Alec Worley, *Empires of Imagination: A Critical Survey of Fanasy Cinema from Georges Méliès to* The Lord of the Rings (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2005); Katherine A. Fowkes, *The Fantasy Film* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); James Walter, *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2011).
[128] Fowkes, 5.
[129] Slusser and Rabkin, vii.
[130] Worley, 14.
[131] Ibid., 14.

definitions of animation, even their movement is wholly illusory. Hence, Susan J. Napier finds that the "fantasyscapes" of animation offer greater freedom for viewers.[132] Fantasy and animation are – in the words of Holliday and Alexander Sergeant – "reciprocal" and "entwined."[133] Because of this nature, an animated text must work harder to follow the grounding impulse toward mimesis.

Hume's conceptualization of the dual impulses of mimesis and fantasy mirrors Furniss' continuum between mimesis and abstraction, both tracing the combined imitating and breaking from reality.[134] All film and television have some relation to reality – or at least with an agreed upon perception of reality – no matter how fantastical or abstract. For André Bazin, photography allowed for the objective reproduction of the profilmic, with film representing "objectivity in time."[135] While such ontology or indexicality of the photographic image does not apply to animation, the medium still exists in relation to some real-world referent. Furthermore, just as iconicity affects constructions of the bodyscape, so too does it impact the world-building of shows like *Avatar* and *Korra*. Borrowing the term from Umberto Eco, Wells' uses "hyper-realism" in order to discuss how classic Disney features echo the realism of live-action films.[136] The concept describes a drive within some schools of animation toward verisimilitude of the real world and of how a camera records it. In keeping with Irwin and Worley, such conventions ground or normalize the fantastical and abstracted elements of this franchise. In both the construction of animated bodyscapes and in world-building, these factors of authenticity, hyper-realism, internal consistency, and streamlining reoccur throughout the various production processes.

Summary: A Triangulation of Theories and Defining the Animated Bodyscape

Across the preceding sections, I have attempted to triangulate theories related to the construction of race, the animated body, and the voice in order to inform this project's understanding of how and by what means race is constructed and ascribed to an animated bodyscape. Race is a social construct based on the assumption that there is a

---

[132] Napier, 294.
[133] Christopher Holliday and Alexander Sergeant, "Introduction: Approaching Fantasy/Animation," *Fantasy/Animation: Connections Between Media, Mediums and Genres*, eds. Christopher Holliday and Alexander Sergeant (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2, 6.
[134] Furniss, 5.
[135] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13.4 (1960): 8.
[136] Wells, *Understanding*, 25-26.

link between internal character and external markers – namely, the body. Through artistic re-presentations, dominant groups control definitions of racial categories as well as which stimuli prompt ascription of their labels. Animation offers the greatest amount of artistic control over these bodyscapes, largely free from the potential for indexical serendipity present in photographic recording. Nevertheless, the resulting images exist within larger societal contexts that the artist can only mediate. Because the animated bodyscape is iconic and plasmatic, the complex of signs that form its identity become complicated, with components being projected, being amplified, or otherwise shifting.

Because animation is largely an audiovisual medium, this all also occurs for the aural elements, in particular for the voice. Like the animated bodyscape, the cinematic voice is highly constructed. Even when originally produced by a physiological body, it undergoes various technological processes that result in a cyborg voice. It is then sutured to an image, with the audience assumed to accept that the sound projected from a loudspeaker actually emanates from the figure on screen. This process is exaggerated in animation, where the audience is willing to disavow that the figure on screen is incapable of producing sound. Despite suturing this gap between the voice and the animated figure, questions of the hierarchy between the two remain. Scholarship on celebrities suggests that vocal performances – despite technological mediation – are still capable of conveying and transferring a part of the identity of its original source. Whether that part of their identity can be racial is debatable. The voice in and of itself is not indicative of race but instead of other and often overlapping identities. Instead, I have focused on the history of vocal re-presentations of out-groups, on how mimicry and imitation of accents can take primacy over visual cues in defining the Other. All these factors contribute to the development of the animated bodyscape.

The upcoming chapters analyze how race has been constructed and ascribed to these complexes of signs known as the animated bodyscape, considering how visual, aural, and narrative components intersect within those complexes of signs. The bodyscape is defined in part by its relationship to reality, and that connection has been mediated by artists at every level of production through the impulses toward fantasy and abstraction. By extension, world-building also impacts the construction and ascription of identities. With consideration for these factors, this project determines how and by what means race is constructed and ascribed in animation.

Chapter One – Building the World of *Avatar* and *Korra*: The Negotiation of Mimesis, Fantasy, and Abstraction

In 2009, an anonymous source leaked an excerpt from the *Avatar* series bible to Racebending.livejournal.com (Appendix 1.01). A highlighted section reads: "This is an ancient, fantastical Asian environment, primarily Chinese." While the document's validity is questionable, its contents are consistent with surrounding production narratives. From the inception of this franchise, the creators and crew sought to emulate an Asian identity in their world-building through the appropriation and adaptation of real-world cultural referents. These dual tendencies impacted the development of cultural signifiers of Asian-ness, identities then projected onto the animated bodyscapes of the characters.

This process conjures the specter of cultural appropriation, as outsiders selected and transformed aspects of an insider culture. Returning to the taxonomies outlined in the literature review, the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* engage in what James O. Young calls style or motif appropriation, where elements of one culture appear in the artwork of another.[1] Therefore, these shows are primarily the products of transculturation, as defined by Richard A. Rogers, due to the flow of artifacts, ideas, and practices across borders.[2] There remains a risk of cultural exploitation as well as of racist appropriation since fantastical adaptations involve de-contextualizing cultural signifiers.[3] However, their origins are not whitewashed – a concern for Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer – as production narratives consistently foreground the historical and cultural background of their referents as evidence of authenticity.[4]

Authenticity – fidelity between the real-world referent and the fantastical cultural signifier – has often been cited as a major goal within this franchise. As stated in the literature review, this term has problematic ramifications, carrying with it the risk of fetishization and misrepresentation.[5] Through style and motif appropriation, these production processes reduce Asian identity to a series of signifiers that continue to carry meaning outside of their original contexts. This franchise mitigates that harm by constructing a series of distinct fictional cultures as opposed to a singular Asian

[1] J.O. Young, 5.
[2] R.A. Rogers: 477.
[3] R.A. Rogers: 477; Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 310-14.
[4] Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 310-12.
[5] Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 314; Fisher: 50.

monoculture. The world of *Avatar* and *Korra* is comprised of the Water Tribe, Earth Kingdom, Fire Nation, and Air Nomads, along with variations and subsets of those groups. None are positioned as direct stand-ins for a specific real-world Asian culture; each features elements appropriated from multiple sources. The fantastical and animated qualities of the franchise further foreground the constructed-ness of this world. Simultaneously, the mimesis offered by the supposed authenticity grounds the franchise's impulses toward fantasy and abstraction, recalling how W.R. Irwin and Alec Worley position fantasy as reliant on realist conventions.[6] This fantasy world was built to be both tethered to and distanced from the real one.

In addition to authenticity, the processes of building the world of *Avatar* and *Korra* involved numerous additional factors. As a part of the adaptation of real-world Asian referents into fantastical cultural signifiers of Asian-ness, the productions of these two shows sought to balance authenticity with internal consistency. Furthermore, they negotiated the desire for the grounding effects of realist conventions such as hyper-realism with the need to streamline designs for television animation. These factors – authenticity, internal consistency, hyper-realism, and streamlining – contribute to building the "ancient, fantastical Asian environment" of *Avatar* and *Korra*. The Asian-ness of those signifiers would be transferred to and projected onto the iconic animated bodyscapes of the characters. Therefore, even those who do not directly contribute to character design, animation, or performance impact the ascription of identity. This chapter determines how and by what means this phenomenon occurs by analyzing the production of backgrounds (BGs), props, and language.

Creating Backgrounds: Transforming Real-world Referents into the Fantastical

Maureen Furniss identifies two categories of animated images: characters and BGs.[7] The latter layer is commonly rendered first as black-and-white line drawings and later as relatively detailed paintings. Co-creator Bryan Konietzko oversaw this process as art director on both *Avatar* and *Korra*. In addition to being the literal context for the animated bodyscapes, the BG is the most stable visual element in an otherwise fluid world. This consistency across frames can help communicate an equally mutable identity to be projected onto the plasmatic animated bodyscapes.

[6] Irwin, 189; Worley, 14.
[7] Furniss, 66.

Appropriating Real-world Referents and the Quest for "Authenticity"

The first stage in the world-building of this franchise was the acquisition of real-world cultural referents in anticipation of their transformation into their fantastical counterparts. The creators and BG designers have spoken at length about finding inspiration in the real world. *Avatar* BG supervisor Elsa Garagarza has spoken about how the designs were primarily modeled off of Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Thai, and Indian referents. She mentioned non-Asian influences as well, notably Inuit aesthetics for Water Tribe architecture and Icelandic topography for Fire Nation landscapes.[8] In our interview, Garagarza repeated much of the same list as well as adding Mesopotamian and Vietnamese referents.[9] *Avatar* BG designer Tom Dankiewicz also described this step of the process: "I would get on [the] computer and look up images online from any and all Asian nations, not limited to just Chinese stuff. It could be from Bhutan or Tibet, as long as there was something to grab onto."[10] By naming these real-world cultures, Garagarza and Dankiewicz emphasized the connection and the fidelity between their BGs and the real world, marking their work as authentic. Furthermore, while there is a primary emphasis on Chinese culture, inspirations came from multiple sources. The *Avatar* world was neither the product of cultural essentialism nor did it seek to be a re-presentation of a specific real-world culture, even though the primary goal remained to construct and ascribe Asian-ness.

As Dankiewicz mentioned, the Internet was a major resource for visual referents. Research was also conducted using an in-house reference library. Only a few books from the apparently vast collection have been named. Konietzko has written and spoken about a behind-the-scenes book on *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* – presumably the one by Paul Apak Angilirq – and *Natural Architecture* by Alessandro Rocca.[11] He also mentioned being inspired by a book on Parisian catacombs for the tunnels in "Lake Laogai" (*Avatar* S2E17).[12] When interviewed, *Korra* BG designer Angela Sung mentioned using the reference library but did not recall specific titles.[13] Garagarza also recounted:

---

[8] Evan Miller, "The Gallery: Elsa Garagarza," *Anime News Network*, 31 Jan. 2009.
[9] Elsa Garagarza (7 Mar. 2018), email interview.
[10] Tom Dankiewicz (19 Feb. 2018), email interview.
[11] Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko, and Joaquim Dos Santos, *The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series – Book Two: Spirits* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2014), 62; "Commentary on Beginnings: Part 2" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).
[12] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 17: Lake Laogai" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2007).
[13] Angela Sung (17 Feb. 2018), Skype interview.

> We would gather as much photographic reference as possible to immerse ourselves truthfully in the environments we were creating. Every reference was presented to Bryan Konietzko... Every location was meticulously studied to create [an] authentic look and feel.[14]

In addition to highlighting Konietzko's supervisory role, Garagarza has positioned authenticity as something created and controlled by the BG designers as opposed to an innate quality. Her language also suggests that it is more an approximation, an "authentic look or feel" rather than exact fidelity to a real-world referent. The formulation recalls Young's definitions of style and motif appropriation, where only elements of the referent are reproduced, synecdochically serving as signifiers for the larger identities regardless of the accuracy of the final image. While this process will be more fully explored in subsequent subsections, Garagarza indicated that this consideration affected how BG designers approached their acquisition of referents.

In interviews, co-creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Konietzko usually highlight their international travels as ways to accumulate reference photography. They have most frequently spoken and written about how their trip to Beijing influenced the architecture of the Earth Kingdom city of Ba Sing Se, how Konietzko's journey to Iceland inspired the landscape of the Fire Nation, and how DiMartino's trek to Buddhist sites in Bhutan impacted the designs of the Air Nomad temples.[15] In our interview, Sung also stressed that travel was arguably the most important type of research for a BG designer. Being somewhere was always different from seeing photographs. For her, just the experience of hiking through California's national parks made her designs feel more like real places.[16] Even when not explicitly linked to an Asian culture, fidelity between BG designs and reality was emphasized. The architecture and landscapes remain grounded by realist conventions although they are fantastical and animated. Through these means, the BG designers acquired referents in their search for authenticity.

---

[14] Garagarza (7 Mar.).

[15] DiMartino and Konietzko, 86, 132; "Audio Commentary – Chapter 14: City of Walls and Secrets" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2007); "Audio Commentary – Chapter 4: Sokka's Master" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008); "Audio Commentary – Chapter 5: The Beach" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008); "Audio Commentary – Chapter 12: The Western Air Temple" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008); Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko and Joaquim Dos Santos, *The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series – Book Three: Change* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2015), 154.

[16] Sung.

Regardless of how they gathered their inspirations, the next stage in the BG process required translating those elements – those looks and feels – into something fantastical.

Adapting Real-world Referents into Fantastical Cultural Signifiers

Concerns of mimesis and fantasy persisted as referents were transformed into black-and-white drawings for Konietzko's approval. Sung recalled him wanting the BG designers to consider how the architecture would have been built in-universe as well as how a camera would have recorded it.[17] These directions recall Paul Wells' definition of hyper-realism as relayed in the literature review.[18] The balancing of mimesis and abstraction or of realist animation conventions and streamlining practices is a consistent theme. In interviews, other BG designers have elaborated on their relationship Konietzko. According to Garagarza:

> Normally Bryan Konietzko had a vision for each location. He would point us to what civilization he was visualizing for each location. We would research on it and present the rough concepts for his approval, or for more finessing. Sometimes, he would not have a set vision in mind for a specific village and he would be open for our input, whether it was my background (BG) design team or me, or the episode Directors.[19]

When asked about the same subject, Dankiewicz recounted:

> A script would come out, a list of BG Designs would be drawn up, and I would often discuss with [Konietzko] what he wanted to see. Often he himself would draw up a quick sketch ("something like this") and I could pursue that line of visualization and he'd leave the sweetening and detail to me. Other times it was left to me to come up with a design from scratch.[20]

Finally, for *Korra,* Sung recalled that Konietzko would provide feedback or draw-overs when a design was not working. Otherwise, she described him as trusting his BG designers' instincts.[21] Across all three testimonies, there is a shared acknowledgment not only of a singular vision or authority but also of the creative freedom of individuals to refine the designs. This range of personnel collectively crafted the cultural identities of

---

[17] Ibid.
[18] Wells, *Understanding*, 25-26.
[19] Garagarza (7 Mar.).
[20] Dankiewicz.
[21] Sung.

this fantasy world, the context that would help define animated bodyscapes. Even when containing signifiers of Asian-ness, those new identities were hybridized.

In some cases, the translation from reality to fantasy was relatively direct. Beijing became Ba Sing Se in "City of Walls and Secrets" (*Avatar* S2E14) or Gullfoss in Iceland became the Shu Jing waterfall in "Sokka's Master" (*Avatar* S3E04). However, the transformation was not always so straightforward. Consider Garagarza's account of the creation of the Sun Warrior ruins for "The Firebending Masters" (*Avatar* S3E13) and how many people and influences can be involved in the creation of a single image (Appendix 1.02). She recalled:

> In the original start up meeting, Bryan [Konietzko] expressed his vision of a civilization with visual influences of ancient Mesopotamia, particularly the tiered pyramids (called Ziggurats). The city was to have a ziggurat in the vary [sic] center and then continue to tier down outwards. In that meeting, Seung-Hyun Oh, the supervising director sketched a possible shot down looking the valley where this city would be. I took the direction and the shot and made a rough city design (this shot basically) with its tiers and avenues and clusters of temples engulfed in foliage, which subsequently Bryan approved to hand to Giancarlo Volpe, the director of the episode, for boarding. Normally because of scheduling, each designer is in charge of his or her own section. But here I took the opportunity to give the same location to my team of designers, Jevon Bue and Enzo Baldi, so that they could separately add their ideas. After a week, I took these drawings to my weekly design meeting and all visions were incorporated into the city. For example, Jevon added interesting motifs like the inverted cones on some rooftops, and some building placement around the ziggurat is Enzo's. Then I could finish the master shot that you see here.[22]

For this and other BGs, a range of inspirations and referents flowed across borders via the Internet, reference books, and vacation photos into the contact zone of Nickelodeon Animation Studios, where they melded and formed something both new and hybrid in nature. Even though he we was the art director, Konietzko's original ideas changed as they came into contact with those of BG designers, episode directors, and others,

[22] E. Miller.

transforming his originally Mesopotamian vision into something more Mesoamerican. The process was highly collaborative, and the television production model necessitates delegation.

However, collaborative does not mean communal. Konietzko still needed to sign off on these designs, and his many responsibilities made scheduling meetings difficult. During our interview, Dankiewicz wrote about his frustrations at trying to acquire feedback or approval for his designs. An attempt to alleviate this workload by hiring an intermediary apparently backfired and worsened the situation so much that Dankiewicz left before the end of season one.[23] Garagarza took a supervisory position for the second and third season with seemingly greater success. This situation demonstrates the risks of bottlenecking and the necessity of delegation. These designs cannot be solely or primarily the results of the art director's vision; they must incorporate input from others, which results in the levels of hybridization seen in the Sun Warrior ruins.

With *Korra*, computers became a more central tool for BG design, allowing for a greater incorporation of details in the service of hyper-realism. Garagarza recalled that this shift from pencil-and-paper to digital was the biggest difference between the two series. She wrote: "Now that *Korra* was all digital, the BGs had shading layers, and the style was a bit more textured."[24] Sung recalled creating 3D models using SketchUp, and Konietzko has credited the program for the level of detail in certain BGs.[25] For example, the interior of the Pro-bending arena, first seen in "A Leaf in the Wind" (*Korra* S1E02), was designed with SketchUp, allowing for the inclusion of intricate patterns.[26] The details and dimensionality afforded by computers in the BG design process again relate to the pursuit of fidelity to the real world. Even if not explicitly appropriating cultural markers, these tendencies in the production process ground the visuals in service of building a more believable world.

Rendering the Final Image and Balancing All of the Factors

In the end, these black-and-white line drawings were rendered as color paintings. Rather than envision this step as the realization of the designer's work, it should be understood and approached as its own separate process. They continued using referents.

---

[23] Dankiewicz.
[24] Elsa Garagarza (6 Apr. 2018), email interview.
[25] Sung; "Commentary on Long Live the Queen" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).
[26] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 5: The Spirit of Competition" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*), Viacom International Inc. (2012).

In our interview, Garagarza recalled composing "a small booklet of references" for *Avatar* BG painters.[27] *Korra* BG painter Emily Tetri reiterated the importance of research. She told me, "we built large libraries of reference material from real world places, from pictures online, in books, and from our own travels."[28] The list matches the one for the BG designers. In an episode of the *Imaginary Worlds* podcast, she repeated the sentiment of how "it's really important to have been in a place."[29] She expanded: "The importance of being in a place was the actual feel and sense of the real materials that things are made of, the texture, the colors that your eyes see rather than what a camera capture."[30] Tetri was clear that such references were for lighting and atmosphere conditions rather than for specific spaces. They were not meant to explicitly signify Asian-ness but instead to convey a real-world specificity in the service of hyper-realism. In another example, Konietzko recounted instructing the BG painters to reference photos from their sound designer's trip to Antarctica. He said: "You do get a lot of these beautiful warm tones because the sun is often very low."[31] The direction broke the monotony of cool, blue tones that dominated polar locations in *Avatar* and the first season of *Korra*. Through the mimicry of real-world lighting, the BG painters both conveyed characteristics of those locations as well as normalized fantastical elements with realist conventions. Across these accounts, concerns over fidelity to the real world, of mimesis both in terms of authenticity and of hyper-realism, were factors.

In addition to these previous considerations, new external factors were introduced. As a BG painter on *Korra*, Frederic William Stewart emphasized the need to "streamline things in a way that is repeatable and consistent."[32] When creating the keys for each new location, he was conscious of how his overseas counterparts would interpret his work from different angles and distances. Too much atmospheric fog in an establishing shot would translate into washed-out color in close-ups.[33] He adjusted accordingly so that his BG paintings were neither overly detailed nor overly stylized. Realist conventions needed to be balanced with abstraction. Even without the impulse toward fantasy, these paintings could not be accurate re-presentations of real-world

---

[27] Garagarza (6 Apr.).
[28] Emily Tetri (27 Mar. 2018), email interview.
[29] Sam Kaden Lai, "Episode 59: Growing Up Avatar-American," *Imaginary Worlds*, 8 Feb. 2017.
[30] Emily Tetri (10 Mar. 2019), email interview.
[31] "Commentary on Civil Wars: Part 2" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).
[32] Chris Oatley, "Interview with 'Korra' and 'Dreamworks' Artist, Frederic William Stewart :: Artcast #95," *The Oatley Academy ArtCast*, 2 Jun. 2017.
[33] Ibid.

referents. In addition to concerns of streamlining, the colors of the original were sometimes altered to avoid clashing with established fantasy aesthetics, as seen when BG painter Lauren Zurcher transformed Buddhist temples into an Air Nomad temple in "Venom of the Red Lotus" (*Korra* S313, Appendix 1.03). On the painting, Konietzko wrote:

> Nearly every one of our reference photos of Buddhist temple interiors were predominantly red. So Lauren [Zurcher] had the challenge of converting the color scheme to one that would fit the Air Nomad aesthetic while still conveying the same feeling as those real-life temples.[34]

Even when fidelity gives way to fantasy and internal consistency, there remains a continued emphasis on conveying the "feeling" of a place, that its spirit is the source of the purported authenticity. Stylistic elements and motifs remain representative of their original cultures, communicating their spirit even when hybridized. In the production of these BG paintings, the external factors of authenticity, streamlining, hyper-realism, and internal consistency all affect how real-world referents are transformed into and rendered as their fantastical counterparts. The following examples exhibit this mixing and altering of cultural referents.

The Fire Nation in Avatar*: Hybridization and Multifaceted Fantasy Cultures*

Although they serve as the primary antagonists in the first series, the Fire Nation – meaning the geographic place, not the people – is rarely featured in seasons one and two of *Avatar*. Its few appearances are usually restricted to flashbacks. The first episode set largely on Fire Nation land is "The Winter Solstice, Part 2: Avatar Roku" (*Avatar* S1E08), when the main characters visit the Fire Sage's temple. In the preceding episode, Aang sees the location while on a spiritual journey (Appendix 1.04). The frame pans down along a hexagonal gray pagoda jutting out of the volcanic topography. Each of its five levels is segmented by a black overhang with red trim and a golden underside. On alternating sides, the overhands extent into three points, the ornamental tip of each curls up in the likeness of a red flame.

Tasked with designing the exterior of this building, Dankiewicz found inspiration in the Yellow Crane Tower located in Wuhan, China. The BG designer described this discovery as his "great triumph" and recalled Konietzko's enthusiasm upon first seeing

[34] DiMartino, Konietzko and Dos Santos, *Change*, 169.

it.[35] On this location, DiMartino and Konietzko wrote, "we thought that the curling, flame-like rooftop corners were a perfect motif for Fire Nation architecture."[36] The aesthetic was both appropriately fiery and appropriately traditionally Chinese, extending those qualities to the fantasy culture with which the design would be associated. Nevertheless, the Fire Nation does not function as a direct stand-in for China, as Chinese referents were dominant in the construction of the other nations. Furthermore, as Dankiewicz pointed out in our interview, the "flames" that the co-creators had described as so perfect for the Fire Nation were actually fish.[37] The Yellow Crane Tower – or, at least, the current iteration of it – sits along the Yangtze River, hence the aquatic motif. Granted, the fish with their upturned tails do resemble tongues of flame. A streamlined recreation might not capture the distinction from a distance. Nevertheless, stylistic elements of a real-world referent were intentionally altered to suit the needs of the show. Similarly, when Will Weston painted the final BG, he used the Fire Nation's established color scheme of red, gold, and gray instead of the orange, yellow, and white of the Yellow Crane Tower. Like the air temple from *Korra*, accuracy was obscured in favor of fantasy and internal consistency. Without these original particulars, the preserved "feeling" was its being traditionally Chinese. For the remainder of the first season of *Avatar*, Dankiewicz's design and Weston's rendering of the Fire Sage's temple served as the predominant model for the Fire Nation aesthetic. The fantasy world-building privileged consistency over mimesis.

As the series progressed, the architecture of this fantasy culture evolved, with Garagarza overseeing an expansion in its pool of referents. Her first assignment as BG designer was the Fire Lord's throne room in "The Storm" (*Avatar* S1E12, Appendix 1.05). DiMartino and Konietzko wrote about giving Garagarza three instructions: "Egyptian, Chinese, scary".[38] When asked, she cited the Great Hypostyle Hall in Karnak, Egypt and its long rows of large and ornate columns as inspiration.[39] The Yellow Crane Tower and the Great Hypostyle Hall were melded together in order to construct and convey Chinese-ness, Egyptian-ness, and scariness, qualities then ascribed to the unseen Fire Lord Ozai. The resulting fantastical image was the product of transculturation, complicating the BG's status is a signifier of Asian-ness.

---

[35] Dankiewicz.
[36] DiMartino and Konietzko, 52.
[37] Dankiewicz.
[38] DiMartino and Konietzko, 61.
[39] Garagarza (7 Mar.).

Ahead of the second season, Garagarza was promoted to BG supervisor, a position she held for the remainder of *Avatar*. Henceforth, she started receiving primary credit from the co-creators for the BG designs. The third and final season, set almost entirely in the Fire Nation, gave Garagarza and her team an opportunity to further expand that culture's aesthetic. For the struggling town in "The Painted Lady" (*Avatar* S3E03), Garagarza cited the floating fishing villages in Halong Bay, Vietnam as influences.[40] For the affluent resorts on Ember Island in "The Beach" (*Avatar* S3E05), Konietzko credited the BG supervisor for incorporating various Thai elements.[41] Finally, her team's designs for the aforementioned Sun Warrior ruins envisioned the precursors of the Fire Nation as more reminiscent of the Mayans than of the Chinese.[42] Across these examples, BG designers under Garagarza combined referents from a range of nonwestern sources in the creation of a multifaceted fantasy culture. In doing so, those real-world cultures were reduced to signifiers of region, class, and time as opposed to of their own specific and nuanced cultural identities. Vietnam is flattened in order to be associated with poverty. Thailand becomes a signifier for wealth and tropical vacations. The Mayans convey a lost civilization. Overlaying these signifiers, Chinese cultural markers are used as synecdoches for Asian-ness. At no point does the show directly re-present these cultures; they were always hybridized, de-contextualized, and fantasicized. While internal consistency is preserved – the aforementioned locations are unquestionably Fire Nation – the use of different sources allowed the BG designers to depict aesthetic variations based on diegetic factors.

In the later seasons of *Avatar*, the aesthetics for the different fictional cultures grew more complex as the art department combined elements from additional sources in order to depict variations and subsets within those nations. Transculturation also exists diegetically in the fantasy world, as the four distinct nations come into contact with one another. The first season features numerous Fire Nation colonies, depicted in BG paintings as a mixture of Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom architecture. In *Korra*, these colonies become the United Republic of Nations, a cosmopolitan melting pot. Transculturation continues to be a central theme in the sequel series, where these fantasy cultures evolve and develop new variations, as seen in the second example.

---

[40] Ibid.
[41] "Commentary – Beach."
[42] DiMartino and Konietzko, 156.

The Metal Clan in Korra*: Western Referents and Asian Signifiers*

An independent part of the Earth Kingdom, the Metal Clan was introduced and prominently featured in the third and fourth seasons of *Korra*. The setting made its first appearance in "The Metal Clan" (*Korra* S3E05), when the heroes visit the city of Zaofu. The episode boasts many emblematic examples of the subculture's architecture, including the Beifong Estate – designed by Sung and painted by Tetri – the home of the city's founder and matriarch, Suyin Beifong (Appendix 1.06).[43] Against an imposing mountain range, a large metal building stretches out in elegant geometric patterns. Before it lies a vast green courtyard. In the foreground, rows of moss-covered columns line a stream that flows into a waterfall, flanked by ornate metal tiers. The establishing shot for this location frames the space differently than the painting featured in the art book, suggesting that this particular image is one of the variations produced by Sung and Tetri's overseas counterparts.

When discussing this and other examples of Metal Clan architecture, Konietzko has repeatedly referenced the Art Deco movement as opposed to the Asian and nonwestern influences he would usually cite.[44] In the art book, he wrote:

> Zaofu was an inspiring location for me to art direct. I gathered Art Deco photo reference of architecture, interior design, furniture, sculpture, lighting fixtures, clothing, jewelry, etc. When it came time for the designers to start generating concepts for this episode, I went through the reference folder with each of them, pointing out the design elements I liked best, and how I wanted them to think about streamlining the complex aesthetics down to its essentials so it could be reproduced repeatedly for animation.[45]

With a streamlined version of Art Deco as a key part of his personal vision, Konietzko wanted to convey certain characteristics of the fantasy subculture. Therefore, this choice of referent warrants further consideration. Art Deco is an art style or movement developed and popularized in western Europe and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s.[46] It was defined initially by geometric patterns and zigzags and then later by

---

[43] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Change*, 74.
[44] "Commentary on The Metal Clan" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).
[45] DiMartino, Konietzko and Dos Santos, *Change*, 71.
[46] Bevis Hillier, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s* (London: Studio Vista, 1968), 13; The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, "Art Deco," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 25 Oct. 2018).

streamlined curves.[47] A modern style, Art Deco looked toward the future through an optimistic or utopian lens.[48] In the words of Michael Windover, it was what modernity "should look like" even when at odds with the economic reality of the time.[49] In application, Art Deco came to represent the ideals of social mobility and individual pleasure, becoming associated with places of middle-class luxury and leisure.[50] The elegant and streamlined aesthetics signified wealth and sophistication in the machine age.[51] Therefore, this art style situates this fantasy within an age of mechanization and modernity. It conveys that Zaofu is the "city of the future" – to quote Konietzko – where its citizens lead fulfilling and easygoing lives.[52] Even reformed criminals can leave their past behind and become the best versions of themselves. Before she is introduced, these qualities are ascribed to Suyin, the leader of the Metal Clan.

Given how North American architecture – especially New York skyscrapers – has become such a dominant representative, it is tempting to read Art Deco exclusively as a cultural signifier for American-ness or more broadly for pan-European-ness. However, that would be a limiting conceptualization. Not only is Art Deco a production of transculturation, drawing on a range of inspirations, it was also adopted and adapted for numerous local contexts.[53] In addition to specific European art movements, scholars have identified the appropriation of stylistic elements and motifs from nonwestern and Indigenous cultures. The most commonly cited ones are Ancient Egypt; Native Americans, from both North and South America; and African tribes, typically listed without greater specification.[54] Bevis Hillier and Bridget Elliot even position the development and popularization of Art Deco in the context of "Egyptomania" following the unearthing of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922.[55] How Art Deco manifests as a signifier of modernization and urbanization varies across nations.[56] Even within the United States,

---

[47] Alastair Duncan, *Art Deco* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 8; Michael Windover, *Art Deco: A Mode of Mobility* (Quebec City: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2012), 2; Anthony Robins, *New York Art Deco: A Guide to Gotham's Jazz Age Architecture* (Albany, NY: Excelsior Editions, 2017), 5.
[48] Windover, 263-64; Robins, 2.
[49] Windover, 7, 30.
[50] Duncan, 180; John Alff, "Art Deco: Gateway to Indian Modernism," *Architecture + Design* 8.6 (1991): 60-61; Windover 11, 20.
[51] Duncan, 8.
[52] "Commentary – Metal."
[53] Bevis Hillier and Stephen Escritt, *Art Deco Style* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1997), 188; Windover, 160.
[54] Hillier 40, 52; Duncan, 6, 8; Alff, 58; Carla Breeze, *American Art Deco: Architecture and Regionalism* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 13-14; Bridget Elliott, "Art Deco in a Tomb: Reanimating Egypt in Modern(ist) Visual Culture," *South Central Review* 25.1 (2008): 114-35; Windover, 5; Robins, 4.
[55] Hillier, 52; Elliott, 115.
[56] Windover, 36.

scholars note changes between regions.[57] Accounts on the history and meaning of the art style in Bombay, Mexico City, and Shanghai further illustrate its mutability.[58] In choosing to emulate Art Deco, Konietzko may have had certain stated intentions in mind. However, that does not mean that the resulting images do not carry additional meanings beyond his control. The aesthetics of the Metal Clan recall not only the modernism of New York but also that of Bombay, Mexico City, and Shanghai. Art Deco is not only a signifier of American-ness or pan-European-ness but also of Indian-ness, Mexican-ness, and Shanghai-ness.

In my interview with her, Sung further complicated this reading. While she did confirm Art Deco as an inspiration after being prompted, she primarily recalled being instructed to utilize Asian referents for Zaofu and for the Beifong Estate in particular. She specifically recounted Konietzko directing her to emulate "Chinese terraces" for this BG as well as to think through how the Metal Clan would have built them.[59] This testimony demonstrates the importance of looking deeper than the official production narratives, revealing a continued line of Asian referents that was not being publicized. If so, then why focus on Art Deco and not other referents? As previously discussed, Art Deco carries with it certain connotations that help differentiate this fantasy subculture. Zaofu is a modern utopia where the heroes can feel safe. Communicating that message was more important than highlighting the persistent use of Chinese referents. While tempting to recall Jean Fisher's criticism of Native American art exhibitions and to claim that the producers of *Korra* felt that authentic Asian referents and modern sensibilities were incompatible, doing so ignores the spotlighting of nonwestern inspirations elsewhere in the series.[60] The co-creators have described Republic City as a combination of 1900s Hong Kong, Shanghai, New York, and Chicago.[61] Konietzko has specifically named Kowloon, an area of Hong Kong, as an inspiration for the updated Ba Sing Se.[62]

---

[57] Duncan, 184; Breeze, 13.
[58] Alff; Hillier and Escritt, 205-06; Windover 159-201; Ageeth Sluis, *Deco Body, Deco City: Female Spectacle and Modernity in Mexico City, 1900-1939* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); Xu Lingna and Dai Zeyu, "Regaining the Sense of Being a Shanghainese: A Study of the Revival of Art Deco as an Apparatus of Cultural Memory from an Intercultural Perspective," *Intercultural Communication Studies* XX.1 (2011): 234-48.
[59] Sung.
[60] Fisher, 44-45.
[61] Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko and Joaquim Dos Santos, *The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series – Book One: Air* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2013), 38, 80; Tasha Robinson, "*Legend of Korra*'s Michael Dante DiMartino and Joaquim Dos Santos," *The AV Club*, 13 Apr. 2012.
[62] DiMartino, Konietzko and Dos Santos, *Change*, 48; "Commentary on The Ultimatum" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).

Even with the Metal Clan, he has noted Art Deco's transcultural background, commenting on the roundabout way that Egyptian stylistic elements had influenced their designs.[63] While Asian-ness remains core to the identity of the fantasy cultures of *Avatar* and *Korra*, a range of referents from a broad spectrum of sources differentiates them and ascribes specific attributes. This process includes the use of western art styles as signifiers of additional qualities.

To build this fantasy world, BG designers and painters blended various sources, creating distinct and multifaceted cultures and subcultures. Doing so flattened and de-contextualized real-world referents into signifiers not of their specific cultures but of attributes associated with that culture. For conveying identities beyond and in addition to Asian-ness, the BG designers and painters appropriated stylistic elements and motifs from a range of nations, cultures, and eras. This practice resulted in the reduction of real-world cultures into de-contextualized signifiers that only convey a part of their original referent's identity. Just as the art department on *Avatar* was able to explore different subsets of the Fire Nation by emulating stylistic elements of Egyptian, Vietnamese, Thai, and Mayan cultures, the crew of *Korra* built a utopian city by hybridizing Art Deco with Chinese architecture. However, much of this process remains framed as a quest for authenticity, that the world-building of *Avatar* and *Korra* captures the spirit of real-world referents. This constructed Asian-ness, along with the other qualities associated with a given location, are then projected onto iconic animated bodyscapes, extending those identities to the characters. Not only does an Air Nomad temple possess the spirit of a Buddhist temple, so too do its occupants. Not only is the Fire Lord's throne room foreboding, so too is Ozai. Not only does Zaofu express the ideals as Art Deco, so too does Suyin. A similar process occurs in other sections of the art department.

Creating Props: Different Methods for Amplifying Cultural Signifiers

Belonging to neither of Furniss' two categories for the animated image, props exist in a sort of liminal space. Like BGs, they serve as cultural signifiers. Thus, many of the same concerns and considerations apply, such as which components of a referent are considered signifiers of the desired identity and which ones can be altered. Unlike BGs, prop designs are more likely to be rendered through a variety of methods, including ones

[63] "Commentary on Enemy at the Gates" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*), Viacom International Inc. (2015); "Commentary on Battle Zaofu" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release for *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*), Viacom International Inc. (2015).

more indicative of character design. In addition to these qualities, prop design and prop designers are largely absent from production narratives for *Avatar* and *Korra*. Whereas the rest of the art department has been spotlighted in art books, invited onto commentary tracks, and interviewed by third-party publications, these personnel are often sidelined. Unless a prop is pivotal to the story, the work and the process behind it is rendered invisible.

Rendering Referents and Designs: Issues of Iconicity, Plasmaticity, and Identity

Like the rest of the art department, the prop designers acquired real-world referents and transformed them into fantastical cultural signifiers. Konietzko appropriated stylistic elements of Native American weapons in order to design ones for the Water Tribe.[64] Although arguably more an example of character than prop design, his drawings for the Blue Spirit mask for "The Blue Spirit" (*Avatar* S1E13) were based on that for Dragon King Nuo, a character from Chinese drama.[65] He and prop designer Aldina Dias also adapted Leonardo da Vinci's sketches into the Earth Kingdom tanks in the "The Day of Black Sun" duology (*Avatar* S3E10-11).[66] However, the production of props starts to deviate from that of BGs in how they were rendered as an animated image. Whereas BG designs were almost universally transformed into paintings, prop designs on *Avatar* and *Korra* were rendered in one of three ways – traditional inking and coloring, painting, and computer-animation – affecting how they operate as cultural signifiers.

Inking and coloring was the most common process for rendering character and prop designs; while the following descriptions are largely in reference to the former, they remain applicable for the latter. The prop exists first as a static image on a model sheet before being interpreted within storyboards. Similarly, the color of the design begins with a "local color" for the model sheet, with a range of alternative hues or "dials" being employed to emulate various lighting conditions. Both processes are overseen by the color stylist, working under the art director.[67] The resulting image – both on the model sheet and in the final episode – possesses similar qualities as the animated bodyscape. They are both iconic and plasmatic in nature. In order to be repeatable in television animation, these prop designs need to be streamlined, which in turn amplifies

[64] DiMartino and Konietzko, 19.
[65] Ibid., 62-63.
[66] Ibid., 152.
[67] Bryan Konietzko, "Korra Crew Profile: Sylvia Filcak-Blackwolf," *Tumblr*, 31 Jul. 2013.

the retained details. While this quality precludes the incorporation of elaborate textures, the color styling of this franchise still contributes to a hyper-realist aesthetic, with the vast number of "dials" imitating how these objects would look in various real-world and fantastical lighting conditions. *Korra* color stylist Sylvia Filcak-Blackwolf detailed the level of precision required for the show:

> TV is a super fast-paced schedule. You got to kick out like a show every two weeks. It doesn't matter if there's 200 characters... And you have to do all the tones and the highlights and all that stuff, and you got to get that approved first. And then, after that, you got to pop everything on the background and do it for every single piece of lighting. So, a lot of times, there would be 500 what we would call "dials." So, you would just have to crank it out fast.[68]

In addition to hyper-realism, this array of dials for a single object contributes to its plasmaticity. They possess the ability to literally change their color in addition to their form between frames. They simultaneously indulge in abstraction while grounding themselves in mimesis. As signifiers of identity, such props are unspecific and fluid. Therefore, those possessing narrative significance and details are amplified as cultural markers.

The designs for larger props – such as the pirate ship from "The Waterbending Scroll" (*Avatar* S1E09) and Azula's vessel in "The Avatar State" (*Avatar* S2E01) – were rendered as paintings, functioning as and created by the same personnel as the BGs.[69] Unlike the previous method, these paintings are highly detailed and textured. Furthermore, these props themselves are static, unchanging frame-to-frame. As signifiers of identity, they are both less iconic and less plasmatic, able to possess a greater specificity and greater consistency. This practice was largely phased out for the sequel series in favor of a third method. Computer-animated props are rare in *Avatar*, with Steve Ziolkowski modeling and rigging mechanized vehicles on only a few episodes. It became more commonplace on *Korra*, as already seen with the incorporation of SketchUp for BG design. When interviewed, Ziolkowski described this process as a sort of "puzzle-solving" where he had to interpret 2D designs as 3D models.[70] This need was mitigated in the sequel series, with the art department using "orthographic projections"

[68] Kris Wimberly, "TAN – Ep43: Color Compositing Supervisor, Sylvia Filcak-Blackwolf," *The Animation Network Podcast*, 7 Mar. 2016.
[69] DiMartino and Konietzko, 54, 87.
[70] Steve Ziolkowski (31 May 2018), phone interview.

when designing for a 3D model.[71] As a result, computer-animated props possess a dimensionality and mobility not achievable through other methods, further tethering fantasy to reality. Ziolkowski also discussed the importance of choosing which type of texture to apply to a 3D model in order to incorporate it into the established diegesis. For the smaller ones, he used "toon shading" to match the traditionally rendered characters and props but without their plasmaticity. When a Fire Nation tank rolls across the mountain in "The Northern Air Temple" (*Avatar* S1E17), a single model was rigged for that movement. It was not a series of still images that created the illusion of a single moving prop. For the larger models, Ziolkowski used texture mapping so that they would resemble BG paintings even if they possessed greater mobility.[72] By imitating 2D processes with 3D computer-animation, modelers and riggers maintained internal consistency. As signifiers of identity, props rendered through this method contain a specificity and immutability akin to those rendered through painting.

While the typical animated prop in *Avatar* and *Korra* does not draw attention to itself, they each possess the ability to act as signifiers of Asian-ness, which would in turn be projected onto animated bodyscapes. How they are rendered impacts this phenomenon. The balance of details and iconicity, of specificity and streamlining, results in the amplification of particular identities over others. The different methods also allow for the animated props to remain stylistically consistent with the other images. These creative decisions helped build a more coherent fantasy world. In order to illustrate how props function as cultural signifiers, this section explores two examples of props marked by their narrative significance, degree of detail, and fidelity to real-world referents.

Piandao's Swords from Avatar*: Amplification, Simplification, and Retention of Details*

The episode "Sokka's Master" introduces the character Piandao, a skilled swordsman and smith. His weapons receive special narrative attention, with a major character training under him as well as forging his own blade. The episode features three main swords – Piandao's, Sokka's, and the shopkeeper's – each of which is directly based on weapons from martial arts consultant Sifu Kisu's personal collection. That the character was directly modeled after him enhances that connection. Konietzko and Kisu have discussed this relationship, with the latter encouraging the association when posting

[71] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Change*, 108.
[72] Ziolkowski.

picture of his collection on social media.[73] Kisu has also emphasized the Chinese origins and authenticity of these weapons.[74] For him, they could operate as signifiers of Chinese-ness, a quality that Dias was tasked with transferring to her designs.

For this process of transforming Kisu's Chinese swords into ones for the *Avatar* world, Konietzko directed his team to preserve as much detail as possible, especially for the crossguards, pommels, and scabbards. He wrote: "They were ornate as far as TV animation props go, but I thought it was worth the extra effort to make these particular weapons look special."[75] Their functionality as cultural signifiers was tied to the retention of details. This need superseded the usual streamlining concerns. The first seen and most ornate of these blades was actually introduced as part of a BG painting for a few shots, including a long panning close-up along its length. The framing and detail convey the specificity and gravity of this weapon. As Scott McCloud would say, with this level of detail, the sword becomes "something with weight, texture and physical complexity."[76] Even when later drawn and colored by traditional methods, the decorative flourishes are retained, albeit simplified (Appendix 1.07-1.08).

An animated prop's ability to act as a cultural signifier relies heavily on its ability to retain certain details. In the case of Piandao's swords, the art department sought to re-present real-world weapons in a way that preserved their authenticity, their Chinese identity, and their association with Kisu. In order to achieve this goal, they designed the swords with more details than the majority of weapons in the series. When Piandao is first introduced via his handiwork, the episode renders one of his swords as a painting, ensuring the maximum possible amount of specificity and gravitas. The aforementioned qualities of the referents and their re-presentations are therefore extended to the master swordsman before his first on-screen appearance.

The Earth Empire's Cannon from Korra*: Specificity of Referent and Design*

The fourth season of *Korra* depicts the rise of the fascistic Earth Empire out of the remnants of the fractured Earth Kingdom. The leaders of this movement came from the Metal Clan and brought some of that aesthetic with them. While promoting the final season at New York Comic Con, Konietzko showed a few designs and said: "It was really fun taking that Art Deco vibe of Zaofu and making a more military version of

[73] "Commentary – Sokka's;" Sifu Kisu, *Tumblr*, 18 May 2014; Sifu Kisu, *Tumblr*, 30 Dec. 2014.
[74] "Commentary – Sokka's."
[75] DiMartino and Konietzko, 140.
[76] McCloud, 44.

it."[77] In order to accomplish this task, the art department looked to a hitherto untapped early twentieth-century source: World War II.[78] This influence can be most clearly seen in the new nation's mechanized war machines, particularly their spirit energy cannon introduced in "Operation Beifong" (*Korra* S4E10, Appendix 1.09).

This weapon offered a way to solidify and reinforce the qualities already associated with Earth Empire and its leaders. It is large, militaristic, and technologically advanced. Furthermore, it was based directly on the *Dora*, a massive piece of Nazi artillery that – like the Earth Empire weapon – had to be transported along railroad tracks.[79] According to Konietzko, he and prop designer Joseph Aguilar were very conscious of this connection.[80] Through the adaptation of this referent, they sought to draw a visual parallel between a real-world fascist movement and a fantastical one. The spirit energy cannon was to be a signifier not of a culture but of an ideology. Because of its size, mobility, and function as a BG for select shots, this prop was rendered as a 3D model. The method maintained the details of the original referent and design as well as ensured stylistic consistency with the other animated images. This process was abetted by SketchUp already having a prebuilt 3D model of the *Dora*.[81] While the preexistence of a re-presentation of a Nazi war machine on the program is concerning, it does underline the iconographic power of the original's image. The 3D model was an effective way to preserve that specificity and significance, allowing the spirit energy cannon to function as a signifier of fascism, an identity projected onto the leaders and members of the Earth Empire.

As part of the world-building of *Avatar* and *Korra*, props provide some of the context that is projected onto the iconic animated bodyscapes of the characters. Like BGs, they appropriate and adapt real-world cultural referents as a means of communicating specific identities. Thus, Piandao's swords become signifiers of Chinese-ness and of Kisu's martial art expertise, and the spirit energy cannon becomes a signifier for fascism. In order to render these props, the art department adopted or imitated methods from other production processes. These creative decisions were

---

[77] "The Legend of Korra: 2014 Comic-Con Panel Featurette" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*), Viacom International Inc. (2015).
[78] Ibid.
[79] Michael Dante DiMartino, Bryan Konietzko and Joaquim Dos Santos, *The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series – Book Four: Balance* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2015), 112; "Commentary on Operation: Beifong" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*), Viacom International Inc. (2015).
[80] "Commentary – Operation."
[81] Ibid.

motivated in part to maintain stylistic consistency, but they also affected the nature of the final animated image of the props. Their function as signifiers is impacted by their relative iconicity and plasmaticity. However formed or manifested, these identities are ultimately projected onto an animated bodyscape. Thus, Piandao is signified as Chinese and associated with Kisu, and the leaders and members of the Earth Empire are signified as fascists.

Creating Language: Cultural Signifiers, Mixing, and Flattening

Language is another important part of the world-building of *Avatar* and *Korra*. While the second and sixth chapters examine the use of English and of accents, respectively, this section focuses on the development of proper names and their visual representation through the use of Chinese calligraphy as a diegetic orthography. Konietzko has discussed the creation of names in the *Avatar* franchise: "Some of the names Mike [DiMartino] and I make up, some we derive from real names in our world, and some are just straight names... from our world and from different cultures."[82] In other words, proper names in this franchise came from a mixture of fantastical, hybrid, and real-world conventions. In the *Avatar* art book, DiMartino recounted the evolution of one of their protagonist's name:

> In the eleven-minute pilot, her name was actually Kya, but when Nickelodeon's legal department vetted the name, they discovered there was already a videogame character named Kya, so we had to change it. For a few weeks we called her Kanna, but weren't totally sold on it. Then Bryan called me one day and said "How about Katara?" The name seemed so foreign at the time, but now I can't imagine it any other way. And later on, we ended up using Kanna for Gran Gran's name and Kya for Katara's mother.[83]

This anecdote demonstrates how the names for the characters – while seemingly "foreign" or exotic – are not always directly derived from real-world referents. It would be more apt to describe them as "fantastical" or "otherworldly." Taking the cue from these early examples, the franchise started giving Water Tribe names strong "k" sounds for consistency. When Piandao identifies Sokka as a member of the Water Tribe in

[82] "Commentary on The Guide" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).
[83] DiMartino and Konietzko, 16.

"Sokka's Master," it is because of his name. This practice eventually leads to Korra. In a 2012 interview promoting the sequel series, Konietzko described combining this naming convention with the real-world name "Cora" when creating the new protagonist.[84] Real-world and fantasy were hybridized. As examples of names derived wholly from reality, two characters from the Tibetan-inspired Air Nation – Gyatso from *Avatar* and Tenzin from *Korra* – combined share the name of the fourteenth Dalai Lama. As mentors for the protagonists in their respective series, these characters had names that both linked them together as well as signified the Asian-ness and the wisdom associated with this public figure. This mixture of naming conventions marks the *Avatar* world as fantastically otherworldly and as authentically Asian. They also help maintain internal consistency and distinguish the fantasy cultures. However, such distinctions are ultimately flattened with a universal written language.

No matter how distinct, every nation in *Avatar* and *Korra* uses the same Chinese calligraphy. Fully fantastical names like Katara are written as 卡塔拉 (Kǎ tǎ lā), hybrid names like Korra as 寇柆 (Kòu lā), and real-world names like Mako as 馬高 (Mǎ gāo). This translated calligraphy communicates authenticity but also erases the differences between real-world and fantasy cultures. After all, these names are not written in "Asian" but in Chinese. Even the traditionally Japanese name Mako becomes Chinese.[85] This rendering of the world and characters of *Avatar* and *Korra* as Chinese was accomplished through the hiring of Siu-Leung Lee, PhD as translator and calligrapher. In our interview, he told me of the impact of his work on the franchise's identity: "If... the sound track was in Chinese, it would be just like a Chinese production."[86] To him, the use of accurate Chinese calligraphy, even for names not directly of Chinese origin, extended a Chinese identity to this fantasy world and to the shows.

Lee's responsibilities were threefold. He would translate text provided to him by Konietzko, compose the calligraphy, and provide layouts for the art department. Of the first one, he said: "They rely totally on my translation. The most time we spent on was the title logo. For the rest, it is almost always just one-shot – my final is their final."[87] When asked whether he recalled any particularly troublesome translations, he replied:

---

[84] Jethro Nededog, "'Legend of Korra' Creators: 5 Things You Didn't Know About the New 'Avatar' (Guest Blog)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 13 Apr. 2012.
[85] The character's namesake, actor Mako Iwamatsu, used the kanji 誠 (Makoto) and the katakana マコ (Ma ko).
[86] Siu-Leung Lee (30 Jan. 2018), email interview.
[87] Siu-Leung Lee (31 Jan. 2018), email interview.

"There is no difficulty in the translation or calligraphy."[88] Konietzko recalled tasking Lee with what he considered to be a tough assignment for "The Drill" (*Avatar* S2E13): "I asked him to translate 'slurry.' That was one where I thought he would kick back and be, like, 'There is no Chinese character for slurry.' And, no complaints, like one hour later, got the Chinese translation."[89] The final episode features the logograms 泥漿管道 (níjiāng guǎndào) as the translation for "slurry pipeline." When asked about how he translated and wrote proper names, Lee responded:

> The same sound in English can be transliterated into different words, the combination of which may take different meanings. I do carefully consider different words for each name to present the character/place appropriately. I try to avoid dialects so that most of the Chinese audience would sound them out the same way as the English audience does. That is another reason the Asian audience love[s] the TV series, because I speak their language, literally.[90]

Lee highlights the appeal to Asian – meaning, to him, Chinese-literate – audiences. Only once did the franchise translate his work via English subtitles. The ending for the *Avatar* series finale (*Avatar* S3E21) featured 劇終 (jù zhōng) alongside "The End." The final shot of *Korra* used the same two logograms sans English accompaniment, leaving Chinese-illiterate viewers to surmise its meaning through context. Again, there is a flattening. If regarded as a signifier of Asian-ness, then the calligraphy positions China as representative of all of Asia, eliding cultural differences in both real-world and fantastical contexts.

In the art book for *Avatar*, Konietzko expanded on his admiration for their translator and calligrapher:

> When I would send Dr. Lee a request for a poster or a decree, he would quiz me about what unseen fictional character had done the calligraphy in the show. If it were a highly cultured royal attendant, he would use a refined, elegant style, but if it were a low-level clerk, he would use a more pedestrian handwriting style.[91]

---

[88] S.-L. Lee (30 Jan.).
[89] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 12: The Journey to Ba Sing Se, Part 1: The Serpent's Pass" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2007).
[90] Siu-Leung Lee (13 Feb. 2018), email interview.
[91] DiMartino and Konietzko, 126.

The co-creator also wrote on how Lee would use a more archaic writing style when depicting "ancient texts about the spirits or elements."[92] The calligrapher corroborated: "They [the emails] include instructions on the time period and style they expect (e.g. the degree of literacy of the writer) so I can design the script and style accordingly."[93] Therefore, the calligraphy of the shows as not entirely reductive, leaving room for class-based and temporal differences. Konietzko praised Lee's level of expertise: "His vast knowledge and command of various styles of calligraphy throughout China's history added a culturally grounding component to the show."[94] Such language positions Lee and his authority as a signifier of cultural authenticity.

In addition to producing direct translations, Lee served as calligrapher and provided layouts for the art department. He specifically mentioned his work on the various wanted posters featured throughout the series; the *Avatar* art book highlights several examples, and one was featured in a special *Avatar* issue of *Nickelodeon Magazine*.[95] His creative input extended into developing the inscriptions on the calendar seen in "The Library" (*Avatar* S2E10), with the art book crediting him for including "historically based names for sixteen eras."[96] However, the development of written language in *Avatar* and *Korra* did not end with Lee. His work still needed to be interpreted by the art department. Both Garagarza and Sung recalled leaving blank spaces in their BG designs for the logograms to be added digitally by someone else.[97] Only Konietzko regularly communicated with Lee.[98] The art director spoke of the journey taken by a piece of graffiti in the episode "The Serpent's Pass" (S2E12, Appendix 1.10). He recalled:

> I got the calligraphy from S.L. Lee, our calligraphy expert, but then I had to make it look all scratchy, like graffiti. But then I needed to show it to someone who could read Chinese and make sure it was still legible or didn't say something bad.[99]

---

[92] Ibid., 126.
[93] S.-L. Lee (31 Jan.).
[94] DiMartino and Konietzko, 126.
[95] S.-L. Lee (31 Jan.); DiMartino and Konietzko, 127; "Fire Nation's Most Wanted," *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2006): 48.
[96] DiMartino and Konietzko, 126. These sixteen eras are (1) 氤武 (yáng wǔ), (2) 淳泰 (chún tài), (3) 坛元 (zhī yuán), (4) 烱裕 (jiǒng yù), (5) 氤隆 (yáng lóng), (6) 溢文 (yì wén), (7) 培治 (péi zhì), (8) 焜德 (kūn dé), (9) 氳貞 (yūn zhēn), (10) 溳明 (rú míng), (11) 堯平 (yáo píng), (12) 煬崇 (yáng chóng), (13) 氛安 (fēn ān), (14) 漳順 (zhāng shùn), (15) 垣正 (yuán zhèng), and (16) 焯光 (chāo guāng).
[97] Garagarza (6 Apr.); Sung.
[98] S.-L. Lee (31 Jan.).
[99] "Commentary – Journey."

The result was 絕望 (jué wàng) or "abandon hope" as read by the characters. This anecdote demonstrates the transformation that the calligraphy would undergo when incorporated into animation as well as the dangers involved.

For *Korra* – set in a era where the world had developed printing – Lee's input was diminished. Indeed, whereas the *Avatar* art book gave the calligraphy a four-page spread, it is barely mentioned in any of the four ones for *Korra*. When asked about the differences between the two series, the translator recalled: "I [had] much less involvement in *Korra* because it is a modern set[ting] that required modern print fonts rather than calligraphy."[100] This marginalization led to instances like the title card for the "mover" *Nuktuk, Hero of the South* or **努篤 南方英雄** (Nǔ dǔ nán fāng yīng xióng), where a decidedly modern 3D font supplants Lee's original work (Appendix 1.11). In the art book for the second season, Konietzko took credit for this stylization; he wanted it "to have that action/adventure *Indiana Jones* feeling."[101] Lee's wording as well as Konietzko's choice of referent suggest that the loss of the original calligraphy is also a loss of authenticity with the move from accurate calligraphy to western-influenced stylization. However, like with the use of Art Deco to design the Metal Clan or the hybridization of real-world and fantastical naming conventions, this melding of sources does not invalidate the Asian-ness of the final product. The translations and calligraphy still operate as cultural signifiers, and the printing press was hardly a western-exclusive innovation. Regardless, the written language's uncontaminated nature – so prized in the preceding series – is not preserved in the construction of a more modern identity.

Lee has taken great pride in his impact on this franchise. During our correspondence, he shared links to webpages discussing and celebrating his calligraphy and boasted about the emails he received from fans complimenting his work. He credited the incorporation of his calligraphy for the success that the franchise has had, especially with Asian viewers.[102] As signifiers of Asian-ness, the use of Lee's Chinese calligraphy plays an important role. Indeed, his involvement was highlighted in a *New York Times* articles promoting the *Avatar* series premiere, where he is mentioned alongside the martial arts consultant.[103] In perhaps the biggest indication of Lee's contribution, the logo for first series prominently features his translation for "Avatar," **降吞神通** (jiàng

[100] S.-L. Lee (31 Jan.).
[101] DiMartino, Konietzko and Dos Santos, *Spirits*, 76.
[102] S.-L. Lee (30 Jan.).
[103] Mark Lasswell, "Kung Fu Fightin' Anime Stars, Born in the U.S.A.," *The New York Times*, 28 Aug. 2005.

shì shéntōng). Such iconography demonstrates how Chinese calligraphy extends an Asian identity to the show.

Summary: Projecting Identities onto Animated Bodyscapes

In the course of world-building, the art department on *Avatar* and *Korra* adapted real-world referents into fantastical signifiers of Asian-ness. The BGs, props, and language balanced mimesis and fantasy as well as mimesis and abstraction. Authenticity or fidelity to the original referent, maintenance of internal consistency between the various fantastical cultures, realist conventions such as hyper-realism, and the necessity of streamlining were also contributing factors. Thus, the *Avatar* world is both tethered to and breaks away from reality. The final animated images are the products of numerous personnel working in the context of collaboration and delegation. Their creative decisions resulted in the specifics of which real-world referents were selected and how they were adapted into cultural signifiers.

BGs provided detailed and static animated images that could project an identity onto iconic and plasmatic animated bodyscapes. In the construction of that identity and the acquisition of cultural referents, the art department privileged authenticity. By reducing real-world referents into cultural signifiers, authenticity becomes something artists can control rather than something innate. It is a feeling that preserves desired qualities rather than a specificity. Thus, when a Buddhist temple becomes an Air Nomad temple, the spirituality and Asian-ness of the original survives the change in color. These alterations can also allow the images to signify new identities. The Fire Sage temple extracts Chinese-ness from the Yellow Crane Tower but also gains fieriness when the fish are transformed into flames.

Through adaptation and mixing, the resulting animated images are prevented from being direct re-presentations of real-world cultures and instead become signifiers of hybridized identities. Through the combination of different sources, the Fire Nation becomes a multi-faceted fantasy culture. Although, as a result, each real-world referent is still reduced to a signifier of a quality other than their cultural specificity. The Metal Clan is also the product of combining referents in order to create a unified whole, with the different design elements serving as signifiers for different characteristics. Similarly, the naming conventions for this franchise are a combination of fantastical, hybridized, and real-world, resulting in the conveyance of a fantastical and internally consistent identity, one of Asian-ness. The alternative would be a cultural flattening as seen in the

use of Chinese calligraphy as an in-universe orthography. Referents from one culture become signifiers for a universal Asian-ness.

The development of props demonstrate how different rendering methods and their relation to iconicity and plasmaticity affect their function as cultural signifiers. Iconicity allows for the amplification of certain details when relevant to the plot or to world-building. Piandao's swords demonstrate how retained details can convey identity – in this case, an authentically Chinese one in association with the martial arts consultant. Plasmaticity relates to the degree that these details can be reliably preserved between frames, with painting and computer-animation possessing the greatest stability. Thus, the spirit energy cannon can retain the specificity of its fascist referent.

Across these different processes, the desired qualities of real-world referents were appropriated in the construction of fantastical cultural signifiers that in turn project those hybridized identities onto the iconic animated bodyscape. Thus, the spiritual Asian-ness derived from Bhutanese Buddhist temples is transferred to the Air Nomads, the fascism of the *Dora* is extended to the Earth Empire, and the authenticity of the Chinese calligraphy is projected onto everyone. Thus, Fire Lord Ozai, Suyin Beifong, and Piandao are ascribed certain traits before their on-screen introductions. The next chapter continues to analyze this phenomenon, shifting from the art department to the writers' room and the development of narrative components. The third chapter then examines how these projected identities interact with the other visual components of the animated bodyscape.

Chapter Two – Scripting the Stories of *Avatar* and *Korra*: Adaptation, Collaboration, and Language in the Writing Process

During our interview, *Avatar* head writer Aaron Ehasz told me: "I always felt that Mike [DiMartino] and Bryan [Konietzko] understood that part of what made *Avatar* great was the depth and dimension of the writing. And so, they allowed it to be a very writing-driven show."[1] *Avatar* writers assistant and *Korra* script coordinator Katie Mattila similarly described the franchise as "script-driven."[2] While these quotes are accompanied by a degree of self-promotion, they raise relevant questions regarding the production and ascription of identity in these shows. What does their being "writer-driven" or "script-driven" mean in regards to the construction and ascription of Asian-ness?

The previous chapter analyzes how visual components produced by or in association with the art department contributed to the fantastical world-building of *Avatar* and *Korra*. An equivalent process occurred in the writers' room, with personnel transforming real-world referents into cultural signifiers of a desired identity, usually Asian-ness. As a result, the writers also engage in forms of cultural appropriation as defined by James O. Young, Richard A. Rogers, and Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer.[3] Concerns of authenticity and of internal consistency continue to be factors, with fidelity to the real world in turn grounding and normalizing the fantastical elements of these shows. The balancing of streamlining and realist animation conventions, on the other hand, is less relevant. The products of the writing process are more ephemeral than those of art direction. The viewer does not "see" the script in the final product in the same way that they can see art designs. Nevertheless, the creative decisions made by writers contribute to fantasy world-building and to the construction of cultural signifiers, which in turn project identities onto animated bodyscapes.

This chapter continues the work of the previous one, tracking this process of appropriating and adapting real-world referents as well as analyzing how the writers conceptualize their work. However, it does more closely examine the interactions of personnel in and in relation to the production culture of the writers' room, noting the role of collaboration and its effects on the construction and ascription of identity. The final

[1] Aaron Ehasz (10 May 2018), Google Hangout interview.
[2] Pilar Allesandra, "526. The Adventures of Katie Mattila," *On The Page*, 6 Oct. 2017.
[3] J.O. Young, 5-7; R.A. Rogers: 477; Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 310-14.

section returns to the topic of how language operates as a cultural signifier in *Avatar* and *Korra*, now considering the effects of the English dialogue.

The "Lens of Inspiration": Fantastical Distancing and Mimetic Authenticity

Ahead of the release of the live-action film, Ehasz spoke with CNN on the whitewashing controversy and how the original series attempted to avoid similar backlash. The 2010 article quotes him:

> We tried to be careful as we could not to directly base anyone's culture on a [real world] culture because we wanted to borrow ideas... The series is clearly Asian inspired with obvious Chinese influences. In the case of the water benders, they are definitely based [on]... indigenous cultures, a la Inuits, but also indigenous people like those portrayed in the movie "Whale Rider."[4]

Nearly a decade later, Ehasz spoke with me at greater length on the subject, being careful to leave room for alternative and critical readings of his and the other writers' work:

> When you're being inspired by a culture that is not your own, you are being inspired by ideas that were not necessarily the ideas you were brought up around. Right? Finding a way to do that that is respectful and authentic... can be tricky. Right? So, I think, we did our best when we saw something that was cool or interesting to interpret it and bring it into our world. I did want to say that we didn't want to appropriate something. Right? We didn't want to just take it. We wanted to make sure that there was a "lens of inspiration," which means instead of just saying "taking an idea from a culture" saying "Well, if we see this idea that's interesting to us, does this idea make sense in our vision for Air Nomad culture or Earth Kingdom culture the way we view it, with elements and magic and the world we're creating? Can we interpret it through that lens in a way that feels inspired but also feels like it's a part of our world?" So, travel some distance, when it's going from inspiration to the actual part where it becomes fiction, you know? And you hope that while it's traveling that distance, that's the difference between it being appropriated and it being

[4] Brandon Ancil, "Did the 'Airbender' adaptation ever have a chance?," *CNN*, 1 Jul. 2010.

> something that is inspiration for something else... I can see in retrospect that it can be a fine line.[5]

While Ehasz is wary of the term "cultural appropriation," I and other scholars have adopted broader and less defamatory definitions. Young's categories of style and motif appropriation work neatly with how the head writer described using the "lens of inspiration."[6] While Young writes specifically about visual elements, his formulations are applicable to other types of art, such as scriptwriting. Ehasz's language also echoes Rosemary Jackson's concept of "paraxial areas." Like reality is refracted by a camera lens, so too are real-world referents refracted by the impulse toward fantasy.[7] The referents "travel some distance" in order to become fantastical. For example, in order to create the Water Tribe, writers de-contextualized elements of real-world cultures in order to convey an Indigenous-ness that did not clash with the otherwise Asian-coded setting. Ehasz has specified that he and the other writers avoided positioning their fantasy cultures as direct re-presentations of real ones, and *Avatar* and *Korra* writer Tim Hedrick has also stressed this point.[8] These are hybridized creations, recalling the art department's strategies of visual world-building. The Water Tribe is "based" on real-world Indigenous cultures – specifically, the Inuit and the Māori – but is not synonymous with them. They maintain a fantastical distance. Nevertheless, culturally and geographically disparate groups are flattened in order to construct fantastical signifiers of Indigenous-ness. The same process occurs when making fantastical signifiers of Asian-ness for the other nations.

In addition to the stated goal of fantastical distancing, Ehasz has also described a self-imposed rubric for artists inspired by other cultures. They and their work must be "careful, sensitive, respectful, and authentic."[9] The pitfalls of authenticity have already been addressed in the literature review. Nevertheless, cultural signifiers of Asian-ness are more effective at conveying a specific identity when there is greater fidelity between them and the original referent. Thus, the Indigenous-ness or the Asian-ness of the fantasy cultures as constructed by the writers would be more successfully projected onto the animated bodyscapes of characters associated with those cultures. For the upcoming examples, *Avatar* and *Korra* writers appropriated referents and refracted them through

---

[5] Ehasz.
[6] J.O. Young, 6.
[7] Jackson, 19-20.
[8] Tim Hedrick (21 Sep. 2018), email interview; Tim Hedrick (24 Sep. 2018), email interview.
[9] Ehasz.

the "lens of inspiration" to construct cultural signifiers. For this process, they sought to balance two needs. First, through fantastical distancing, they avoided creating direct re-presentations of real-world cultures. Second, through mimetic authenticity, they strengthened the effectiveness of their signifiers. Unlike with the art department, research is rarely mentioned in relation to the writing process. In our interview, Ehasz did not recall any specific directed examples.[10] For the following exceptions, the writers for this franchise adapted a religious concept, a historical figure, and a medical practice into equivalents that would "make sense" in the world of *Avatar* and *Korra*.

Chakras: Retaining and Erasing the Specificity of a Religious Concept

In "The Guru" (*Avatar* S2E19), Aang visits Guru Pathik at the Eastern Air Temple in order to reach his full spiritual potential as the Avatar. The episode is then structured around the guru guiding Aang through unblocking his chakras while explaining their significance. In preparation for these scenes, episode writers DiMartino and Konietzko have referenced conducting research on this topic to ensure accuracy.[11] Nevertheless, in their adaptation , they also had to balance mimetic authenticity and fantastical distancing in order to both project the desired identities onto Pathik as well as integrate the concept with the other fantastical cultural signifiers of Asian-ness from throughout the series.

While the idea of *chakras* (चक्र)[12] appears in various religious and philosophical traditions in India, Hinduism recognizes seven major "psychic centers" – six along the spine and one at the crown of the skull.[13] Both practitioner Harish Johari and Sanskrit scholar John A. Grimes identify the seven *chakras* as the *Mūlādhāra* at the base of the spine, the *Svādhiṣṭhāna* at the groin, the *Maṇipūra* at the navel, the *Anāhata* at the heart, the *Viśuddha* at the throat, the *Ājñā* at the forehead, and the *Sahasrāra* at the crown of the head.[14] When adapting this religious concept to the *Avatar* world, the writers made creative decisions regarding how much of that specificity to retain so that their chakras would signify Asian-ness but not explicitly Indian-ness or Hindu-ness.

---

[10] Ibid.
[11] DiMartino and Konietzko, 122.
[12] For consistency and clarity, I refer to the real-world concept as "*chakras*" (italics) and the *Avatar* version as "chakras" (no italics).
[13] Harish Johari, *Chakras: Energy Centers of Transformation* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2000), 1; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Chakra," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 4 Sep. 2018).
[14] Johari, 2; John A. Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of India Philosophy: Sanskrit Terms Defined in English* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 100-101, 265, 390.

In the show, Pathik takes Aang on a tour through the gardens of the Eastern Air Temple and explains:

> The water flows through this creek, much like the energy flows through your body. As you see, there are several pools where the water swirls around before flowing on. These pools are like our chakras... If nothing else were around, this creek would flow pure and clear. However, life is messy, and things tend to fall in the creek... Each pool of energy has a purpose and can be blocked by a specific kind of emotional muck.

In the subsequent scenes, each "pool of energy" is associated with a body part and an emotion. Their placements are preserved with the exception of the second one. While not explicitly changed, its location is unspecified presumably because its being situated in the genitals would be inappropriate for children's programming. Regardless of rationale, some of the specificity is erased. Furthermore, while the term *chakra* is preserved from the original Sanskrit, the names of the individual energy nexuses are not. The *Mūlādhāra* becomes the Earth Chakra, the *Svādhiṣṭhāna* the Water Chakra, the *Maṇipūra* the Fire Chakra, the *Anāhata* the Air Chakra, the *Viśuddha* the Sound Chakra, the *Ājñā* the Light Chakra, and the *Sahasrāra* the Thought Chakra. These new names remain linked with their referents. Both Johari's and Grimes' breakdowns of the first four *chakras* associate them with those elements.[15] Although some specificity is retained, the writers still removed this Hindu concept from its original historical and cultural context by erasing language.

In order to "make sense" in the *Avatar* world, chakras needed to be compatible with established definitions and understandings of chi or *qi* (氣).[16] *Qi* has its roots in Daoism and Confucianism within Chinese philosophy, religion, and medicine. Put simply, it broadly refers to the "energy" that flows through the body.[17] The concept also appears in connection to Chinese martial arts and its cinematic re-presentations.[18] Unlike

---

[15] Johari, 2; Grimes, 390.
[16] For consistency and clarity, I refer to the real-world concept as "*qi*" and the *Avatar* version as "chi."
[17] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Qi," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (10 Aug. 2018).
[18] Brian Kennedy and Elizabeth Guo. *Chinese Martial Arts Training Manuals: A Historical Survey* (Berkeley, CA: Blue Snake Books, 2005), 15, 20, 26-33; Lu Shengli, *Combat Techniques of Taiji, Xingyi, and Bagua: Principles and Practices of Internal Martial Arts*, trans. Zhang Yun and Susan Darley (Berkeley, CA: Blue Cnake Books, 2006), 37-38; Alexandra Ryan, "Globalisation and the 'Internal Alchemy' of Chinese Martial Arts: The Transmission of Taijiquan to Britain," *East Asia Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 2.4 (2008): 527; Peter Allan Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10-11, 201; Wang Guangxi, *Chinese Kung Fu*, trans. Han Huizhi, Wang Wenliang, and Kang Jin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6; Hsiao-Hung Chang, "The Unbearable Lightness of Globalization:

many of its contemporaries, *Avatar* treats it as a given that both characters and the audience are familiar with this concept. The lack of an explicit definition afforded the writers some flexibility with their application of the idea. Firebenders can channel and redirect lightning through the chi flows in their body. Chi blockers can cause temporary paralysis or loss of bending by hitting an opponent's pressure points. In contrast, *Avatar* spends an entire episode explaining chakras in a way that signals that neither the main character nor presumably the audience have prior knowledge. However, while chakras and chi are compatible in *Avatar*, the writing does not explicitly link the two. Pathik never uses the word "chi" in any of his appearances, only "energy." He also does not resort to the more appropriate Sanskrit equivalent *prāna* (प्राण), defined by Johari as "the energy that creates life, matter, and mind" and by Grimes as "life breath."[19] There appears to be a compromise. In order to integrate into the *Avatar* diegesis, chakras are discussed in terms of "energy." In order to not be marked as Chinese, they are not verbally linked to chi. Both the chakras and chi anchor the fantasy to real-world historical and cultural contexts, but those tethers do not intersect.

To adapt a Hindu concept to the *Avatar* world, the writers made a series of creative decisions about what details to retain. While the locations and characteristics of the individual chakras are more or less preserved, their original Sanskrit names are removed. This elision reveals two things. First, Sanskrit positions these chakras within a specific real-world context, that of India and Hinduism. Therefore, the concept needs further de-contextualization to fit with the more overtly Chinese signifiers. The concept of *prāna* is similarly translated as "energy." Second, the lack of linguistic specificity means that chakras as re-presented in *Avatar* function as signifiers for a general spiritual Asian-ness rather than for a particular religion or region. The episode's commitment to authenticity clashes with the fantastical distancing. While the Asian-ness of the signifiers is still projected onto the *Avatar* world and more specifically onto the character of Pathik, it has lost some specificity – an Indian-ness or Hindu-ness – associated with the original referent. The following example considers a more extreme case of de-contextualization, with a historical figure becoming the namesake for a fantastical organization.

On the Transnational Flight of *Wuxia* Film," *Cinema Taiwan: Politics, Popularity and State of the Arts*, eds. Darrell William Davis and Ru-Shou Robert Chen (London: Routledge, 2007), 96-98.

[19] Johari, 2; Grimes, 239.

Dai Li: The De-contextualized Name of a Historical Figure as a Cultural Signifier

When Aang and his friends first arrive in Ba Sing Se in "City of Walls and Secrets" (*Avatar* S2E14), they are introduced to a dangerous organization known as the Dai Li. As the city's secret police, the Dai Li function as antagonists in both *Avatar* and *Korra*, serving as minions for Grand Secretariat Long Feng, Princess Azula, and Queen Hou-Ting at different points in the franchise. At the behest of these villains, they imprison and brainwash dissidents, partake in a coup d'état, and kidnap Airbenders to create an army. Episode writer Hedrick has proudly brought up the inspiration for their name as a sign of authenticity.[20] While preparing for the Ba Sing Se story arc, his research led him to the historical figure Dai Li.

Dai Li was Chiang Kai-shek's head of secret police in the Republic of China. As the founder of the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics or *Juntong*, he was likened to Heinrich Himmler in the western press and has become synecdochic of Chiang's regime to Communist China.[21] Biographer Frederic E. Wakeman introduces him as "an extraordinary secret policeman," as "a sinister specter of the shadows," and as "the personification of Chiang's dictatorship."[22] Historian Wen-hsin Yeh's account focuses on how Dai positioned himself as absolutely loyal to Chiang.[23] In choosing to name the Ba Sing Se secret police "Dai Li" instead of "*Juntong*," Hedrick signaled that he was constructing a cultural signifier not only for "Chinese Secret Police" but also for attributes specific to this historical figure.

In "City of Walls and Secrets," the heroes' guide and handler, Joo Dee, describes the organization thusly: "Those men are agents of the Dai Li, the cultural authority of Ba Sing Se. They are the guardians of our traditions." By the end of the episode, the Dai Li would threaten the protagonists, imprison a recurring character, and replace Joo Dee. Like their namesake, this fictional group and its members are known for their cruelty and shadowiness. They also serve a master rather than their own individual ambitions. However, these parallels remain tenuous and applicable to a number of real-world people and organizations. Why the name Dai Li and not *Juntong* or a referent from another era of Chinese history? What does Dai Li specifically signify when outside of his historical context?

---

[20] "Commentary – Lake"; Hedrick (21 Sep.).
[21] Wen-hsin Yeh, "Dai Li and the Liu Geqing Affair: Heroism in the Chinese Secret Service During the War of Resistance," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 48.3 (1989): 345.
[22] Frederic E. Wakeman, *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2003), xiii, 4.
[23] Yeh, 346.

In our interview, Hedrick implied that he and the other writers did not have these considerations in mind when selecting and approving this name. Not recalling specifics, he suggested that he had probably Googled "Chinese Secret Police" and that Dai Li was the first name he saw. Without any objections from the Nickelodeon Clearance Department, it became the name for the fantasy organization.[24] If accurate, then Dai Li was just meant to signify "Chinese Secret Police," and even that connection depends on historical knowledge of the Republic of China. Any other parallels between the two are coincidental. However, regardless of artistic intent, the name Dai Li carries greater significance, recalling a specific time in Chinese history, even when the surrounding text and production narratives do not support it. Both intended and unintended identities are equally projected onto the individual members of the Dai Li. The final example analyzes how real-world medical practices and knowledge were adapted for fantasy.

Acupuncture: The Fantastical Embellishment of Medical Practice and Knowledge

In the third season of *Korra*, the character Lin Beifong visits Zaofu, which was founded and is ruled by her estranged sister, Suyin. The two had not seen each other for thirty years. In "Old Wounds" (*Korra* S3E06), Lin is referred to an acupuncturist named Guo to help her deal with repressed feelings.[25] Episode writer Mattila has talked about undergoing acupuncture treatment around the same time she was working on this script, but she was not clear whether she had intended it as a research trip.[26] For these scenes, she was tasked with retaining the specificity of this real-world medical practice while incorporating fantastical embellishments.

Writing on this subject, historian Roberta E. Bivins proposes that any medical practice and knowledge develops based on its culture's worldview. For her, acupuncture was the direct product of a Chinese understanding of the human body as "a dynamically balanced whole."[27] From this worldview emerged the practice of inserting metal needles into mapped points as a means to remove blockages and correct imbalances of *qi*.[28] Bivins has focused her research on western understandings of this practice, with early

[24] Hedrick (24 Sep.).
[25] Otherwise credited as "Acupuncturist," his name is only revealed on his business card with the logogram 郭 (Guō).
[26] "Commentary on Old Wounds" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc., 2014.
[27] Roberta A. Bivins, *Acupuncture, Expertise and Cross-Cultural Medicine* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2000), 1, 197.
[28] Bivins, 13; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Acupuncture," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (20 Aug. 2018).

adopters engaging in a condescending "medical orientalism," where they emphasized the physical over the metaphysical.[29] In *Korra*, acupuncture's spiritual background and connection with *qi* is foregrounded even when re-presented outside of its original historical and cultural context.

Healing through unblocking one's chi is commonplace in this fantasy world, as seen in the previous section on chakras. However, acupuncture is not specifically mentioned until the episode "Nightmares and Daydreams" (*Avatar* S3E09), where Toph humorously recommends the technique as a way to cure Aang's insomnia. Upon seeing her holding a baby boar-q-pine covered in bristling quills, the Avatar responds by running away. Acupuncture is reduced to a quick joke about how needles are scary. The writers place the emphasis on the mechanics of the practice, the needling, and ignore its metaphysical aspects. The sequel series depicts the medical practice with more respect and nuance. As Guo inserts needles into Lin's "acu-points," he tells her: "This process will correct the imbalances in your chi." As a final needle is inserted into her forehead, Lin has a series of flashbacks that eventually leads to familial resolution. While there are some obvious exaggerations – both the use of Metalbending and the more visceral side effects – there is greater proximity than distance. The characters explicitly discuss chi, and the healing process is understood in those metaphysical terms. The practice is not reduced to the mechanics of needling as has historically been the case in western adaptations. This mimetic authenticity grounds the more fantastical embellishments of the scene, helping this re-presentation of acupuncture function as a cultural signifier of Asian-ness and Chinese-ness. These identities are then extended to the characters partaking in the practice.

In the writers' rooms for this franchise, real-world concepts, historical figures, and practices were appropriated, de-contextualized, and adapted for a fantasy world. While going through the "lens of inspiration," they retained enough specificity to signify desired identities. Individual *chakras* lose their Sanskrit names but not their other attributes in order to integrate into the established setting. Dai's name is totally removed from its original context and treated as a general signifier of "Chinese Secret Police." Acupuncture is exaggerated but still defined by its metaphysical elements. In *Avatar* and *Korra*, the writers constructed these re-presentations as signifiers of Asian-ness, sometimes emphasizing the specificity of the referent and other times erasing them, acts

[29] Bivins, 5, 10, 13.

of mimetic authenticity and fantastical distancing. Their creative decisions were not made in a vacuum but instead as a result of the production culture of the writers' room.

Constructing a Collaborative Environment and Its Impact on Signifying Identity

Both *Avatar* and *Korra* stand apart from their Nickelodeon contemporaries in their commitment to a serialized ongoing narrative. Observing this difference, co-creator and story editor DiMartino has noted that a freelance model would have been ineffective. The writers for both series needed to work together closely to ensure continuity and consistency between episodes.[30] The writing of these long-form narratives can be broken down into two levels – the planning of a season and the writing of an episode. Each involved a degree of collaboration and delegation in the construction of a production culture.

Breaking Down the Writing Process and Constructing a Production Culture

Like with the art direction, there is a shared recognition of a "vision" or "path" on the part of the co-creators, while others had room to make their own contributions.[31] Season breakdowns were the first point at which the writers could affect the narratives of *Avatar* and *Korra*. Before each season, the writers and co-creators spent time brainstorming story arcs and pitching episode ideas – often as part of a writers' retreat. This step has been discussed by DiMartino, Ehasz, Hedrick, and Mattila across commentaries, interviews, and podcasts.[32] It is repeatedly characterized as a narrowing down or specifying of a season, with individual writers pitching characters, episodes, and themes. This environment persisted when they worked on individual episodes.

Over the course of writing an episode of *Avatar* or *Korra*, three types of documents were produced: a premise, an outline, and finally a script. While usually only one or two individuals are credited per episode, accounts of the writing process by personnel from both series emphasize how the whole writers' room worked collectively in the creation and revision of these three documents.[33] Key to this collaboration was the

---

[30] "Commentary – Journey"; "Commentary – Old."
[31] Ehasz; Allesandra.
[32] "Commentary on The Southern Lights" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014); "Commentary on The Earth Queen" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014); Ehasz; Hedrick (21 Sep.); Allesandra.
[33] "Audio Commentary – Episode 20: The Siege of the North – Part 2" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006); "Commentary –Southern Lights"; "Commentary – Earth Queen"; "Commentary – Old"; Ben

implementation of a specific "process," which Konietzko credited Ehasz for bringing to the production.[34] The two co-creators have confirmed that they continued using it on *Korra*.[35] During our interview, Ehasz described his process in detail. First, the writers' room determined the story so that the episode writer could write a two-page premise.[36] Mattila recalled how Ehasz encouraged the whole room – including assistants like herself – to contribute ideas.[37] With an acceptable premise, everyone would spend two-to-five days pitching the episode scene-by-scene as part of what Hedrick described as the "pitchout" until the assigned writer could go write a ten-to-twelve page outline.[38] After getting feedback on this new document, they would then make their first draft, adding the action and dialogue.[39] This was – according to Konietzko – a "synthesis" of those story meetings.[40] Usually, Ehasz told me, the writer would receive initial feedback and turn in a second draft for the "note stage."[41] Konietzko admitted that most of his notes on these scripts were him being "pedantic" about the rules of bending.[42] Hedrick concurred about how martial arts heavy stories would "get a vigorous kung-fu pass."[43] For the "note stage" – or, as Mattila referred to it, the "room punch" – the draft was projected onto the wall, and everyone collectively went through line-by-line, tweaking the dialogue and story beats.[44] According to Konietzko, this process resulted in "a much more consistent voice" across episodes.[45] The life of the episode did not end here; other departments contributed to their construction and ascription of Asian-ness.

Under Ehasz and DiMartino, the writers' rooms for *Avatar* and *Korra* were constructed so to encourage a collaborative and collective writing process. Working within a single room, they created something new, a "synthesis" of their individual contributions. However, while the writers' room may have been a self-contained

---

Blacker, "Episode 154: Legend of Korra/Avatar: The Last Airbender," *Nerdist Writers Panel*, 19 Aug. 2014; Allesandra; Ehasz; Hedrick (21 Sep.).

[34] Blacker. In our interview, Ehasz credited his mentors Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein of *Mission Hill* (1999-2000) for teaching him this process; they had, in turn, learned it from their time on *The Simpsons* (1989-present).

[35] "Commentary – Earth Queen"; Blacker.

[36] Ehasz.

[37] Allesandra.

[38] Ehasz; Hedrick (21 Sep.).

[39] Ehasz.

[40] "Commentary – Southern Lights."

[41] Ehasz.

[42] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 8: When Extremes Meet" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*), Viacom International Inc. (2012).

[43] Hedrick (21 Sep.).

[44] Ehasz; Allesandra.

[45] "Commentary –Southern Lights."

production culture, it and its products still relate to the other departments and processes. In our interview, Ehasz told me:

> I think the best writing understands it's not the final product, that the writing's something that you're handing to someone else to breathe life into, and you need to hopefully give them something that is inspiring and a launching point for them to add their creativity, their brilliance, to where you started.[46]

As he said, scripts are not the final product in animation; they need to be interpreted. The writers continued to be involved and make suggestions, as noted by Ehasz and Hedrick, but they were no longer in control of the content of a given episode.[47] Returning to the previous examples of fantastical adaptation, the unblocking chakras, the introduction of the Dai Li, and Lin's acupuncture treatment were rendered by storyboard artists and animators. That process is addressed in greater depth in chapters three and four. For now, the writers have noted two ways that their work was amended and built upon by other departments. First, episode directors and storyboard artists would insert visual jokes, a tendency commented upon by Hedrick and fellow *Avatar* writer John O'Bryan.[48] The next chapter will analyze how some of these comedic flourishes directly affected the construction and ascription Asian-ness. Hedrick has also cited fight scenes as places where the writers anticipated similar embellishments and therefore intentionally left out details.[49] Reflecting upon the *Avatar* series finale, DiMartino spoke about how the script avoided a "beat-for-beat breakdown" and instead conveyed a general "vibe."[50] Konietzko, on the other hand, noted that he tended to be more specific when writing such scenes, and he has ribbed the writing staff for their relatively vague descriptions.[51] Chapter four shows how these intentional gaps in the script served as launching points for the martial arts choreography, giving space for others to contribute. In this regard, while the Nickelodeon Animation Studio is a single self-contained geographic space, it is not a singular and unified production culture. Instead, it resembles

---

[46] Ehasz.
[47] Ehasz; Hedrick (21 Sep.).
[48] "Commentary – Lake"; "Audio Commentary – Chapter 18: The Earth King" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2007).
[49] "Commentary – Lake."
[50] Andrew Whalen, "On Its 10-Year Anniversary 'Avatar: The Last Airbender' Creators GIve an Oral History of the Finale," *Newsweek,* 19 Jul. 2018.
[51] Whalen; "Audio Commentary – Chapter 4: The Voice in the Night" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*), Viacom International Inc. (2012).

a series of adjacent continents. They communicate and interact regularly but remain separate. Collectively, their actions construct and ascribe Asian-ness to the world and characters of this franchise.

Whose Cultural Identity Is It? Establishing the Parameters of a Contact Zone

Both on the level of a season and an episode, the writing process on *Avatar* and *Korra* has been described as a collective endeavor. Everyone, regardless of seniority, was encouraged to participate. Other departments then continued to interpret and build upon their work. Within this production culture, it is pertinent to analyze who is contributing to this process and how that affects the construction and ascription of Asian-ness. Young writes extensively about subject or voice appropriation, which refers to when an outsider both represents and re-presents individuals or institutions from an insider culture.[52] His criticism of this type of appropriation is that – regardless of the accuracy of their artwork – the outsider can only re-present their own limited experiences and understandings of another culture.[53] At some point, every writer on the *Avatar* franchise was an outsider appropriating elements from an insider culture; Ehasz has already noted and defended this dynamic. The degree of collaboration attributed to the *Avatar* and *Korra* writers' room as well as between the different departments had the potential to mitigate this problem by incorporating a broader range of perspectives. Therefore, Ehasz boasts about his coworkers:

> [T]he crew itself... was a pretty diverse crew and there were people not only from the U.S. but from all different cultures including some of the cultures that may have influenced or inspired the show. So we were able to talk about things with people whose parents were born in those countries and things like that.[54]

In this quote, he highlights how the writers' room and, more broadly, the Nickelodeon Animation Studio function as a contact zone, bringing in a range of artistic voices and perspectives in order to create something new and fantastical.[55] Not only do referents and inspirations cross national and cultural borders, so too do people, an example of Arjun Appadurai's ethnoscape.[56]

---

[52] J.O. Young, 6-7.
[53] Ibid., 9.
[54] Ehasz.
[55] Pratt, 6.
[56] Appadurai, 297.

In order to activate this transcultural potential, personnel on *Avatar* have described two different strategies. First, Ehasz had credited a loose approach to incorporating a range of cultural perspectives. Returning to his previous quote on the "pretty diverse crew," he described casual conversations between people from different cultural backgrounds. They are the sort of interactions that could only take place within a self-contained creative space, such as a writers' room or an animation studio. His formulation thus treats transculturation as something that occurs naturally within the parameters of a contact zone. It also shifts much of the burden of authenticity to individuals, who are expected to act as representatives of their respective out-groups. While their contributions can mitigate the pitfalls of subject appropriation, each individual can still only re-present their experiences of a culture, even their own. In contrast to Ehasz's approach, Nickelodeon addressed the issues around cultural representation in a more deliberate and regimented way.

As a part of the writing process, Nickelodeon executives regularly gave notes on premises, outlines, and scripts.[57] For the first two seasons of *Avatar*, that feedback included reports from cultural consultant Edwin Zane. Rather than rely on the organic flow of culture as described by Ehasz, the network contacted and hired someone to ensure that the show's use of Asian referents and signifiers was careful, sensitive, respectful, and authentic. A former Vice President of MANAA, Zane claimed that his name "came up a lot" when executives were contacting Asian American media organizations.[58] As the show's cultural consultant, he recalled providing feedback on scripts, storyboards, animatics, and rough cuts, although he did not remember many specific examples.[59] Still, his contributions have been positively framed by third parties. In the aforementioned CNN article, Ehasz is quoted describing Zane's as "read[ing] the scripts and essentially mak[ing] sure they were culturally sensitive."[60] In *Diversity in U.S. Mass Media*, the authors include a formal complaint from MANAA President Guy Aoki regarding the live-action adaptation of *Avatar*. In his letter, Aoki credits the positive reception of the original show in part to the participation of his organization's former Vice President.[61] Notably, Zane was never physically present at Nickelodeon studios outside of annual meetings. Instead, he worked remotely, sending his notes to

[57] Blacker; Allesandra; Ehasz; Hedrick (21 Sep.).
[58] Zane.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ancil.
[61] Luther, Lepre, and Clark, 148-49.

Nickelodeon executive Jenna Luttrell, who then relayed them to the relevant departments.[62] Neither Ehasz nor Hedrick recalled any significant interactions with him or his feedback.[63] Furthermore, as far as I can tell, neither of the co-creators have mentioned him in interviews or studio-produced paratexts – in contrast to the spotlighting of the other consultants with whom they had more regular interactions. Zane operated like a satellite orbiting around the contact zone of the Nickelodeon Animation Studio, contributing to and affecting the construction and ascription of Asian-ness without becoming immersed in the production communities.

Even within the context of fantasy world-building, the writers' rooms of *Avatar* and *Korra* sought to avoid the pitfalls of subject appropriation through the incorporation of a range of artistic perspectives. Their strategies included hiring personnel from different backgrounds as well as an outside consultant to operate as representatives of their cultures. In this regard, the Nickelodeon Animation Studio operated as a contact zone, where individuals and ideas from different cultures collaborated and combined to form something new and transcultural. Instead of a singular self-contained space, the production narratives of *Avatar* and *Korra* reveals that the Nickelodeon Animation Studio is composed of a series of separate but still interlocking production cultures with various remote satellites orbiting around them and beaming down data.

"They Don't Call It *Na Sing Se*": An Anglophonic Centering

In *Avatar* and *Korra*, language operates as a cultural signifier, affecting the construction and ascription of Asian-ness to animated bodyscapes. The previous chapter addresses the impact of proper names and Chinese calligraphy on fantastical world-building, and chapter six addresses the pronunciations of those proper names. This section focuses on the ramifications of having the characters speak English. On one hand, given that these are mainstream U.S. television series, there was never really a viable alternative to using the nation's *de facto* official language. However, while there is a trope within fantasy of positioning character dialogue as having been translated for the benefit of the audience or reader, that is not the case for the *Avatar*.[64] The characters are written to speak English in a way that is specific to that language, a practice that clashes with the non-English linguistic elements of the franchise.

---

[62] Zane.
[63] Ehasz; Hedrick (21 Sep.).
[64] For an example of this practice, consider Appendix F for *The Lord of the Rings*, in which author J.R.R. Tolkien metatextually maintains he had translated a preexisting text into English.

This Anglophonic centering is most apparent in the proliferation of puns. In "The Earth King" (*Avatar* S2E18), Sokka gloats about an antagonist's arrest: "Looks like Long Feng is long gone." The wordplay emphasizes this homonym between a common English word and an Asian-coded name, crafting an Anglo-centric pun at the expense of the latter. In "Rebel Spirit" (*Korra* S2E01), Mako practices one-liners: "Looks like you guys should put more 'try' in Triad." The word 'try' is aurally identical to the first syllable of the criminal organization "Triad." These are two English words that need to correspond in order for the pun – even an intentionally bad one – to work. Bolin engages in a similar type of wordplay in "The Stakeout" (*Korra* S3E09). While preparing to play the fictional board game Pai Sho, he declares to his opponent: "Well, looks like we have ourselves a Pai Sho-down." Naturally, the practice of dubbing – translating, rewriting, and re-recording the dialogue after the fact for other national markets – complicates this dynamic. However, this project focuses on the original versions of the texts; dubs and other localizations were made outside of the initial production processes and by different crews.

The franchise does feature one prominent example of a non-English pun. In "The Drill" (*Avatar* S2E13), General Sung boasts about his city's defenses: "Nevertheless, that is why the city is named *Ba Sing Se*. It's the 'impenetrable city.' They don't call it *Na Sing Se*. [laughs] That means 'penetrable city.'" The structure and delivery of line – the initial pun, pause, and subsequent explanation – communicates that, while the speaker understands his joke, the other characters and the audience do not and therefore require a translation. English is positioned as the default and knowledge of other languages as the outlier, something that can be mined for humor. After all, the joke in this scene is not the pun but the awkward pause. In contrast, the protagonists are able to read Chinese calligraphy – even the most archaic of scripts – without difficulty. Consider the scene from "The Serpent's Pass" (*Avatar* S2E12) where the heroes find some graffiti on a wooden post. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the carvings depicted in a close-up read 絕望, but instead of reciting "jué wàng" Katara says "abandon hope" (Appendix 1.10). In universe, she reads those words aloud for the benefit of the blind Toph. However, doing so – especially during a close-up of the logograms – also translates the phrase for a presumed Chinese-illiterate audience. This practice continues in *Korra*, as people read Chinese aloud in English tenuously for other characters but primarily for the audience. For example, in "The Terror Within" (*Korra*

S3E08), Mako finds a note with the logograms 隊伍斉集 待命行事, and – with the calligraphy once again framed in a close-up – he reads the message to the others in the room (Appendix 2.01). Similar to Katara and the graffiti, he says: "Team assembled. Ready to rendezvous." instead of "Duìwǔ qí jí. Dàimìng xíngshì." Even while the visuals signify Asian-ness and Chinese-ness, the dialogue centers English as the default. Fantastical distancing is in tension with mimetic authenticity.

Across these instances, the writers of *Avatar* and *Korra* treat English as a neutral element that neither contributes to nor detracts from other cultural identities. However, regardless of artistic intent, spoken language operates as a signifier just as much as written language. Therefore, what does English signify in the *Avatar* world? What identities does it project onto the animated bodyscape? In the real world, English has come to mean many things in different contexts, as numerous scholars have explored.[65] It would be a mistake to position the language exclusively as a signifier of a particular nation, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, because versions and variations exist in other cultures. The language is spoken on such an international and intercultural level that linguist Braj B. Kachru can observe there are now more nonnative than native speakers.[66] Of this "universalization," he notes two impacts. First, there is an "Englishization" of native languages, which ties in with connotations of imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. Second, there is a "nativization" of English, with the "dominant" language undergoing hybridization with local ones.[67] What happens when English is removed from these real-world contexts and transplanted into a fantasy setting? There are two primary options. First, the language carries some mixture of the multiple connotations detailed above. After all – with few exceptions, such as substituting "movie" with "mover" in season two of *Korra* – there is little fantastical distancing between American English and *Avatar* English. Instead of archaisms evoking a distant past, plain language normalizes fantastical elements.[68] If the calligraphy conveys Chinese-ness because of its fidelity, then by extension the dialogue should

[65] Braj B. Kachru, ed., *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Farzad Sharifian, ed., *English as an International Language: Perspectives and Pedagogical Issues* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2009); Vaughan Rapatahana and Pauline Bunce, eds., *English Language as Hydra: Its Impacts on Non-English Language Cultures* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2012).
[66] Braj B. Kachru, "World Englishes: Agony and Ecstasy," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 30.2 (Summer 1996): 138.
[67] Ibid., 138.
[68] Susan Mandala, *The Language of Science Fiction and Fantasy: The Question of Style* (London: Continuum, 2010), 76, 92, 96.

convey an American-ness. Alternatively, English is truly a default placeholder with no greater significance. The dubbing of these shows for international distribution would support this stance, since the practice positions spoken language as incidental and interchangeable. However, this second option still ties into and reinforces the English's real-world identity as a "universal" language. Fantasy conventions could have papered this over, but the disparity between re-presentations of spoken and written languages highlights the use of English and its incongruity with the rest of the world-building. Even though English is spoken in various Asian countries and even though there are native English speakers of Asian descent, the application of this language in *Avatar* and *Korra* projects an American-ness onto the animated bodyscapes of the characters.

Summary: Constructing Identities and Constructing Production Cultures

Scripts are not the final product in animation. They are meant to be interpreted by other departments as part of other productions processes. Nevertheless, the creative decisions made at this stage still affect the construction and ascription of race and other identities onto animated bodyscapes. Like with the art department, the writers' room engages with the appropriation and adaptation of real-world referents into fantastical cultural signifiers. Recognizing the risks associated with taking inspiration from other cultures, Ehasz emphasized the importance of fantastical distancing and mimetic authenticity. In their world-building, *Avatar* and *Korra* writers refracted referents through the "lens of inspiration," de-contextualizing and hybridizing them in order to prevent a direct translation between a real-world culture and a fantasy one. At the same time, they retained enough specificity as to be "careful, sensitive, respectful, and authentic" when constructing signifiers. With chakras, DiMartino and Konietzko removed some linguistic specificity, weakening explicit connotations with India and Hinduism. When naming the Dai Li, Hedrick de-contextualized the name of a historical figure in order to convey the general identity of "Chinese Secret Police." Finally, Mattila embellished her depiction of acupuncture in order to fit it into the *Avatar* world, and her fidelity to the referent helped ground the more fantastical elements. Their decisions resulted in the projection of Asian-ness onto animated bodyscapes. However, the writers' foregrounding of American English dialogue complicates matters, as the spoken language clashes with the equally authentic Chinese calligraphy. Despite artistic intent, English as utilized in this franchise is not a neutral element but instead a signifier of American-ness.

The construction and ascription of Asian-ness in *Avatar* and *Korra* depended not only on what the writers did but also in how they did it. Despite the above attributions of writing credit, the writing process was designed to be collaborative and collective. As a production culture and contact zone, the writers' room affected the creation of identities for the animated bodyscapes, with people from various national and cultural backgrounds coming together to collectively synthesize and hybridize. Such transculturation mitigated the risk of subject appropriation by incorporating a greater range of perspectives. Their work was then interpreted by adjacent production cultures that similarly operated as collaborative contact zones. For the most part, they all shared the same geographic space – the Nickelodeon Animation Studio – and regularly communicated with each other. However, these processes remained separate. Finally, consultants like Zane orbited around these central locations, making contributions remotely but not directly participating in the production cultures.

The writing process is just one part in the production of an animated television series like *Avatar* or *Korra*. Even though the product of their labor was ultimately interpreted by other departments and unseen by general audiences, writers made creative decisions related to fantasy world-building that in turn can construct and ascribe racial and cultural identities to animated bodyscapes. The nature and impact of those decisions depend on the construction of their production culture and its relationship to adjacent and orbiting ones. After spending these last two chapters on how fantasy world-building constructs cultural signifiers, the upcoming one analyzes how animated bodyscapes incorporate these projected identities into their complex of signs.

Chapter Three – Rendering the Characters of *Avatar* and *Korra*: Intersections of Racial and Cultural Signs in the Animated Bodyscape

Animated bodyscapes are complexes of signs, re-presentations of human bodies defined by their non-indexicality, iconicity, and plasmaticity. Their lack of specificity, especially when compared to photographic reproductions, results in the amplification of retained and surrounding details.[1] Furthermore, their fluidity between frames complicates the ascription of a singular identity.[2] As Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, artists are never in complete control of these complexes of signs; they can only direct or limit sundry factors.[3] As demonstrated in the previous two chapters, through fantasy world-building, personnel construct cultural signifiers that project meaning onto animated bodyscapes. These are one set of signs. Character designers, storyboard artists, and color stylists also make creative decisions that ascribe identity via visual components. For *Avatar* and *Korra*, they marked these characters as Asian, both racially and culturally.

Race in fantasy is a rich area of research, one mined by scholars such as Elisabeth Anne Leonard, Sue Kim, and Helen Young.[4] However, such writings are not always applicable to *Avatar* and *Korra*. The aforementioned authors focus on examples of fantasy that center whiteness and either erase or Other nonwhite-ness. Furthermore, the world of *Avatar* and *Korra* is not populated by multiple sentient species. There are no orcs, elves, or dwarfs – only humans. The spirits are the closest equivalent, but they are not framed in the same way that fantasy "races" traditionally are. This study of racial ascriptions in *Avatar* and *Korra* is therefore limited to re-presentations of human bodies.

In this fantasy world, race as popularly defined does not exist. While there are physical variances – such as skin and eye color – between peoples, they are more commonly categorized by nation based on cultural markers – such as clothing or names. As a result, throughout the franchise, characters are able to travel incognito by changing their outfits and adopting aliases. However, in the real world, the one that produced and consumes these shows, race as popularly understood does persist even if as a social construct. Through their creative decisions, character designers, storyboard artists, and

---

[1] McCloud, 28-36; Honess Roe, 108; Wells, *Animated*, 3-4.
[2] Eisenstein, 21; Deleuze, 5; Wells, *Understanding*, 188, 213; Batkin, 1-2.
[3] Mirzoeff, 3.
[4] Elisabeth Anne Leonard, ed., *Into Darkness Peering: Race and Color in the Fantastic* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997); Sue Kim, "Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in The Lord of the Rings Films," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.4 (2004): 875-907; Helen Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

color stylists ascribed racial identities derived from the real world to these animated bodyscapes. The impact of their actions can be understood as a balancing of familiar factors. They indulge in the mimetic grounding of realist conventions such as hyper-realism as well as requisite streamlining. They also negotiate desires for both the specificity of mimetic authenticity as well as the internal consistency afforded by fantastical distancing. The following sections analyze the effects of these influences on how these production processes each contribute to the complex of signs that is the animated bodyscape.

Character Design: Iconicity, Cultural and Racial Markers, Referents and Models

Character design broadly refers to the production of model sheets for each figure that appears on screen. These include ones for main, guest, and background characters. As part of their job, character designers on *Avatar* and *Korra* constructed and mixed cultural signifiers of Asian-ness – such as clothing, hairstyles, makeup, and jewelry – as well as racial markers of Asian-ness – most notably facial features, as a later section addresses skin tone. In order to make those fantastical signifiers, this production process also appropriated and adapted real-world referents and models. These re-presentations and their interactions with racial markers are informed by the iconicity of these types of animated bodyscapes.

As part of television animation, character designs also underwent a streamlining process in order to remove extraneous details, resulting in iconic bodyscapes. Co-creator and art director Bryan Konietzko noted the difficulty of reproducing more elaborate designs within this system: "If something's too realistic, people get scared to do expressions with them, and they end up looking too stiff."[5] In this quote favoring streamlining over specificity, Konietzko reveals the preference for iconicity for designing facial features. Furthermore, iconic re-presentations of racial out-groups risk caricaturing. With relatively few details, what then does the viewer grasp onto in order to read race in an animated bodyscape? As seen in the literature review, scholars such as Amy Shirong Lu and Terry Kawashima have sought to answer this question in different ways.[6] In place of specificity, remaining and contextual details are amplified. Cultural markers signify and project identity that iconic facial features alone cannot. Therefore,

[5] "Commentary on Rebirth" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).
[6] A.S. Lu; Kawashima.

when clothes from the Tang Dynasty are transformed into Ba Sing Se high fashion, when the third eye of Shiva becomes the third eyes of Combustion Man and P'Li, and when women's active wear of 1920s and 1930s United States inspires one of Zhu Li's outfits, those adaptations position the corresponding characters in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts.[7] The following example analyzes how this process produced visual components for the character design of Zuko, examining how various creative decisions constructed and ascribed Asian-ness to that animated bodyscape.

Designing Zuko: Intentional and Unintentional Signifiers of Asian-ness

Zuko is the primary antagonist for the first season of *Avatar* before he eventually joins the heroes. He is the first member of the Fire Nation shown on screen and is therefore representative of the fantasy culture. As relayed by the co-creators, the idea for the character came from Nickelodeon executive Eric Coleman, who thought that the series could use a recurring villain.[8] From the initial sketches by Konietzko and Yoon Young Ki, character designers made creative decisions that constructed and ascribed Asian-ness to the figure. Original concepts featured overt adaptations of Japanese and samurai referents for his armor and hairstyle, in turn marking the Fire Nation as Japanese in opposition to the more Chinese-inspired Earth Kingdom.[9] Upon seeing these designs, cultural consultant Edwin Zane warned Nickelodeon: "This might be interpreted or translated as 'Japanese are bad, and all other Asian people are good.'"[10] As a result, the art department shifted to using more Chinese referents. The Asian-ness of Zuko and by extension the rest of the Fire Nation was not to be synonymous with Japanese-ness or any single real-world culture. There needed to be greater fantastical distancing. However, at the same time, this decision to center Chinese referents for multiple fantasy cultures does position China as synecdochic for Asia.

This production narrative demonstrates how various individuals navigated and negotiated cultural signifiers in order to ascribe a desired type of Asian-ness, one suggestive of Chinese-ness but not explicitly linked with any one culture. However, the character designers also made creative decisions that ascribed identity in ways that they did not intend, as seen with the development of Zuko's scar. Konietzko recalled early

[7] DiMartino and Konietzko, 110, 142; "Commentary on Kuvira's Gambit" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*), Viacom International Inc. (2015).
[8] Blacker.
[9] DiMartino and Konietzko, 24-25.
[10] Zane.

feedback from Coleman: "Eric said, 'You know how skinheads are scary? But, when you see a thirteen-year-old skinhead, it's somehow scarier?' So, that's what he said, and I just said, 'Can he have a scar?'"[11] In this recounting, Coleman wanted to transform a real-world referent – the shaved scalp of a young skinhead – into a signifier of intensity. Such a visual would also be accompanied by additional connotations of white supremacist movements. In order to mitigate such signification, Konietzko introduced additional design elements, including a topknot and a scar. While Zuko's hairstyle changes over the course of the series and the franchise, his scar remains a consistent identifying mark.

While the scar was originally intended to lessen the severity of the character's shaved head, Zane had a different reading. He told me:

> I remember giving them the note that there's actually a genetic trait in the Asian population – and just by coincidence my cousin has it... But there's a lot of Asian people that have this really big birthmark... on parts of their faces that they can't hide or they can't cover... I did point out to them that there is a significant Asian population – especially if there's children that's watching this – that can easily identify with not being able to hide a certain shame, even though... his was a scar and theirs was a birthmark.[12]

Zane appears to be referring to port-wine stains (*nevus flammeaus*), congenital vascular malformations caused by permanently dilated blood vessels, most commonly on the face. According to the Vascular Birthmarks Foundation, this reddish birthmark is non-hereditary, affecting all racial groups equally.[13] That said, most common removal treatments were still designed for lighter skin tones.[14] Regardless, for Zane, port-wine stains specifically signified Asian-ness, to the extent that Zuko's similarly colored and positioned scar carried the same connotations. At no point did the creators or character designers note this possible parallel. Nevertheless, they had ascribed Asian-ness to that animated bodyscape.

---

[11] Blacker.
[12] Zane.
[13] "Port Wine Stain (PWS)," *The Vascular Birthmarks Foundation*, n.d.
[14] Ho Wai Sun, et al. "Laser Treatment on Congenital Facial Port-Wine Stains; Long-Term Efficacy and Complication in Chinese Patients," *Lasers in Surgery and Medicine: The Official Journal of the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery* 30.1 (2002): 44-47; Yoo-Soo Cindy Bae, Elise Ng, and Roy G. Geronemus, "Successful Treatment of Two Pediatric Port Wine Stains in Darker Skin Types Using 595 nm Laser," *Lasers in Surgery and Medicine: The Official Journal of the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery* 48.4 (2016): 339-42; Yu Wenxin, et al. "Shorter Intervals of East Asians with Port-Wine Stain with Pulsed Dye Laser Are Safe and Effective – A Prospective Side-by-Side Comparison," *Photomedicine and Laser Surgery* 36.1 (2018): 37-43.

When developing Zuko, character designers and other personnel made creative decisions that marked him as Asian in both intentional and unintentional ways. Early concept sketches of his armor and hairstyle were revised in order to avoid equating the villainous Fire Nation with the real-world Japan. Instead of mimetic authenticity and specificity, they chose fantastical distancing and hybridization, using the same pool of referents as for the Earth Kingdom. Just as the emulation of samurai armor bore inadvertent connotations, so too did other design decisions. The use of a skinhead referent indeed conveys intensity and scariness but also positions Zuko's animated bodyscape in relation to specific real-world white supremacist movements. Even attempts to mitigate this connection by adding other elements had unintended ramifications. When the show's cultural consultant reviewed their designs for this character, he saw the scar as resembling a port-wine stain and therefore as a signifier for Asian-ness. Through these visual components, these individuals ascribed Asian-ness to an animated bodyscape. In addition to these and other cultural referents, the character design process of *Avatar* and *Korra* used specific models for their re-presentations of human bodies.

The Transformation of Physiological and Animated Models into Signifiers of Asian-ness

Throughout both series, character designers used the physiological bodies of other crewmembers, friends, and family as models. The pirates from "The Waterbending Scroll" (*Avatar* S1E09) were based on the animators from JM Animation in South Korea, June the bounty hunter from "Bato of the Water Tribe" (*Avatar* S1E15) emulated postproduction supervisor Lisa Yang, and Joo Dee from "City of Walls and Secrets" (*Avatar* S2E14) was modeled after line producer Miken Lee Wong in "design and personality."[15] In the sequel series, the Equalist doorman from "The Revelation" (*Korra* S1E03) was a re-presentation of martial arts videographer William Rinaldi, Ryu from "Rebirth" (*Korra* S3E02) was based on producer Ki Hyun Ryu, and two Kuvira supporters from "The Coronation" (*Korra* S4E03) were modeled after designers Angela Song Mueller and Christine Bian.[16] While personnel of different racial and ethnic backgrounds were all transformed into Asian-coded characters, the use of Asian and Asian American models was more prevalent and more spotlighted. When *Avatar*

[15] DiMartino and Konietzko, 54, 67, 110.
[16] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Air*, 65; DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Change*, 35; DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Balance*, 44.

animatic editor Dao Le condemned the casting for the live-action film, she specifically wrote that "some of the characters were even modeled after Asian members of the crew."[17] This statement suggests that the Asian identity of these models was transferrable to the characters. She did not address the use of non-Asian models and whether some of their racial and ethnic identity was likewise transmitted. Nevertheless, as with the adaptation of real-world referents, the use of models creates fantastical signifiers. The following examples of character design have been defined by their relationships with their models and how they can convey Asian-ness.

As mentioned in chapter one, martial arts consultant Sifu Kisu served as the model for the character of Piandao in "Sokka's Master" (*Avatar* S3E04). While he has been aged and given facial hair, the adaptation is straightforward enough that Kisu claimed he could recognize himself in the design. Rather than a random cameo, Konietzko and Mueller made a deliberate decisions to use Kisu and as a model for this specific character, the master swordsman and teacher.[18] Like the use of Chinese swords as referents for the character's weapons, the use of Kisu as a model for Piandao was meant to mark the figure as a master in Chinese martial arts. This signification is derived from the consultant's acquired expertise rather than his genealogy. It also exists only for those with behind-the-scenes knowledge. As a result, by emulating Kisu, the character designers were able to construct and ascribe Asian-ness to his doppelganger.

The Pirate Barker introduced in "The Waterbending Scroll" and the Warden introduced in "The Boiling Rock, Part 1" (*Avatar* S3E14) share the same model, Seung Hyun Oh, an employee of JM Animation and later supervising director at Nickelodeon.[19] A comparison of the two designs reveals which facial features were considered most representative of Oh and therefore worth retaining or exaggerating (Appendix 3.01-3.02). Both characters have prominent lips, downward eyebrows, epicanthic folds, and long faces. By the third season, the animated figures were relatively more detailed. As a result, Jae Woo Kim's design for the Warden has more pronounced nasolabial folds, whereas those in Konietzko and Woo Sung Gu's design for the Pirate Barker barely pass his nostrils. The Warden's nose and chin are also less pronounced, and his cheekbones are more defined, clearly rendered as black lines. For the designers, these facial features were enough to represent and re-present Oh. Unlike with Piandao, the creators and

[17] Marissa Lee, "Statement from Dao Le, Animatic Editor," *Racebending.com*, 31 Jul. 2009.
[18] DiMartino and Konietzko, 140; "Commentary – Sokka's."
[19] DiMartino and Konietzko, 54, 157.

crewmembers have not provided a clear rationale for modeling the Pirate Barker and the Warden after this crewmember. Because neither character shares a personality, Oh's likeness does not appear to signify any internal qualities. Perhaps they thought he looked interesting, with his long face and pronounced lips. Regardless, this choice of model carries connotations related to identity. If nothing else, recalling Le's earlier statement, it helps mark these characters as racially Asian.

However, what happens when the model is not a physiological body? How does it convey Asian-ness? Introduced in "Reunion" (*Korra* S4E07), Baraz is a Firebender who has escaped from an Earth Empire reeducation camp. Because his design was not yet finalized, the storyboard artists rendered him as a mixture of Spike Spiegel from *Cowboy Bebop* (1998) and Mugen from *Samurai Champloo* (2004-05), sharing their triangular faces, messy hair, and thin eyebrows.[20] This appearance persisted into final animation. The emulation of these iconic anime characters connotes different facets of Baraz's identity. The visual parallels mark him as a rough rogue in imitation of Spike and Mugen. The connection is reinforced by the casting of Steve Blum, who voiced the two anime characters in the English dubs. Furthermore, through their sketches, the storyboard artists positioned this bodyscape in relation to anime. The storyboard artists therefore constructed fantastical signifiers of Asian-ness as well as specific personality traits through the selection of models.

For the construction of animated bodyscapes, character designers on *Avatar* and *Korra* adapted referents and models into cultural and racial signifiers. These visual components intersected as part of a complex of signs that the artists could not fully control. As a result, their creative decisions ascribed identities in both intentional and unintentional ways, as seen in the development of Zuko's original design. These bodyscapes are defined by their iconicity, by their lack of specificity. Surrounding cultural signifiers – including those created by other production processes – and the retained details of facial features are amplified in their construction and ascription of Asian-ness and other identities. However, animated bodyscapes are not static illustrations on model sheets but are instead bodies in illusory motion, defined by their plasmaticity. These designs had to be interpreted by episode directors and storyboard artists, who made their own impactful creative decisions.

---

[20] "Commentary on Reunion" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*), Viacom International Inc. (2015).

Storyboarding: Plasmaticity, (Re)Interpretations, and Referencing Anime

Upon completion of the script, an episode would be assigned to a director and team of storyboard artists. *Avatar* storyboard artist Juan Meza-Leon described his job as to "interpret" the script in order to tell the "visual narrative of the story."[21] This summation complements how writers left gaps in anticipation of embellishments, as described in the previous chapter. The storyboards would, in turn, be interpreted by other groups of personnel. As *Korra* assistant director Olga Ulanova noted, their job was not to create the final animation but instead "to create an animatic that we could send overseas to be animated."[22] While this wording implies a more straightforward translation, with the animatic functioning like an industrial blueprint, "interpretation" is more apt. Film scholars Chris Pallant and Steven Price join other academics in contesting how the "blueprint metaphor" has been historically used for scripts and storyboards, noting that such a framework defines them as more restricting than they are in practice.[23] Meza-Leon's and Ulanova's outputs were not final products but instead sequential black-and-white drawings that privilege movement over visual detail. Pallant and Price note that this emphasis is common for storyboards.[24] Therefore, when episode directors and storyboard artists contributed to the construction and ascription of Asian-ness, it was primarily through the choreographing of movement, as chapter four explores in greater depth. This section instead focuses on instances where these personnel made creative decisions that affected a character's appearance.

Like a script, an animatic was the synthesis of ideas from various individuals across multiple meetings and passes.[25] Unlike the writers' room, though, there was greater delegation and division of labor, with each director assigned a group of storyboard artists to oversee. *Avatar* director Giancarlo Volpe and *Korra* director Melchior Zwyer both discussed how they then divided the script into sections for each member of their team.[26] Their work still received extensive feedback and underwent extensive revisions, even after the team had moved to another episode. Due to this

---

[21] Juan Meza-Leon (21 Jul. 2018), Skype interview.
[22] Olga Ulanova (22 May 2018), Google Hangouts interview.
[23] Pallant and Price, 6-8.
[24] Ibid., 16-17.
[25] "Commentary on A Breath of Fresh Air" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014); Meza-Leon; Ulanova.
[26] Acastus, "Interview with Director Giancarlo Volpe (part 1 of 3)," *AvatarSpirit.net*, 16 Jun. 2006; "Commentary on Original Airbenders" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Nickelodeon (2014); "Spirit of an Episode: Original Airbenders" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Nickelodeon (2014).

degree of collaboration, Joaquim Dos Santos – director and storyboard artist on *Avatar* as well as producer and director on *Korra* – has frequently commented on the difficulty of assigning credit to one person for a single section or even for a specific element in a storyboard.[27] While the process differs from the writers' rooms, the directing and storyboarding process was also designed to bring in a variety of perspectives from both inside and outside of this particular production culture. As a result, there was a range of interpretations not only of the scripts but also of the character designs, revealing the malleability of these animated bodyscapes.

(Re)Drawing Animated Bodyscapes: Plasmatic Potential and the Storyboarding Process

Given this type of animation, plasmaticity was inevitable. Too many people were involved to preserve the specificity of original designs, regardless of streamlining. As Konietzko phrased it: "Dozens of storyboard artists and animators all take turns drawing the same characters, and their interpretations can vary widely. And we just don't have the time, money, or energy to have every inconsistency corrected in retakes."[28] In this quote, he was referring chiefly to mistakes or "off-model" renderings. However, storyboard artists have also deliberately altered elements of a design for various reasons. Sometimes, these deviations are minor, such in one shot in "Enemy at the Gate" (*Korra* S4E05) where Baatar Jr.'s buttons his cufflink, a feature of his uniform absent in the model sheet created by Konietzko and Mueller.[29] Whether the action originated in the script or the storyboards, this image is the result of someone reinterpreting a character design, adding details and attributes that did not previously exist. Other choices had more lasting impacts on the visual appearances of characters in these shows.

According to Volpe, by the storyboarding stage, the art department would often still be creating the designs for new locations, characters, and props.[30] Meza-Leon and Ulanova both confirmed working with rough approximations or non-finalized versions.[31]

---

[27] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Spirits*, 52, 86; DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Change*, 21; "Audio Commentary – Chapter 3: The Revelation" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*), Viacom International Inc. (2014); "Commentary – Southern Lights"; "Commentary on Night of a Thousand Stars" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Viacom International Inc. (2014); "Commentary on A New Spiritual Age" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).

[28] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Change*, 95.

[29] "Commentary – Enemy"; DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Balance*, 18.

[30] Acastus, "Interview with Director Giancarlo Volpe (part 3 of 3)," *AvatarSpirit.net*, 1 Jul. 2006.

[31] Meza-Leon; "The Spirit of an Episode: Rebirth" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).

For example, Meza-Leon recalled using a blank mannequin as a placeholder for Piandao. Knowing that the character would be modeled after Kisu, he drew the figure as tall and lean but otherwise nondescript.[32] Other times, these placeholders would contain details that survived to final animation. This was the case with Baraz in "Reunion," where an unnamed storyboard artist drew Spike from *Cowboy Bebop* in lieu of a new character design. Konietzko recalled making some alterations, such as adding a receding hairline, to lessen the resemblance. However, he noted that "you change it too far from the board, then the expressions get watered down in translation."[33] Storyboard artists exercise immense power over an animated bodyscape. Their interpretations of or substitutes for a character design introduce elements that can persist to final animation. One of the more prominent examples of a character permanently altered by a storyboard artist is Varrick, introduced in "Rebel Spirit" (*Korra* S2E01). Because this eccentric Water Tribe entrepreneur was a recurring character for the new season, a design by Ryu was finalized ahead of storyboarding. Nevertheless, that model sheet still needed to be interpreted by storyboard artists, including Lauren Montgomery. Her off-model renderings of Varrick were lankier than Ryu's, and they ultimately supplanted the original in subsequent appearances.[34] While these changes did not directly impact any racial or cultural significations, they did mark the character as more visually comedic.

As the animated bodyscape flows between production cultures, from character design to storyboarding, it is reinterpreted and ascribed with new signifiers. Some of these additions come in the form of minor deviations while others are major reinterpretations. Inevitable outcomes given the range of contributing perspectives, both types of embellishment emphasize the plasmaticity of these animated bodyscapes. They possess the potential for radical transformation between frames. As part of the introduction of new components to these complexes of signs, directors and storyboard artists also utilized models and referents.

Models and Referents: Emulating Live-action Performances and Animated Expressions

Like character designers, storyboard artists transformed real-world elements in order to block and choreograph performances and actions. In our interview, Meza-Leon recounted being directed to use existing acting references, specifically of Jennifer

[32] Meza-Leon.
[33] "Commentary – Reunion."
[34] "Commentary – Guide."

Aniston for Katara and of kid protagonists of various 1980s U.S. films for Aang. He also described how some of his colleagues would film themselves acting out assigned scenes. The performances would be polished during the cleanup stage, especially if the voice actors had not yet been recorded.[35] This practice appears to have been largely abandoned for *Korra*, with Ulanova saying: "We didn't really need reference for [acting]... Honestly, there's not a lot of complicated stuff like that in the show that would need additional reference for the animation studio."[36] However, there were exceptions, such as episode director Colin Heck acting out a scene from "The Ultimatum" (*Korra* S3E11) where Bolin reacts to meeting Zuko.[37] Elements of these cinematic and live performances were appropriated and transformed into the animated performances.

These adaptations highlight two main facets of the ascribed identity. First, they represent a drive toward mimesis, as the imitated naturalistic acting avoids activating the plasmatic potential of an animated bodyscape as well as normalizes the more fantastical and abstracted elements. The second point conjures questions about the selection of models. The actors cited by Meza-Leon are overwhelmingly white and American, yet elements of their performances were transcribed to characters who are neither. How much of their identities was transferred to these newly constructed bodyscapes? How do they intersect with the other signifiers? The use of white and American performances as models was apparently regarded as neutral. The identities that these elements ascribed relate to mimesis rather than something explicitly racial or cultural. Nevertheless, like the use of American English discussed in the previous chapter, these referents operate as unintentional signifiers of an American identity. In order to deliberately ascribe a cultural identity, episode directors and storyboard artists utilized referents from outside of live-action filmmaking practices.

For the third season of *Avatar*, Meza-Leon recalled how supervising director Oh instructed the storyboard artists how to draw anime-style.[38] Despite its supposed statelessness, anime and its conventions are often associated with national and cultural identity, with scholars such as Susan J. Napier describing how it captures aspects of Japanese society.[39] Rayna Denison also recounts how writers such as Antonia Levi and Gilles Poitras have treated this kind of animation as representative of Japan and Japanese

[35] Meza-Leon. For Aang's performance, he recalled being directed to reference characters from *Time Bandits* (1981), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), and *The Goonies* (1985), and *Hook* (1991).
[36] Ulanova.
[37] "Commentary – Ultimatum."
[38] Meza-Leon.
[39] Napier, 27-34.

culture on a global stage.[40] Approaching the topic from an East Asian context, Tze-Yue G. Hu refers to anime as a form of cultural imperialism, as the dominant form of animation in the region and the only type to reach global audiences.[41] Through the appropriation and imitation of stylistic elements of anime, the directors and storyboard artists of *Avatar* and *Korra* positioned their show in relation to Japan and more broadly to Asia.

In his list of recognizable "anime-esque" traits, Stevie Suan includes "common conventionalized facial/body expressions".[42] Other writers have identified some of these visual components as *manpu* (漫符) or "manga notations," as iconic symbols that indicate and amplify emotional or mental states.[43] According to Suan:

> The most common citational acts are not of specific instances from other anime, but of more formal elements such as the figurative acting of characters in their conventionalized facial and bodily expressions, each expression citing previous instances of that expression. These expressions are generally slower changing and some of these gestures have been almost inseparable from the image of anime, integral acts of the anime-esque. Each re-performance of every anime-esque act, by its very nature as a conventional act, will be citing prior anime performances.[44]

Through the appropriation and imitation of *manpu*, *Avatar* and *Korra* storyboard artists directly linked animated bodyscapes not to specific texts but to anime in general, in turn signifying Japanese-ness and Asian-ness. At numerous points in the franchise, an on-model rendering of a character is comically juxtaposed with an exaggerated or "super-deformed" version, frequently accompanied with *manpu*. While there are many types, this section highlights three kinds of manga notations.

In "Lake Laogai" (*Avatar* S2E17), Aang yells at Joo Doo (Appendix 3.03). To convey the character's extreme frustration, storyboard artist Kenji Ono incorporated a set of visual icons emphasized by Aang's enlarged head.[45] The most prominent *manpu*

---

[40] Denison, *Anime*, 3-4.
[41] Hu, 137-63.
[42] Stevie Suan, "Anime's Performativity: Diversity through Conventionality in a Global Media-Form," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12.1 (2017): 64.
[43] Koji Aihara and Kentaro Takekuma, *Even a Monkey Can Draw Manga Vol. 1*, trans. Yuji Oniki (San Francisco, CA: Viz Communications, Inc., 2002), 19; Thomas J. Wallestad, "Developing the Visual Language of Comics: The Interactive Potential of Japan's Contributions," *Hyōgen Bunka* 7 (2012): 5; Daliot-Bul and Otmazgin, 116.
[44] Suan, 73.
[45] "Commentary – Lake."

are the cross of "veins" or "blood vessel mark" in his left temple. Koji Aihara, Kentaro Takekuma, and Thomas J. Wallestad identify this symbol as indicative of anger.[46] Amplifying the effect, steam non-diegetically shoots out from behind Aang's head, another *manpu*.[47] As with all instances of *manpu* in this franchise, the scene plays the reaction as a comedic contrast to his usual appearance and demeanor.

For a different example, Chan has a particular reaction to Azula's attempt to flirt with him in "The Beach" (*Avatar* S3E05, Appendix 3.04). He is shocked, nervous, and intimated by her but awkwardly tries to hide it before excusing himself. To achieve this effect, Ono simplified the design and added a distinctive *manpu*.[48] A single drop runs down the right side of Chan's face. Wallestad writes about the versatility of this simple icon. In addition to sweat, it can represent tears, saliva, or mucus, each indicative of different emotions or states. Here, the symbol represents a "psychological cold sweat."[49] Against more iconic features, the *manpu* and its signification is amplified, not only Chan's apprehension but also the association with anime and Japan.

These extreme reactions are tempered in *Korra*. When the characters acquire *manpu*, their appearances do not drastically deviate from the model sheets. They do not indulge in their plasmaticity as much as their predecessors. In "When Extremes Meet" (*Korra* S1E08), when Ikki is frustrated after Korra shuts a door in her face, episode director Ryu storyboarded her eyes glowing and her face darkening (Appendix 3.05).[50] In "Darkness Falls" (*Korra* S2E13), Tenzin undergoes a similar transformation after he is surprised by Kya's sudden scream (Appendix 3.06). The art book credits Dae-Woo Lee as the storyboard artist for this sequence.[51] While Suan views them as emblematic of "comedic shock and despair," the blank white eyes that define these instances act as multipliers for the characters' existing expressions, Ikki's anger and Tenzin's alarm.[52] Ono also used this *manpu* for Aang's aforementioned outburst. While a relatively subtle embellishment, blank white eyes position these animated bodyscapes in relation to anime and Japan.

In both *Avatar* and *Korra*, episode directors and storyboard artists exploited the plasmaticity of the animated bodyscape to associate them with anime and therefore to

[46] Aihara and Takekuma, 19; Wallestad, 7.
[47] Aihara and Takekuma, 19.
[48] "Commentary – Beach."
[49] Wallestad, 6.
[50] "Commentary – When."
[51] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Spirits*, 160.
[52] Suan, 70.

construct and ascribe Japanese-ness and Asian-ness. As Suan writes, these expressions and *manpu* connect these characters not with specific texts but with anime in general. Through anime, they are linked with Japan as a whole. The discourse around these reinterpretations of character design also highlight their Asian origins, with the co-creators primarily crediting Asian and Asian American personnel – Ono, Ryu, and Lee – for these flourishes. According to production narratives, these individuals brought their specific perspectives to their renderings of these animated bodyscapes. Thus, *manpu* becomes part of these complexes of signs. Joining them is one other major visual component: color.

Color and the Animated Bodyscape: Iconicity, Plasmaticity, and Race

With iconic facial features, skin tone is of increased importance for the construction and ascription of a racial identity. The visual components of these animated bodyscapes pass through a series of production cultures, each making creative decisions related to the application of color. The primary points of this journey are character design, where the color stylist chooses which hues to use; storyboarding, where individuals add embellishments that survive to final animation; and color correction, where colorists smooth out the rough edges as part of postproduction. Through such processes, these animated bodyscapes are defined by their iconicity and plasmaticity in both form and color.

The Application of Color Across Production Processes: Mimesis and Integration

The role and responsibilities of the color stylist has already been addressed in the first chapter. To summarize, they select the "local color" for the model sheets – depicting the figure in an imitation of neutral lighting conditions – as well as the "dials" for various locations or circumstance. In both the model sheets and the finished episodes, the digital ink and color method employed by this franchise results in a lack of texture or gradient, a necessary streamlining for television production. Barring special lighting effects, usually only one or two colors are associated with the skin tone of a figure at a time. Furthermore, those hues can and do change once the character has left the model sheet. Like the BG designers were instructed to think about how the architecture was constructed, the color stylist was tasked with integrating the characters into different environments. As a result, a major character has multiple skin tones over the course of a

single series. In these ways, color stylists contribute to the iconicity and plasmaticity of an animated bodyscape.

While most examples of dials do not deviate far from the local color, these animated bodyscapes always possess the capacity for extreme change. Konietzko discussed two types of lighting conditions that make a significant impact: "Any time you add green, it really makes the characters' skin just look bizarre. Green and blue. They all react differently."[53] These distortions are so "bizarre" because they drastically break from the warm and naturalistic tan and brown hues usually utilized. In isolation, such dials do not appear to follow realist animation conventions, are not mimetic of physiological bodies. However, such hues help integrate these characters into their surroundings, still have a grounding effect. Consider how Katara's skin tone changes throughout the first series. In "The King of Omashu" (*Avatar* S1E05), the green light of King Bumi's throne room results in a sickly green hue, reminiscent of mold (Appendix 3.07). In "The Waterbending Master" (*Avatar* S1E18), the cold polar light of the Northern Water Tribe banquet hall turns the character dark blue (Appendix 3.08). A comparison of these scenes to her model sheet reveals just how wide a range of skin tones an animated bodyscape can possess (Appendix 3.09). These two dials are not imitative of the human body, appearing to break away from the hyper-realist aesthetics of the franchise. Nevertheless, in addition to integrating Katara in specific settings, they also do not break the illusion of a unified bodyscape. Across these renderings, Katara remains recognizably Katara, despite the visual disparity. Korra, in the sequel series, undergoes a similar procedure as she approaches a spirit portal in "The Southern Lights" (*Korra* S2E02, Appendix 3.10). Due to the otherworldly and Antarctic setting, the character's local color is replaced with a cyan-green tint (Appendix 3.11). Again the difference between the two is great, revealing how these animated bodyscapes are plasmatic not only in form but also in color.

As a part of the production process, these animated bodyscapes passed beyond the purview of character designs and color stylists and into that of episode directors and storyboard artists. Generally, *Avatar* and *Korra* storyboards are comprised of black-and-white drawings with color only added to aid continuity, for example helping differentiate figures in an action scene.[54] Such uses of color were not retained in the final animation.

---

[53] "Commentary – Southern Lights."
[54] DiMartino and Konietzko, 171; DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Spirits*, 168.;"Commentary – New."

On the other hand, the storyboard artists also used color to depict emotional reactions. As seen in the official animatics, they applied pink to Aang's cheeks at the end of "Bato of the Water Tribe" to illustrate him blushing, and they colored Pema's face pink to show her getting angry in "Civil Wars, Part 1" (*Korra* S2E03, Appendix 3.12-3.13).[55] These flourishes were preserved, if still adapted, by the animators, affecting final colors.

Again, these bodyscapes passed along the chain of production, with overseas studios utilizing the dials selected by the color stylist before returning the final animation to Nickelodeon for postproduction. Once back, these animated bodyscapes underwent one more major step: color correction. Konietzko has framed this process as a refining of the work of the original stylists. When discussing a scene featuring Zuko from "The Siege of the North, Part 1" (*Avatar* S1E19), he recalled:

> Hye Jung Kim, the color supervisor, and I tried to do this difficult lighting situation where there was cooler color coming from outside, from the nighttime, and this warmer color coming from the gas lamps inside this bay. That was pretty complex, and Kevin [Kirwan] kind of wrapped it all together nicely.[56]

According to this description, the colors used for Zuko's skin tone in this scene were the products of multiple individuals. Kim supplied the local colors and dials before Kirwan smoothed out the rough edges.[57] The resulting pinkish gray integrates the character into his surroundings without appearing incongruous with his other appearances. Zuko remains recognizably Zuko. In turn, the creative decisions that resulted in this appearance complicate but do not erase the ascription of racial and cultural identity in previous renderings.

Given how pivotal skin tone is to the definition and ascription of race in the real world, any application of color to these animated bodyscapes risked impacting their Asian-ness. At each stage in the production process, individuals made creative decisions, affecting and building on each other's work. Their use of color underlines the iconicity and plasmaticity of these animated bodyscapes, complicating the ascription of a singular

---

[55] "Original Animatic Chapter 15 – Uncut (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006); "Scene Bending – Civil Wars: Part 1" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).

[56] "Audio Commentary – Episode 19: The Siege of the North – Part 1" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006).

[57] DiMartino and Konietzko, 77.

identity based on complexion. Their choices were motivated largely by a desire for internal consistency without sacrificing mimesis, to make the characters look like they were in fantastical environments while remaining recognizably human. Within this window, these hues could vary widely from both the local colors of model sheets as well as real-world physiological bodies. Failure to navigate these elements could mitigate or compromise the Asian-ness of these animated bodyscapes, as seen in the discourse around the character of Kya from *Korra*.

Rendering Kya: The Application of Color and the Ascription of Race

Ahead of the second season of *Korra*, Konietzko posted a series of pictures from a screening of early animation. One image was a photo of the monitor showing the characters Bumi, Kya, and Tenzin – the three adult children of Aang and Katara – in the episode "Darkness Falls" (Appendix 3.14).[58] Later that night, episode director Colin Heck responded to an anonymous Tumblr "ask" that has since been deleted but was screenshot and reposted by Konietzko. The unnamed individual simply wrote: "None of katara and aang's kid share katara's complexion ;~;"[59] The complaint and subsequent reply focus on the character Kya, who has the darkest skin tone of the three. According to the art book, initial design and color concepts for this character were drawn up by Montgomery, with Ryu and Konietzko finalizing the design.[60] Heck's response was terse and somewhat dismissive:

> Look- I know that complexion of cartoon characters is a fraught issue these days, but I'd ask you to not put too much stock in an iPhone photo of a non-color-corrected tv. Especially when the lighting situation that those characters are in might be different from normal lighting. Actually, look up color theory and then light theory and get back to me.[61]

A few days later, Konietzko expanded on the topic, going through the stages of applying color to the characters.

In his Tumblr post, Konietzko noted that Katara in *Avatar* and Kya in *Korra* actually do have the same local color: hexadecimal #bd916f, to be precise. Multiple factors contributed to their skin tones appearing to be different. First, the art director explained color theory and the contrast effect: "in simple terms, colors are pushed

[58] Bryan Konietzko, *Tumblr*, 28 Jun. 2013.
[59] Bryan Konietzko, *Tumblr*, 2 Jul. 2013.
[60] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Spirits*, 13.
[61] Konietzko, 2 Jul.

lighter, darker, warmer, and cooler based on what other colors are next to them."[62] Kya's gray hair makes her skin appear lighter than had it be contrasted with Katara's darker hair. Furthermore, for this shot, Kya is in front of a light source in the Spirit World. Therefore, her skin tone is lighter than it is on the model sheet. Konietzko also noted that this image was from before retakes or color correction. While scheduling does not always permit drastic revision of finished animation, the art director claimed to have done so when characters looked "too light."[63] Finally, the co-creator wrote about how this photo is of a monitor and thus the colors are distorted. All these elements combined to create Kya's skin tone for this image.

No character from *Avatar* or *Korra* retains the local color of their model sheet. Over the course of their respective series, personnel at different stages in production – art design, storyboarding, or postproduction – made creative decisions that affected the application of color. As seen with Kya as well as Katara and Korra, dials were implemented to integrate a character into fantastical settings. While not a factor cited by Konietzko, storyboard artist also have the power to build on and affect the work of color stylists by introducing visual flourishes. Finally, during postproduction, another round of personnel refine the final animation to ensure coherence and consistency, a step that the shot of Kya had not yet reached when Konietzko published the initial Tumblr post. As demonstrated by the response to this image as well as the co-creator's defense of it, the synthesis of these factors does impact the construction and ascription of race to the animated bodyscape.

Summary: Understanding the Animated Bodyscape and Ascribing Asian-ness to It

The animated bodyscape is comprised of intersecting racial and cultural markers. In the incorporation of these visual components, these complexes of signs journey through a series of production cultures, each contributing to the construction and ascription of identity. The animated bodyscape is born in the art department, where character designers and color stylists collaborate in the creation and revision of a model sheet. The streamlined aesthetics of *Avatar* and *Korra* produce relatively iconic character designs, especially for facial features. Therefore, other signs – namely, skin tone and cultural signifiers – are amplified. As addressed across these first three chapters, cultural signifiers are constructed through the appropriation and adaptation of

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

referents, which in turn positions these bodyscapes in relation to real-world historical and cultural contexts. For the sake of fantastical distancing and internal consistency, designers hybridized their inspirations, preventing a fantasy culture from being synonymous with a real-world one. Thus, Zuko's design was altered to avoid being representative of Japan or of skinheads. Through this process, the artists were never in full control of these signs, as seen with Zane's reading of Zuko's scar as a signifier of Asian-ness. Visual components can contain unintended significations.

The animated bodyscape then passes on to the episode directors and storyboard artists who interpret these designs for animatics. Deviations take the form of mistakes, minor amendments, or major revisions. Like the writing process, storyboarding is a synthesis of different perspectives, resulting in the incorporation of new signifiers and affecting existing ones. For example, the storyboard artists of *Avatar* and *Korra* introduced *manpu* and exaggerated expressions to these animated bodyscapes, activating their plasmatic potential and associating them to anime and Japan. Even the selection of dials by the color stylist, which helps integrate these characters in fantastical settings, reveal the fluidity of these figures. As the various renderings of Katara, Korra, and Kya demonstrate, these dials can vary greatly from the local colors of their model sheets. Like the character designers, storyboard artists occasionally used physiological and animated models. The practice was meant to transfer desired identities as well as ground the more abstracted or fantastical elements. These animatics were in turn interpreted as final animation before undergoing color correction as part of postproduction. At this point, colorists refined the skin tones of the characters, such as Zuko and Kya, affecting the ascription of racial identities. Throughout these stages, network executives like Coleman and consultants like Zane orbited these production cultures, beaming down notes and feedback that affected these processes as well as the construction and the ascription of Asian-ness.

As this chapter illustrates, the animated bodyscape is composed of various types of signs – racial and cultural as well as ones related to form and color. However, there are others employed in the construction and ascription of Asian-ness in *Avatar* and *Korra*. The following chapter goes into greater depth on the storyboarding process, focusing not on the reinterpretation of character designs but instead how choreographing movement can construct and ascribe identity. The final two chapters further complicate these complexes of signs by incorporating aural components. Together, all these signs comprise the animated bodyscape.

Chapter Four – Choreographing Movement in *Avatar* and *Korra*: Martial Arts Inspirations and Executions

Norman McLaren once defined animation as "the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between the frames."[1] The animated bodyscape is not a still image confined to a model sheet or storyboard panel but is instead comprised of a series of frames juxtaposed to create the illusion of movement. This animated-ness is a fundamental part of these complexes of signs and therefore affects signification. In *Avatar* and *Korra*, the choreography of the action scenes constructs and ascribes Asian-ness to these animated bodyscapes primarily through the imitation of Chinese martial arts or *wushu*.

As many scholars have argued, *wushu* in both their practical and cinematic iterations are informed by national, transnational, and transcultural factors in their production, content, and reception.[2] Even the overtly national significations are formed in response to outside influences.[3] Writing primarily about Korean cinema, Kim Soyoung adopts Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone to describe the meeting and mixing of international ideas and conventions in the formation of action genres, including Hong Kong kung fu cinema.[4] Through the appropriation and adaptation of traditional and cinematic *wushu*, *Avatar* and *Korra* position their fantasy cultures and their characters in relation to these real-world identities. Siu Leung Li and Leon Hunt have noted how the discourse around the mimesis of cinematic re-presentations of *wushu* converges around two points, both of which are relevant to the martial arts choreography of *Avatar* and *Korra*. First is "archival authenticity," meaning fidelity to a cultural

---

[1] Sifianos.
[2] Appadurai: 305; Siu Leung Li, "Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity," *Cultural Studies* 15.3/4 (2001): 515-42; Hunt; Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu, editors, *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Gina Marchetti, "Martial Arts, North and South: Liu Jialang's Vision of Hung Gar in Shaw Brothers Films," *EnterText* 6.1 (2006): 74-110; David West, *Chasing Dragons: An Introduction to the Martial Arts Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); H.-h. Chang; Ryan; D.S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge, editors, *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011); Lorge; Kin-Yan Szeto, *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chang in Hollywood* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2011); Tim Trausch, editor, *Chinese Martial Arts Media Culture: Global Perspectives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018).
[3] Lu Zhouziang, Qi Zhang, and Fan Hong, "Projecting the 'Chineseness': Nationalism, Identity and Chinese Martial Arts Films," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 31.3 (2014): 320-35; Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
[4] Kim Soyoung, 101.

tradition.[5] Due to the fantasy setting, the choreography inevitably entailed a degree of de-contextualization. Despite this fantastical distancing, the production narratives around these shows have emphasized the accuracy of their re-presentations of *wushu*. Second, for Li and Hunt, "corporeal authenticity," the assurance that the actions on screen were performed by physiological human bodies without the aid of special effects, is of greater importance.[6] While seemingly less relevant for animation due to technological mediation, this concern also factored into the choreography of *Avatar* and *Korra*, as seen in the employment of martial arts consultants and the filming of original reference footage. The imitation of these disciplines and movements grounded these animated bodyscapes in reality, meaning both the historical and cultural contexts of *wushu* as well and the physiological specificity of the human body.

To determine how the fight choreography of *Avatar* and *Korra* constructed and ascribed Asian-ness, this chapter analyzes both the martial arts inspirations and their executions. Once again, this franchise appropriated and adapted real-world referents for fantasy world-building, with the surrounding discourse emphasizing authenticity. This chapter then traces the choreography's journey though the different production processes, noting how individuals collaborated in the construction and ascription of identity to animated bodyscapes. Through the creative decisions and actions of martial arts consultants, storyboard artists, and other personnel, these animated bodyscapes obtained a new set of signs, new visual components signifying Asian-ness.

Appropriating Referents: Archival Authenticity and Fantastical Distancing

The re-presentation of *wushu* is a fundamental part of the *Avatar* franchise's identity. Every episode opens with silhouetted figures demonstrating different disciplines as they manipulate or "bend" the four elements – water, earth, fire, and air. According to co-creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, this aspect set the first series apart from the then-dominant "magic wand" fantasy franchises – *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* – as well as contemporaneous superhero action cartoons.[7] Paratexts for both shows have emphasized the authenticity of these fight

[5] Li S. L., 522; Hunt 22, 29-35.
[6] Li S.L., 522; Hunt, 39-41.
[7] DiMartino and Konietzko, 26; Eduardo Vasconcellos, "Interview: Avatar's Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino," *IGN* (6 Sep. 2007); Blacker. Regarding *The Lord of the Rings*, while the wizards not use wands, the scope and limitations of their magic is undefined. Therefore, DiMartino and Konietzko's original point still stands.

sequences.[8] For example, the first behind-the-scenes extra on a home video release of *Avatar* features martial arts consultant Sifu Kisu discussing and demonstrating the four "Chinese martial arts" that inspired the different types of bending, educating audiences of their real-world connections.[9] His movements are juxtaposed with animation from the show, indicating a corporeal authenticity that will be analyzed in greater depth in a later section. Production narratives on the acquisition of these referents highlight two main elements. The first is archival authenticity, how fidelity to real-world systems and styles strengthen the signification of Asian-ness by placing the new choreography within a *wushu* lineage. The second is fantastical distancing, how artistic re-presentations also deviate from and hybridize established norms in the process of internally consistent world-building and character development. Through the selection and blending of referents, this franchise ascribed identity in both intended and unintended ways via their development of fantastical martial arts.

Avatar: Production Narratives of Fidelity, Specialization, and Hybridization

According to Konietzko, the original plan for *Avatar* was for everyone to practice Northern Shaolin, citing how the discipline's "balletic" and "dynamic" qualities would translate well to animation.[10] However, their consultant, Kisu, recommended an alternative approach, using multiple types of *wushu* to differentiate and ascribe characteristics to the four fantasy cultures – the Water Tribe, Earth Kingdom, Fire Nation, and Air Nomads.[11] On one hand, Kisu's proposal averts one type of cultural flattening, where a single discipline would have become representative of all *wushu*. On the other hand, through this approach, Chinese martial arts become representative of all of Asia. As the previous chapters demonstrate, this privileging of Chinese cultural signifiers has been reflected in the other world-building processes, from character design to calligraphy. Even within this limited scope, the pool of referents is deep and diverse, with each system subdivided into multiple styles. To demonstrate, historians Brian Kennedy and Elizabeth Guo write about the many ways in which *wushu* have been imprecisely categorized. The first distinction is between hard (*waijia*) and soft (*neijia*), based on whether the system is designed to foster external and physical strength or

[8] "How"; "Essence"; DiMartino and Konietzko, 113, 124; "Nickelodeon: The Last Airbender: Legend of Korra Martial Arts Reference Demo – Fusion Comics," *Vimeo* (9 Aug. 2011).
[9] "Behind – Kung."
[10] Hector Navarro, "Episode 1: Bryan Konietzko & Michael Dante DiMartino," *Nick Animation Podcast,* 13 May 2016.
[11] Navarro, "1"; Vasconcellos; Lasswell; DiMartino and Konietzko, 26.

internal power through the cultivation of *qi*.[12] They and other scholars have noted that this division is largely arbitrary as all systems contain "hard" and "soft" elements.[13] Nevertheless, they remain indicative of another set of classifications, that of *Shaolin* and *Wudang*, of Buddhism and Taoism, respectively.[14] Kennedy and Guo find this classification to be the least helpful, as it reveals more of myth than history. They note that the three primary *Wudang* systems – *Tai Chi*, *Bagua*, and *Xingyi* – were not founded or developed in the predominantly Taoist Wudang Mountains.[15] In his region-based list of *wushu* "families," martial arts scholar Wang Guangxi places these three systems in their own separate categories distinct from *Wudang*.[16] Despite this reality, these two branches of *Shaolin* and *Wudang* still correspond with issues of national and cultural identity in ways that will be expanded upon shortly. Another dichotomy is between Northern and Southern systems, with the former defined by kicks and higher stances while the latter is defined by hand techniques and low stances, prompting the expression "Northern Leg, Southern Fist."[17] While both still utilize kicks and punches, they are framed as signifiers of regional specificity, of a tension between mainland China and Hong Kong, especially in their cinematic re-presentations.[18] Through the referencing of one group of systems over another, *Avatar* and *Korra* choreographers navigate and negotiate these distinctions in their construction of Waterbending, Earthbending, Firebending, and Airbending, even when they do not openly acknowledge doing so.

In a brief promotional interview for *Nickelodeon Magazine*, Kisu emphasizes the importance of making Waterbending feel "fluid and smooth."[19] In other paratexts, he discusses choosing *Yang*-style *Tai Chi*[20] as the primary referent for this fantastical martial art, highlighting how its softness can be indicative to water.[21] In addition to this aesthetic quality, martial artist Lu Shengli defines *Tai Chi* as a constantly changing balance of *yin* and *yang*.[22] This connection is visualized in the episode "The Siege of the North, Part 1" (*Avatar* S1E19), where Tui and La – the Moon and Ocean Spirits – are depicted as encircling black-and-white koi fish in imitation of a *taijitu*. It is also

[12] Kennedy and Guo. 78.
[13] Kennedy and Guo, 78-80; Ryan 528; Lu S., 11; Wang G., 8-9.
[14] Kennedy and Guo, 83-84; Lorge, 206.
[15] Kennedy and Guo, 84.
[16] Wang G., 12-13.
[17] Hunt, 29; Kennedy and Guo, 80-83.
[18] Hunt, 15; Marchetti, "Martial," 75.
[19] "How": 43.
[20] AKA: *Taiji* or 太极拳 (Tài jí quán).
[21] "Behind – Kung"; "Essence."
[22] Lu S., 64-71.

verbalized in the episode "Bitter Work" (*Avatar* S2E09), when Iroh describes the four types of bending to Zuko. He tells his nephew: "Water is the element of change. The people of the Water Tribe are capable of adapting to many things. They have a deep sense of community and love that holds them together through anything." Without overtly citing Taoism or *yin* and *yang*, the dialogue highlights the qualities of change and adaptation present in *Tai Chi* and indicative of the element of water. The development of Waterbending provides a model for the analysis of the other bending disciplines. The use of a specific referent positions a fantastical martial art in relation to real-world historical and cultural contexts. For the creators and crew of *Avatar*, that entails the signification of Asian-ness as well as of Chinese-ness, but it can be more specific. Some fantastical distancing is inevitable. After all, there is no China or Taoism in the *Avatar* world, and real-world practitioners of *Tai Chi* cannot bend water. Furthermore, the emphasis of the aesthetics of a *wushu* over its background is another form of de-contextualization, an attempt to sever and hide the factors that led to the development of these systems and styles as well as what that context signifies. In the case of Waterbending, other departments re-forged that connection through the evocation of Taoist iconography and philosophy. Other examples are not as straightforward.

The development of Earthbending and its function as a cultural signifier are more complex. Across paratexts, Kisu has described the people of the Earth Kingdom as formidable, strong, and grounded.[23] In Iroh's aforementioned speech in "Bitter Work," the character recites many of these traits: "Earth is the element of substance. The people of the Earth Kingdom are diverse and strong. They are persistent and enduring." The emphasis is on how this bending discipline is representative of its practitioners. In order to convey these attributes, Kisu selected *Hung Gar*[24] as the primary referent. He emphasized that – as a Southern system – it has low and strong stances, which indicate a close connection to the earth.[25] This creative decision also places Earthbending within a specific historical and cultural framework. In her analysis of Hong Kong kung fu films, Gina Marchetti defines contemporary *Hung Gar* as an entwinement of both a traditional *wushu* system and its re-presentation in popular entertainment.[26] Specifically, the modern iteration of *Hung Gar* is largely derived from the output of director, choreographer, and actor Lau Kar-leung. Because of his work for the Shaw Brothers in

[23] "How": 43; "Behind – Kung"; "Essence."
[24] AKA: *Hungar*, *Hung Ga*, *Hung Ga Kuen*, or 洪家 (Hóng jiā).
[25] "Behind – Kung"; "Essence."
[26] Marchetti, "Martial," 77.

the 1970s, Lau has been credited for creating a distinct, authentic, and "specifically southern" cinematic kung fu style.[27] Like with Waterbending and *Tai Chi*, Earthbending's association with *Hung Gar* is based primarily on aesthetics. A low stance conveys literal and figurative proximity to earth. However, *Hung Gar* also connotes a Southern and Hong Kong identity, in opposition to a Northern and mainland one. In this regard, there is a possible parallel between fantasy and reality, as the Earth Kingdom is also in tension with the cultural and military imperialism of the Fire Nation. Although the narrative does not re-contextualize *Hung Gar* as strongly as it does for *Tai Chi*, the signification of Hong Kong and of Lau's films remains.

This identity is further complicated in the second season of *Avatar*, with the addition of a new main character in "The Blind Bandit" (*Avatar* S2E06). Unlike other Earthbenders, Toph is blind and self-taught, emulating the movements of badgermoles. Later in the series, she uses her personalized techniques to become the first Metalbender. To create this unusual style, Kisu brought in Sifu Manual Rodriguez to shoot reference footage for *Chu Gar*-style Southern Praying Mantis,[28] his specialization.[29] While *Chu Gar* is not as widespread or as chronicled a style as *Chow Gar*, all variations of Southern Praying Mantis have a shared myth of their founder developing the discipline by studying the movements of a praying mantis. Even Northern Praying Mantis, a separate system with a different set of moves, reports a similar origin story.[30] Although there is a shared parallel, with Toph developing her martial arts style by imitating specific animals, production narratives have instead highlighted a legend that the founder of *Chu Gar* was also a blind woman. For the choreographers, these shared backgrounds were coincidental and incidental, with the creators allegedly unaware until later.[31] This referent was selected primarily because it could signify Toph's uniqueness. Although they are both examples of Southern *wushu*, Southern Praying Mantis is its own distinct system and not a subset of *Hung Gar*. Still, a shared regional specificity connects them

[27] Li S.L., 522; Hunt, 15, 23; Marchetti, "Martial," 75.
[28] AKA: 南派螳螂 (Nán pài táng láng).
[29] "Avatar Spirits" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection (Collector's Edition)*), Viacom International Inc. (2010); DiMartino and Konietzko, 162; Minister Faust, "Sifu Kisu on Martial Arts Mastery and Designing + Choreographing the Bending of Avatar the Last Airbender (MF Galaxy 069)," *MF Galaxy*, 14 Mar. 2016.
[30] D.S. Farrer, "Coffee-Shop Gods: Chinese Martial Arts of the Singapore Diaspora," *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*, eds. D.S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bidge (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 221; D.S. Farrer "Becoming-animal in the Chinese Martial Arts," *Living Beings: Perspectives on Interspecies Engagements*, ed. Penelope Dransart (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 150.
[31] DiMartino and Konietzko, 162; Minister Faust.

even as it breaks from the commitment to archival authenticity. The development of Earthbending and its variations demonstrate how the selection of a referent can construct unintended cultural signifiers, regardless of de-contextualization. In addition to ascribing identity to whole fantasy cultures, the choreography of *Avatar* can also distinguish individual characters. A similar process occurs with other bending disciplines.

For Firebending, Kisu wanted to convey aggressiveness with quick and sharp moves.[32] He therefore chose to model this fantastical martial art after his specialization, Northern Shaolin.[33] This rationale is similar to Konietzko's reasoning for planning to base all of the bending disciplines on this system. In interviews, Kisu has highlighted the strong and dynamic kicks, punches, and stances associated with Northern Shaolin.[34] Such visuals are emblematic of how Iroh describes the fantastical martial art in "Bitter Work." He tells his nephew: "Fire is the element of power. The people of the Fire Nation have desire and will and the energy and drive to achieve what they want." Northern Shaolin allowed the choreographers to visualize those attributes through strong and aggressive moves. However, once again, Kisu also positioned Firebending in relation to reality. As previously addressed, Northern Shaolin falls into two categories of *wushu*. First, it is Northern, with its emphasis on "high flying kicks" and "wide stances." While more emblematic of the mainland, this visually stimulating *wushu* also became commonplace in Hong Kong kung fu films.[35] Regional specificity is not a primary signification. Second, the referent is *Shaolin*, which – as historian Peter Allan Lorge writes – is emulative of a specific historical context. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, as it was being mythologized, *Shaolin* became shorthand for foreigners. It was an external and Buddhist martial art framed as inferior to internal and Taoist systems, such as the aforementioned *Tai Chi*.[36] While the background of *Hung Gar* can be seen as in parallel with that of Earthbending, the narrative of *Avatar* precludes an equivalent interpretation of Northern Shaolin and Firebending. The Fire Nation are imperialist invaders imposing their rule on others, not a religious minority group targeted by reactionary nationalists. The show and the choreographers are seemingly uninterested in fostering such a reading, instead just using the dynamic and cinematic movements of Northern Shaolin as signifiers for aggressiveness.

---

[32] "How": 43.
[33] AKA: 北少林 (Běi shào lín).
[34] "Behind – Kung"; "Essence."
[35] Hunt, 29.
[36] Lorge, 195, 206.

Like with Earthbending, the second season of *Avatar* introduced a new character who further complicated the significations of this fantastical martial art. Making her first proper appearance in "The Avatar State" (*Avatar* S2E01), Azula exercises a variant of Firebending defined by her "effortless" movement.[37] To create this style, Kisu has discussed incorporating elements of *Chaquan*,[38] which he described as "a Northern Islamic style which is associated with Northern Shaolin" and that was utilized by Genghis Khan.[39] Kennedy and Guo also identify this system as an "ethnic martial art" practiced by the Hui people.[40] Like with Toph, a real-world *wushu* ascribes an identity to a specific character. Azula is a prodigy to whom Firebending comes naturally. The association with a fellow Northern system was enough for Kisu to justify choosing *Chaquan* as inspiration for a personalized subset of Firebending. Otherwise, the referent was completely de-contextualized, with its background only brought up in passing in interviews and not alluded to within the narrative of the show. Nevertheless, through the selection of both Northern Shaolin and *Chaquan*, the choreographers of *Avatar* equated ethnic and religious minorities in China with the Fire Nation and one of the primary antagonists. As cultural consultant Edwin Zane is quoted saying in chapter three, there are ramifications to the appropriation of real-world referents when constructing villains. Fantastical distancing can dissuade direct comparisons, but the signification persists and becomes part of these complexes of signs. The following and final type of bending was developed through the overt hybridization of different *wushu* systems, ones with complementary connotations.

For Airbending, Kisu primarily emulated *Bagua*,[41] with its wind-like circular hand movements and footwork.[42] His description of the system echoes that of Kennedy and Guo; the principle of both the fantastical and real-world martial art is to move around one's opponent and prevent them from landing an effective hit.[43] Kisu does not mention the broader historical context for the development and popularization of the *wushu* system. Like *Tai Chi*, *Bagua* was a response to *Shaolin* during the Qing Dynasty, emphasizing soft and internal power over hard and external strength.[44] Kisu does

[37] Minister Faust.
[38] AKA: Zhāquán or 查拳 (Chá quán).
[39] "Essence"; Gene Ching, "Kisu on The Legend of Korra," *Kung Fu Magazine*, n.d.; Minister Faust.
[40] Kennedy and Guo, 293.
[41] AKA: 八卦掌 (Bāguà zhǎng).
[42] "Behind – Kung"; "Essence."
[43] "Behind – Kung"; Kennedy and Guo, 10.
[44] Lorge, 206.

however allude to how the Taoist text *I Ching* forms the philosophy behind this system but offers little elaboration within the paratexts.[45] As with the other types of bending, there is an emphasis on the physical movements with only cursory acknowledgments of their backgrounds. According to Iroh in "Bitter Work," "Air is the element of freedom. The Air Nomads detached themselves from worldly concerns and found peace and freedom." This description offers only a general association between air and the principle of "freedom," emblematic more so of the monastic lifestyles of Air Nomads than the specifics of Airbending. Less publicized was the incorporation of elements of *Xingyi*[46] for the more linear movements of this fantastical martial art.[47] This *wushu* was also part of the anti-*Shaolin* backlash during the Qing Dynasty.[48] Given this historical context, there is an incongruity in the construction of the Air Nomad culture. As addressed in the first chapter, their architecture, names, as well as additional aspects were derived from primarily Buddhist referents. Yet, *Shaolin* martial arts are associated not with the Air Nomads but with the Fire Nation. Instead, in order to suggest the movement of air, the choreographers appropriated and combined elements of Taoist *wushu*. Nevertheless, as these signs are mixed together in the construction of a coherent and cohesive fantasy culture and set of animated bodyscapes, signifiers for Buddhism and Taoism were flattened together and the tension between the two were elided. The resulting signification was of Asian-ness and Chinese-ness rather than of either Taoist-ness or Buddhist-ness.

The development of Airbending is the first major example of hybridization in the choreography of *Avatar*, with *Bagua* and *Xingyi* transformed into a single discipline. The mixing of different martial arts systems and styles is not a new phenomenon, either in reality or in fiction. According to Lu Shengli, these two Airbending referents are often practiced concomitantly and "are said to be one family."[49] While there have been and continue to be a number of *wushu* "purists" or "traditionalists" who emphasize the authenticity and lineage of their chosen disciplines, there have also always been an equal number of "eclectic types" who borrow from multiple sources.[50] Kennedy, Guo, Lu Shengli, William Acevedo, Mei Cheung, and Lorge have all traced how the history of the formation and development of *wushu* systems and styles is one defined by

[45] "Essence."
[46] AKA: Hsing-I, Hsing Yi, or 形意拳 (Xíng yì quán).
[47] "Essence"; Acastus, "Interview with Sifu Kisu" (part 2 of 3), *AvatarSpirit.net*, 12 Oct. 2006.
[48] Lorge, 206.
[49] Lu S., 85.
[50] Kennedy and Guo, 12.

hybridization.[51] The trans-regional, transnational, and transcultural cross-pollination continued in cinematic re-presentations, as Hunt and Kim Soyoung have noted the influence of Korean *Taekwondo* on Hong Kong kung fu films.[52] The ability to adopt, adapt, and mix different disciplines is also treated as a strength within the narrative of *Avatar*, most explicitly in the episode "Bitter Work." After summarizing the characteristics of the four elements, Iroh tells Zuko:

> It is important to draw wisdom from many different places. If we take it from only one place, it becomes rigid and stale. Understanding others – the other elements and the other nations – will help you become whole... It is the combination of the four elements in one person that makes the Avatar so powerful, but it can make you more powerful too.

He then proceeds to demonstrate how to redirect lightning by emulating Waterbending techniques. Both these characters and the show's choreographers have appropriated and transformed different martial arts systems and styles. To construct Waterbending, Earthbending, Firebending, and Airbending, the creators and crew of *Avatar* navigated and negotiated the real-world historical and cultural contexts of their *wushu* referents. With a consistent emphasis on forms over backgrounds, they engaged in a quest for archival authenticity, for fidelity between traditional systems and styles and their fantastical re-presentations. Their creative decisions resulted in the construction and ascription of Asian-ness to fantasy cultures and individual animated bodyscapes. Still, through the introduction of specialized and personalized forms of bending as well as other types of hybridization, they complicated these significations. These practices continued and were expanded upon in the production and the narratives of the sequel series, with both the choreographers and the characters amending established bending disciplines.

Korra: Production Narratives of Evolution, Synthesis, and Transculturation

In addition to the continued if diminished presence of Kisu, *Korra* saw the hiring of new martial arts consultants, most notably Jake Huang, a professional stuntman with a background in *Taekwondo* and traditional *wushu*. He credited the latter "soft-style" techniques for helping him choreograph and perform the Waterbending and

[51] Kennedy and Guo; Lu S.; William Acevedo and Mei Cheung,. "A Historical Overview of Mixed Martial Arts in China," *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 19.3 (2010): 31-45; Lorge.
[52] Hunt, 30; Kim Soyoung, 108.

Airbending.[53] For this show, Huang was tasked with building on the techniques and moves from the first series. He told me: "I had to go back and watch all of the original *Airbender* series so I could get familiar with their motions, their powers, of all the elements and whatnot, to see kind of how to evolve it."[54] To accomplish this goal, he synthesized different types of referents, not only his own *wushu* training but also films and anime.[55] While this chapter focuses primarily on the appropriation and adaptation of real-life martial arts systems and style, cinematic influences are also relevant to the construction and ascription of Asian-ness.

The creators and producers have cited Chinese martial arts films – especially *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) – as inspirations since the original series, even though paratexts have stressed practical applications.[56] While not an absolute distinction, *wushu* films are often divided into two categories – *wuxia* and kung fu. The former embraces the fantastical and the stylistic, with characters using their *qi* to fly and exercise "Palm Power."[57] Huang remembered watching this type of film with his father as a child.[58] Scholars have noted that this cinematic genre – commonplace on the mainland – is more evocative of Chinese culture and history, that it holds greater nationalist potential.[59] Kung fu, on the other hand, is more emulative of Hong Kong sensibilities, "a cultural hybrid" with greater international appeal.[60] Instead of the specificity of *wuxia*, these films are more grounded in reality and modernity, with hard and muscular bodies exhibiting *waijia* with minimal interference from special effects.[61] The choreography of *Avatar* and *Korra* combine aspects of both types of *wushu* films. Benders use chi to fight and fly in fantastical and acrobatic displays, but these acts are still tenuously grounded in reality. Benders manipulate their respective element to shoot projectiles, heal, or propel themselves through the air rather than directly evoking chi. The antagonist Zaheer is the closest exception, capable of flying and hovering after the events of "Enter the Void" (*Korra* S3E12). However, his ability is still regarded as an advanced form of Airbending. Like with kung fu cinema, the *Avatar* franchise emphasizes hard and muscular bodies, although children and the elderly are depicted as able to compete with

[53] Jake Huang (31 Oct. 2018), Google Hangouts interview.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] "In Their Elements," *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2006): 6; DiMartino and Konetizko, 26.
[57] Hunt, 6-7; H.-h. Chang, 97-98.
[58] Huang.
[59] Szeto, 20; Teo, *Chinese*, 8.
[60] Hunt, 3, 6-7; Szeto, 20.
[61] Hunt, 39-41; H.-h. Chang, 97-98.

or even surpass able-bodied and middle-aged benders. The character of Iroh is a noteworthy case. For the majority of the first series, he is depicted with what scholar Hsiao-hung Chang would call "a soft *qi* body" (Appendix 4.01).[62] A formidable fighter able to defend himself against multiple opponents, Iroh is also old and squat. In "Bitter Work," he refers to his stomach as a "vast ocean" of chi. However, while imprisoned during the third season, he acquires a hard, muscular body, first displayed in "Sokka's Master" (*Avatar* S3E04, Appendix 4.02). In subsequent episodes, this new physique is hidden under loose-fitting robes, better affecting his original appearance. Through creative decisions in both choreography and character design, *Avatar* and *Korra* sought to emulate the fantasy of *wuxia* and the grounded-ness of kung fu in their construction and ascription of Asian-ness.

In addition to navigating those sets of signifiers, *Korra* choreographers also continued to hybridize real-world martial arts disciplines in the process of world-building and character development. Ahead of the series premiere, DiMartino told *The AV Club*: "Republic City represents that big melting-pot aspect of the *Avatar* universe, so it's the blending of all these cultures, and that affects the martial arts as well."[63] *Korra* producer Joaquim Dos Santos elaborated: "Mike [DiMartino] and Bryan [Konietzko] were setting [*The Legend of Korra*] seventy years later and the world has evolved and so had the martial arts. So we got to incorporate a lot of different styles."[64] In our interview, Huang added: "They wanted to evolve [the bending] into something new where Korra didn't have a specific style from [*Avatar*]."[65] As stated in the previous subsection, the hybridization of martial arts traditions is commonplace within both real-world contexts and artistic re-presentations. In *Avatar*, such breaking from archival authenticity was done primarily in service of creating unique forms of bending for specific characters. That practice still occurs in *Korra*, as seen in the antagonists Ghazan, Zaheer, and Kuvira. Because Ghazan practices a subset of Earthbending called Lavabending, Dos Santos wrote about supplementing *Hung Gar* with elements of *Bajiquan*[66] – specifically the shorter elbow and knee strikes – for the character's more impactful moves.[67] A freshly anointed Airbender, Zaheer's movements were modeled after Parkour in addition

[62] H.-h. Chang, 97.
[63] T. Robinson.
[64] Seth Robinson, "Joaquim Dos Santos Ready to Tell THE LEGEND OF KORRA," *Newsarama*, 10 Apr. 2012.
[65] Huang.
[66] AKA: 八極拳 (Bā jí quán).
[67] DiMartino, Konietzko and Dos Santos, *Change*, 91.

to *Bagua* and *Xingyi*.[68] The combination conveys that the character was an experienced martial artist prior to acquiring his new abilities. For Kuvira's climatic fight in "The Battle of Zaofu" (*Korra* S4E06), Dos Santos referenced Southern Praying Mantis in imitation of Toph's Metalbending as well as western boxing, especially that of Muhammad Ali. According to him, the footwork was meant to signify that the character was "cocky" rather than intentionally link her with North American fighting styles.[69] Through these and other examples, the *Korra* choreographers depicted the evolution of bending in the aftermath of in-universe modernization and globalization. While the legacy of the disciplines developed by Kisu and the other *Avatar* choreographers persisted, traditional *wushu* was hybridized with a new pool of referents. Their Asian-ness and Chinese-ness endured but was now accompanied by other significations. Rather than pursue archival authenticity, *Korra* choreographers incorporated non-Chinese martial arts, contributing to the construction of a cosmopolitan "melting-pot."

After moving to Republic City, Korra witnesses the ultimate example of martial arts transculturation: Pro-bending. This professional sport is a major part of the first season, as the title character joins a team with Bolin and Mako. Even though each side is comprised of a Waterbender, an Earthbender, and a Firebender, their stances and moves are indistinguishable, all defined by quick hooks and jabs. The evolution and blending of martial arts and its benefits are addressed within the series. Although Tenzin describes the sport as "a mockery of the noble tradition of bending" in "A Leaf in the Wind" (*Korra* S1E02), his student Korra only progresses in her Airbending training not through his traditional methods but through her involvement in Pro-bending. To create this new and modern fighting style, the choreographers referenced Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), albeit omitting the grappling component.[70] To ensure authenticity, the show hired two MMA fighters – Mac Danzig and Jeremy Umphries – to choreograph the Pro-bending matches, distinguishing those sequences from the rest of the series. Further emphasizing this connection, the title character was even partially modeled after MMA fighter Gina Carano.[71] Like Pro-bending, contemporary MMA is also a transcultural blending of styles, especially of Asian and western disciplines after the two had been developing

[68] "The Spirit of an Episode: A Breath of Fresh Air" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).
[69] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Balance*, 74.
[70] S. Robinson; Charles Webb, "Interview: Paging, Dr. Fight! A Chat With 'Legend of Korra' Art Director and Co-Executive Producer Joaquim Dos Santos," *MTV*, 23 Apr. 2012; Huang.
[71] Christopher John Farley, "The Legend of Korra Creators Answer Your Questions," *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 Jun. 2012.

separately for so long.[72] Regardless, there persists an attempt to legitimize the sport by positioning Bruce Lee and his *Jeet Kune Do*[73] system as a precursor.[74] Dana White, president of the MMA organization Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), was once quoted saying:

> Actually, the father of mixed martial arts, if you will, was Bruce Lee. If you look at the way Bruce Lee trained, the way he fought, and many of the things he wrote, he said the perfect style was no style. You take a little something from everything. You take the good things from every different discipline, use what works, and you throw the rest away.[75]

Despite the hybridization and flattening inherent in contemporary MMA, White and others have still pursued a form of archival authenticity by framing the sport as the successor to a specific Asian martial arts as well as to a specific Asian martial artist. An MMA fighter is an explicit example of the "eclectic type" of which Kennedy and Guo wrote, taking elements from different sources until they have formed a repertoire that best suits their needs or brand. Likewise, Korra and many of the other characters do the same, unwittingly following Iroh's advice from the previous series. They adopt and adapt a range of real-world and fantastical martial arts in order to become more powerful benders. While doing so does complicate the construction and ascription of Asian-ness, it does not completely erase it. Like with MMA, Pro-bending remains linked to the original Asian referents.

The choreography of *Avatar* and *Korra* was a balancing of mimesis and fantasy. Following an impulse for archival authenticity, the four bending disciplines were modeled after specific *wushu* referents, signifying Asian-ness and Chinese-ness. Even though the choreographers have emphasized the aesthetics of these referents over their historical and cultural backgrounds, they nevertheless placed these fantastical martial arts in relation to real-world contexts, creating both intentional and unintentional significations. This process was not straightforward, as culture- and character-specific techniques were constructed through hybridization. A natural part of martial arts, the blending of referents flattened and equated different systems and styles to signify

---

[72] Raúl Sánchez García and Dominic Malcolm, "Decivilizing, Civilizing, or Informalizing? The International Development of Mixed Martial Arts," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45.1 (2010): 40, 43-46.
[73] AKA: 截拳道 (Jié quán dào).
[74] Acevedo and Cheung, 31; Stacey Howard Bishop, Paul La Bounty, and Michael Devlin, "Mixed Martial Arts: A Comprehensive Review," *Journal of Sport and Human Performance* 1.1 (2013): 28.
[75] Marc Wickert, "Dana White and the Future of the UFC," *Fight Times*, 1 Oct. 2004.

particular attributes. In addition, real-world martial arts were synthesized with previous artistic depictions, most notably *wuxia* and kung fu films from China and Hong Kong. These practices were exaggerated in *Korra*, with the different bending disciplines evolving due to in-universe modernization and globalization. The most explicit examples are the MMA-inspired Pro-bending sequences, which retain some archival authenticity despite transculturation and flattening. However, finding inspirations was only the first step in the choreography process. These movements still need to be transposed onto the animated bodyscapes.

Producing Animatics: Corporeal Authenticity and Production Cultures

As discussed in the previous chapter, the animated bodyscape flows between production cultures, acquiring new sets of signs. The development of martial arts choreography is part of that process, also undergoing a journey through different departments as individuals made their contributions to the construction and ascription of Asian-ness. The first step was an initial meeting for some combination of the creators, producers, directing teams, and consultants to read through the finished script for an episode. While in the same room, they interpreted and embellished the writers' descriptions by pitching ideas and sometimes shooting improvised reference footage.[76] According to Huang, it was an environment where everyone was encouraged to contribute.[77] In this regard, the initial meeting operated as a contact zone in the same way as the writers' room. Representatives from different production cultures as well as from the orbiting consulting satellites collaborated and synthesized ideas from their distinct perspectives. Once again, through the incorporation of a range of viewpoints, the process was able to mitigate the risk of subject appropriation. Following this stage, the directing teams started storyboarding.

The first drafts – alternatively called "roughs" or "thumbnails" – established the major action beats for a fight scene. As a result, *Avatar* and *Korra* crewmembers have described the storyboard artists as the primary choreographers of the franchise.[78] In addition to discussion and footage from the initial meeting, episode directors and

[76] "Essence"; Brad Curran, "Interview with Sifu Kisu," *Kung-Fu Kingdom*, 6 Oct. 2015; Minister Faust; Huang.
[77] Huang.
[78] Acastus, "Interview with Sifu Kisu (part 1 of 3)," *AvatarSpirit.net*, 5 Oct. 2006; "Commentary on Enter the Void" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014); Ed Liu, "Toon Zone Interviews Joaquim Dos Santos on Directing 'Avatar'," *Toon Zone*, 22 Jul. 2008; Ulanova.

storyboard artists utilized preexisting reference material for these sequences. *Avatar* storyboard artist Juan Meza-Leon specifically cited *Samurai Champloo* and Jackie Chan films as common referents.[79] *Korra* co-director Olga Ulanova recalled finding relevant videos either on YouTube or on the shared production server. She specifically discussed referring to a folder of *Bagua* clips for the Airbending sequences as well as Dos Santos' well-curated collection of barrel rolls.[80] By the time these two had joined their respective series, the different bending disciplines and their primary referents had been well-established. Their contributions to the choreography was not in the selection of inspirations but in establishing the major beats and movements of the scene. For guidance on first drafts, both have emphasized the use of Asian referents, either real-world demonstrations of martial arts or their artistic re-presentations. As Ulanova elaborated: "It was understood... don't look at traditional western styles of fighting, look at Asian martial arts... It was very specific in that regard."[81] In following this directive, the directing team reinforced the connection between the choreography and Asian-ness. Of course, as previously addressed, *Korra* did utilize western martial arts referents for the bending sequences. These were not intended to ascribe specific national or cultural identities, only to indicate a character's background or personality. Nevertheless, the storyboard artists still positioned their choreography in relation to the reference footage that they emulated. Hence, Meza-Leon and Ulanova highlighted the clips that they could label as Asian. Upon completion of the roughs, the choreography underwent another pass with the consultants, the most foregrounded part of this process in the production narratives.

With the general blocking and beats established, a martial arts consultant was brought in to help refine the choreography ahead of revisions. Their job was to perform the blocking from specific camera angles.[82] For Zaheer's introductory fight scene in "A Breath of Fresh Air" (*Korra* S3E01), episode director Melchior Zwyer recalled: "We'd show up with boards, the rough boards. [Huang would] take a look at it and just go, 'No, that's impossible. How about we do this instead.' And he'd show us a move, and it's even way better than what we boarded out."[83] While Konietzko framed the directing teams as the principal choreographers, he credited the consultants for adding

[79] Meza-Leon.
[80] Ulanova.
[81] Ibid.
[82] "Essence"; Curran; Minister Faust; Liu, "Interviews"; Huang.
[83] "Spirit – Breath."

"specificity" and "that extra fine-tuning."[84] *Avatar* director Giancarlo Volpe, Dos Santos, Meza-Leon, *Korra* co-director Owen Sullivan, and Ulanova have all praised the consultants for inserting realism and accuracy into the fight sequences.[85] The mimesis provided by Kisu, Huang, and others was not merely archival authenticity from their demonstrations of traditional disciplines. It was also corporeal authenticity through the real-life performances of the choreography. The connection between the physiological bodies of the consultants and the animated bodyscapes of the characters is reflected in the language used to describe this step in the process. For Konietzko, they are taking moves "from [Kisu's] body into the animation."[86] According to Huang, the storyboard artists would "capture" his performance and "draw [his] motions over the characters."[87] There was a greater degree of technological and artistic mediation than these quotes suggest. Hence, Hunt's third category of "cinematic authenticity" is not especially applicable.[88] Meza-Leon recalled how the *Avatar* storyboard artists would play the new footage of Kisu on QuickTime, going through frame-by-frame, tracing poses on post-it notes before translating them onto cleaned-up storyboards.[89] The practice was not quite rotoscoping, with ample room left for embellishment. As Meza-Leon noted, Kisu was not as acrobatic as many of the characters.[90] Also, as Ulanova recalled, the consultants were not required to perform every action in a sequence, just the more complicated ones or those framed from a difficult angle.[91] Furthermore, a single martial arts session might have entailed moves from various sequences from multiple episodes. At the same time, a particular move may have been repeatedly performed and refined across numerous sessions over the course of several months. Because of this disjointed process, Huang has had difficulty differentiating the bending sequences from *Korra* without the final animation in front of him.[92] A consultant's performance of the choreography only became coherent and cohesive through the technological and artistic mediation of storyboarding. With these observations in mind, how much corporeal authenticity persists in these martial arts sequences? How much of a role does it play in the construction and ascription of Asian-ness to these animated bodyscapes?

---

[84] "Commentary – Enter."
[85] Acastus, "Director 3"; Liu, "Interviews"; Meza-Leon; "Spirit – Breath"; Ulanova.
[86] "Essence."
[87] Huang.
[88] Hunt, 35-39.
[89] Meza-Leon.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ulanova.
[92] Huang.

The previous chapter addresses how storyboard artists would sometimes use reference footage – either preexisting or original – to construct performances in *Avatar* and *Korra*. Rather than transfer specific cultural, national, or racial attributes – although they inadvertently did – this practice was intended to use the specificity of the human body in order to ground the fantastical and abstracted animated bodyscape. The production of original martial arts reference footage also aimed to tether these animated bodyscapes to reality rather than exploit their plasmatic potential. There was still some distancing at play, both technological and artistic mediation. The performances of the martial arts consultants were not subjected to rotoscoping or motion capture but were instead adapted by storyboard artists. Their embellishments would make the choreography more acrobatic and fantastical, strengthening its emulation of the *wuxia* film genre. However, by highlighting this step in the production process, promotional materials emphasize mimesis over fantasy and abstraction. In addition to their grounding effect, the production and use of original reference footage also contributes to the construction and ascription of identity. This particular part of the production process offered the potential for a corporeal authenticity. Despite technological and artistic mediation, the choreography has been framed as the actual movements of trained martial artists. That specificity, "that extra fine-tuning," was still transferred to the animated bodyscapes. However, the question remains: how much of the performer's body is still present in the final animation? Film scholar Tanine Allison touches on this question when she writes about the use of motion capture in the computer-animated film *Happy Feet* (2006), specifically the transposing of the moves of Black dancer Savion Glover onto one of the character models. According to her, the film not only appropriated the movements of a Black body; those movements were explicitly and culturally coded as Black.[93] Do the fight sequences of *Avatar* and *Korra* function similarly? There were physiological bodies with real-life racial identities performing traditionally but not exclusively Asian martial arts. However, the conversion of the movements of consultants into those of animated figures was not as direct. Without rotoscoping or motion capture, there was greater artistic mediation on the part of the directing teams. Despite claims made in paratexts, the movements of the animated bodyscapes are not identical to those of the consultants. Furthermore, whereas the protagonist of *Happy Feet* is otherwise coded as white, the characters from *Avatar* and *Korra* are primarily signified as Asian,

[93] Allison, 114-15.

as the preceding chapters detail. Nevertheless, like the acting references, the performances of the martial arts consultants contributed to the complexes of signs that comprise of these animated bodyscapes. The resulting animatics – the products of collaboration between production cultures within the Nickelodeon Animation Studio as well as orbiting satellites – were subsequently sent overseas for final animation.

Summary: A New Set of Signs for the Animated Bodyscape

The illusion of movement – a pivotal part of this medium's specificity – offer another set of signs for the animated bodyscape. Therefore, the fight sequences of *Avatar* and *Korra* were used to construct and ascribe Asian-ness by having the characters imitate traditional Asian martial arts. Like the character design, such choreography also underwent a journey through the different production cultures. At each step in the process, individuals met in contact zones and made creative decisions. From their specific perspectives, they introduced and combined ideas in order to construct new and fantastical martial arts disciplines and movements.

The first stage was the acquisition of real-world referents. They were predominantly, but not exclusively, *wushu* systems and styles; China once again became a synecdoche for all of Asia. While the choreographers of *Avatar* and *Korra* also appropriated and adapted stylistic elements and motifs from *wuxia* and kung fu cinema, paratexts have focused on the real-life versions of these disciplines. This process therefore displayed an impulse toward archival authenticity. The supposedly faithful re-presentation of cultural traditions positioned the fantastical martial arts in relation to real-world historical and cultural contexts. There was still some distancing. Official production narratives have indicated a greater interest in the aesthetics of these referents than in their backgrounds. This emphasis resulted in unintended signification. After all, as with all bodyscapes, an artist is never in full control. Even when they did not acknowledge doing so, the choreographers of *Avatar* and *Korra* navigated and negotiated the tensions between Northern and Southern systems and their corresponding regional identities as well as between soft and hard style and their corresponding religious identities. While the productions privilege Chinese referents as signifiers of Asian-ness, China is not a monoculture. In the construction of the four main bending disciplines as well as various specialized and personalized subsets, the choreographers also hybridized different referents, forging new connections between historically distinct disciplines. While the production narratives for *Avatar* and *Korra* have emphasized the

specificity of the bending disciplines, they also depict a flattening and elision involved in the creation of signifiers of Asian-ness.

With the referents selected, episode directors and storyboard artists interpreted the scripted descriptions to create the roughs. Along with guidance from initial meetings for an episode, they used preexisting reference footage – either from recorded demonstrations or cinematic re-presentations – to establish the major action beats. With the first draft completed, the martial arts consultants were brought back to perform sections of the fight sequences. The purpose of this step was to help the storyboard artists with subsequent revisions. Even though their performances were ultimately embellished, these consultants have been described as contributing an authenticity and a specificity to the choreography. The language indicates a desire for corporeal authenticity, with an emphasis on how the fight sequences in the shows were performed by physiological human bodies. Despite the technological and artistic mediation on the part of the storyboard artists and animators, the movements of the consultants have been described as persisting through to the final product, carrying with them the specificity of physiological bodies.

Through their emphasis on archival and corporeal authenticity, the animated and fantastical martial arts choreography of *Avatar* and *Korra* – in both their inspirations and executions – has sought to tether itself to reality, to both the real-world historical and cultural contexts of its referents as well as the physiological specificity of the bodies of the consultants. Furthermore, promotional materials aimed to educate audiences about these connections. While production narratives have framed this process as an assurance of authenticity and accuracy, the process also allowed for unintentional ascriptions of identity. These movements and poses contributed to the complexes of signs that constitute the animated bodyscape. In addition to the visual and narrative components that have been analyzed in these first four chapters, aural elements – music, sound effects, and the voice – also contribute to the construction and ascription of Asian-ness.

Chapter Five – Composing the Music and Sound Effects of *Avatar* and *Korra*: Mimesis, Fantasy, and Abstraction in the Soundscape

Contemporary television animation is primarily an audiovisual medium. As a result, the animated bodyscape is also comprised of aural components. Music, sound effects, and the voice all contribute to the construction and ascription of identities. This chapter focuses on the first two, on how they contribute to the fantasy world-building of *Avatar* and *Korra* and on how they function as signifiers. As with the other production processes, even when not directly associated with character design or movement, sounds create connotations that are, in turn, projected onto animated bodyscapes. The voice is the subject of its own chapter.

As discussed in the literature review, the visual and the aural are produced via distinct processes and apparatuses before they are sutured by the audience. Michel Chion refers to this phenomenon as the "audiovisual illusion," Mary Ann Doane uses the term "fantasmatic body," and Rick Altman likens it to ventriloquism.[1] While these writers are primarily interested in the voice and the cinematic bodyscape, their formulations are applicable to the other aural components. Music and sound effects are also synchronized with cinematic visuals, affecting the meaning of the images. Claudia Gorbman refers to film music as a "suturing" device that "lowers thresholds of belief."[2] While seemingly contrary to realist filmmaking practices, non-diegetic music grounds the final product in reality. Similarly, Gianluca Sergi describes sound effects as "something that is used in works of fiction to add realism."[3] These aural components serve primarily as agents of mimesis or at least of the illusion of mimesis. Janet K. Halfyard expands upon Gorbman's claims: "If music is felt to be needed in realist cinema, it is clearly even more essential in fantasy cinema".[4] She echoes W.R. Irwin and Alec Wooley; realist conventions ground fantasy so that audiences will be more invested.[5] For Halfyard, even non-diegetic music fosters belief in a fantastical diegesis. Paul Taberham extends this framework to animation: "Sound sells the reality of an animation to its audience,

---

[1] Chion, *Audio*, 5; Doane: 33-34; Altman, "Moving": 67.
[2] Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5-6.
[3] Gianluca Sergi, "In Defence of Vulgarity: The Place of Sound Effects in the Cinema," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* 5 (2006).
[4] Janet K. Halfyard, "Introduction: Finding Fantasy," *The Music of Fantasy Cinema*, ed. Janet K. Halfyard (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2012), 8.
[5] Irwin, 189; Worley, 14.

encouraging viewers to invest in the onscreen event."[6] Like fantasy, animation is comprised of highly constructed worlds. Aural components – both music and sound effects – anchor them to reality. Therefore, as fantasy and as animation, the *Avatar* franchise relies on these elements for mimesis, as connections to the real world.

The music and sound effects of *Avatar* and *Korra* impact the balance of mimesis and fantasy. As the aforementioned film scholars have argued, these aural components tether their more fantastical or abstracted elements to reality. However, these parallel processes also have a more complicated and nuanced effect on the world-building of these series. Non-diegetic music does ironically operate as a realist filmmaking convention, abetting in the audience's suspension of disbelief, but it also functions as a series of cultural signifiers through the selection of instruments, instrumentations, and performers. By tethering these shows to the real world, the music also tethers them to specific historical and cultural contexts. Sound effects are comparatively straightforward agents of mimesis. Nevertheless, individual personnel still contended with factors of authenticity, technological mediation, internal consistency, and production limitations. The resulting soundscapes both constructed, ascribed, and grounded Asian-ness for the franchise.

Composing the Music: Instruments, Instrumentations, and Performers

The musical score for *Avatar* and *Korra* was composed by Jeremy Zuckerman. In order to build what he has described as a "fictional and ancient" musical score, he pursued two types of mimesis.[7] First, he gathered "ethnic instruments" to create "world music."[8] Returning to James O. Young's categories of cultural appropriation, Zuckerman engaged primarily in style or motif appropriation, in that he de-contextualized stylistic elements of an insider culture in order to create something new.[9] The terms he used to describe this process require further unpacking. In her analysis of Disney's *Brother Bear* (2003), Janice Esther Tulk critiques that film's reliance on "world music" – where typical instrumentation was accompanied by "hybrid 'flavours' of non-western instruments" – as signifiers for exoticism and Otherness at the expense of cultural

[6] Paul Taberham, "A General Aesthetics of American Sound Design," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13.2 (2018): 131.
[7] Acastus, "Music Interview with the Track Team (part 1 of 3)," *AvatarSpirit.Net*, 26 Jul. 2006.
[8] Acastus, "Music Interview with the Track Team (part 2 of 3)," *AvaarSpirit.Net*, 5 Aug. 2006; Mike Brennan, "The Music of Avatar: The Last Airbender," *Soundtrack*, 7 Apr. 2008; Marissa Lee, "Interview with The Track Team: The musicians behind The Legend of Korra," *Racebending.com*, 27 Mar. 2012.
[9] J.O. Young, 5.

specificity and accuracy.[10] Of course, while *Brother Bear* attempted to re-present a real – albeit nonspecific – Indigenous North American tribe, *Avatar* and *Korra* take place in a wholly original fantasy world. Even with this leeway, Zuckerman still made creative decisions that impacted the construction and ascription of Asian-ness. As musicologists Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman argue throughout their edited collection, music is a major, if largely ignored, signifier of racial identity and difference.[11] One of the goals of this section is to determine how Zuckerman navigated and negotiated the racial and cultural significations of his instruments, instrumentation, and performers while creating a "fictional and ancient" soundscape.

A second way that this composer displayed an impulse toward mimesis was through the privileging of live recordings over digital synthesis. By having physiological bodies play these membranophones or percussion instruments, aerophones or wind instruments, and chordophones or stringed instruments rather than a computer simulate those sounds, the human imperfections and texture were supposedly retained. Through these two approaches, he sought to tether the music of *Avatar* and *Korra* to reality, to position it in relation to real historical and cultural contexts as well as the physiological bodies of the musicians. Given the concurrent impulse toward fantastical distancing as well as the production constraints of television animation, Zuckerman also engaged in forms of hybridization. Through these processes, he and his fellow musicians attempted to maintain the authenticity and Asian-ness of the soundscapes of *Avatar* and *Korra*.

Avatar: Mimesis through Traditional Instruments and Live Recordings

From its inception, the music of *Avatar* was envisioned to be nonwestern, nontraditional, and nonspecific. Zuckerman strove for these goals through the balancing of mimesis and fantasy in his compositions. In production narratives for the first series, he has emphasized the instruments over the instrumentation as the primary cultural signifiers. As a result, he has spoken about purposefully avoiding western instruments and large orchestras, although both appear in the series.[12] He has also stated: "It's really

[10] Janice Esther Tulk, "An Aesthetic of Ambiguity: Musical Representation of Indigenous Peoples in Disney's *Brother Bear*," *Drawn to Sound: Animation Film Music and Sonicity*, ed. Rebecca Coyle (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2010), 130.
[11] Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, editors, *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).
[12] "Commentary on Light in the Dark" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Nickelodeon (2014); Brennan; M. Lee, "Interview"; Hector Navarro, "Episode 30: Jeremy Zuckerman & Bryan Konietzko," *Nick Animation Podcast*, 27 Jan. 2017.

important to us to try to understand these instruments as much as we can and to treat them with respect."[13] Because he considered them to be the bearers of cultural identity and of authenticity, Zuckerman has regularly listed the instruments utilized for the show, being sure to acknowledge their national and cultural backgrounds.

For example, he has mentioned using the plucked chordophones *guzheng* and *pipa*, identifying them as ancient and Chinese, and has discussed how he studied them under "a master musician named Celia Liu."[14] The former is a kind of zither, one of the oldest of its type, that was played by both nobles and peasants.[15] The latter is a lute that originated in India before becoming "indispensable" to traditional Chinese music.[16] Both are noted for their versatility and range.[17] By naming these chordophones, Zuckerman established a link between his work and the historical and cultural contexts in which these instruments were first developed and popularized. Their ancient and Chinese identities were therefore transferrable to Zuckerman's compositions. He further strengthened that connection by mentioning his teacher, thus positioning himself within and a part of a musical lineage. In doing so, he indicated an impulse toward the type of archival authenticity discussed in chapter four, carrying on a tradition. In an interview, Zuckerman went into greater detail about what attributes these types of instruments signified in addition to ancient-ness and Chinese-ness. He recounted: "The xun is an especially powerful instrument. It is one of the oldest Chinese instruments with about 8000 years of history and is believed by some to have been invented to imitate the crying of the villagers in a war torn village. It really does sound sad."[18] Author Li Xiaoxiang confirms that this particular aerophone produces a "deep and sorrowful tone" but dates it at 7000 years old.[19] When naming the *guzheng*, the *pipa*, and the *xun*, Zuckerman emphasized their being Chinese and their being ancient or traditional. When he did go into greater detail, he focused on the emotional function of the instruments. In the case of the *xun*, rather than being divorced from its historical and cultural context, that connotation was highlighted and reinforced.

---

[13] Brennan.
[14] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 6: The Avatar and the Firelord" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008); "Avatar Spirits"; Acastus, "Music 2"; Brennan.
[15] Li Xiaoxiang, *Origins of Chinese Music*, trans. Wong Huey Khey (Singapore: Asiapac Books Pte Ltd, 2007), 80; Jin Jie, *Chinese Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2010), 64.
[16] Li X., 82; Jin, 64-65.
[17] Jin, 64-65.
[18] Acastus, "Music 2."
[19] Li X., 45-46.

In addition to these primarily Chinese instruments, Zuckerman has also discussed using non-Asian instruments for *Avatar*. Two of the most common examples are the *duduk* and the *kalimba* or *mbira*. He has identified the former as an Armenian woodwind and the later as an African chordophone.[20] Their being traditional and nonwestern "ethnic instruments" was seemingly enough justification to be part of the world music of *Avatar*. When he did elaborate, Zuckerman focused on the tones of the instruments rather than their backgrounds. In one interview, he referred to the *duduk* as "very melancholy... and extremely expressive."[21] Musicologist Andy Nercessian has also noted the "velvety and deeply evocative sound" of this double-reed aerophone, but the emphasis of his book on the subject is on the strong link between the *duduk* and Armenian national identity.[22] Similarly, the *mbira* has been positioned as emblematic of the Shona people, an ethnic group currently centered in Zimbabwe.[23] However, when discussing that chordophone, Zuckerman reduced its identity to simply "African." The elision of these national and ethnic specificities is understandable given that they risk diluting or counteracting the Asian-ness and Chinese-ness of the more dominant instruments. Instead, Zuckerman has prioritized their being traditional and nonwestern. Furthermore, the emphasis remains on emotional impact. He has adopted the same approach in his rare mentions of western instruments. When talking about the use of the cello, for example, he does not elaborate on the historical and cultural background of the chordophone, instead only describing it as being good for "scary sounds," function divorced from context.[24] The discrepancy between the framing of different types instruments can be plainly seen in Zuckerman's account of an alternative version of the Fire Nation theme:

> Azula's theme is a variation of the main Fire Nation theme that is used throughout the series. That theme is mostly comprised of drums, bass trombones and French horns in very low registers. It's pretty masculine. We wanted to portray her femininity and power and so used the gamelan (Indonesian orchestra comprised of pitched percussion) to achieve this.

---

[20] "Commentary – Avatar"; "Avatar Spirits"; Acastus, "Music 2"; Acastus, "Music Interview with the Track Team (part 3 of 3), *AvatarSpirit.Net*, 12 Aug. 2006.
[21] Acastus, "Music 3."
[22] Andy Nercessian, *The Duduk and National Identity in Armenia* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001), 3.
[23] Paul Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).
[24] "Commentary – Avatar"; "Commentary – Operation."

> We combined the gamelan's eerie bell like quality with a choir to highlight her deeply rooted and very controlled evil.[25]

For most of the series, the Fire Nation is represented with a theme comprised of predominantly western instruments. Zuckerman did not feel the compulsion to expand about the backgrounds of the drums, bass trombones, and French horns utilized for the theme. For him, they signified masculinity rather than any real-world national or ethnic specificity. In contrast, when discussing Azula's pitched variation, he identified the instrumentation as Indonesian in addition to as signifiers of femininity and precision. For the former, the historical and cultural contexts of the instruments are treated as incidental. For the later, those identities are highlighted as transferable to the final compositions. Of course, significations occur regardless of an individual's intentions. The *dukuk, mbira,* cello, and other instruments are bearers of national and ethnic identities beyond the emotional impact of the sounds that they produce. The artist is never in complete control of these complexes of signs, as can also be further seen in the production narratives on how these instruments were performed.

In an interview for Racebending.com, Zuckerman defined the underlying philosophy behind the instrumentation of the music of *Avatar*. He told the website: "we didn't want to portray any negative characteristics... to any specific culture."[26] Elsewhere, he elaborated: "I didn't want a certain culture to be ascribed to the bad guys and another culture to be ascribed to the good guys. And that was also part of the advantage of not being super traditional musically."[27] This central concern has reappeared throughout the production processes of both series. Fantastical distancing and hybridization had allowed them to appropriate and incorporate stylistic elements and motifs from a range of cultures without directly re-presenting or representing them. Sometimes, the adaptation was relatively straightforward, as seen with the Bei Fong theme introduced in "The Blind Bandit" (*Avatar* S2E06). Written to be performed on the *guzheng*, this track was adapted from the Chinese folk song "Jasmine Flower."[28] Zuckerman told Racebending.com, "They [the Bei Fong family] were upscale, and I imagined they were very traditional, and the song is very traditional. The only traditional song I really knew. Slightly modified."[29] Musicologist Jin Jie identifies "Jasmine

---

[25] Acastus, "Music 3."
[26] M. Lee, "Interview."
[27] Joel Cornah, "Jeremy Zuckerman Interview," *Sci Fi Fantasy Network,* 16 Jan. 2016.
[28] AKA: 茉莉花 (*Mò lì huā*).
[29] M. Lee, "Interview."

Flower" both as "the first Chinese folk song to become popular and well known outside China" and as a song of great cultural importance within China.[30] Once again, the qualities of being traditional and being Chinese are the ones Zuckerman stressed. He did not discuss the possible parallels between the narrative of the song – a girl wants to pick a beautiful flower but fears repercussions – and that of the episode – Toph is stifled by her rich family. Instead, its traditional nature became a signifier of the Bei Fong family's conservative values. Through all of this, Zuckerman remained adamant that – while the interviewer recognized the connection between the two – the Bei Fong theme is an adaptation of "Jasmine Flower," that it is not a direct reproduction. This composition is a rarity within the *Avatar* soundscape. For most of the music, the composer engaged in more obvious hybridizations.

According to Zuckerman, he avoided making fantasy cultures synonymous with real-world ones by playing traditional instruments in nontraditional ways.[31] He elaborated: "We wound up making this kind of compromise between the ethnic instrumentation and the western stuff. And out of that naturally, the styles merged."[32] According to the composer, this sort of transculturation was a positive for the series because – in his words – "the mixing of instruments from completely different cultures has had some really interesting results."[33] One example was the Foggy Swamp Tribe theme featured in "The Swamp" (*Avatar* S2E04). In this episode, the main characters meet a group of Waterbenders coded as American hillbillies. Part of that signification comes from non-diegetic music, a *pipa* being played like a banjo, adding a bluegrass twang absent in more traditional compositions.[34] While both chordophones, these two instruments are otherwise distinct. Emblematically American, the banjo was adapted from tribal equivalents by enslaved Africans as an alternative to forbidden drums. Because of this background, Joanna R. Smolko interprets the banjo music featured in some *Looney Tunes* cartoons as signifiers of Black-ness.[35] The instrument later became associated with white backwoodsmen and mountainfolk in the Appalachians. Authors Dena J. Epstein, Karen Linn, and Cecilia Conway trace this history in depth.[36] The latter

[30] Jin, 81-82.
[31] Acastus, "Music 1"; M. Lee, "Interview"; Cornah.
[32] M. Lee, "Interview."
[33] "Acastus, "Music 1."
[34] Brennan.
[35] Smolko, 353.
[36] Dena J. Epstein, "The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History," *Ethnomusicology* 19.3 (1975): 347-71; Karen Linn, *The Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Urbana, IL: University

connotation is the one that appears in this episode of *Avatar*. Through his method, Zuckerman aimed to signify Asian-ness through the instrument and backwoods-ness through the instrumentation. These identities were therefore combined and projected onto the associated animated bodyscapes of the members of the Foggy Swamp Tribe, complementing their character designs, animation, and vocal performances. He adopted a similar approach to conveying different identities in *Korra*. With this and other examples, Zuckerman sought to balance mimesis and fantasy. Based on his creative decisions, he located authenticity in the instruments rather than in how they were played. He also displayed an impulse toward mimesis in the performance of his compositions.

In the production narratives surrounding *Avatar,* live recordings have been framed as the ideal. This privileging can be plainly seen in discourses around the series finale, where Zuckerman indulged by hiring a sixteen-piece orchestra.[37] He recalled: "we couldn't resist the orchestra."[38] This preference is visible elsewhere in the production of the series. Tellingly, Zuckerman has been insistent that "All the ethnic instruments are performed" rather than fabricated on a computer.[39] Akin to the martial arts choreography, the physiological body of the musician is highlighted to indicate a sort of corporeal authenticity. There was a real person holding a real instrument, generating those sounds with minimal technological mediation. Otherwise, Zuckerman relied heavily on sound editing, on digitally manipulating musical notes from original or library recordings. For example, he has spoken about recording a live *taiko* performance in order to create a reference library that he could sample for new compositions.[40] Still, when following this process, he has emphasized the need for the instruments "to sound physical and acoustic."[41] He discussed the difficulty of accomplishing this task in regards to the sequel series as well: "When you use computer music elements, you don't want them to sound tech-y. It still had to sound very natural and organic and very physical and real."[42] Rather than exploit the abstract potential of synthetic music, his

---

of Illinois Press, 1994); Cecilia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

[37] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 18: Sozin's Comet, Part 1: The Phoenix King" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008); Brennan; "Avatar Spirits."

[38] Brennan.

[39] Ibid.

[40] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 20: The Crossroads of Destiny" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2007); Brennan.

[41] Brennan.

[42] Kaya Savas, "Composer Interview: Jeremy Zuckerman," *Film.Music.Media,* 11 Oct. 2013.

goal was to hide the technological mediation by aping the aural qualities of a live recording. As a result, the music grounds the more fantastical elements. The archival authenticity of the instruments and the corporeal authenticity of the performances complement and compound each other in the shared drive toward mimesis.

The blending between the natural and technological – as well as between the nonwestern and the western – is on display in the tsungi horn, a fantastical instrument heard both diegetically and non-diegetically in *Avatar*. Both Zuckerman and sound designer Benjamin Wynn have discussed the creation of this aerophone across various interviews and podcasts. They described the music as the result of "convolution," of digitally combining characteristics of the *duduk* and the trombone.[43] For Zuckerman, the goal was to make the result "sound real" and to not "sound modern and computerized."[44] If the tsungi horn did exist, then this is how a live recording would sound. A culmination of the music of *Avatar*, this synthetic aeorphone demonstrates the value placed on traditional and nonwestern instruments, how they were hybridized with western instruments and instrumentations, as well as the imitation of live recordings to disguise technological mediation. Even with the selection of a specifically Armenian woodwind, Zuckerman has emphasized its emotional function – the ability to convey melancholia – over its historical and cultural background. Regardless, those connotations remain embedded in the final sound. The blending of instruments and instrumentations result in a mixing of significations, both intentional and unintentional. The artist is never in full control of these complexes of signs. Finally, computers created fantastical sounds that did not or could exist in the real world – such as a combination of reed and brass – while still trying to sound organic. Realist conventions belie a false mimesis for something that never existed in the real world yet still tethers the fantasy to reality, a key aspect of sound design explored in a later section. These considerations persist in the production narratives surrounding the music of *Korra*.

Korra: Hybridization through Nontraditional Instrumentation and Jazz Musicians

As with *Avatar*, Zuckerman still stressed the use of traditional and identifiably Asian instruments and instrumentation for the sequel series, especially for the two-part flashback "Beginnings" (*Korra* S2E07-08). In the commentaries for these episodes, the composer identified the *guqin* as Chinese and the *shamisen* as Japanese. He also talked

[43] Acastus, "Music 3"; Brennan; M. Lee, "Interview"; Cornah; Navarro, "30."
[44] Acastus, "Music 3"; Brennan.

about researching *tanggu* and *paigu* "rhythms" as well as reusing *gamelon* orchestration.[45] However, the music for these episodes is atypical for the series, which is defined by what co-creator Bryan Konietzko described as "Chinese instruments... playing sort of American-style jazz."[46] This designation and its ramifications on the franchise require deeper analysis, as it positions the music in relation both to ancient China as well as to early twentieth-century United States.

Musicologist Daniel Goldmark has written about how early U.S. animators used jazz to signify Black-ness, which for them was synonymous with primitiveness.[47] That was not Zuckerman's goal with *Korra*. Instead, like the imitation of Art Deco and MMA, jazz signified that the world introduced in *Avatar* has evolved into a more modern and cosmopolitan one. While jazz can and has been understood primarily as American and as Black, its production and consumption have often adapted elements of hybridity, multiculturalism, and transculturation since inception. For example, E. Taylor Atkins, Alyn Shipton, Peter Keppy, and Eugene Marlow all write about how jazz spread through Asia since the 1920s.[48] Even within the United States, it would be a mistake to solely identity jazz as Black music just as it would be a mistake to erase the significance of Black American culture to its formation and development. Musicologist Loren Kajikawa writes at length about how Asian American musicians of the 1980s and 1990s had sought to define their racial and cultural identities through the appropriation of jazz. He specifically references how Japanese American Glenn Horiuchi and Chinese American Francis Wong navigated their mixed heritages by performing jazz music on the *shamisen* and the *ehru*, respectively.[49] So, Zuckerman was not the first to play traditional Asian instruments in such a manner. Much like Horiuchi and Wong, Zuckerman sought to convey a hybridized identity. Whereas the first two were expressing an Asian American "essence" – to borrow Kajikawa's term – the latter sought to convey both Asian-ness through the instruments as well as a turn-of-the-century

---

[45] "Commentary on Beginnings: Part 1" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Viacom International Inc. (2014); "Commentary – Beginnings 2."
[46] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 6: And the Winner Is...." (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*), Viacom International Inc. (2012).
[47] Goldmark, 77-106.
[48] E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Alyn Shipton, *A New History of Jazz*, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2007), 290-91; Peter Keppy, "Southeast Asia in the Age of Jazz: Locating Popular Culture in the Colonial Philippines and Indonesia," *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 44.3 (2013): 444-64; Eugene Marlow, *Jazz in China: From Dance Hall Music to Individual Freedom of Expression* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).
[49] Loren Kajikawa, "The Sound of Struggle: Black Revolutionary Nationalism and Asian American Jazz," *Jazz/Not Jazz*, eds. Daniel Goldmark, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and David Andrew Ake (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 209.

cosmopolitanism through the instrumentation. Like when he played a *pipa* as though it were a banjo, Zuckerman centered national and ethnic specificities in the instruments rather than in how he and others used them. As a result, music played on Chinese instruments would always be in some way Chinese. However, through nontraditional instrumentation, he could instill other qualities.

When discussing the music of *Korra,* Zuckerman frequently talked about studying early jazz or "the roots of jazz" in preparation. He specified emulating ragtime and Dixieland, going so far as to hire a professional Dixieland band to perform some incidental music that he would insert throughout the show, akin to the *taiko* drums for *Avatar*.[50] Both of these styles of music carry with them specific meanings. Ragtime has been described as an early precursor to jazz, offering similar syncopations or irregular rhythms, with its origins in the Black American music of the 1890s.[51] Dixieland refers to both the Original Dixieland Jazz Band – an all-white group from 1910s New Orleans – as well as their imitators in the 1930s and 1940s.[52] Both music styles were developed and popularized within specific historical and cultural contexts that result in particular regional as well as racial connotations. However, for Zuckerman, the most important qualities that these types of jazz offered was temporal. They complemented the visual and narrative elements that situated *Korra* in that world's equivalent of the 1920s. Anything else was incidental. To further stress this emphasis on jazz as a temporal signifier, Zuckerman described his music for the final season of *Korra* – set three years after the previous one – as emulative of the evolution from Dixieland to the "straight-ahead jazz" of the 1930s.[53] To him, the regional and racial specificity of these subsets were less relevant than how they could position the series in relation to the early twentieth century. This desire for hybridization in the construction of Asian-ness was also reflected in how these compositions were performed and recorded.

While on the *Nick Animation Podcast*, Zuckerman spoke about wanting to duplicate his experience on the *Avatar* series finale for the entirety of *Korra*: "After having the live strings, I just couldn't go back."[54] Retaining a sixteen-piece orchestra

---

[50] "KorraScope Interviews Jeremy Zuckerman," *YumChunks*, 21 Apr. 2014; Cornah; Navarro, "30"; "Commentary – And."
[51] Shipton, 24-31; Gary Giddins and Scott DeVeaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 67; Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 20.
[52] Shipton, 71-78, 443-51.
[53] "Republic City Dispatch #51: Audio Bending with Jeremy Zuckerman and Benjamin Wynn," *Republic City Dispatch*, 19 Jan. 2015.
[54] Navarro, "30."

would not have been financially feasible for the new series, resulting in a string sextet. Rather than a hindrance, the composer has described the small size of his team as an advantage because it resulted in more "intimate" and more "human" sounds where one could hear the "details" and the "discrepancies."[55] Once again, the language he has used in regards to live recordings highlight the physiological bodies of the musicians, fetishizing their imperfections as indicators of a corporeal authenticity. According to Zuckerman, a key figure in realizing the vision of Chinese jazz was Hong Wang, a multi-instrumentalist with a background in both Chinese folk styles and jazz.[56] In a piece spotlighting this musician, the *Las Vegas Sun* credited Zuckerman as saying that "Wang will add little, stylistic embellishments to the music that a Western composer cannot write... It is these articulations that bring the music to life and add extra depth."[57] While not framed as a direct quote from Zuckerman, this sentiment suggests that – despite the emulation of American jazz – the music of *Korra* was still observably nonwestern. Not only was that identity derived from the instruments being performed, Wang also contributed an irreproducibly Chinese embellishment. There is a parallel between how Zuckerman credited Wang for the music of *Korra* and his previous reference to studying Chinese instruments under Liu before *Avatar*. In both cases, their involvements signified an Asian-ness that Zuckerman's compositions alone could not. Across interviews and commentaries, he was not only explicitly referring to them as experts in their field, he was also implicitly identifying them as Asian experts in their field. That identity was transferred to the music that they either helped inspire or performed.

The music of *Avatar* and *Korra* are the results of transculturation, of ideas and inspirations crossing borders from a variety of sources to form new compositions. Unlike the other contact zones discussed in previous chapters, here Zuckerman is the primary contributor and the sole credited musician across both series. In his production narratives, he has emphasized the traditional and nonwestern backgrounds of his selection of "ethnic instruments" as signifiers of Asian-ness. Nontraditional instrumentation helped distance this music from being synecdochic of specific real-world cultures as well as contributed supplemental connotations. Simultaneously, he pursued mimesis through the privileging or the aping of live recordings, emphasizing the

[55] "Republic City Dispatch #29: Sound of Book 2 w/Jeremy Zuckerman and Benjamin Wynn," *Republic City Dispatch*, 3 Feb. 2014; "Commentary – Light"; Savas.
[56] "Commentary – And"; "Commentary – Beginnings 2;" "Commentary – Light"; "Commentary – Metal"; "Commentary – Operation"; "KorraScope"; Navarro "30."
[57] Cristina Chang, "Las Vegas musician helping preserve Chinese folk music, instruments," *Las Vegas Sun* (12 Aug. 2012).

physiological bodies and physical instruments that produced these sounds in ways that recall discussions of corporeal authenticity in the fight choreography. The result for Zuckerman and for the co-creators was a fictional and ancient soundscape, one that contributed to and reinforced the construction and ascription of Asian-ness. Many of these factors also impacted the production of the other aural components.

Constructing Sound Effects: False Mimesis and Tethering the Fantastical to Reality

On both *Avatar* and *Korra*, the sound effects were produced concurrently with the music. For each episode, Zuckerman and Wynn attended a spotting session along with the Foley team and the co-creators to go over finished animation and make initial creative decisions.[58] While music could signify Asian-ness through instrument, instrumentation, and performance, sound effects were more restricted. Their sources generally lack equivalent explicit historical and cultural contexts that could be exploited as signifiers of Asian-ness. They could imitate aural conventions found in Asian media – such as anime, as *Korra* sound designer Steve Tushar noted in our interview – but that was rarely the case with this franchise.[59] Instead, these shows primarily aped the realist conventions of live-action filmmaking practices, albeit with some room for exaggeration, akin to Taberham's "poetic authentication mode" of sound design.[60] As the primary sound designer on *Avatar* and *Korra*, Wynn drew a distinction between what he called the "realistic" or "detailed" and the "magical" or "abstract," expressing preference for the former.[61] Therefore, the mission statement for the sound effects of *Avatar* and *Korra* was to tether the fantastical elements of the franchise to reality. Personnel for both series strove for this goal through Foley – the live recording of original sounds – and sound design – the synthesis and editing of original sounds. In keeping with the previous section's analysis of live recordings, such mimesis can also help authenticate and compound signifiers of Asian-ness even when not directly contributing such connotations.

---

[58] "Audio Commentary – Episode 17: The Northern Air Temple" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006); "Commentary – Avatar"; "Commentary – Beginnings 1"; "Inside the Book of Spirits" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*), Viacom International Inc. (2014); Acastus, "Music 1"; Brennan; Michal Schick, "SeptBender Interview: Jeremy Zuckerman discusses music-bending on 'The Legend of Korra'," *Hypable*, 23 Sep. 2013; Savas; "KorraScope."
[59] Steve Tushar (22 Jun. 2018), Skype Interview.
[60] Taberham, 143-45.
[61] "Commentary – Northern"; "Commentary – Avatar."

Foley: Corporeal Authenticity, Suturing, and Technological Mediation

Film scholar and practitioner Vanessa Theme Ament offers a definition for Foley as "the sonic performance of the character."[62] She describes the process as supporting, enhancing, or replacing reality through the sounds of character movement.[63] These functions are exaggerated in animation, which tasks Foley artists with creating new realities.[64] *Avatar* and *Korra* Foley supervisor/mixer Aran Tanchum concurred, defining Foley as "the types of sound that are recorded... in sync to picture. So, that's generally the sounds of movement."[65] *Avatar* Foley engineer/mixer Jeff Kettle also described it as "anything we can record in a studio."[66] On social media, Tanchum expanded and listed three categories of Foley sound: cloth, footsteps, and props.[67] According to these personnel, there was something inherently organic and authentic to the noises that they recorded because they came from real-world sources as opposed to from technological synthesis. As Tanchum wrote: "You can think of [Foley] as the natural, organic sounds of movement."[68] Such language emphasizes a connection between the physiological bodies of the Foley artists and the animated bodyscapes of the characters. Their actions – or, more precisely, the aural recordings of their actions – are sutured to these figures, signifying mimesis and grounding them to reality by giving them weight and texture.

This process is not straightforward, as the crews of *Avatar* and *Korra* have noted. The object used to generate the sound is rarely identical to the one on screen. In a discussion with Wynn and Tanchum, Konietzko cited the use of cornstarch for snow in an episode of *Korra*.[69] Foley artist Vincent Guisetti stepped on this prop to imitate the sound of walking through snow. That specific recording was synchronized with the animation. For such a sequence, the process would have to be invisible as to not draw attention to itself. An audience must not think of the true source of that sound effect. While this instance allowed the Foley team to subtly and unobtrusively connect animated bodyscapes to reality, sound effects could also be either exaggerated or diminished for narrative or stylistic needs. On the commentary track for "The Terror

---

[62] Vanessa Theme Ament, *The Foley Grail: The Art of Performing Sound for Film, Games, and Animation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Focal Press, 2014), 86.
[63] Ibid., 34-39.
[64] Ibid., 39-40, 76-81.
[65] "The Making of Avatar – Inside the Sound Studios" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006).
[66] "Commentary on The Terror Within" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra - Book Three: Change*), Viacom International Inc. (2014).
[67] third ear audio, *Tumblr*, 9 Mar. 2013.
[68] third ear audio, *Tumblr*, 11 Mar. 2013.
[69] "Commentary – Terror."

Within" (*Korra* S3E08), while Tanchum and Wynn discussed the accuracy and realism of the soundscape, Konietzko chimed in to point out how they would enhance certain sounds – such as cloth movement – for dramatic effect.[70] To illustrate, in a video Tanchum uploaded onto social media, Guisetti flaps a leather coat in sync with Tenzin's decidedly non-leather cape; the recorded noise is noticeably more pronounced than had he used a more accurate material.[71] For the inverse, Konietzko also recalled that Foley for the Metalbender cops' metal boots had to be removed because it was distractingly loud.[72] The primary goal of Foley on *Avatar* and *Korra* may have been to produce realistic sound effects to be sutured to these animated bodyscapes, but fantastical distancing still occurred. The props were not always identical to their on-screen counterparts, and the resulting sound effects were sometimes exaggerated or diminished. Furthermore, despite the emphasis on physiological bodies wielding physical props, technological mediation still occurred. The sounds heard by human ears are different from those recorded by a microphone, which is why Foley artists are paired with Foley engineers or supervisors in a sound booth.[73] Discourse around Foley indicates that – despite technological mediation – that connection with a physiological human body was preserved. Therefore, these animated bodyscapes acquired new sets of signs that grounded their more fantastical elements. By extension, connections between signifiers of Asian-ness and the real world were likewise reinforced.

Sound Design: Balancing Fantasy and Mimesis in Hard Effects and Ambiences

Whereas Foley is the live recording of natural noises with minimal technological mediation, sound design entails manipulating sounds – either from a library or an original recording – to suit the needs of a given scene. While working on *Avatar*, Wynn explained how as a sound designer he would modify the envelope or shape of an existing sound effect.[74] He later expanded:

> For this show, a lot of the sounds start as some sort of natural recording but then get modified to form the movement. Again, a lot of it is about

[70] Ibid.
[71] third ear audio, *Tumblr*, 9 Jul. 2013.
[72] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 9: Out of the Past" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*), Viacom International Inc. (2012).
[73] "Making – Sound"; "Commentary – Terror."
[74] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 10: The Day of Black Sun, Part 1: The Invasion" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008).

> movement, and a lot of it is about intensity and filling the whole audio spectrum. So, a lot of making something impactful and powerful was about giving it bass and giving it some treble and really filling out the range so that it sounds huge.[75]

There is an incongruity between the desire for organic sound effects and the processes by which the sound designers constructed them. In this quote, Wynn emphasized the naturalness of the originals, but they nevertheless underwent technological manipulation and synthesis in order to be synchronized with final animation. The internal consistency of the show superseded the desire for accuracy. Sequences featuring bending, comedy, and the Spirit World illustrate how the sound designers sought to balance mimetic authenticity and fantastical distancing through the construction of hard sound effects – featured sounds that draw attention to themselves and to what they are sutured to – as well as of ambiences – environmental sounds without an on-screen source.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, some characters in *Avatar* and *Korra* possess the ability to manipulate or bend the elements. While water, earth, fire, and air do exist in the real world and can produce or be used to produce sounds, they do not move or act in the same way as depicted in these shows. Because an unadulterated recording of reality could not be adequately synchronized to animation of bending, technological mediation was required. Wynn went into detail about how he approached creating these types of hard sound effects:

> Bryan [Konietzko] and Mike [DiMartino] always wanted the show to sound completely natural, as if the events were happening in reality. This ruled out synthesis and processing that was too obvious. So that steered me to try to find the best recordings of water, air, earth/rocks, and fire I could find. I then combined and processed these sounds to create the various different elements. We also came up with a varity of semi-transparent processes that I do to the sound design. Certain tricks to make it more impactful, deeper, more intense, etc. And lots of the natural sounds are augmented by highly designed ones.[76]

Like with the tsungi horn, the goal for the bending sound effects was a false mimesis. This was what bending would sound like if it existed in the real world. Once again, the goal was to ground the more fantastical elements of the animation. Namely, it made the

[75] "Commentary – Terror."
[76] Brennan.

impossible act of someone bending water, earth, fire, or air appear believable. As Tushar said, "We got to sell what they draw with the sound."[77] This task was only accomplishable through the digital manipulation of either original or preexisting audio recordings. For a Waterbending subset called Bloodbending, Wynn and Tanchum removed the higher frequencies from Foley of twisting vegetables in order to "suggest muscles stressing."[78] For the Earthbending in *Avatar*, Wynn processed excerpts from a sound library of crushing rocks and falling boulders.[79] On the sequel series, Tushar created the Earthbending sound effects in part from recordings that he did for the videogame *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* (2010).[80] Wynn also pitched recordings of his own voice in order to create sound effects for Firebending and Airbending.[81] In regards to the former fantasy martial art, Tushar recalled editing or "tweaking" preexisting kits, specifically Wynn's work on the original series as well as his own on *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (2012), although those only comprised one layer of many.[82] Whether derived from original, archival, or previously constructed sources, the sound effects used to create bending are emphasized as being mimetic, even when they were not produced by real water, earth, fire, or air. Regardless, they were digitally manipulated to create the desired effect and to synchronize with the animation. Even with this technological mediation, the resulting sound effects are identified as natural and organic, their synthetic background hidden.

For some of the more comedic moments, on the other hand, Wynn broke away from this impulse toward mimesis, although he still did not fully engage in the "flamboyant and incongruous" "zip-crash mode" of sound design as used by Taberham to describe U.S. cartoon shorts of the 1940s and 1950s.[83] Wynn discussed the intentions and inspirations behind the comedic sound effects of the first series:

> The cartoonish sounds are always interesting because we've wanted to be true to the silliness of the moment but at the same time try to give them a unique sound. We didn't want to get fully Hanna-Barbara as that would sound too distant from the tone of the rest of the show. The approach that we developed somewhere in the middle of the second season was using

[77] Tushar (22 Jun.).
[78] Brennan; third ear audio, *Tumblr*, 3 May 2013.
[79] Brennan.
[80] Steve Tushar (28 Apr. 2019), email interview.
[81] "Commentary – Northern"; "Commentary – Avatar"; "Making – Sound."
[82] Tushar (22 Jun.); Tushar (28 Apr.).
[83] Taberham, 136-40.

> my Cwejman analog synthesizer. There's something about the color of the analog that attaches itself really easily to the world, and at times it sounds almost organic, amazingly. This style is more a nod to FLCL than Hanna-Barbara.[84]

While the results were more abstracted than mimetic, Wynn's explanation still attempted to tether his sounds to the real world in two ways. First, he emphasized his desire to convey an "organic" feeling for these moments. Even though these sound effects went against realist conventions, he still tried to camouflage their synthetic nature, hence the expressed preference for analog over digital. This practice was exaggerated in *Korra*, with the sound designer recalling that the new comedic beats were more realistic and less synthetic.[85] Second, by citing *FLCL* (2003) as a chief inspiration in explicit opposition to U.S. cartoons, Wynn situated his work in relation to Japanese animation. Even if the sound effects are not mimetic, they are signifiers of Asian-ness. There is a parallel between these moments and the exaggerated facial expressions from chapter three. When *Avatar* breaks from its hyper-realist tendencies, it often incorporates anime convention as an alternative way to connect with the real word, meaning a specific national animation industry rather than everyday reality. These aural exaggerations are diminished in the sequel series. Tushar observed: "It's not like with *The Powerpuff Girls* [(1998-2005)], when they were just imitating Japanimation."[86] Instead, even the more fantastical and abstracted moments of comedy were anchored by relatively realistic sound effects.

Both the bending and comedic sequences in *Avatar* and *Korra* prioritized hard effects as ways to establish a link between the visuals and the real world. In addition to such moments, the sound designers also created naturalistic ambiences to construct a believable fantasy world. The negotiation of fantasy and mimesis is exemplified in sequences set in the Spirit World. Generally, everything related to the Spirits are without real-world aural referents, yet they had to be integrated in the established diegesis of *Avatar* and *Korra*. Therefore, as Wynn recalled: "That's another huge challenge with the show, portraying these things that aren't natural in our world in a sort of naturalistic way that isn't sci-fi."[87] He wanted to hide the technological mediation even when the sounds are purely synthetic. For sequences set in the Spirit Wilds in the "Beginnings" two-part

---

[84] Brennan.
[85] "Commentary – Beginnings 1."
[86] Tushar (22 Jun.).
[87] "Commentary – Beginnings 1."

episode, the sound designer recalled: "So the ambiences are... jungles but pitched down so they're different but sort of familiar."[88] Tushar concurred:

> There's a lot of ambiences going on that we didn't have in the first season that we had to create. Stuff that had to sound otherworldly, so we couldn't just use birds and crickets and the normal stuff. Sometimes, we would use the birds and crickets, but they'd be heavily pitched down and processed to give that otherworld kind of sound.[89]

He also recalled recycling some of the appropriately "surreal" ambiences that he had previously made for *Oz the Great and Powerful* (2013).[90] Like with the bending sequences, Wynn and Tushar filtered sounds through technological mediation in the service of internal consistency and synchronization. Furthermore, they took steps to hide the Spirit Wilds ambience's synthetic nature. Like with the comedy sequences, even though they apparently broke from mimesis through fantastical sound design, they still emphasized the organic nature of the initial audio. The non-synthetic origins of the sounds are positioned as anchors to reality. The resulting ambience was designed to be both fantastical and grounded, to keep audiences invested in the constructed diegesis and narrative as well as to validate signifiers of Asian-ness.

Summary: Aural Signs, Agents of Mimesis, and Affecting Ascriptions of Asian-ness

Because animation is an audiovisual medium, the animated bodyscape is also comprised of aural components. Musicians, Foley artists, and sound designers all contribute to those complexes of signs, making creative decisions that construct and ascribe identity. Given the degree of fantasy and abstraction inherent in shows like *Avatar* and *Korra*, music and sound effects act primarily as agents of mimesis, as tethers to reality. However, their function within the franchise can be more complicated, as personnel constructed additional and sometimes unintentional connotations.

The composition of music operates similarly to the other processes of fantasy world-building. Real-world referents are appropriated and adapted to create desired cultural signifiers. In production narratives, the "ethnic instruments" were emphasized as centers of signification. They both placed the resulting music in relation to real-world historical and cultural contexts as well as conveyed ancient-ness and traditional-ness. By

[88] Ibid.
[89] Tushar (22 Jun.).
[90] Ibid.

highlighting these qualities, the production narratives treat them as transferable to the final compositions. Zuckerman and other musicians also played these traditional instruments nontraditionally. The composer explained that this approach was principally to avoid equating fantasy and real-world cultures, fantastical distancing and internal consistency as signs of respect. However, his instrumentations were also used to ascribe additional characteristics to the music. By playing the *pipa* like a banjo, he blended connotations of both Chinese-ness and backwoods-ness. By performing jazz on traditional Chinese instruments, he conveyed both Chinese-ness and early twentieth-century cosmopolitanism. In addition to these creative decisions that placed the music in relation to the real world, Zuckerman further invoked mimesis through the privileging of live recordings over synthesis. He has emphasized how the music was produced by physical instruments and physiological bodies, complete with irreproducible details and discrepancies, indicative of a sort corporeal authenticity. In addition, he has referenced the influence of his teacher Liu and jazz musician Hong, discussing how their involvements were also indicators of authenticity. Not only were the two of them expert musicians, they were Asian musicians. Their knowledge and backgrounds informed the resulting musical compositions, instilling it with irreproducible Asian-ness.

Whether in the form of hard effects or ambiences and whether created via Foley or sound design, sound effects function primarily as agents of mimesis in *Avatar* and *Korra*. Whatever animated object or event to which they were sutured became more grounded and realistic. This phenomenon occurred even with the real-world source of a sound effect differed greatly from its on-screen counterpart as well as when it was exaggerated or diminished for narrative or stylistic purposes. Even when original audio recordings underwent subsequent manipulation for synchronization with animation, their naturalness and organic-ness were highlighted as signs of realism. Such technological mediation was designed to be invisible to avoid overly "tech-y" or "sci-fi" sound effects. The sound designers often strove for a false mimesis, for creating what these fantastical objects, actions, and places would sound like if they were real. Even when the sound effects where not especially mimetic, such as some of the comedy beats from *Avatar*, the sound designers still tethered the soundscape to the real world, emulating Japanese animation conventions rather than lived reality.

The soundscapes of *Avatar* and *Korra* contribute to the construction and ascription of Asian-ness to the animated bodyscape. Sometimes, they do so directly, such as through the emulation of Chinese music or of *FLCL*-inspired sound effects, both

of which project Asian-ness onto iconic animated bodyscapes. Primarily, though, they function as agents of mimesis, tethering the fantasy to reality so that the audiences could more easily consume the other visual and narrative elements. By extension, the soundscape abets other signifiers of Asian-ness by building a believable world in which they could exist. These production processes establish a framework for understanding the role of the voice in the formtion of the animated bodyscape, as detailed in the final chapter.

Chapter Six – Producing the Vocal Performances of *Avatar* and *Korra*: The Synchronization of Race, the Body, and the Voice

The animated bodyscape is comprised of various sets of signs, not only visual and narrative components but also aural ones. In addition to the world-building music and sound effects that project meaning onto these iconic figures, voices are directly sutured to animated bodyscapes. As the preceding chapter observes, sounds in *Avatar* and *Korra* function primarily and at times paradoxically as agents of mimesis. Vocal performances likewise ground the more fantastical and abstracted elements of this franchise, in keeping with W.R. Irwin's and Alec Wooley's assessments of fantasy and realism.[1] However, in these two shows as well as in other animations, the voice carries supplementary and more complicated connotations that affect constructions and ascriptions of Asian-ness.

As a tether to the real world, a vocal performance can potentially link the animated bodyscape of a character with the physiological body of an actor. Writings on the practice of celebrity voice acting have noted how this connection can be used to transfer or project characteristics from an established star persona to an animated figure, for better or for worse.[2] According to Tanine Allison, this includes racial identity, as she writes on how voice actor Elijah Wood's whiteness is hybridized with Savion Glover's motion captured Black-ness to form the protagonist of *Happy Feet*.[3] Indeed, popular discourse on race and animation has focused on the racial identities of voice actors. Yet, these sets of signs are not so straightforward, and there are further factors that contribute to the construction of these vocal and of these animated performances.

Indeed, the casting and audition process did affect both this franchise's impulse toward mimesis as well as how these shows constructed and ascribed Asian-ness. However, the selection of actors to provide voices for the characters was only the first step. The recording process entailed the generation of aural building blocks in the form of line readings, themselves produced not only by actors' physiological bodies but also in collaboration with other personnel. Finally, these aural building blocks were filtered through technological apparatuses and edited into coherent cyborg performances before

[1] Irwin, 189; Worley, 14,
[2] Bevilacqua; Wells, "To," 94; Marcello: 63-64; Holliday, 153-55.
[3] Allison, 114-15.

being sutured to animation. The final synchronization between aural and visual components – more than the sum of their parts – completes the animated bodyscape.

The Casting Process: Mimesis, Physiological Bodies, and Race

By emphasizing casting, popular discourse on race and animation indicates that the physiological bodies of these actors possess transferrable traits that animated bodyscapes can acquire. While the preceding five chapters have demonstrated that there are multiple other ways that racial and cultural signifiers are constructed and ascribed, this stage of production remains important. As race is rarely explicitly mentioned – perhaps to hide the apparent incongruity between the primarily white cast of actors and the nonwhite cast of characters – production narratives instead stress a drive toward mimesis through the pursuit of naturalistic vocal performances.

Auditioning Actors: Severed Voices and Collaborative Vocal Performances

On the subject of casting for *Avatar*, co-creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko have discussed seeking to avoid overly cartoonish, modern, or flowery vocal performances. According to Konietzko: "It was a tough show to cast because it was like 'What sound do you want?' 'We just want normal people. We don't want cartoon sounds and cartoon voices.'"[4] He repeated this sentiment for *Korra*: "We were just trying to find something naturalistic."[5] Voice director Andrea Romano praised *Avatar* casting supervisor Maryanne Dacey for finding candidates who fit this description. According to her, she did "a remarkable job of putting together actors who sound like they're all in the same world. It's kind of got a classical level to it. At the same time, it's contemporary, yet it's timeless."[6] In this quote, she privileged internal consistency and a lack of recognizable real-world specificity. The voices supposedly grounded the fantastical without linking the characters to any particular real-world contexts. One way that the *Avatar* casting personnel sought to accomplish these goals was the hiring of an actual boy – Zach Tyler Eisen – to voice the twelve-year-old Aang, in contrast to the industry norm of casting a middle-aged woman for such a role.[7] DiMartino reiterated this commitment for the sequel series, which cast child actors

[4] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 16: The Southern Raiders" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008).
[5] "Commentary – Out."
[6] "Commentary – Southern Raiders."
[7] Ibid.

Kiernan Shipka, Darcy Rose Byrnes, and Logan Wells as Jinora, Ikki, and Meelo, respectively. The co-creator asserted: "We always like to cast real kids for the kid parts."[8] Such creative decisions are indicative of a drive toward mimesis, toward normalizing fantastical and abstracted elements. This approach was seemingly limited to the ages of the actors, as racial and ethnic identities were not positioned as equivalent conveyers of authenticity. However, Romano has claimed credit for helping Dacey locate Asian voice actors for the first series, and the way she highlighted race in the casting process is explored in the subsequent subsection.[9]

With DiMartino and Konietzko's guidelines as well as Romano's input, the casting personnel set out on their task. Across original and preexisting interviews, voice actors for both series have shared memories of their experiences. In our interview, Janet Varney – who voiced the eponymous Korra – recalled:

> It was really just kind of a standard auditioning process. I had already done some work for Nickelodeon, so they called my voiceover agents to invite me to audition for the role. If I remember correctly, there were a couple of different phases to the process. I think I read just for Nickelodeon casting first, and then for Mike [DiMartino] and Bryan [Konietzko], and then in a chemistry test with a handful of other actors in consideration for the roles, and they did a kind of mix-and-match with people. One combination was definitely David Faustino, PJ Byrne, and me. And we were the ones who ended up getting cast![10]

At the time, Varney did not recall whether or what sort of material regarding the show or the character she was had access to prior to this process. However, she did confirm that her vocal performance from the audition was consistent with the one in the show.[11] She expanded:

> I think the general direction, as communicated by Mike [DiMartino] and Bryan [Konietzko] (the show creators) and Andrea Romano (our voice director) was really just about being real, not cartoonish. They wanted an emotionally believable performance. My voice is very slightly altered to play Korra, but not much. She is a little more level in terms of her

[8] "Audio Commentary – Chapter 2: A Leaf In the Wind" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*), Viacom International Inc. (2012).
[9] Ed Liu, "From Tiny Toons to Brave & Bold: Toon Zone Interviews Voice Director Andrea Romano," *Toon Zone*, 5 Aug. 2008.
[10] Janet Varney (20 Sep. 2017), email interview.
[11] Ibid.

> highs/lows, and maybe just a touch more textured than my regular voice.[12]

Realist conventions are again positioned as agents of mimesis, as ways to normalize the fantastical or – in Varney's words – be "emotionally believable." The actor elaborated:

> There would be times when I think I would lean into a deeper voice by accident and would be reminded that Korra is younger than I am... I'm doing a slightly different voice than my normal speaking voice, but not much. More regulated, less highs and lows. Textured means maybe a little raspier than my normal speaking voice.[13]

While both are generated by the same physiological apparatuses, an actor's speaking voice and character voice are not equivalent. Through minor changes, Varney was able to convey a toughness and youth without sacrificing that emotional believability, that naturalism that helped ground this fantastical character.

Other actors have reported similar experiences. They began often by submitting a tape featuring only their voice. Johanna Braddy recalled recording her audition for Princess Yue at her agency and that she was hired based solely on that performance.[14] Zelda Williams also recounted recording her audition for Kuvira at home.[15] Both vocal performances were severed from these actors' physiological bodies, with the casting personnel presumably unaware of their physical appearances until they were either hired or brought in for further auditions. Such circumstances are indicative of "colorblind" casting practices. Even actors with previous experience with the franchise were required to audition. Jessie Flower, who previously voiced the guest character Meng in the episode "The Fortuneteller" (*Avatar* S1E14), was asked to audition for the new regular Toph.[16] Similarly, the co-creators knew Seychelle Gabriel from the table read for the live-action theatrical adaptation of *Avatar*. Gabriel recorded an audition for the title character before being cast as Asami Sato.[17] In these cases, the creators already knew these individuals, including their physical appearances and their racial identities. Some voice actors circumvented auditioning due to their celebrity. As DiMartino noted, Mako

---

[12] Ibid.
[13] Janet Varney (21 Sep. 2017), email interview.
[14] Acastus, "Interview with Joanna Braddy (part 1 of 2)," *AvatarSpirit.net*, 30 Nov. 2006.
[15] "Commentary – Battle."
[16] Acastus, "Interview with Jessie Flower (part 1 of 2)," *AvatarSpirit.net*, 22 Dec. 2006; "Audio Commentary – Chapter 17: The Ember Island Players" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008).
[17] "Commentary – Voice"; Hector Navarro, "Episode 46: The Legend of Korra Cast," *Nick Animation Podcast*, 20 Oct. 2017.

was an offer-only situation, and therefore he did not audition prior to being cast as Iroh for *Avatar*.[18] Similarly, the co-creators recalled wanting a Jason Isaacs-type for the character of Zhao, emulative of the actor's performance in *The Patriot* (2000). So, the casting department booked Jason Isaacs.[19] They also requested for Clancy Brown to voice Long Feng in season two of *Avatar*.[20] Not all high-profile actors received this treatment. For the third season of *Korra*, both Anne Heche and Henry Rollins auditioned for Suyin Beifong and Zaheer, respectively.[21] Like with Varney, Flower, and Gabriel, the co-creators and casting personnel were aware of their appearances, of their racial identities. Their voices could not be fully severed from their physiological bodies, even when constrained to audiotapes. The process could not be fully colorblind. The racial and ethnic identities of the auditioning or pursued actors were factors, even if unspoken, because the individuals who made casting decisions were cognizant of them.

If not hired based on their first audition, the actors would meet at Nickelodeon and refine their vocal performances. Steve Blum recalled being directed to pull back and be subtler as Amon for the first season of *Korra*.[22] Williams reported receiving similar feedback to help her pinpoint "which level of crazy [her character, Kuvira] would be."[23] While the vocal performance sutured to an animated bodyscape was generated by a particular set of physiological apparatuses, it was also the product of collaboration and feedback from multiple sources. As a signifier, the voice is no less a construction, as further detailed in the following section. For now, note that the audition process strove for mimesis through the cultivation of naturalistic performances as well as variably severed voices from their corresponding physiological bodies. Throughout the surrounding production narratives, race is rarely if ever directly addressed.

Addressing Race and Asian-ness during the Casting Process

As these production narratives indicate, those involved in casting generally did not discuss the role and impact of race unless asked. Whatever their intentions, the results were predominantly white casts. Across the two series, only three of the main

[18] Navarro, "1."
[19] "Audio Commentary – Episode 18: The Waterbending Master" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006).
[20] "Commentary – Out."
[21] "Commentary – Metal"; "Commentary – Old."
[22] "Commentary – Revelation."
[23] "Commentary – Battle."

voice actors – meaning, those who worked on over half of the episodes of their respective show – were people of color: Filipino American Dante Basco as Zuko and Japanese American Mako as Iroh for *Avatar* as well as Latina Gabriel as Asami for *Korra*. That is the irrefutable result of the casting decisions. On the hiring of Basco and Mako, cultural consultant Edwin Zane told me that he was "very happy and pleased" while also stressing the importance of "instill[ing] the Asian American voice acting community into [the] product as much as possible."[24] While he did not elaborate on the casting of white actors, Zane saw value of Asian American voices – both literally and figuratively – in the collaborative construction of these vocal performances.

In my interview with Varney, when I inquired whether race was ever explicitly mentioned during casting or recording, she responded:

> It really never was at all in terms of my performance or the color of Korra's skin, that I can remember. What I remember was the universality of the characters. I do get asked questions about that when I do panels at conventions, and usually I say that I was incredibly proud to represent someone who has a more "diverse" appearance than some other animations provide, and that if they had wanted to cast someone non-caucasian [sic] to play her, I would have understood and supported that choice 100%. But I was so honored to have been allowed to explore Korra's humanity, her vulnerability, and her strength as the person behind her voice. I just hope I served it well![25]

In an interview, Romano spoke about colorblind casting in animation:

> I personally feel very strongly that the entertainment industry as a whole needs to use minority actors and ethnic actors more often, so any way I can do my part in that, I do. It just seems right to me if we see an Asian character on-screen, whether it's on-camera or animated, it should be an Asian actor. If we see a Hispanic character, it should be a Hispanic actor. I often go out and teach seminars to various different communities. For example, maybe two months ago, I went and spoke to the East West Players, which is an Asian theatrical group in downtown Los Angeles, and said, "Please, train, you guys. We need you. We need Asian voice-over actors. I need them all the time." There are very few Asian voiceover

[24] Zane.
[25] Varney (20 Sep.).

> actors who work consistently in animation, only because they just haven't trained in it and they don't have the experience yet. And in working on *Avatar the Last Airbender* for Nickelodeon, which I'm very very proud of, it was filled with Asian characters. I worked really hard with the casting director at Nickelodeon, Maryanne Dacey, in finding Asian voice-over actors, but after the first season of 20 episodes, we had used almost every Asian voice-over actor that we know of. Now sometimes, it's cost prohibitive. The Screen Actor's [sic] Guild allows me, essentially, to use an actor for three voices for the same price. So let's say I've got two Caucasian characters and one Hispanic character, and the Hispanic character has one line, and says something like, "Look at that guy! He's running away!" It makes financial sense for me to use that Caucasian actor who's already doing two other characters as that third character. However, I will not ask him to put on a Hispanic accent. I don't want to have a Caucasian actor pretending to be a Hispanic actor with an accent. I typically will just have him do that voice straight-ahead.[26]

She later followed up by describing the role that the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) played on casting decisions for animated projects:

> The Screen Actor's [sic] Guild, of course, wants us to cast the right ethnic character. We have to do a report to them for every single episode that we do, breaking down the character casting to make sure that I'm not avoiding casting actors of certain ages or avoiding casting minority actors, and I work really hard to fit within their guidelines. They also say that after a massive search, when it becomes cost-prohibitive, they sign off on it. They say, "OK. You did your search." I can show them the casting sheets of the people that I've brought in and auditioned for this project, and they say, "OK. you did due diligence, you did try. You didn't find it. Go ahead and move on with a Caucasian actor." So I feel it's important that the entire entertainment industry does try to cast appropriately.[27]

Both Varney and Romano either identified these characters as "Asian" or at least recognized that they are visually "diverse" and "non-Caucasian." Even when

[26] Liu, "From."
[27] Ibid.

emphasizing their "universality," there is no attempt to paint or code them as white, racially neutral, or otherwise non-racial. Although they acknowledge a larger system of problems concerning racial representation in the voiceover industry, they also shift the responsibility to confront and fix those inequalities to other parties. They would support different casting if it were financially feasible or if someone else had made those decisions. It is a safe and understandable position for members of the animation industry to take, one that avoids implicating themselves or condemning past projects. They do have their careers as well as the reputations of their previous work to consider while they are discussing this subject. However, such passivity only reinforces the status quo. As Romano indicated, only deliberate action with bring about change.

There is also an assumption of what is normal within the animation industry, especially in Romano's responses. Whether consciously or unconsciously, she centers white, SAG-registered, American voice actors in her statements. She regards such performers as a default, seeing it as normal for them to voice minor Hispanic characters. Indeed, white actors are the default in this industry, as demonstrated by how nominally colorblind casting processes yield primarily white casts. In contrast, Romano and Dacey had to purposefully pursue Asian and Asian American actors for *Avatar*. Romano uncritically accepts this system of networking, one in which she casts actors she knows and does not actively train new talent. Her policy of forbidding white actors from mimicking nonwhite accents is unpacked in the following section. Casting was only part of the process of constructing vocal performances. How they ascribed race and identity to those animated bodyscapes was also affected by the creative decisions made during later stages.

The Recording Process: The Voice Director and Generating Aural Building Blocks

After being cast, actors gathered in a studio to record the dialogue for a given episode. For *Avatar* and *Korra*, this stage of production maintained the themes of mimesis and collaboration from auditioning. The vocal performances generated by the physiological bodies of the actors were based on a combination of their own creative decisions as well as direction from Romano and others. These sessions aimed to foster an environment for the sort of naturalistic performances that the casting personnel had initially sought. Furthermore, their function as tethers to the real world was complicated through intentionally and unintentionally racialized elements.

Ensemble Recording: Mimesis, Continued Collaboration, and Technological Mediation

Throughout her career, Romano advocated "ensemble recording," meaning having as many actors in the same session as possible. The voice director has promoted this method in interviews, podcasts, and commentary tracks, citing the benefits of actors being able to react to each other.[28] She specified that ensemble recording tends to lead to the best adlibbing, typically involve fewer takes, and is less likely to require automated dialogue replacement (ADR) at a later date.[29] Actors from both series have echoed this system's benefits. Basco has spoken about his time with Mako during the first season of *Avatar*, recounting: "We really established that foundation of who we were and our relationship with each other as the characters and just as actors."[30] His costar and the voice of Sokka, Jack DeSena recalled the "freedom" and "playfulness" the format allowed.[31] Varney likewise praised "the dynamic of the group reading together".[32] In these production narratives, ensemble recordings contributed to the goal of mimesis, of imitating interactions between real people in opposition to more cartoonish deliveries.

According to Romano, prior to a recording session, she would go over the script and if available the storyboards, developing a mental track of line readings.[33] At the same time, she emphasized the importance of being open to contributions from the actors.[34] To accommodate both of these tendencies, Romano adopted the industry standard of having an actor perform three takes before giving them a line reading.[35] According to her:

> I let them try to find it. I give them as many opportunities as I can to find it themselves, and then I try to gently as I can to guide them without making them feel like they're just not getting it, for whatever reason, because I know that ultimately they will, I always believe that the actor will ultimately get it.[36]

Therefore, the vocal performances were the products of collaboration between the actors' creative decisions as well as direction from others. When asked about how much

---

[28] Acastus, "Interview with Voice Director Andrea Romano (part 1 of 3)," *AvatarSpirit.net*, 12 May 2007; Liu, "From"; "Commentary – Southern Raiders."
[29] Chris Hardwick, "Episode 621: Andrea Romano," *Nerdist Podcast,* 7 Jan. 2015.
[30] "Commentary – Southern Raiders."
[31] Lisa Granshaw, "An Oral History of Avatar: The Last Airbender: Cast Looks Back As Show Celebrates 10th Anniversary of Finale," *SYFY Wire,* 30 Jul. 2018.
[32] Varney (20 Sep.).
[33] Hardwick; Acastus, "Voice."
[34] Hardwick; "Commentary – Southern Raiders."
[35] Hardwick.
[36] Liu, "From."

freedom he was given to interpret his recurring character of Jet, *Avatar* voice actor Crawford Wilson recounted:

> Well, they all have their main foundation of how they believe it should be done so we will always do a take like that, but then they will let me do some wild lines a couple of different times and different ways and a lot of times those takes will turn out to be just as good and creative so there are a couple different good takes that they producers can pick from.[37]

Wilson as well as Varney have noted that Romano was not the only person giving directions in these recording sessions.[38] When given the same question, Flower recalled: "They give me a lot of freedom. They let me try all different ways all the time, and if I don't hit something they like, then they direct me."[39] She later elaborated:

> [Romano] knows the exact words to use when she's trying to get me to say a line a certain way. And when you're trying to say something, sometimes it's really hard to come up with that exact word that you need but she just comes up with it, and then I get it.[40]

According to Flower, that direction usually resulted in her making her voice either "tougher" or "more sincere."[41] DeSena has also described the guidance that he received from Romano:

> She really knows how to get out of me whatever needs to be gotten, especially as we transitioned toward the end of season one to more dramatic material... She definitely was able to tailor the recording sessions to really get out of me what needed to get gotten and... help me reach the place I needed to be.[42]

Based on these statements, an actor should not receive sole credit for the creative decisions behind the construction of a vocal performance. As Crawford, Flower, and DeSena testified, their performances were largely guided and finessed by feedback and direction from Romano and other unspecified sources. At the same time, these actors' physiological bodies were not instruments controlled by the voice director. They were able to impact the construction of vocal performances and by extension of the characters, especially when encouraged to improvise.

---

[37] Acastus, "Interview with Crawford Wilson (part 1 of 2)," *AvatarSpirit.net*, 15 Nov. 2006.
[38] Acastus, "Crawford"; Varney (20 Sep.).
[39] Acastus, "Jessie."
[40] "Commentary – Ember."
[41] Acastus, "Jessie."
[42] "Commentary – Ember."

The co-creators recalled how quickly DeSena's adlibbing skills revealed themselves, an ability that gradually affected how his character was written.[43] Regarding this shift, Konietzko said: "I think he took Sokka in a totally different direction. Sokka was always going to be more wry and dry, sarcastic... but it ended up being goofier."[44] Reflecting on his time on the show, DeSena said: "We were definitely sticking to the script, but there was always a bit of room for playfulness and for my character they would encourage me to play around a little bit, especially if I was like ranting."[45] Similarly, on the sequel series, Romano would invite John Michael Higgins to improvise as Varrick. Williams recalled her costar once being asked to riff for five minutes before producing the line "Head voices are liars!" in "Enemy at the Gates" (*Korra* S4E05).[46] By being given space to improvise, DeSena and Higgins were able to more greatly contribute to the construction of these vocal performances than had they simply read their lines as explicitly directed. Nevertheless, even with relative freedom, other personnel ultimately selected which takes would comprise of the final performance. Five minutes of Higgins' adlibbing was reduced to four words. According to Romano, her job entailed getting the takes that the writers, producers, and directors wanted.[47] If the actor was able to provide those three satisfactory takes, then she would have the log-taker mark them and "let the editor play with them" when creating their dialogue track.[48] In addition to the process of being recorded via a microphone, the voices produced by the actors experienced further technological mediation. While this topic and its ramifications are more directly addressed in the next section, it immediately impacted the recording process in two pivotal ways.

First, the actors were not always all available at the same time. Celebrities, whose schedules are often the most restrictive, typically recorded separately.[49] Indeed, Byrne recalled how he was never in the same room as Aubrey Plaza despite their characters – Bolin and Eska – being love interests in the second season of *Korra*.[50] Sometimes even the non-celebrity actors were unavailable. Throughout the production of *Avatar*, Eisen lived on the East Coast, so the crew recorded his sessions via satellite

---

[43] "Avatar Pilot Episode with Audio Commentary" (supplementary material for *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006).
[44] Navarro, "1."
[45] Granshaw.
[46] "Commentary – Battle."
[47] Acastus, "Voice."
[48] Hardwick.
[49] Acastus, "Voice."
[50] Navarro, "46."

using an Integrated Serviced Digital Network (ISDN). Different sides of the same conversation could be recorded weeks apart, meaning that Eisen often provided more takes on the day as well as was more likely to utilize ADR later.[51] For *Korra*, Romano used the same technology to record Gabriel's lines for her first few episodes because the actor was out of town for a film shoot, as the actor recalled.[52] In these initial appearances, Asami's relationships with the rest of the main cast are established. That naturalistic and authentic rapport indicative of the impulse toward mimesis was wholly synthesized. Second, the individual performances themselves were constructions, with ADR often filling in the gaps from previous recording sessions. In one case, Skyler Brigmann came in for ADR to complete the vocal performance for the character Kai in "After All These Years" (*Korra* S4E01). However, in the intervening months, the child actor's voice had noticeably dropped. For consistency, he rerecorded all of his dialogue for the episode.[53] Usually, audio from different sessions were combined more smoothly. The following section addresses technological mediation is greater depth. For now, note that the recording process was not designed to produce coherent and complete vocal performances but instead aural building blocks to be combined later.

Racialized Aural Building Blocks: (Mis)Pronunciations and Accents

However recorded, these aural building blocks tethered *Avatar* and *Korra* to the real world, not only though the imitation of naturalistic tones and delivery but also through the evocation of real-world historical and cultural contexts. Isaacs is one of the few actors to voluntarily discuss how considerations of race impacted his performance. When asked about the then-upcoming live-action adaptation of *Avatar* and the possibility of reprising his role, he responded:

> I can't imagine they'll [live action producers] be coming to me, because as far as I'm aware, I'm the only Caucasian actor that does a voice for it. It was very odd, the first time I went to record. I looked around, and it was like I was in the wrong studio. I said, "Do you guys want me to do an Asian voice or something?" They said, "no, no, no. Just be yourself." And then after we started recording, they went, "Okay, just to slightly clarify that. Be yourself, but be your American self." I said, "Okay, fine." But

[51] "Commentary – Southern Raiders."
[52] "Commentary – Voice."
[53] "Commentary on After All These Years" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*), Viacom International Inc. (2015).

> you can't help but be influenced by the fact that all the other actors are Asian.[54]

Based on this quote, Isaacs apparently had limited interactions with the rest of the cast. The other actors to whom he was referring were most likely Basco and Mako, with whom he shared all his scenes in his first episode, "The Southern Air Temple" (*Avatar* S1E03). Their presence influenced Isaac's instincts as an actor. While Romano followed through on her stated policy to prohibit white actors from mimicking nonwhite accents, she did direct this British actor to adopt a North American one. As discussed in chapter two, American English was used in the writing process and now here in recording sessions as a default, as a way to neutrally convey information without additional signification. However, whether consciously or unconsciously, the creative decision to direct Isaacs and many of the other actors to speak with North American accents did position their vocal performances in relation to a real-life nation and culture. It also impacted the construction of signifiers of Asian-ness.

For both series, predominantly American voice actors were required to recite proper names derived from Asian and fantastical sources. Konietzko commiserated: "It doesn't matter what name – what the origin is – whatever it is, the actors say it differently than we've decided it's going to be said."[55] Sometimes, ensuring correct pronunciation required special effort. Williams jokingly recalled undergoing "a Bolin boot camp" after repeatedly failing to say that character's name.[56] Such efforts helped ensure internal consistency if not necessarily authenticity. On other occasions, the crew elected to be accommodating. They did not correct actors Mark Allan Stewart and Rick Zieff when they pronounced Mako as *may-ko* instead of *mah-ko*, reasoning that their characters – Lu and Gang – were disrespectful and incompetent enough to make such an error.[57] When recording for the episode "After All These Years," guest actor Robert Morse pronounced the State of Yi as *yai* as opposed to as *yee*. However, because the venerable actor had said it "with such authority," the mistake was not remedied during the recording session.[58] The art direction made the error apparent by incorporating the logograms **夷國京師** (Yí guó jīngshī) on a sign marking the entrance to the Yi State Capital (Appendix 6.01). While Stewart and Zieff's mispronunciation was framed as

---

[54] Eric Goldman, "IGN Interview: Jason Isaacs," *IGN*, 15 Feb. 2007.
[55] "Commentary – Guide."
[56] "Commentary – Battle."
[57] "Commentary – Guide."
[58] "Commentary – After."

characterization, Morse's decision – as well as the choice to not correct him – created an incongruity that compromised the internal consistency of the show's diegesis as well as the authenticity introduced through the naming and calligraphy.

While most of the characters on *Avatar* and *Korra* speak with generic North American accents, there have been some exceptions. As addressed in the literature review, media depictions of accents mark the speaker as different. Rosina Lippi-Green and Sam Summers both write about how animation often uses accents to foster distrust.[59] Furthermore, as Homi Bhabha notes, mimicry of accents is an exercise of authority over the designated Other.[60] Hence, Romano instituted her policy of not having white actors imitate nonwhite accents. In addition to American English, *Avatar* and *Korra* have utilized accents to connote aspects of new characters. In "The Swamp" (*Avatar* S2E04), members of the Foggy Swamp Tribe speak in Southern American English, signifying their backwoods-ness. Throughout *Korra*, some characters use a Mid-Atlantic accent to position them and their fantasy world in relation to the 1920s and 1930s America. This practice is most prominent with Jeff Bennett's vocal performance as radio announcer Shiro Shinobi as well as with Heche's vocal performance as Suyin. However, the most notable deviations from American English in this franchise are the implementations of various Asian accents or – to use the language of Shilpa Davé and Alison Loader – "brown voices" and "yellow voices."[61]

Given their relative rarity in this fantasy world, Asian accents distinguish the speakers. However, rather than people to fear or ridicule, they are primarily depicted as conveyers of ancient or traditional knowledge. The accents operate much like the archaisms on which Susan Mandala writes, evoking a distant past that clashes with presumably more familiar American English.[62] Referencing Mandala, Summers notes a similar dichotomy in *How to Train Your Dragon*.[63] Furthermore, these types of accents tether the vocal performances to real-life Asian cultural contexts, legitimizing the content of their dialogue as authentic. This framing is most consistently demonstrated with Mako's vocal performance as Iroh. After the original voice actor died, his replacement Greg Baldwin became an exception to Romero's rule and mimicked his predecessor. Throughout *Avatar* – especially in the first season – Asian and Asian

[59] Lippi-Green, 103; Summers, 239.
[60] Bhaba: 126.
[61] Davé; Loader.
[62] Mandala, 76, 92, 96.
[63] Summers, 234.

American voice actors utilized accents to succinctly signify wisdom, as evidenced in the vocal performances of Sab Shimono as Aang's mentor Gyatso in "The Southern Air Temple" (*Avatar* S1E03) and "The Storm" (*Avatar* S1E12), of James Hong as a fellow Air Nomad in the latter episode, of Tsai Chin as the fortuneteller Aunt Wu in "The Fortuneteller," of Keone Young as Firebending master Jeong Jeong in "The Deserter" (*Avatar* S1E16), and of Takayo Fischer as Azula's advisers and trainers Lo and Li in "The Avatar State" (*Avatar* S2E01) and subsequent episodes. In addition to connoting expertise, Asian accents were also utilized to legitimize the adaptations of real-world concepts and practices. As Iroh, Mako explains the underlining philosophies of the bending disciplines in "Bitter Work" (*Avatar* S2E09). As Guru Pathik, Brian George affected a South Asian accent for lengthy descriptions of chakras in "The Guru" (*Avatar* S2E19). As Guo, Paul Nakauchi employed a thick Asian accent as his character performs acupuncture in "Old Wounds" (*Korra* S3E06). By having these characters and these actors speak in such manners, the soundscape communicates that they possess special and authentic knowledge.

There are, of course, exceptions. At a few points of the show, primarily comedic characters are portrayed with explicit Asian accents. Shimono and Hong return in the second season of *Avatar* to portray new characters. The former voices Master Yu, a parody of strip-mall martial arts teachers in "The Blind Bandit" (*Avatar* S2E06). The latter voices the anti-Avatar Mayor Tong in "Avatar Day" (*Avatar* S2E05). Whatever the intention of the cast and crew, the decisions to have these actors perform with Asian accents again set apart these characters. Even if the comedy is not explicitly derived from their accents, they are still Othered. Similarly, the second season of *Avatar* associates Asian accents with mid-level Ba Sing Se bureaucrats. This habit is first displayed in "The Serpent's Pass" (*Avatar* S2E12), in which Karen Maruyama voices an unnamed official who blocks refugees from securing safe passage to the city. The practice is most plainly demonstrated with the heroes' handler Joo Dee, voiced by Lauren Tom in "City of Walls and Secrets" (*Avatar* S2E14) and "Lake Laogai" (*Avatar* S2E17). Both figures obstructed the heroes' quests, either with a frown or a smile but always with an Asian accent. Recalling the writings of Lippi-Green and Summers, the accents signal to the heroes that they cannot trust these new characters. The actual leaders of Ba Sing Se – Grand Secretariat Long Feng and Earth King Kuei, voiced by Brown and Phil LaMarr, respectively – speak with North American accents. As a result, Asian accents are associated not with actual power within Ba Sing Se but with

bureaucracy and obstruction. Within media depictions, accents always Other the speaker, always distinguish them from their peers, even when an accent is depicted in a supposedly positive manner.

The Editing Process: Technological Mediation, Suturing, and Recognizing Voices

In the final stage, the voices were prepared for synchronization with animation. The editor selected the aural building blocks provided by the actors and arranged them into a coherent dialogue track. At this point, some digital manipulation may have occurred. For the third season of *Avatar*, the sound engineer pitched up Eisen's voice, as the actor had aged faster than the character, to ensure internal consistency.[64] As Gianluca Sergi and Pamela Robertson Wojcik note, a theatrical model for studying film acting is inadequate as it fails to recognize the role of technology in the construction of cinematic performances.[65] These observations are exaggerated in animation. Through the acts of recording, editing, and synchronization, all heard cinematic performances are cyborgs, marriages of the technological and the organic. The difference between live-action and animation happens in the reconstitution. While recording does sever the actor's voice from their physiological body, live-action filmmaking practices tend to restore that connection. With animation, that voice is instead synchronized with wholly constructed imagery, the audience assumed to suture that cyborg voice with those animated lips.

The result is a hybrid performance, one that cannot be simply broken down into its visual and aural components. Nevertheless, because it was mostly created first, the audio did impact the visual half of the animated performances. According to Romano, that was intentional: "Well, the animators do those wonderful drawings based on the vocal performance. Whatever we give them as a vocal track makes the cartoon."[66] Such a supposition positions the aural as having seniority over the visual. Romano has also said: "Hopefully, the board artist has a chance to listen to the recorded, edited dialogue track and make any adjustments before the board is finalized."[67] These statements are consistent with Rick Altman's formulations of the cinematic voice.[68] Sound, especially the voice, ventriloquistically controls the significations of the visuals and has primacy over them.

---

[64] Ed Liu, "Toon Zone News Interviews Bryan Konietzko & Mike DiMartino on 'Avatar the Last Airbender,'" *Toon Zone*, 22 Apr. 2008.
[65] Sergi, "Actors," 136; Wojcik: 75.
[66] Harwick.
[67] Acastus, "Voice."
[68] Altman, "Moving."

The act of suturing is not merely the addition of two distinct components. The combination creates something new and different. The co-creators apparently understood the gravity of this situation. As Konietzko describes the evolution of the character of Sokka:

> Some great animation by animation director Yu Jae-myung and JM Animation. Ever since the pilot, he has taken to Sokka so well. Just like Jack [DeSena] has. And the two of them together just make a great lively combination.[69]

He reiterated this shared credit elsewhere:

> I see the animators in Korea [in the animated performances]. There's something that happens magically between Jack's [DeSena] performance of Sokka and Yu Jae-myung, one of the animation directors. When the two of them come together – the voice and that animation – it's just that's who Sokka is. That's him at his most pure state.[70]

This "pure state" of which Konietzko spoke, the one achievable only through a collaborative suturing of aural and visual, is of particular note. More than a mere sum of its parts, these different sets of signs intersect and interact to form the animated bodyscape. Recalling Allison's chapter on *Happy Feet*, these characters are hybridizations.[71] Visual and aural components as well as their corresponding significations combine to create a seemingly unified whole.

The actors have also noticed this peculiar phenomenon, often having difficulty expressing their reactions to witnessing their voices sutured to animation. According to Basco:

> The wild thing about... watching the cartoon now... the animation... is we've worked together so long, we've worked on these characters, and the characters are so whole and so well-rounded, three-dimensional characters that I actually see the actors in the cartoon characters. It's a very strange thing to see as an actor. We voice the characters, and then as I'm watching it now I see Mae [Whitman] in the performance. I see Jack [DeSena]. I see Jessie [Flower]. I see Grey [DeLisle]. And these are cartoon characters, so – it's like you said – it's very strange how the actor

[69] "Commentary – Waterbending"
[70] "Commentary – Southern."
[71] Allison, 114-15.

> and the character kind of over the years melded into this one thing where it's… These characters are very, very tangible.[72]

When asked by Konietzko whether she ever felt that her voice was detached from her "ego" while watching the animated performance of Korra, Varney replied:

> It's the first opportunity I've really had to be separate from my own performance. Because there's enough space between when we record and when I see the final product that I have a vague awareness that it's me, but the storytelling is so good that and the animation is so gorgeous that it allows me to totally sort of remove myself. And that's such a gift because I can't stand watching myself on camera.[73]

Higgins had a more disquieted reaction than his costar, although he articulated his discomfort through humor:

> It's always shocking [undecipherable] voiceover jobs to actually see the character on screen. You know, I do the voice, you do it much earlier than you ever get to see the actual guy, and I see: "Is that my face? How odd. And he can lift his left eyebrow, and I can't."[74]

These voice actors found these "pure states," these animated bodyscapes, to be "strange" and "shocking." Their voices had been severed from their physiological bodies, edited as aural building blocks through technological processes, and finally sutured to animation to construct something new. Like with Foley, there was invariably a mix-matching between the original source and the figure on screen, yet actors like Basco claimed to recognize each other in the animated performances. This process does afford certain freedom, as the voice of a woman becomes that of a young boy or the voice of one person becomes that of many. In *Avatar* and *Korra*, the voices of white actors become those of Asian-coded characters.

Within this dynamic, how invisible are the actors' physiological bodies supposed to be? While not to the extent of celebrity voice actors in major theatrical productions, paratexts do feature the faces and bodies of these performers. Profiles in *Nickelodeon Magazine*, interviews on home video releases, and convention appearances all promote associations between actors and characters.[75] In parallel to the martial arts choreography,

---

[72] Ibid.
[73] "Commentary – Leaf."
[74] "Commentary – Enemy."
[75] "Voicebending," *Nickelodeon Magazine* (Feb. 2007): 44; "Aang's Gang," *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2007): 4-5; "A Bunch of Hotheads," *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2007): 44; "Behind the Scenes The Voices

such material seeks to educate audiences about the franchise's real-world connection. Instead of *wushu* and bending, these texts strengthen the connection between the voice actors and the characters. Aside from Konietzko's namedropping on the commentary tracks, Yu has not been as visibly and publicly connected with Sokka as DeSena has been. Ironically, the bigger names, such as Mako, Isaacs, and J.K. Simmons, are relatively absent from promotional material. Furthermore, the latter two delivered vocal performances that obscured their identities and did not exploit their respective star personas. Zhao's American growl rendered Isaacs unrecognizable. At the time, he would have primarily been known for *The Patriot*, the *Harry Potter* series (2001-11), and maybe *Peter Pan* (2003), all in which he used his native English accent. As Tenzin, Simmons is comparatively more recognizable, still speaking in American English, but his breathy performance is at odds with the sharp tone used in his most famous roles, such as J. Jonah Jameson in the *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002-07) or Terence Fletcher in *Whiplash* (2014). These creative decisions – both within the recording process and later during marketing – disguised the physiological bodies that generated the voices sutured to Zhao and Tenzin, abetting in the severing of their voices from their bodies.

On the other hand, for celebrity actors in minor or guest roles, their star personas were utilized to succinctly convey desired qualities. The episode "Rebirth" (*Korra* S3E02) introduces Ryu, a disaffected adult who still lives in his mother's basement. Through the casting of Jon Heder as well as through his vocal performance, the new character is associated with the actor's lead role in *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004). Therefore, specific attributes were immediately ascribed to this animated bodyscape, fleshing out the character during his limited screen time. For a different example, General Iroh first appears at the end of "Turning the Tides" (*Korra* S1E10). The framing dramatically reveals this new recurring character as his moving lips are synchronized with Basco's voice. The shared casting and distinctive vocal performance forge a connection between General Iroh and his grandfather Zuko, one that the writing and storyboarding anticipated audiences recognizing. This circumstance differs from other examples of recognizable voices. Unlike with Heder and Ryu, viewers were not expected to envision Basco's physiological body upon identifying his voice but instead to recall Zuko's animated bodyscape. Throughout these examples, bodies and bodyscapes are connected through shared voices. The physiological bodies that produced

---

of Avatar Feaurette" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006).

those aural building blocks used to construct vocal performances contain characteristics and significations beyond the sounds they generate. Animation can exploit audience knowledge of these bodies to convey desired identities. The shared ages between actor and character indicate naturalism, and a celebrity signifies traits associated with their star persona. By extension, even if the aural building blocks themselves do not contain explicit racial or cultural markers, the bodies that produced them do. Depending on audience awareness, those traits are added to the complexes of signs that form the animated bodyscape.

Summary: Completing Construction of the Animated Bodyscape

As with all production processes in this franchise, vocal performances underwent a journey through different intersecting production cultures before becoming part of the animated bodyscape. Casting personnel selected the actors, recording sessions generated aural building blocks, and sound engineers edited together coherent vocal performances. As a result, the final product cannot be attributed to one person, not even to the actor. The process is too collaborative and the result too much of a cyborg for that to be the case. Casting personnel, the voice director, sound engineers, and others all contributed to the construction of vocal performances and, by extension, to the construction of animated performances. Through their creative decisions, voices function as anchors to reality, as part of an impulse toward mimesis as well as through the evocation of specific real-world contexts.

As the previous chapter explains, sound typically normalizes the fantastical and the abstract. Not only do music and sound effects act as and reinforce realist filmmaking conventions, the vocal performances of *Avatar* and *Korra* were created with the expressed goal of mimesis. Casting personnel hired child actors rather than adults to play children, and they sought “normal people” over cartoonish performers. Through ensemble recording sessions, Romano cultivated naturalistic rapports and directed actors toward emotionally believable deliveries. Nevertheless, they only generated the aural building blocks, as sound engineers combined individual line readings into coherent dialogue tracks. Despite such technological mediation, the goal of naturalistic and emotionally believable vocal performances persisted. The tethering offered by these steps could get more specific.

As signifiers of identity in animation, the voice is defined by its relationship to the physiological body that generated it as well as the animated bodyscape with which it

is sutured. The casting process involved actors severing their voices from their bodies in order to submit audio-only auditions. Given how predominately white the voiceover industry is, any colorblind casting resulted in a majority white cast. The creators, Romano, and the casting personnel had to deliberately pursue Asian and Asian American talent. Through the use of celebrity voice actors and promotional material, *Avatar* and *Korra* could restore and exploit audience awareness of these actors' physiological bodies, allowing for additional nonverbal qualities – including racial ones – to be transferred to the vocal performances and ultimately to the animated bodyscapes. During recording sessions, the voice actors and Romano collaborated in the construction of intentional and unintentional racial and cultural significations. Asian and Asian American performers sometimes spoke with various Asian accents to strengthen and legitimize other signifiers of Asian-ness, while still denoting their characters as Other. The standard of having the cast speak with North American accents – even those who were not American – affected the pronunciation of Asian-coded and fantasy names, complicating their signification. When these aural building blocks are reconstituted as coherent vocal performances and synchronized with animation, they create something new and at times disturbing to those involved. The animated bodyscape is more than the sum of its parts, more than just an actor's voice plus animation. The sundry sets of signs interact and intersect to generate new meanings and identities.

With the construction and suturing of the vocal performance, the animated bodyscape is complete. Those complexes of signs contain visual, narrative, and aural components directly associated with animated figures. Furthermore, due to their iconic and plasmatic nature, additional visual, narrative, and aural elements of fantasy world-building project complementary and supplementary cultural significations onto them. As the preceding chapters demonstrate, the creation of an animated bodyscape and the ascription of Asian-ness to it is not a single production process confined to one production culture, to one contact zone. A different model is needed. Furthermore, by using Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of the bodyscape, this project emphasizes that the construction and ascription of Asian-ness is not a straightforward endeavor. There are many interlocking factors at play. Finally, due to the fantastical and animated nature of *Avatar* and *Korra*, the balancing of mimesis and fantasy as well as of mimesis and abstraction impacted the construction of signifiers of identity. The conclusion expands upon these interventions and their impact on the study of race and animation.

Conclusion: *Avatar*, *Korra*, and Ascribing Asian-ness

There is no Asia in *Avatar* and *Korra*. By extension, there are no Asians. In the racial, cultural, and geographical sense, the designation does not exist within the confines of this fantasy world. Yet, Asian-ness does. That identity is not innate, and the fictional characters do not possess the agency to claim it. Instead, Asian-ness is constructed and ascribed to animated bodyscapes by individual personnel at every stage of production. The different components passed through interlocking production cultures, further affected by consultants and secondary sites of production. These animated bodyscapes are comprised of multiple sets of signs – visual, aural, and narrative as well as racial and cultural – sometimes creating unintentional connotations. Their identities are further complicated through external factors particular to fantasy and animation. Nevertheless, this approach to conceptualizing race and animation is applicable to other texts – even those less overtly fantastical – and it can help reveal the conception and perception of race and other identities in real-world contexts.

In the literature review, I demonstrate how concepts of race, the body, and the voice intersect when applied to discussions of animation as well as how those interactions are filtered through the theoretical lenses of culture, fantasy, and mimesis. In the subsequent chapters, I apply these ideas to accounts of the different production processes. The first and second chapters explore how the art direction and writing process for *Avatar* and *Korra* built a fantasy world through the appropriation and alteration of real-world cultural referents. Artifacts, ideas, and practices were severed from their original historical and cultural contexts and were adapted to fit into this diegesis. The third and fourth chapter examine how racial and cultural signifiers interact in these non-indexical, iconic, and plasmatic animated bodyscapes through character design and storyboarding. As with the art direction and writing process, there is a transcultural hybridization that nevertheless conveys Asian-ness. Finally, the fifth and sixth chapters consider the aural half of these audiovisual mediums. As with the visual elements, there is an emphasis on authenticity, on a link between the real world – including specific historical and cultural contexts – and the animated fantasy. Throughout these production narratives, three major themes recur regarding the construction and ascription of Asian-ness. First, this phenomenon took place across multiple orbiting production cultures. Second, these processes created visual, aural, and narrative components that were then incorporated into animated bodyscapes. Third, the

signification of Asian-ness was associated with tethering the fantastical and abstracted to reality. These discussions reappear in discourse related to a final stage of the production process – outsourcing.

Modeling Production Cultures: Continents, Satellites, and Lunar Bodies

Those who produce media also produce communities that function as cultures.[1] Within these spaces, individuals operate by interacting with one another – via delegation and collaboration – and by making creative decisions that affect the final product. Therefore, this project reconstructs the production narratives of *Avatar* and *Korra* in order to understand these cultures, the individual's place within them, and ultimately how race was constructed and ascribed within them. Importantly, these shows were not made within a singular production culture but across multiple ones. Within the context of globalization, animation and the ascription of race are made by transnational and transcultural groups. People, media, technology, capital, and ideologies flow across traditional borders to create new texts, including film and television.[2] A new way of understandings this process is needed. Therefore, I propose a planetary model illustrating a series of interlocking production cultures (Appendix 0.01). The central planet divided into continents represents a primary site of production; the orbiting satellites represent consultants, freelancers, and remote workers; and the lunar bodies represent secondary sites of production. All are in varying degrees of communication with one another. Together, they constructed and ascribed Asian-ness to the animated bodyscapes of this franchise.

Much of the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* took place within a shared geographic space – the Nickelodeon Animation Studio in California – but across distinct departments. Hence, I use the analogy of a planet divided into separate continents, with each operating as a self-contained production culture where individuals delegate, collaborate, and make creative decisions. For examples of these types of interactions, the first chapter details how the *Avatar* art department produced BG designs and paintings. Proper delegation was a necessity, as art director Bryan Konietzko learned during the first season.[3] The issue was apparently alleviated with the promotion of Elsa Garagarza to BG supervisor the following year. The final designs were the results of multiple

[1] Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, 2.
[2] Appadurai, 296-301; Kraidy, 14, 148; R.A. Rogers: 477; Higson; Acland.
[3] Dankiewicz.

personnel adapting and revising each other's work, as Garagarza recalled in her description of the Sun Warrior ruins (Appendix 1.02). Even though their output needed to be approved by Konietzko, individuals made creative decisions that at times broke away from his initial directives. Hence, these ruins appear Mesoamerican even though he had requested Mesopotamian.[4] Such collaboration, especially within the context of globalization, indicates that these production cultures were also contact zones, "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other".[5] The concept, especially as deployed by Mary Louise Pratt, may not be the most precise descriptor for the Nickelodeon Animation Studio. The productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* were more deliberate in their accumulation and assemblage of referents and perspectives. However, when summarized as sites as transculturation, as Kim Soyoung and John T. Caldwell appear to do, contact zones are apt labels for these communities.[6] In chapter two, *Avatar* head writer Aaron Ehasz referred to the writers' room as a place where a "pretty diverse crew" came together to create something new.[7] While he did not use the vocabulary, he treated transculturation as something that occurs organically within the parameters of a contact zone. Through their contributions, each individual would transfer part of their personal identities to the final product. By incorporating and spotlighting these different perspectives, the writing process could mitigate the pitfalls of subject appropriation as defined by James O. Young as well as exemplify antiracist appropriation as defined by Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer.[8] The same applies to accounts of storyboarding in chapter three, martial arts consultation in chapter four, and musical composition in chapter five. However, this conceptualization places an unfair burden upon individual crewmembers to operate as representatives for their respective racial, ethnic, cultural, and national backgrounds. It also erases internal power dynamics. While these production cultures were distinct, they were not isolated. Because they shared a geographic space and because they were interpreting and adapting each other's work, intercontinental communication was standard. As described in the third and fourth chapters, character designs created model sheets that were then rendered by storyboard artists, sometimes resulting in off-model or exaggerated versions of characters. In the case of Lauren Montgomery's lanky rendition of Ki Hyun Ryu's design of Varrick, the

[4] E. Miller.
[5] Pratt, 6.
[6] Caldwell, 108; Kim Soyoung, 101.
[7] Ehasz.
[8] J.O. Young, 9; Desmond and Emirbayer, *Race*, 312-14.

interpretation supplanted the original.[9] Simultaneously, storyboard artists adapted scripts into original fight choreography, which would be subsequently revised after sessions with martial arts consultants.[10] Furthermore, these teams were only producing animatics, which were then interpreted and adapted into animation by other personnel outside of the primary site of production.

Operating in orbit around this primary production site, satellites would receive and beam down information remotely. While some would occasionally touch ground, they were never fully integrated members of those production communities. Regardless, they contributed to transculturation. The consultants are the most blatant illustrations of this category. As detailed in chapter one, calligrapher and translator Siu-Leung Lee primary corresponded with Konietzko via email, and BG designers left space for his work in theirs.[11] Similarly, chapter two describes how cultural consultant Edwin Zane communicated his feedback via Nickelodeon executive Jenna Luttrell, who relayed it to the relevant departments.[12] Alternatively, the martial arts consultants – including Sifu Kisu and Jake Huang – regularly visited the Nickelodeon Animation Studio for meetings and recording sessions with directors and storyboard artists. In our interview for chapter four, Huang described an inclusive environment where he was encouraged to creatively contribute.[13] In addition, some crewmembers – including *Avatar* 3D modeler and rigger Steve Ziolkowski and *Korra* sound designer Steve Tushar – simply worked remotely.[14] Even though they were not embedded in a particular production culture, it would be inaccurate to claim that individuals had no impact. In addition to these satellites, a set of lunar bodies also orbit the central planet. These secondary sites of production are themselves self-contained geographic spaces that may house their own multitude of distinct continents. Various visual, aural, and narrative components are rocketed to and from these spaces for adaptation. This conclusion examines one type of lunar body – the overseas animation studio – in greater depth shortly.

Constructing the Animated Bodyscape: Visual, Aural, and Narrative Components

In order to describe how race is constructed and ascribed in animation, I utilize the concept of the animated bodyscape. Adapted from the writings of Nicholas Mirzoeff,

[9] "Commentary – Guide."
[10] "Spirit – Breath."
[11] S.-L. Lee (31 Jan.); Garagarza (6 Apr.); Sung.
[12] Zane.
[13] Huang.
[14] Ziolkowski; Tushar.

I define this term as a complex of signs, comprised of visual, aural, and narrative components, distinct from its physiological equivalents and those from other types of artistic re-presentation.[15] It possesses qualities inherent to animation, which I identify as non-indexicality, iconicity, and plasmaticity. In addition to the medium's highly constructed nature, streamlining allows for greater amplification and projection of meaning, and its malleability resists a fixed identity.[16] In *Avatar* and *Korra*, these visual, aural, and narrative components either directly signify Asian-ness or they somehow complement or complicate that signification. They contain connotations beyond the intentions of the artists, especially when they were designed to be neutral or default. As illustrated by the aforementioned planetary model, each kind was produced across a series of processes.

Chapter three describes how the visual half of the animated bodyscape journeys through the production processes. It originates in the art department, where character designers and colorists collaborate on model sheets. These static images can be ascribed racial identities through the imitation of key phenotypes, most notably skin tone and facial features. The former are rendered in local color, emulative of flat and neutral lighting. Given the iconicity of these figures, amplifying certain details risks caricature.[17] In some cases, the character designers of *Avatar* and *Korra* used coworkers as models. These were typically people who could function as signifiers of Asian-ness, either because of their racial or national identities – as was the case with Oh Seung Hyun – or because of their cultural knowledge – as was the case with Kisu.[18] Usually, rather than straightforward re-presentations of real-world bodies, the designs of *Avatar* and *Korra* were hybridizations, mixing racial and cultural markers. In the case of Zuko, he was modeled after Japanese samurai and American skinheads but additional design elements – including a scar – mitigated those connotations.[19] Zane then interpreted that scar as an unintentional signifier of Asian-ness on account of it resembling a port-wine stain.[20] Character designs are then interpreted and adapted by storyboard artists for the creation of sequential images, in which they can exploit their plasmatic potential. For *Avatar* and *Korra*, storyboard artists emulated anime conventions, which in turn convey Asian-ness

[15] Mirzoeff, 3.
[16] McCloud, 30; Wells, *Animated*, 3-4; Royal: 10; Gardner, 136; A.S. Lu; Eisenstein, 21; Deleuze, 5; Wells, *Understanding*, 188, 213; Batkin, 1-2.
[17] Gardner, 136.
[18] DiMartino and Konietzko, 54, 157; "Commentary – Sokka's."
[19] DiMartino and Konietzko, 24-25; Blacker.
[20] Zane.

by connecting these bodyscapes to those traditions.[21] At different points in the franchise, angry or shocked characters inflated their heads, turned red, lost details, and acquired *manpu* (Appendix 3.03-06). The resulting animatics were then sent overseas for final animation. As a part of this step, animated bodyscapes were assigned alternative colors or dials in order for them to be integrated into various settings. As a result, one character could possess multiple skin tones over the course of a series, evidence of their plasmaticity (Appendix 3.09, 3.11). Such instances do impact the ascription of race, as demonstrated by the reaction to and the discourse surrounding Kya's appearance in a screenshot from season two of *Korra* (Appendix 3.14).[22] The resulting images only account for the visual half of the animated bodyscapes, whose identities are further complicated through the incorporation of sound.

As chapter six details, the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* also generated vocal performances to be sutured to the animation. Once again, this multistep process involved personnel from various departments or cultures building upon each other's work. While tempting to center discussion of race and animation around the voice actor and casting process, such a focus depends on awareness of the physiological bodies of the voice actors. Paratexts as well as the hiring of celebrities can highlight the connection between voice and actor.[23] However, discussion of race and animation cannot be reduced to the lack of representation within the voice acting industry, even as it remains a factor in the production of the aural components of the animated bodyscape. A colorblind casting process – auditioning via audiotapes, as described by actors Joanna Braddy and Zelda Williams – only perpetuates that system.[24] If the goal is to hire nonwhite – and, in the case of *Avatar* and *Korra*, Asian and Asian American – voice actors, then the casting personnel must deliberately pursue them. According to voice director Andrea Romano, that was a part of her job on the first series.[25] Regardless, the end results for both shows were predominantly white casts. Still, the identity of the voice actor is not the dominant way that race is ascribed to the animated bodyscape. The performances they are directed to give during recording sessions also contributed, typically through "brown voices" or "yellow voices," to use the language of Shilpa Davé and Alison Loader.[26] Even though Romano insisted on only Asian or Asian American actors speaking with such accents,

[21] Suan, 73.
[22] Konietzko, 2 Jul.
[23] Denison, "Star," 137-38; "Voicebending"; "Aang's"; "Bunch"; "Behind – Voices."
[24] Acastus, "Joanna"; "Commentary – Battle."
[25] Liu, "From."
[26] Davé, 314-15; Loader.

they still marked the speakers as different.[27] In part, this Otherness is amplified by the decision to have the majority of the actors speak with North American accents, including the British Jason Isaacs.[28] This supposedly neutral accent in fact also tethers the vocal performances to specific historical and cultural contexts. Just as an Asian accent conveys Asian-ness, so too does a North American accent convey American-ness, regardless of the actor performing it. Unintentional connotations enter into the complex of signs and complicate their identity. Still, these recording sessions only produced the aural building blocks, which were subsequently edited into coherent dialogue tracks to aid in the creation of and to be synchronized with final animation. The resulting animated bodyscapes were further impacted by other processes.

Narrative components play a less obvious role within these complexes of signs, but they can be found in the utilization of language described in chapters one, two, and six. As hybridizations of the real world and the fantastical, proper names in *Avatar* and *Korra* were designed to convey varying degrees of otherworldliness and Asian-ness, qualities incorporated into the corresponding animated bodyscapes.[29] Simultaneously, Anglophonic voice actors would occasionally mispronounce these names, complicating matters.[30] This Asian-ness was further impacted by the use of English dialogue. While this decision indicates that the language was regarded as a neutral element, it is incongruous with surrounding signifiers, most notably the Chinese calligraphy. In addition to these narrative components, the animated bodyscape is further impacted by other factors related to world-building.

Projecting Identity through World-building: Mimesis, Fantasy, and Abstraction

As stated beforehand, the animated bodyscape is iconic and plasmatic, making it susceptible to additional significations being projected onto it. Hence, the world-building of *Avatar* and *Korra* contributed narrative components to those complexes of signs. For example, chapter one demonstrates how the characters of Ozai, Suyin, and Piandao are introduced via BG and prop designs before their animated bodyscapes are seen or heard. Racial Asian-ness is complemented and reinforced by cultural Asian-ness. In order to understand how the visual, aural, and narrative world-building of this franchise

[27] Liu, "From"; Dixon, Mahoney, and Cocks; Boucher, et al.; Wang, et al.; Subtirelu; C.K.Y. Lee; Lippi-Green; Summers.
[28] Goldman.
[29] Konietzko and DiMartino, 16; Nededog.
[30] "Commentary – Guide"; "Commentary – After."

constructed and ascribed identities to these animated bodyscapes, I have focused on the effects of mimesis, fantasy, and abstraction.

Many scholars have attempted to define the relationship between fantasy and reality. Kathryn Hume identifies two impulses present within all fiction – mimesis and fantasy, the imitation of reality and the breaking away from it.[31] Rosemary Jackson uses "paraxial areas" to describe how fantasy operates as a prism that distorts reality, a conceptualization that Ehasz echoed in his comments about the "lens of inspiration."[32] According to W.R. Irwin, fantasy requires realist conventions, agents of mimesis, to normalize its excesses and immerse the reader.[33] Writing about film, Alec Worley and Janet K. Halfyard second this stance.[34] For *Avatar* and *Korra*, real-world referents were utilized to tether the fantastical to real-world historical and cultural contexts. Predominately but not exclusively, that context was Chinese, as seen in the art direction, calligraphy, martial arts, and musical instruments in chapters one, three, four, and five. This world-building does tend to position China as a synecdoche for all of Asia. However, China is not a monolith and offers a deep pool of referents. While they did flatten some differences – such as combining Buddhist art direction and Taoist *wushu* for the Air Nomads – *Avatar* and *Korra* generally exploited China's diversity in the creation of distinctive fantasy cultures, subcultures, and individuals. The bending choreography detailed in chapter four demonstrates this variety. Even within this limited framework, the world-building of this franchise did not restrict Asian-ness to one definition. There is no one way for these fantasy cultures or characters to signify Asian-ness – no one way of looking, talking, or acting. Hybridization with referents from additional historical and cultural contexts further broadened its construction and ascription.

Production narratives emphasize the authenticity of these cultural signifiers. Paratexts even educate audiences about their real-world connections, as detailed in chapters one, four, and five. Piandao's swords were modeled after Kisu's personal collection of Chinese weapons, retaining the specificity of the originals' designs (Appendix 1.07-08).[35] The bending choreography was based off of different *wushu* systems and styles.[36] Composer Jeremy Zuckerman used traditional Asian instruments.[37]

---

[31] Hume, 20.
[32] Jackson, 19-20; Ehasz.
[33] Irwin, 189.
[34] Worley, 14; Halfyard, 8.
[35] "Commentary – Sokka's."
[36] DiMartino and Konietzko, 113, 124; "Behind – Kung"; "Essence"; "How."

Across these examples, there is an evocation of what Leon Hunt calls "archival authenticity."[38] They cite the fidelity of the re-presentation in order to position them within a lineage with the referents. Through their research, individuals engaged in cultural appropriation, specifically style or motif appropriation, when an outsider reproduces stylistic elements or motifs from an insider culture.[39] This approach flattens a referent into a cultural signifier that is then de-contextualized and integrated into an established diegesis. Identities were reduced to "feelings" or "spirits" rather than sets of specificities. Chapter two traces journeys of appropriation and transformation in the writing process. Aspects of religious concepts, historical figures, and medical practices were retained or erased in a balance of mimesis and fantasy, of conveying authenticity and of maintaining consistency.[40] A similar process appears in other departments, as analyzed in chapters one and five. Individual signifiers were also hybridized with one another in order to create fantasy cultures distinct from their real-world counterparts. BG designers and painters of *Avatar* combined stylistic elements from Chinese, Egyptian, Vietnamese, Thai, and Mayan referents in order to construct a multifaceted Fire Nation (Appendix 1.04-05).[41] Thus, none of those real-world cultures are synonymous with the fantasy one. Zuckerman likewise played a *pipa* like a banjo in order to convey a backwoods Asian-ness, and he performed jazz music on Chinese instruments to signify a cosmopolitan Asian-ness.[42] Like with the bodyscape, these collections of signs are not always fully controlled by the artist. By emulating Art Deco for the Metal Clan architecture, Konietzko intended to create the *Korra* equivalent of the "city of the future" (Appendix 1.06).[43] However, due to the style's transnational and transcultural history, the art department inadvertently created signifiers of Egyptian-ness, Indian-ness, Mexican-ness, and Shanghai-ness.[44] Jazz similarly has various additional connotations, including those related to Asian-ness.[45] A referent can signify a multitude of identities. This balance of mimesis and fantasy in the pursuit of authenticity and internal consistency was further complicated by other factors.

---

[37] "Commentary – Avatar"; Acastus, "Music 2"; Brennan; "Commentary – Beginnings 1"; "Commentary – Beginnings 2."
[38] Hunt, 22, 29-35.
[39] J.O. Young, 6.
[40] DiMartino and Konietzko, 122; "Commentary – Lake"; "Commentary – Old."
[41] DiMartino and Konietzko, 52, 61, 156; Dankiewicz; Garagarza (7 Mar.); "Commentary – Beach"; E, Miller.
[42] Brennan; "Commentary – And."
[43] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, 71; "Commentary – Metal."
[44] Elliot; Alff; Sluis, Xu and Dai.
[45] Atkins; Shipton, 290-91; Keppy; Marlow.

Alongside mimesis and fantasy, the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* featured elements of mimesis and abstraction. Much like the former dual impulses, the latter two exist within all audiovisual media. Hence, in lieu of a definition of animation, Maureen Furniss purposes a continuum between mimesis and abstraction on which both animated and live-action texts could be placed.[46] Much like how realist conventions ground the fantastical, they also ground the abstracted. This franchise mitigated the plasmatic potential of animation by adopting what Paul Wells labels "hyper-realism," the imitation of how a camera records profilmic reality in animation.[47] As described in chapter one, BG designers were instructed to think through both how the animated architecture would have been built and how a camera would have recorded it.[48] For the martial arts choreography in chapter four, consultants performed moves to help the storyboard artists obtain corporeal authenticity.[49] In addition to the visuals, sounds also operate as agents of mimesis, especially within animation.[50] As *Korra* sound designer Steve Tushar is quoted saying in chapter five, "We got to sell what they draw with the sound."[51] The sound effects were complemented by the naturalistic vocal performances sought in the casting process and fostered through ensemble recording, as described in chapter six.[52] At the same time, these agents of mimesis interacted with those of abstraction.

Due to the requirements of television animation, the visual components needed to be streamlined in order to be reproduced by other individuals and other production cultures, as *Korra* BG painter Frederic William Stewart noted in chapter one.[53] The recorded movements of martial arts consultants underwent technological and artistic mediation, introducing elements of fantasy and abstraction.[54] The sound effects and vocal performances also experienced technological mediation, not only through being recorded by a microphone but also through being digitally edited into coherent wholes for integration into the diegesis.[55] Even when breaking from realist conventions, these shows were still anchored to real-world contexts through the imitation of anime conventions, namely the storyboarding of *manpu* and occasionally the designing of

[46] Furniss, 5.
[47] Wells, *Understanding*, 25-26.
[48] Sung.
[49] Huang; Meza-Leon; Ulanova; Hunt, 39-41.
[50] Sergi, "In"; Taberham: 131.
[51] Tushar.
[52] "Commentary – Southern Raiders"; "Commentary – Out"; Hardwick.
[53] Oatley.
[54] Meza-Leon.
[55] "Making – Sound"; "Commentary – Terror"; Liu, "News."

FLCL-inspired sound effects.[56] All these factors – authenticity, internal consistency, hyper-realism, and streamlining – impacted the production of the visual, aural, and narrative components of both the animated bodyscape and of fantasy world-building, in turn impacting the construction and ascription of Asian-ness. These themes are also present in the outsourcing for final animation.

Producing Final Animation: Outsourcing and Asian-ness

Outsourcing – where part of a production is contracted out to another company, often in another country – is a common practice within contemporary U.S. television animation. Material passes from the central planet to orbiting lunar bodies. Most of *Avatar* and *Korra* were animated in South Korea. After the pilot was completed with Tin House, the first series was animated by JM Animation, DR Movie, and Moi Animation. For *Korra*, the majority of the episodes were handled by Studio Mir, who were aided in-house by Studio Reve for the third and fourth seasons. Studio Pierrot in Japan animated half of season two, and computer-animation for the vehicles in season one was outsourced to Technicolor India in Bangalore. For these shows, the involvement of these Asian animation studios has been framed similarly to that of the consultants. They were indicators and ensurers of cultural authenticity, tethering the shows and the animated bodyscapes to real-world contexts. For *Avatar*, the studios were spotlighted in the art book and on home video releases, and the creators would credit specific animators by name when discussing the series.[57] For *Korra*, production narratives focused on Studio Mir over Studio Pierrot and Technicolor India.[58] The following section examines how both the stateside and overseas crews of *Avatar* and *Korra* have described their relationships as well as their impact on the construction and ascription of Asian-ness.

Granting Freedom: The Stateside Perspective

Across interviews, Konietzko has repeatedly criticized how other U.S. productions treat overseas animators.[59] In his words, "We don't think they're using those

[56] "Commentary – When"; Brennan.
[57] DiMartino and Konietzko, 34-37; "The Making of Avatar – Inside the Korean Studios" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2006); "Commentary – Waterbending."
[58] "Commentary – New"; "Commentary – Breath"; "Commentary – Enter."
[59] Navarro, "1"; "Audio Commentary – Chapter 20: Sozin's Comet, Part 3: Into the Inferno" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008); DiMartino and Konietzko, 34.

artists like artists" and "They weren't allowed to actually be animators."[60] With this language, he positioned the *Avatar* franchise as an opportunity to revise that system and allow for greater creative input and collaboration. Michael Dante DiMartino recalled the first major change, removing exposure or timing sheets and instead only sending over storyboards and animatics. Even though scene lengths were set, this amendment allowed animators more freedom to "figure out the best way to execute it."[61] In the art book, DiMartino had elaborated: "The goal was to put some creative control and decision making into the hands of the Korean artists, and give them the freedom to make the best animation they could."[62] Konietzko described removing exposure sheets as a way to "empower the artists" to "augment the art" in a way not otherwise possible.[63] He repeated this view regarding the production of *Korra*: "We give [the animators] room to figure out a lot of the timing. They always do great embellishments and augmentation to what we've plotted out in the storyboards."[64] Across these paratexts and promotional material, both co-creators have emphasized their goal of granting the overseas animators greater creative freedom, to augment the work done by the stateside crew rather than execute by rote.

As a part of developing a new system of production, *Avatar* gave greater decision-making power to the overseas studios, as seen in the transition from layouts to boards-only in the first season. According to DiMartino, they had initially implemented layouts because they wanted more stateside control but stopped because "the Koreans were way better at it."[65] Returning to my planetary model of production cultures, there exists a tension between the central planet and the lunar bodies. To extend the analogy, these secondary sites of production both exist within the gravitational pull of the primary one and remain self-contained entities. When the resulting text is the product of collective creative decisions, then it behooves one to ask where those decisions were made and by whom. For *Avatar*, by expanding the responsibilities of JM Animation and DR Movie to include layouts, they increased their influence. Both production and ownership became less centralized. By using "the Koreans" as shorthand, DiMartino emphasizes the nationality of these contributions over their specific studio brand. Their Asian-ness – both of the studios and of their contributions – is foregrounded, in parallel

[60] Blacker.
[61] Ibid.
[62] DiMartino and Konietzko, 34.
[63] Blacker.
[64] "Inside."
[65] Blacker.

to how Asian and Asian American storyboard artists has been credited for incorporating anime-inspired flourishes in chapter three.[66] From early in the production, overseas animators had a recognizable and recognized impact on *Avatar*, which is evident in the figure of "foaming mouth guy." In the episode "The Warriors of Kyoshi" (*Avatar* S1E04), Aang performs an Airbending trick. As the crowd cheers, one person has an extreme reaction. His arms flail about, he foams at the mouth, and his eyes roll back in his head before he finally collapses (Appendix 7.01). DiMartino recalled this moment, how the storyboard had initially depicted a figure merely fainting before Ryu – then, just an employee at JM Animation – improvised the action. The co-creator remembered thinking: "This new system might work."[67] Ahead of the series premiere, an article in *The New York Times* called attention to this figure, describing him as the result of the Korean animators being given more creative freedom.[68] In this context, "foaming mouth guy" serves as a clear example of transculturation. JM Animation was as much a contact zone as the Nickelodeon Animation Studio. Because of the creative decisions made by Ryu, this animation also marked the scene and the characters as Asian in a way that the actions of the stateside crew alone could not.

Since *Korra* was originally developed as a limited series, the Nickelodeon staff started out smaller and Studio Mir had a larger workload. As the series continued, the pivot to a more sustainable production system involved the overseas studio relinquishing responsibilities. By season three, most of the production processes were centralized in the Nickelodeon Animation Studio. On a commentary track for the first episode of the third season, DiMartino, Konietzko, and producer Joaquim Dos Santos expressed joy at the change. Early on, DiMartino pointed out how "This was the first season of *Korra* where we had a full, in-house team of designers and storyboard artists."[69] Dos Santos contributed: "For me, it was game-changing. Just the ability to go and talk about revisions with the person right outside your office or in the cubicle next to you is huge."[70] Konietzko qualified:

> We've often said it's nothing against the artists we've worked with overseas. They're awesome people. I don't even care if he or she speaks the same language as I do, it's just about being under the same roof…

[66] "Commentary – Lake"; "Commentary – Beach"; "Commentary – When"; DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Spirits*, 160.
[67] Blacker.
[68] Lasswell.
[69] "Commentary – Breath."
[70] Ibid.

> When you can work with a team under the same roof, it's definitely smoother.[71]

Whereas the co-creators took pride in the decentralization of the production of *Avatar*, they displayed resistance to greater globalization on the sequel series. While Konietzko carefully extended their observations to include all remote workers – those orbiting satellites – there was a move to reinforce the Nickelodeon Animation Studio as the primary site of production. While Studio Mir still retained some responsibilities and the corresponding creative freedom, it was nevertheless a lunar body.

This commentary track featured another production narrative, with the three celebrating the full-time return of Studio Mir and the involvement of Studio Reve.[72] For the corresponding art book, DiMartino wrote about how the key animation added extra and unique details, a formulation akin to the augmentation of the previous series.[73] While Studio Mir animated the bulk of *Korra*, two other Asian studios partook in its production. Neither received as much attention or praise as their South Korean counterparts. Japan's Studio Pierrot animated half of season two because Studio Mir had other projects and could not commit to all fourteen episodes. Despite their involvement when the production was still decentralized, the Japanese studio is rarely mentioned by the co-creators or producers. Konietzko did once commend their conducting special effects tests. He said: "That was one really good thing about working with the Japanese studios. Man, they would test everything. Every effect, they would send us three different versions, have us look at it, and give them parameters of settings and stuff."[74] Studio Pierrot is reduced to the metonymic "Japanese studios" in this somewhat backhanded compliment. Konietzko framed the Japanese animators as performing manual labor, following instructions and deferring to their stateside colleagues, whereas the South Korean animators performed creative labor and took initiative. They did not send Nickelodeon animation tests. In contrast, DiMartino and Konietzko have regularly praised Studio Mir by name. When discussing their return for "A New Spiritual Age" (*Korra* S2E10) after the past several episodes had been animated by Studio Pierrot, DiMartino said: "We got them to come back for the end of book two. So, starting with this episode, Studio Mir was back in the mix, and it was great to have them back."[75]

---

[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Change*, 22-23, 137.
[74] "Commentary – Enter."
[75] "Commentary – New."

Neither co-creator ever extends equivalent language to Studio Pierrot, an odd absence given how they consistently sought to emulate anime with *Avatar* and *Korra*. Still, they have received greater acknowledgement for their contributions than the other non-Korean overseas studio.

Technicolor India is a Bangalore-based studio that handled the modeling and rigging of the vehicles in the first season of *Korra*. Outside of the end credits – which do not even list the animators by their full names – their involvement in the series has been rarely mentioned. In my research, I have only found one accreditation in the official art book regarding the Pro-bending arena interior and a passing mention in a promotional piece for *The Hollywood Reporter*.[76] Given their limited and specialized contribution to the series, the lack of overt references is understandable. Nevertheless, their absence from production narratives reveals a hierarchy of which national animation industries are privileged as indicators of an authentic and transferrable Asian-ness. While the world of *Korra* is hardly devoid of Indian referents – as can be seen by some of the character names – there was nevertheless a decision made to not promote Technicolor India's involvement in the same way as that of Studio Mir.

By spotlighting the practice of outsourcing for *Avatar* and *Korra*, the production narratives depict these Asian animation studios as indicators of authenticity and Asian-ness. Their reported creative freedom frames them more as collaborators than as subcontractors. However, paratexts and testimonies treat the different studios unequally. For both series, the South Korean studios are the most spotlighted. Even though JM Animation, DR Movie, Studio Moi, Studio Mir, and Studio Reve collectively worked on most of the episodes, the relative erasure of Studio Pierrot and Technicolor India still positioned the South Korean animation industry as more representative of Asian animation. The county becomes a synecdoche, like China through the selection of cultural referents and Japan through the imitation of anime. Regardless, the stateside production cultures remain centralized. Thus far, this section has only considered one side's perspective of this transnational and transcultural relationship. The overseas studios and their employees possessed agency not only in their creative decisions but also in how they have understood and described their roles in the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra*.

[76] DiMartino, Konietzko, and Dos Santos, *Air*, 56; Nededog.

Claiming Ownership: The Overseas Perspective

Yoo Jae-myung was an animation director for JM Animation for *Avatar* and was the president of Studio Mir for *Korra*. Because of his leadership role, he has served as a primary spokesperson in the South Korean press for the franchise, constructing and relaying production narratives within that national context. As a guest on *The INNERVIEW* in 2013, he spoke about the early days of working on *Avatar*:

> In the animation industry, we have what's called an indication. An indication contains information on each scene, giving instructions on every fine detail, including the movements of characters as well as how and when they should move. This actually makes the animated characters' movements appear robotic. So, when we were asked to work on the pilot film of 'Avatar: the Last Airbender,' we asked the producers to scrap the indication because it'd prevent us from making the movements appear natural. I explained that following an indication makes the characters appear stiff and typical. Brian [sic] and Michael relayed our message to Nickelodeon, who rejected the idea at first. So, we argued with them, saying that this was an essential matter for this animation series. We finally got their approval to eliminate the indication and our studio had more freedom in choosing how the characters should act and move depending on the scene.[77]

Yoo challenges the more paternalistic narrative put forth by Nickelodeon and the co-creators. Instead of DiMartino and Konietzko granting them greater freedom, Yoo and his colleagues insisted upon receiving that freedom. A similar formulation appears in a *Korean Times* interview from 2014. Yoo described working on the sequel series:

> As a sub-contractor, we are supposed to get things done as we are told. But Konietzko was different. While working on Korra, I asked him to allow us to present our ideas and he allowed us to do so. We were able to create characters and design backgrounds that required an artistic approach and innovative thinking.[78]

While he remains deferential, Yoo again presented himself as an instigator for change rather than as a passive recipient. This self-centering is understandable given the context

---

[77] Susan Lee MacDonald, "The INNERview #61 - Yoo Jae-myung (유재명), Animation director," *The INNERview With Host Susan Lee MacDonald*, 2 May 2013. Translation by Ro Kaylin.
[78] Baek Byung-yeul, "'Drawing animation is our DNA,'" *The Korea Times*, 8 May 2015. No credited translator.

of these interviews, where he was promoting the relatively new Studio Mir as well as his own reputation for primarily South Korean readers. Hence, he credited himself rather than JM Animation for the discontinuation of exposure sheets. *The INNERview* even grants Yoo authorial credit for *Korra*.[79] These statements position supposedly lunar bodies as equals with the central planet, a dual system rather than an asymmetrical one, in turn marking the shows as being as equally Korean and Asian as they are American.

Regardless of who made the first overtures to revise the typical stateside/overseas dynamic, there is a shared understanding that the productions of *Avatar* and *Korra* brought with them greater freedom and responsibilities. Aside from translated interviews with Yoo as well as brief promotional videos on Studio Mir's YouTube page, there is little available testimony from those animators. The most substantive resource is the bonus feature "The Making of Avatar – Inside the Korean Studio." The video contains interviews with staff members from JM Animation on their experiences working on the first season of *Avatar*. Like many other paratexts, this one seeks to educate audiences about connections between the franchise and real-world Asian-ness. The BGs described in the first chapter crossed borders into South Korea, where they were adapted from different angles and distances by people like JM Animation BG director Jeong Sang Woong. He spoke at length about a particular difficulty:

> The hardest part was the trees. The reason drawing trees was difficult was that we don't see many conifer trees in Korea. *Avatar* trees were like Scandinavian conifer forests. In *Avatar*, there were always conifer trees. It would have been easier if it was something I grew up with.[80]

The above quote illustrates a dissonance between the American and South Korean crews, between primary and secondary sites of production. This dynamic favors the creative input of the stateside staff, keeping the production of the show and its identity centralized in the Nickelodeon Animation Studio. However, that does not diminish the impact of decisions made at JM Animation. The trees – at least during the wintery first season – were based on what Jeong identified as western conifers as opposed to the Korean flora with which he and his team would have been more familiar. That said, pine trees are hardly alien to the Asian continent; therefore, they do not inherently connote western-ness. More importantly, the final images that appear in the show are Jeong's and others' interpretations of key BG paintings. Furthermore, they are also Korean

[79] MacDonald.
[80] "Making – Korean." No credited translator.

renderings of western referents, the products of transculturation. JM Animation was as much a contact zone as the Nickelodeon Animation Studio. This production narrative describes an inverse of the formulations that have been widely discussed in the preceding chapters, complicating the process of world-building. By re-presenting something western, they construct and ascribe Asian-ness.

In addition to BG paintings, the overseas studios were tasked with adapting storyboards and animatics into final animation. As previously addressed, the removal of exposure sheets granted South Korean animators greater freedom in determining the movement of the characters. Those who spoke on this subject concurred with stateside production narratives, describing the change as both freeing and challenging. Oh – then a timing director – described the animation process thusly: "By the time we finished season one we were pretty used to it. As we got better at it we were able to become more creative. Not only did we improve our skills but the acting became more free and enjoyable."[81] Animation director Hong Kyoung Pyo said: "I was very happy about not having set timings, because that opened up the flexibility of what we do… We had a lot of freedom."[82] Fellow animation director Jeong Hoon added: "In the beginning, it was difficult but after a while we began to see it as a really joyful animation. It almost felt as if we were actors doing all the action. We thought of ways to make our work better too. That way, we could enjoy work together."[83] In-between checker Lee Joo Ri recalled: "There were no timings attached to the original drawings, so I could do as I wanted. Sometimes that made it difficult to connect with other parts."[84] During his segment, Oh spoke of the gap between American and Korean sides of the production, specifically regarding video references. He was translated saying: "In the case of acting, I became concerned about the difference between what Koreans think of acting and what Americans think of acting… Having such references… especially for facial expressions, helped me greatly."[85] The final performance – even while guided by reference footage that privileged supposedly American sensibilities – was a transcultural collaboration. Like Jeong Sang Woong's trees, these animated performances were Korean interpretations of live-action American ones, informing the visual components incorporated into these animated bodyscapes. Oh also discussed how animators adapted

[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.

recordings of the martial arts sessions: "Of course, it's not that I copy things directly. I maximize its effect by turning it into animation so I can get a better kung-fu move, or find a better angle in the shot and the right proportions, and also a nuance of the kung-fu movements."[86] As it did stateside, the choreography underwent artistic mediation as individuals embellished the movements of martial artists, resulting in a transcultural mix of contributions. Chinese *wushu,* scripted descriptions, multiple passes on storyboards, preexisting reference footage, the recorded movement of physiological bodies, and finally the creative decisions made by the animators combined to create the bending sequences of *Avatar* and later of *Korra*.

Across these accounts, two seemingly contradictory threads dominate. First, stateside elements – such as coniferous trees or western-style acting – were prioritized. The production remained centralized at the Nickelodeon Animation Studio, with the overseas studios operating as lunar bodies. Second, these animators emphasized that they were not automatons, that they were collaborators who produced something new and unique. Yoo repeated the latter conceptualization:

> If I were to do simply what I was told without a sense of ownership, then I'd be labeled as a "subcontractor." But if I add my own ideas to the materials I receive to make them my own, then I'm contributing to the planning process, and it becomes a "new creation." The definition of subcontractor is very loose, and it's you who decide on its meaning. I've never considered the projects I've undertaken as someone else's. As soon as I undertake a project, it becomes my own. And I try to make a creative approach with a sense of ownership.[87]

Yoo has articulated an underlying theme of this project. Through their participation and contributions, artists like Yoo transformed this franchise into a "new creation," into something to which they can lay claim. Therefore, *Avatar* and *Korra* becomes partially Korean, partially Asian. The same applies to all individuals in below-the-line positions across the various production cultures who contributed to the visual, aural, and narrative components that comprise these series and these animated bodyscapes. Through their collective involvement, they transferred parts of their own identities and perspectives in their construction and ascription of Asian-ness.

---

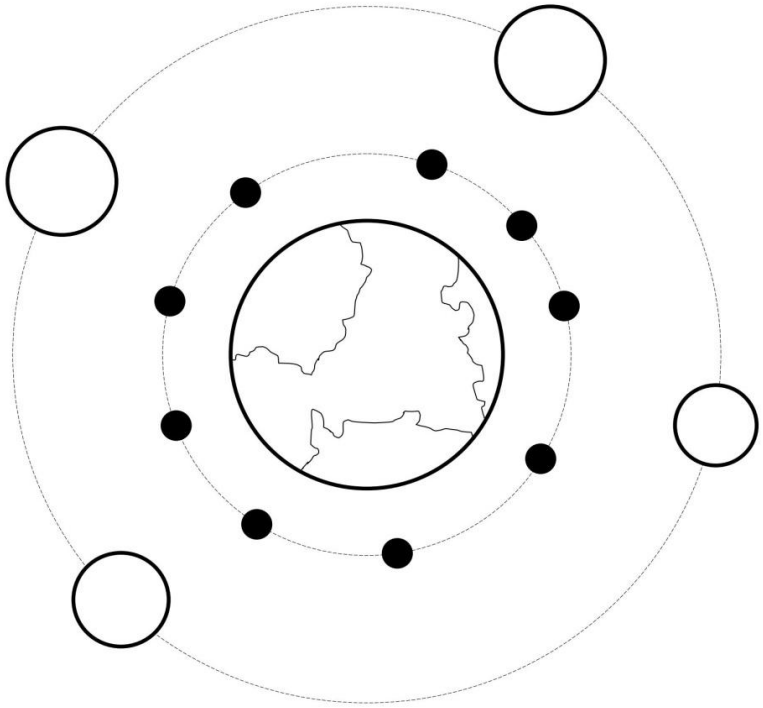
[86] Ibid.
[87] MacDonald.

Summary: Going Forward

When I started this project, I sought to better understand how we construct and ascribe racial identities. Animation – especially those with fantastical settings – seemed like an ideal way to take an abstract approach to this topic. However, one cannot divorce the idea of race from its real-world applications, cannot treat it merely as a thought exercise. The construction and ascription of race to the animated bodyscape in *Avatar* and *Korra* was not done directly. Instead, individual visual, aural, and narrative components passed through multiple production cultures where individuals impacted their construction. Through my methodology, I sought to center those who worked on this franchise, especially in below-the-line positions. These processes were mediated through the shows' relationship with mimesis, including its negotiation with fantasy and abstraction. These components were then incorporated into complexes of signs. These animated bodyscapes and these series are not simply the products of corporations or of specific authors but are instead the summations of the collective creative decisions made by all crewmembers. Thus, the identity of the *Avatar* franchise is as potentially fluid as that of the animated bodyscape. The result is a transcultural and Asian franchise.

While this project focuses on one case study, my approach can be applied to other animated or even live-action texts. The production and ascription of race can be analyzed in narratives set not only in fantasy worlds but also in re-presentations of the real one. The bodyscapes could belong to non-human characters. Other forms of identity – including, but not limited to, gender, sexuality, ability, and age – can be studied in this manner. Finally, these processes can be observed in other national and transnational industries. My methodology can be further amended for the analysis of ongoing productions, with direct observations preceding original interviews. Such research can be complemented with an audience component, acknowledging how the viewer also constructs and ascribes identity through their reading of a text. Such projects should reach the same conclusion as the preceding chapters. The identities of animated bodyscapes – including those related to race – are not innate. Individuals operating within a series of interlocking production cultures ascribe those identities through the construction and incorporation of visual, aural, and narrative components. Therefore, the study of race and animation should center these personnel, their actions, and their understandings of those actions. A piece of animation is more than just a final product; it is the summation of various processes and creative decisions. Race may not exist in animation, but animators can still construct and ascribe it.

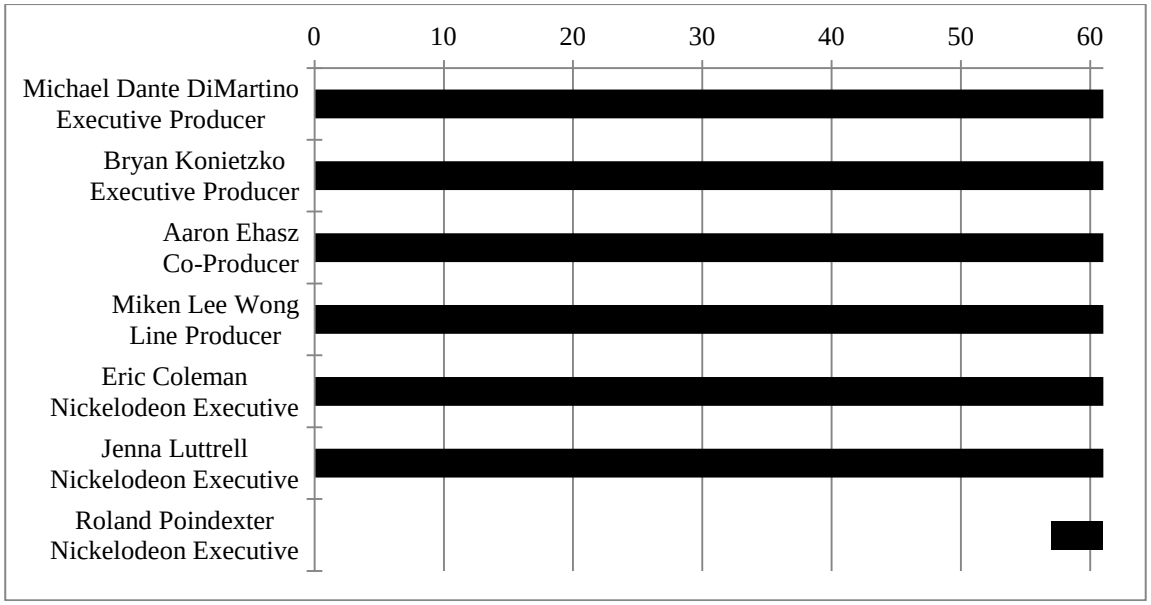
Appendix



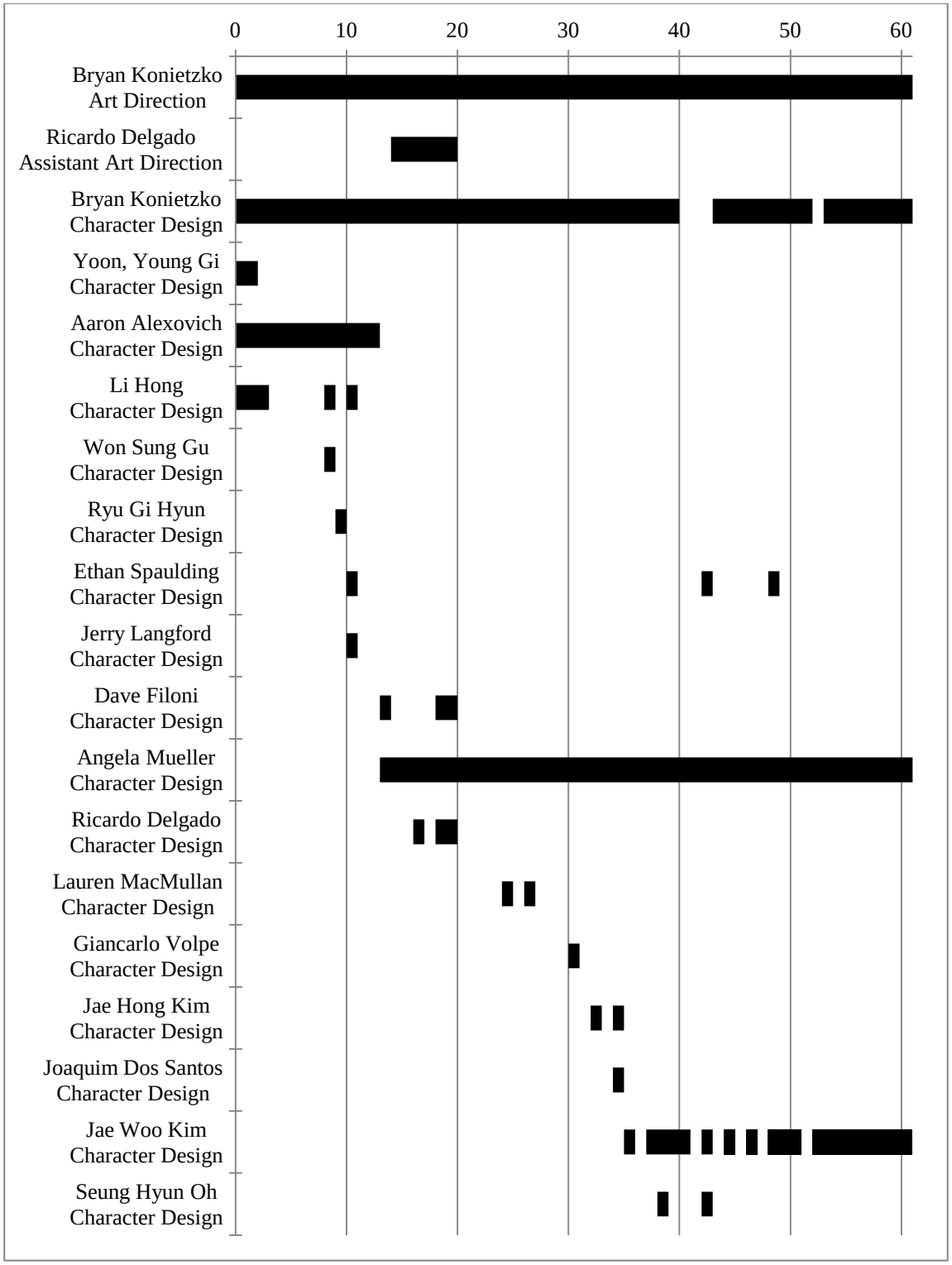
0.01 – Planetary Production Cultures Model

		Episode Title	Air Date
1	S1E01	“The Boy in the Iceberg”	2/21/05
2	S1E02	“The Avatar Returns”	2/21/05
3	S1E03	“The Southern Air Temple”	2/25/05
4	S1E04	“The Warriors of Kyoshi”	3/04/05
5	S1E05	“The King of Omashu”	3/18/05
6	S1E06	“Imprisoned”	3/25/05
7	S1E07	“Winter Solstice, Part 1: The Spirit World”	4/08/05
8	S1E08	“Winter Solstice, Part 2: Avatar Roku”	4/15/05
9	S1E09	“The Waterbending Scroll”	4/29/05
10	S1E10	“Jet”	5/06/05
11	S1E11	“The Great Divide”	5/20/05
12	S1E12	“The Storm”	6/03/05
13	S1E13	“The Blue Spirit”	6/17/05
14	S1E14	“The Fortuneteller”	9/23/05
15	S1E15	“Bato of the Water Tribe”	10/07/05
16	S1E16	“The Deserter”	10/21/05
17	S1E17	“The Northern Air Temple”	11/04/05
18	S1E18	“The Waterbending Master”	11/18/05
19	S1E19	“The Siege of the North, Part 1”	12/02/05
20	S1E20	“The Siege of the North, Part 2”	12/02/05
21	S2E01	“The Avatar State”	3/17/06
22	S2E02	“The Cave of Two Lovers”	3/24/06
23	S2E03	“Return to Omashu”	4/07/06
24	S2E04	“The Swamp””	4/14/06
25	S2E05	“Avatar Day”	4/28/06
26	S2E06	“The Blind Bandit”	5/05/06
27	S2E07	“Zuko Alone”	5/12/06
28	S2E08	“The Chase”	5/26/06
29	S2E09	“Bitter Work”	6/02/06
30	S2E10	“The Library”	7/14/06
31	S2E11	“The Desert”	7/14/06
32	S2E12	“The Serpent’s Pass”	9/15/06
33	S2E13	“The Drill”	9/15/06
34	S2E14	“City of Walls and Secrets”	9/22/06
35	S2E15	“The Tales of Ba Sing Se”	9/29/06
36	S2E16	“Appa’s Lost Days”	10/13/06
37	S2E17	“Lake Laogai”	11/03/06
38	S2E18	“The Earth King”	11/17/06
39	S2E19	“The Guru”	12/01/06
40	S2E20	“The Crossroads of Destiny”	12/01/06
41	S3E01	“The Awakening”	9/21/07
42	S3E02	“The Headband”	9/28/07
43	S3E03	“The Painted Lady”	10/05/07
44	S3E04	“Sokka’s Master”	10/12/07
45	S3E05	“The Beach”	10/19/07
46	S3E06	“The Avatar and the Firelord”	10/26/07
47	S3E07	“The Runaway”	11/02/07
48	S3E08	“The Puppetmaster”	11/09/07
49	S3E09	“Nightmares and Daydreams”	11/16/07
50	S3E10	“The Day of Black Sun, Part 1: The Invasion”	11/30/07
51	S3E11	“The Day of Black Sun, Part 2: The Eclipse”	11/30/07
52	S3E12	“The Western Air Temple”	7/14/08
53	S3E13	“The Firebending Masters”	7/15/08
54	S3E14	“The Boiling Rock, Part 1”	7/16/08
55	S3E15	“The Boiling Rock, Part 2”	7/16/08
56	S3E16	“The Southern Raiders”	7/17/08
57	S3E17	“The Ember Island Players”	7/18/08
58	S3E18	“Sozin’s Comet, Part 1: The Phoenix King”	7/19/08
59	S3E19	“Sozin’s Comet, Part 2: The Old Masters”	7/19/08
60	S3E20	“Sozin’s Comet, Part 3: Into the Inferno”	7/19/08
61	S3E21	“Sozin’s Comet, Part 4: Avatar Aang”	7/19/08

0.02 – List of *Avatar* episodes.

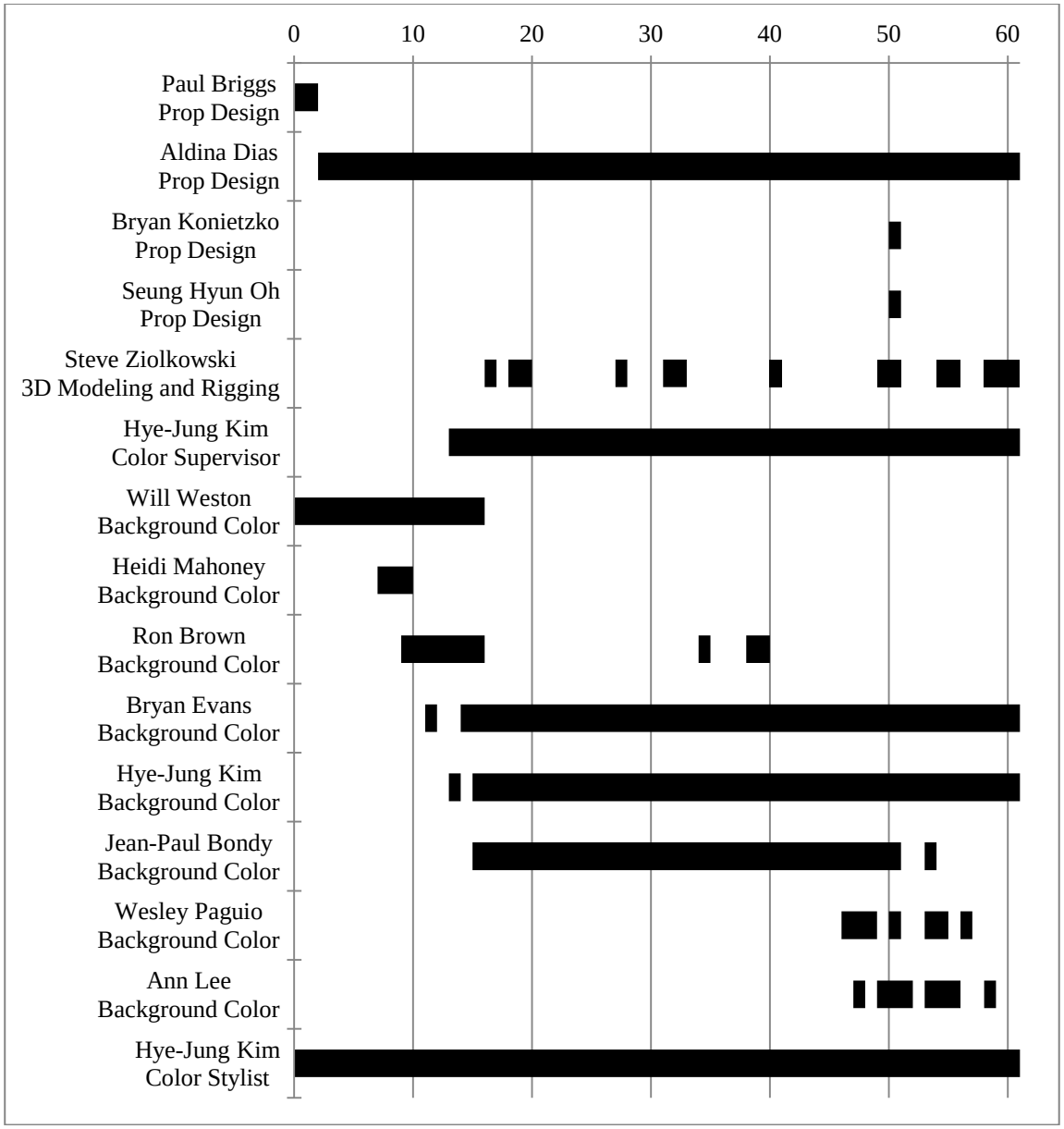


0.03 – Credited Personnel: Producers for *Avatar*.

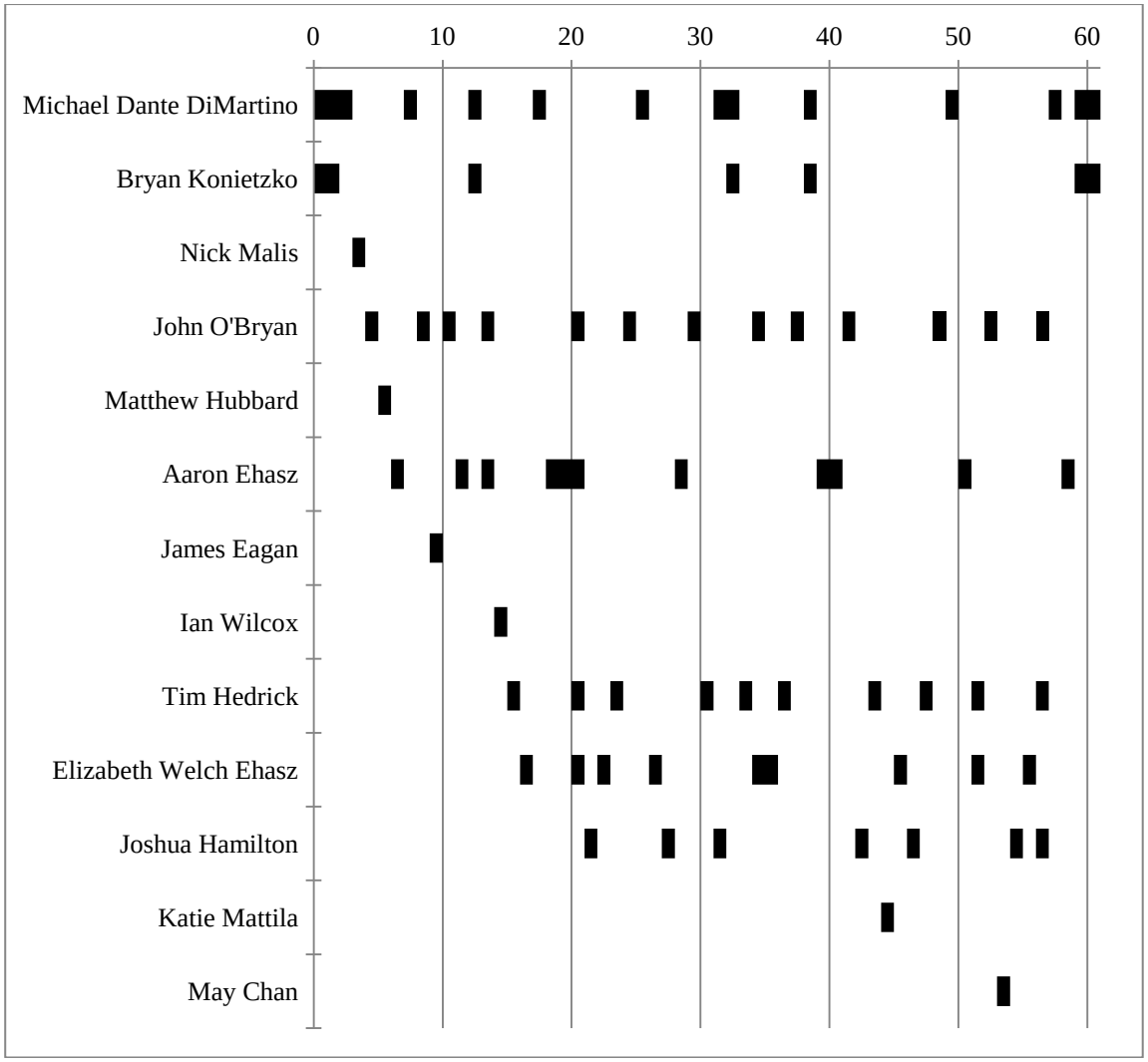


0.04 – Credited Personnel: Art Department 1, Character Design for *Avatar*.

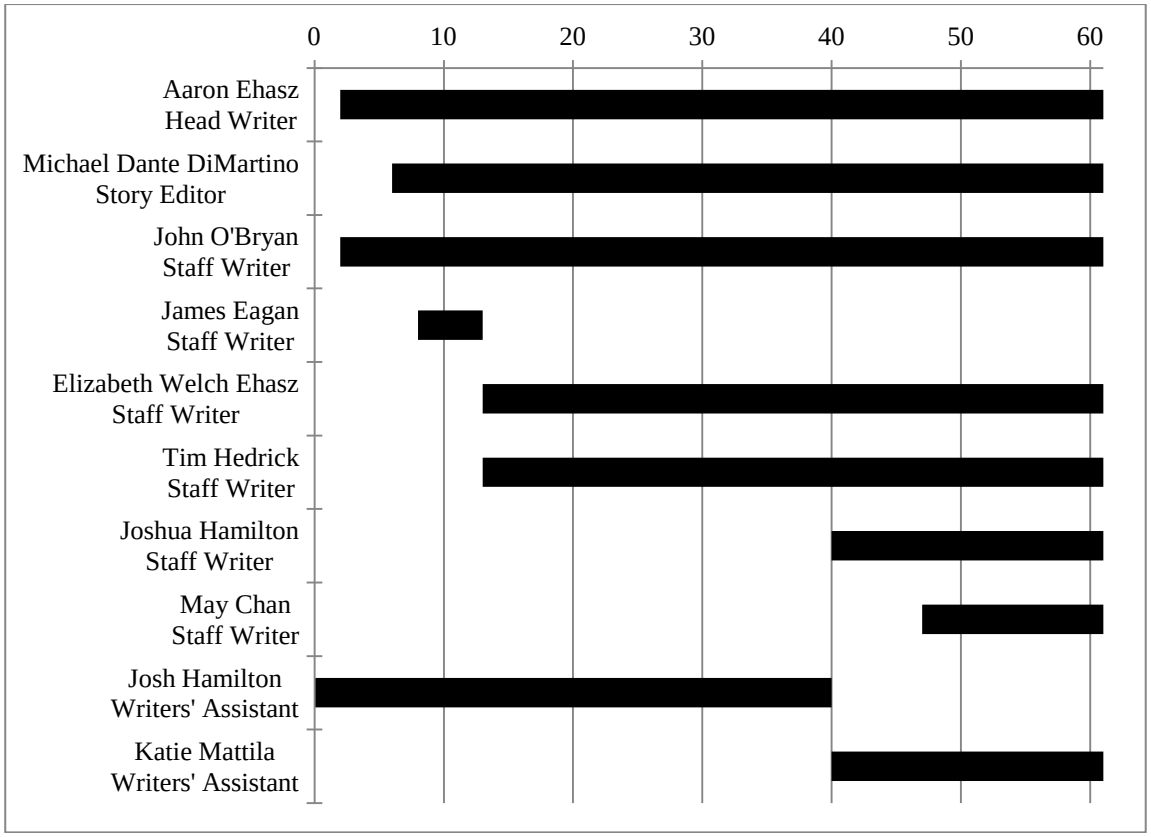
0.05 – Credited Personnel: Art Department 2, Background Design for *Avatar*.



0.06 – Credited Personnel: Art Department 3, Prop Design and Coloring for *Avatar*.

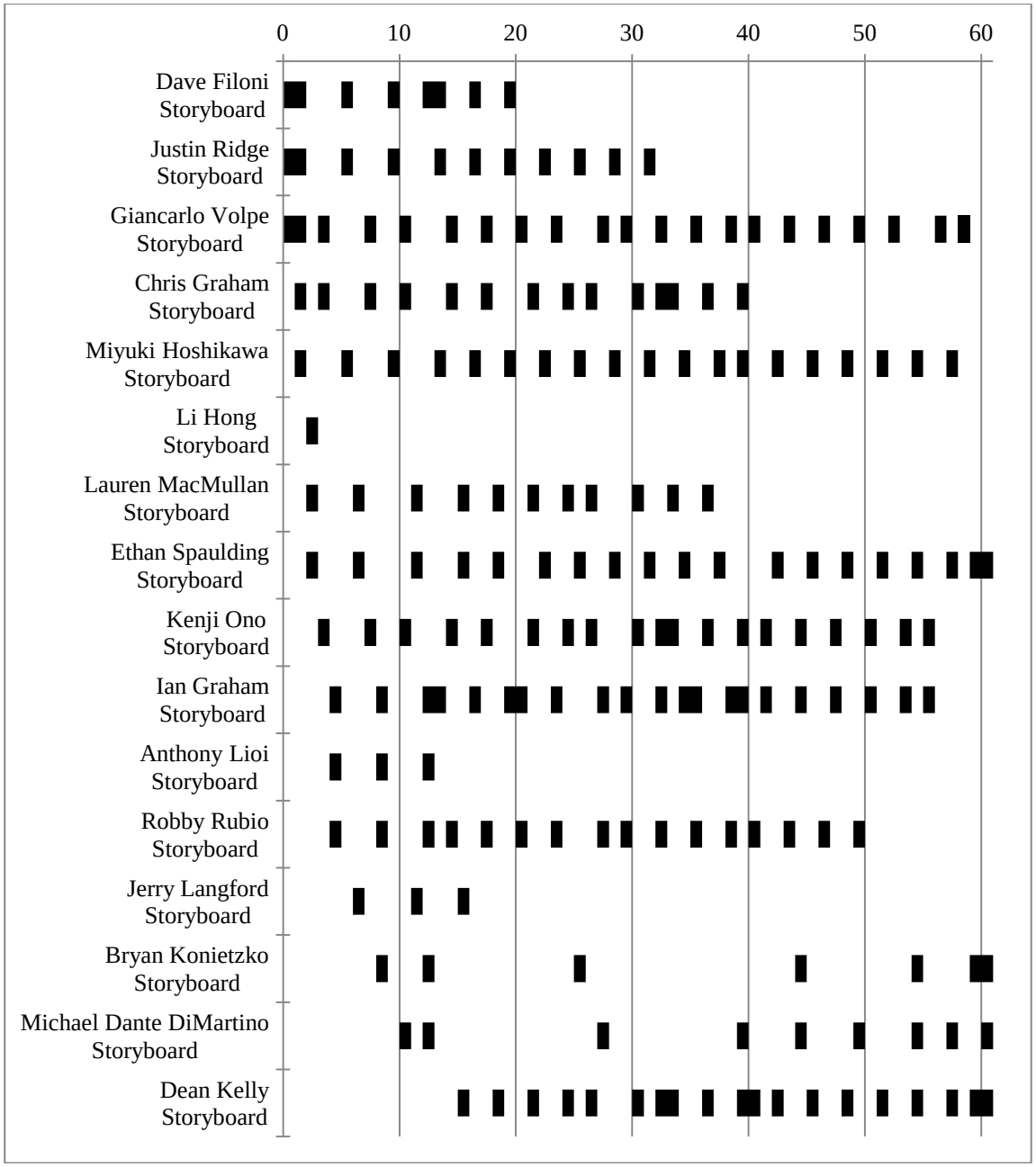


0.07 – Credited Personnel: Episode Writers for *Avatar*. Note: for the anthological episode "The Tales of Ba Sing Se" (S2E15), staff writers Elizabeth Welch Ehasz and John O'Bryan served as story editors, with the following staff members guest writing the different vignettes – Joann Estoesta and Lisa Wahlander, Andrew Huebner, Gary Scheppke, Lauren MacMullan, Katie Mattila, and Justin Ridge and Giancarlo Volpe.

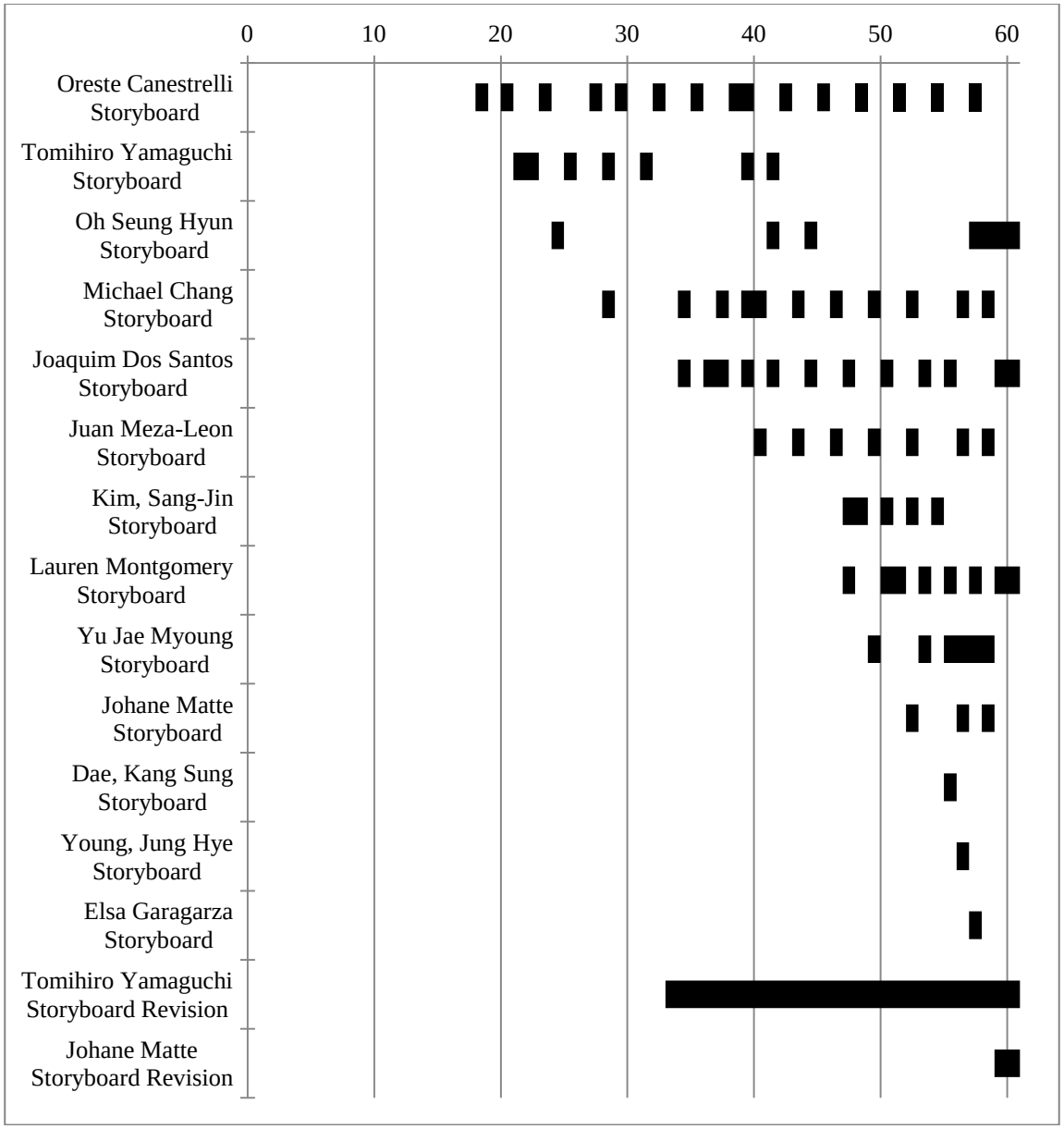


0.08 – Credited Personnel: Writing Department for *Avatar*.

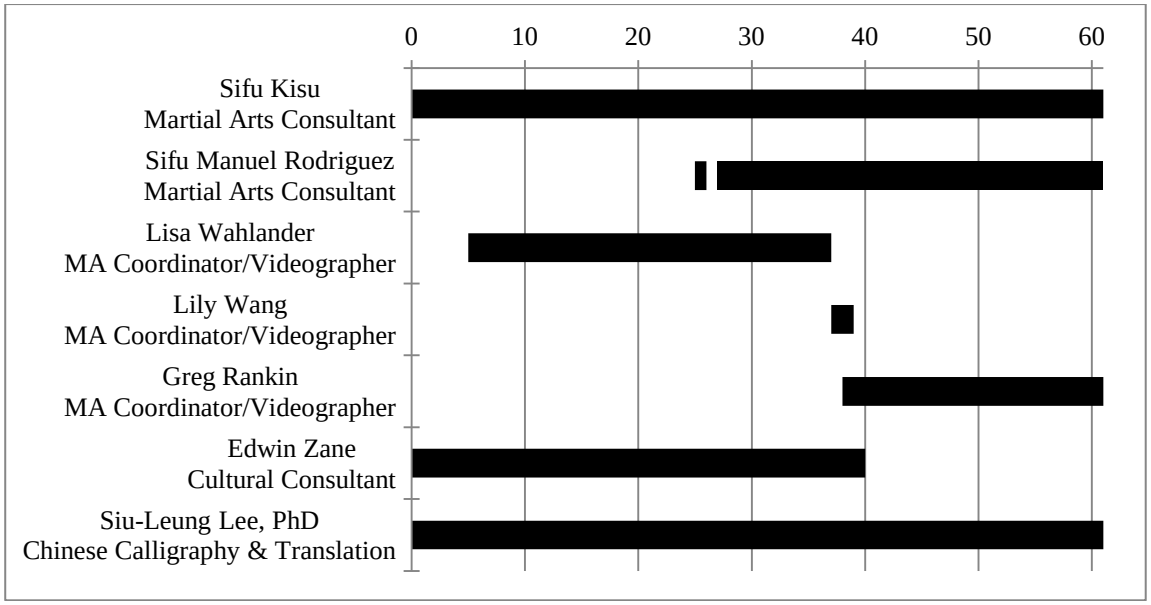
0.09 – Credited Personnel: Directors for *Avatar*.



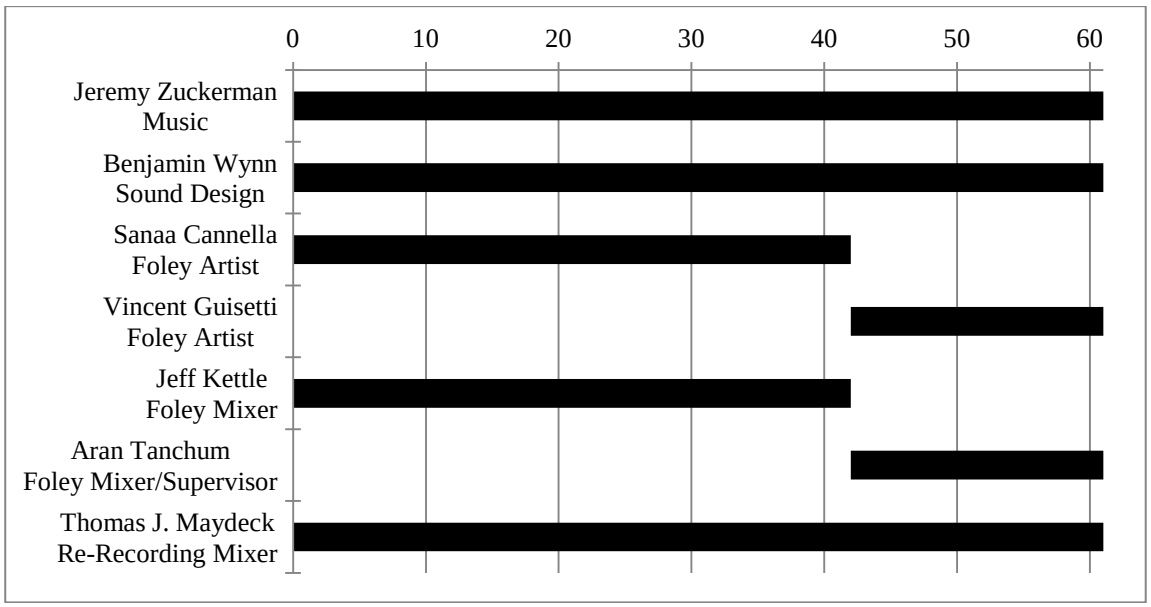
0.10 – Credited Personnel: Storyboards 1 for *Avatar*.



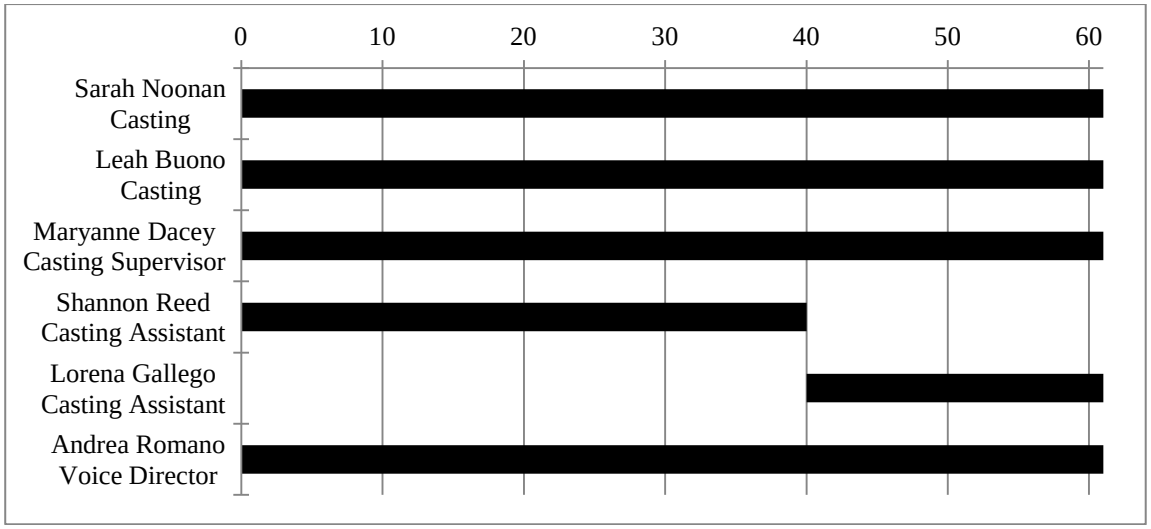
0.11 – Credited Personnel: Storyboards 2 for *Avatar*.



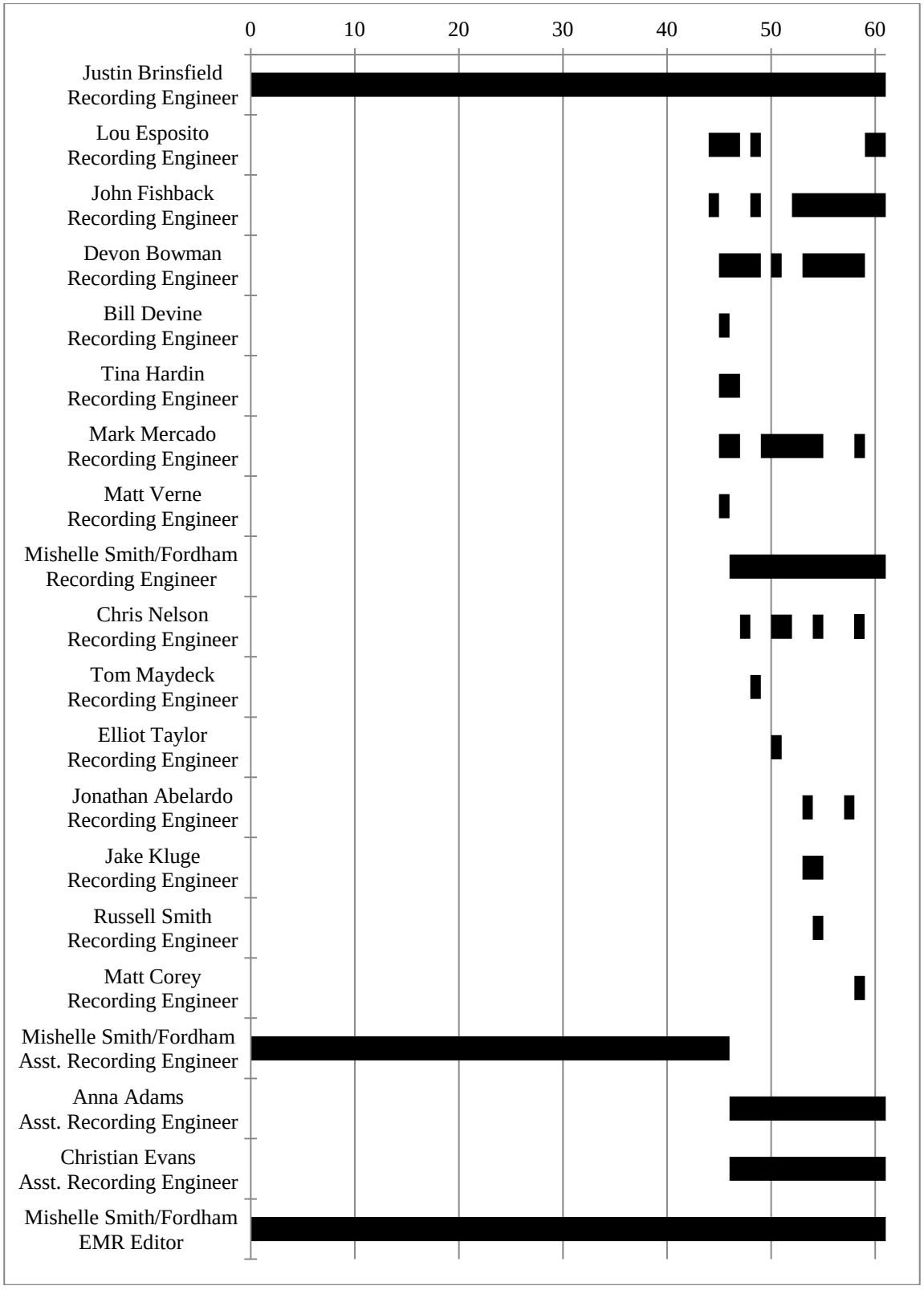
0.12 – Credited Personnel: Consultation for *Avatar*.



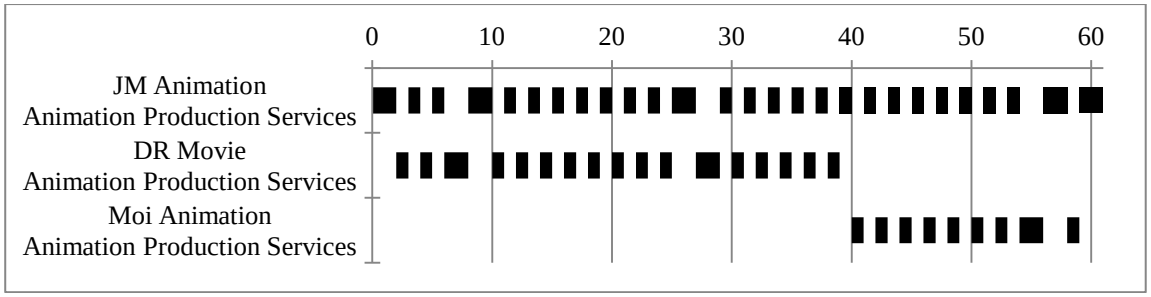
0.13 – Credited Personnel: Music and Sound for *Avatar*.



0.14 – Credited Personnel: Casting and Voice Direction for *Avatar*.



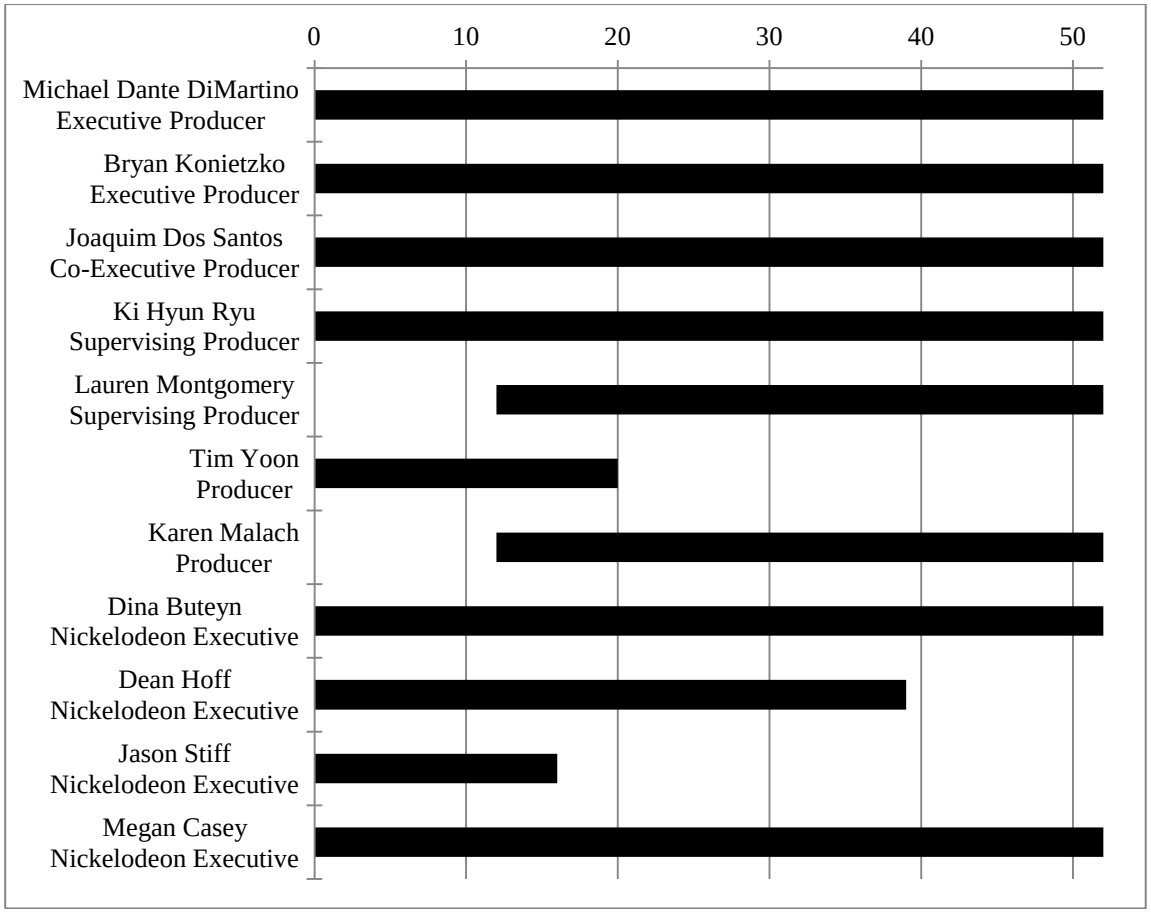
0.15 – Credited Personnel: Voice Recording and Editing for *Avatar*.



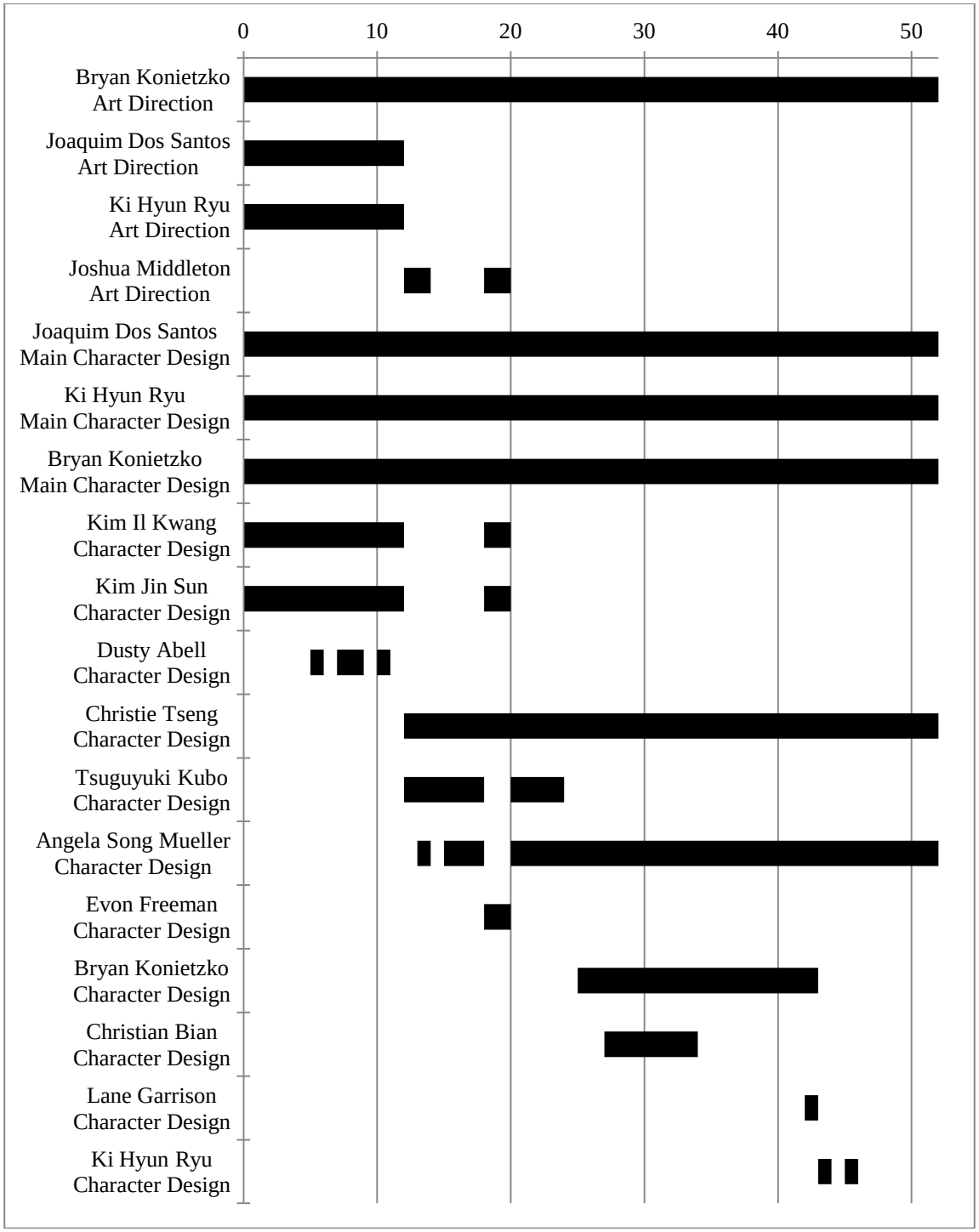
0.16 – Credited Personnel: Overseas Studios for *Avatar*.

		Episode Title	Air Date
1	S1E01	"Welcome to Republic City"	4/14/12
2	S1E02	"A Leaf in the Wind"	4/14/12
3	S1E03	"The Revelation"	4/21/12
4	S1E04	"The Voice in the Night"	4/28/12
5	S1E05	"The Spirit of Competition"	5/05/12
6	S1E06	"And the Winner Is..."	5/12/12
7	S1E07	"The Aftermath"	5/19/12
8	S1E08	"When Extremes Meet"	6/02/12
9	S1E09	"Out of the Past"	6/09/12
10	S1E10	"Turning the Tides"	6/16/12
11	S1E11	"Skeletons in the Closet"	6/23/12
12	S1E12	"Endgame"	6/23/12
13	S2E01	"Rebel Spirits"	9/13/13
14	S2E02	"The Southern Lights"	9/13/13
15	S2E03	"Civil Wars, Part 1"	9/20/13
16	S2E04	"Civil Wars, Part 2"	9/27/13
17	S2E05	"Peacekeepers"	10/04/13
18	S2E06	"The Sting"	10/11/13
19	S2E07	"Beginnings, Part 1"	10/18/13
20	S2E08	"Beginnings, Part 2"	10/18/13
21	S2E09	"The Guide"	11/01/13
22	S2E10	"A New Spiritual Age"	11/08/13
23	S2E11	"Nights of a Thousand Stars"	11/15/13
24	S2E12	"Harmonic Convergence"	11/15/13
25	S2E13	"Darkness Falls"	11/22/13
26	S2E14	"Light in the Dark"	11/22/13
27	S3E01	"A Breath of Fresh Air"	6/27/14
28	S3E02	"Rebirth"	6/27/14
29	S3E03	"The Earth Queen"	6/27/14
30	S3E04	"In Harm's Way"	7/11/14
31	S3E05	"The Metal Clan"	7/11/14
32	S3E06	"Old Wounds"	7/18/14
33	S3E07	"Original Airbenders"	7/18/14
34	S3E08	"The Terror Within"	7/25/14
35	S3E09	"The Stakeout"	8/01/14
36	S3E10	"Long Live the Queen"	8/08/14
37	S3E11	"The Ultimatum"	8/15/14
38	S3E12	"Enter the Void"	8/22/14
39	S3E13	"Venom of the Red Lotus"	8/22/14
40	S4E01	"After All These Years"	10/03/14
41	S4E02	"Korra Alone"	10/10/14
42	S4E03	"The Coronation"	10/17/14
43	S4E04	"The Calling"	10/24/14
44	S4E05	"Enemy at the Gates"	10/31/14
45	S4E06	"The Battle of Zaofu"	11/07/14
46	S4E07	"Reunion"	11/14/14
47	S4E08	"Remembrances"	11/21/14
48	S4E09	"Beyond the Wilds"	11/28/14
49	S4E10	"Operation Beifong"	12/05/14
50	S4E11	"Kuvira's Gambit"	12/12/14
51	S4E12	"Day of the Colossus"	12/19/14
52	S4E13	"The Last Stand"	12/19/14

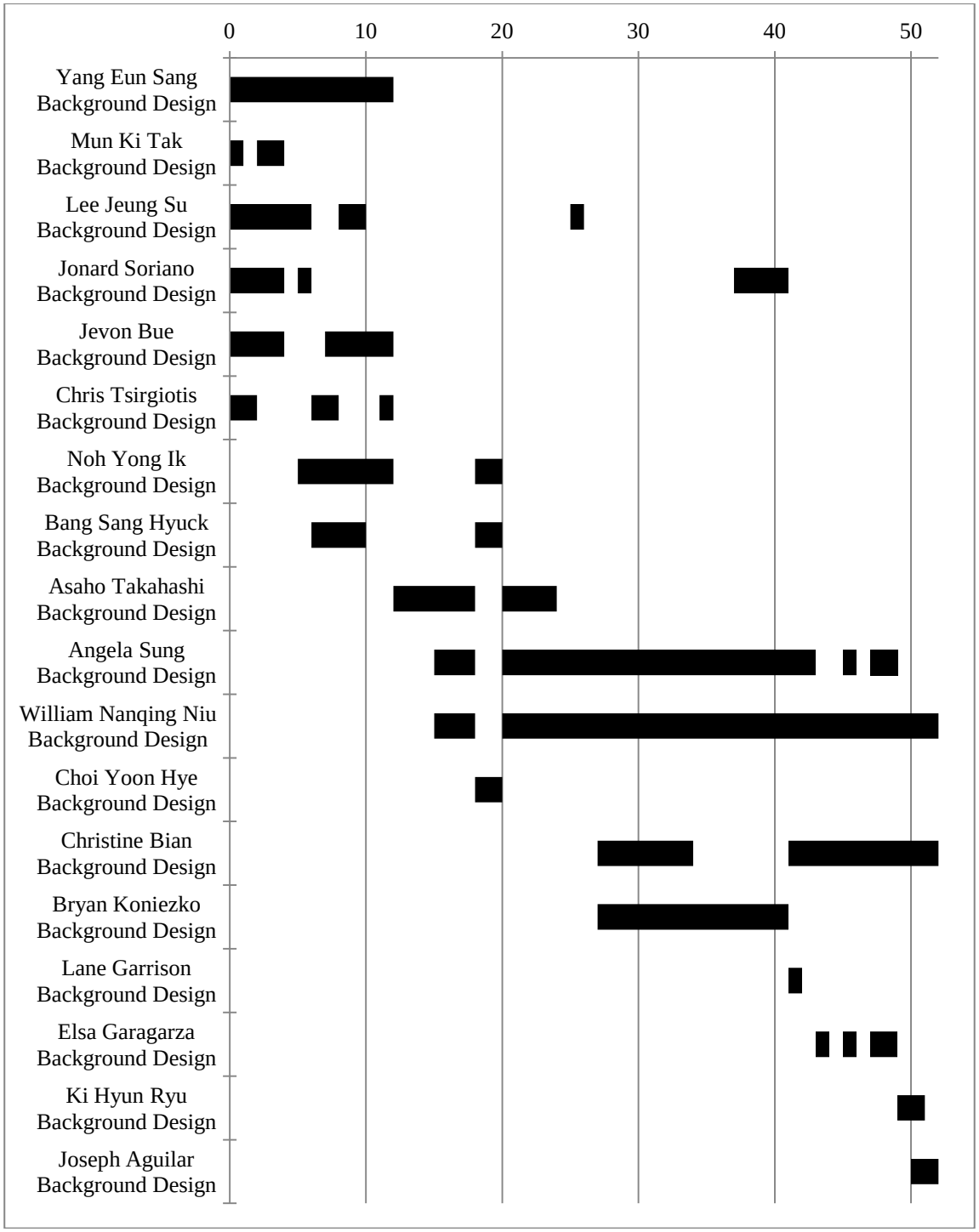
0.17 – List of *Korra* episodes.



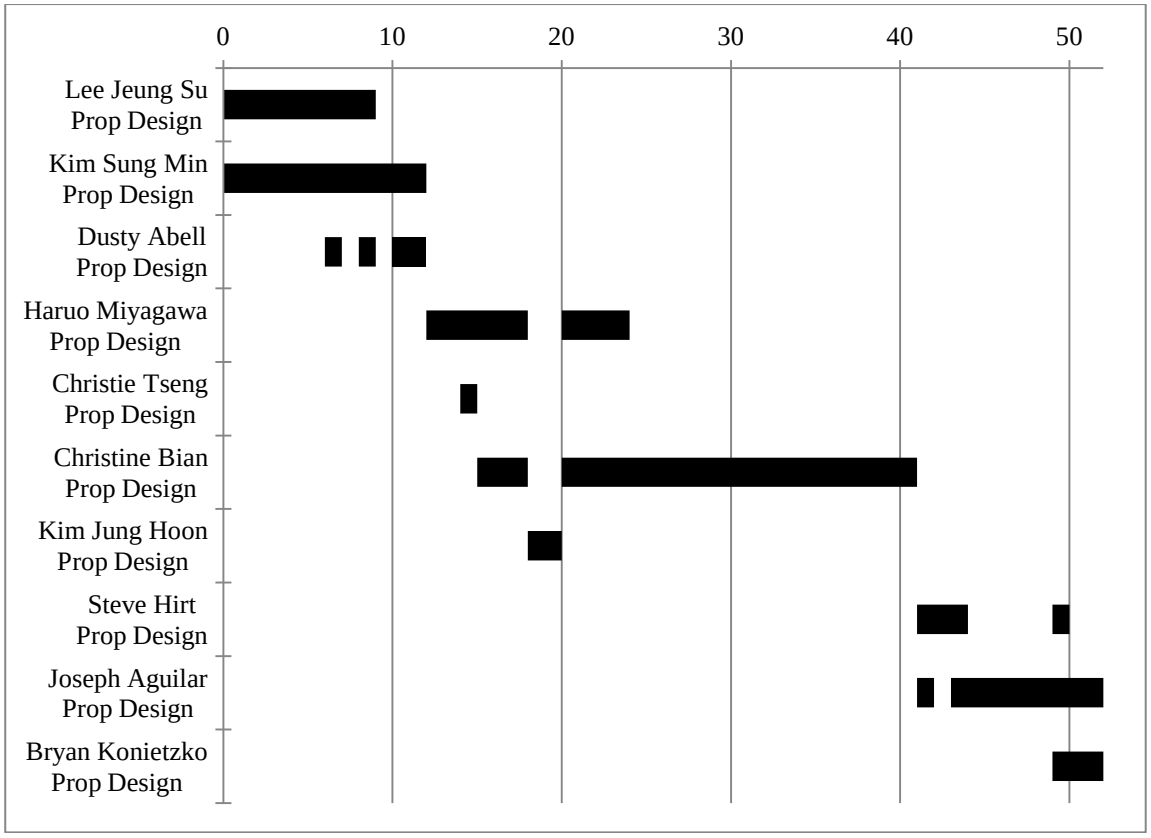
0.18 – Credited Personnel: Producers for *Korra*.



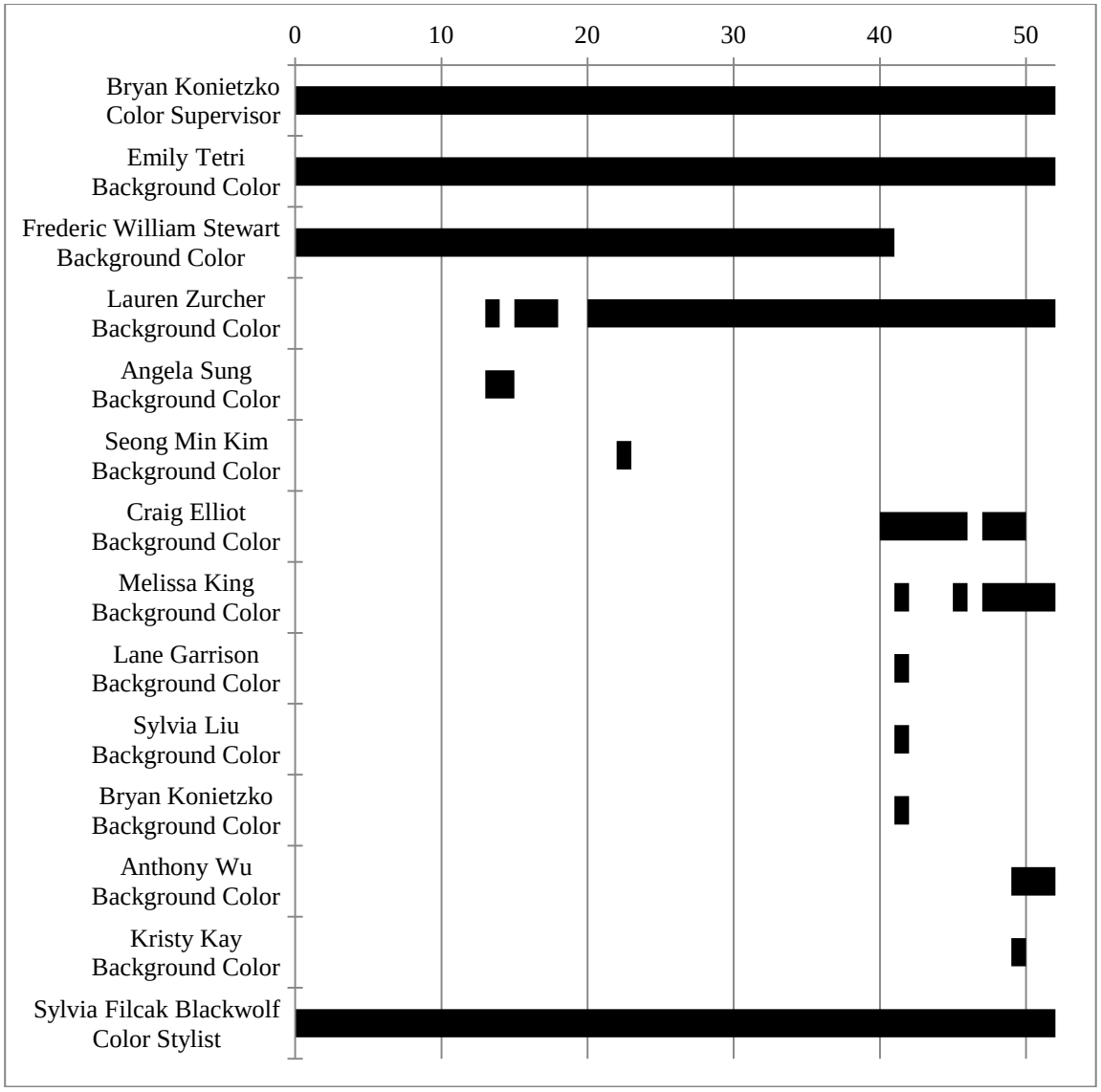
0.19 – Credited Personnel: Art Department 1, Character Design for *Korra*.



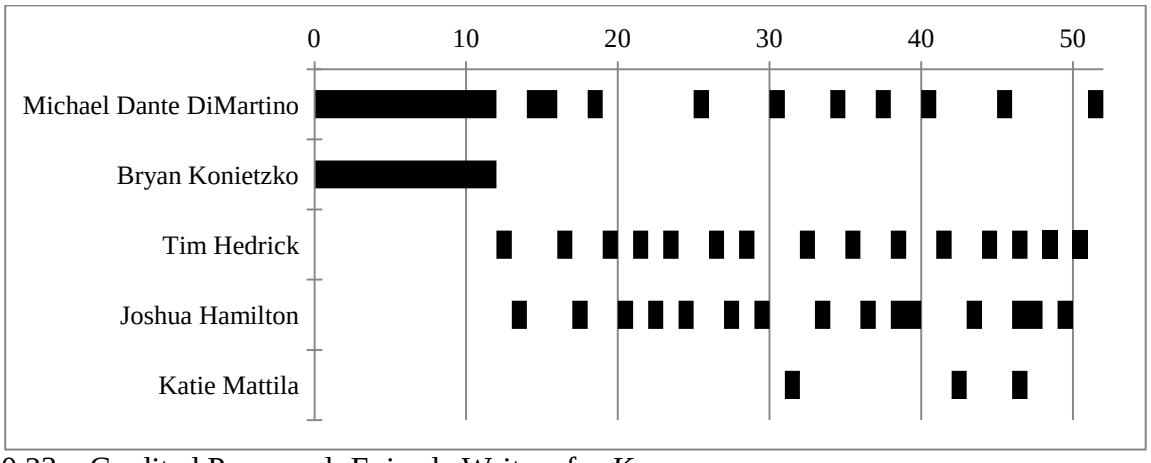
0.20 – Credited Personnel: Art Department 2, Background Design for *Korra*.



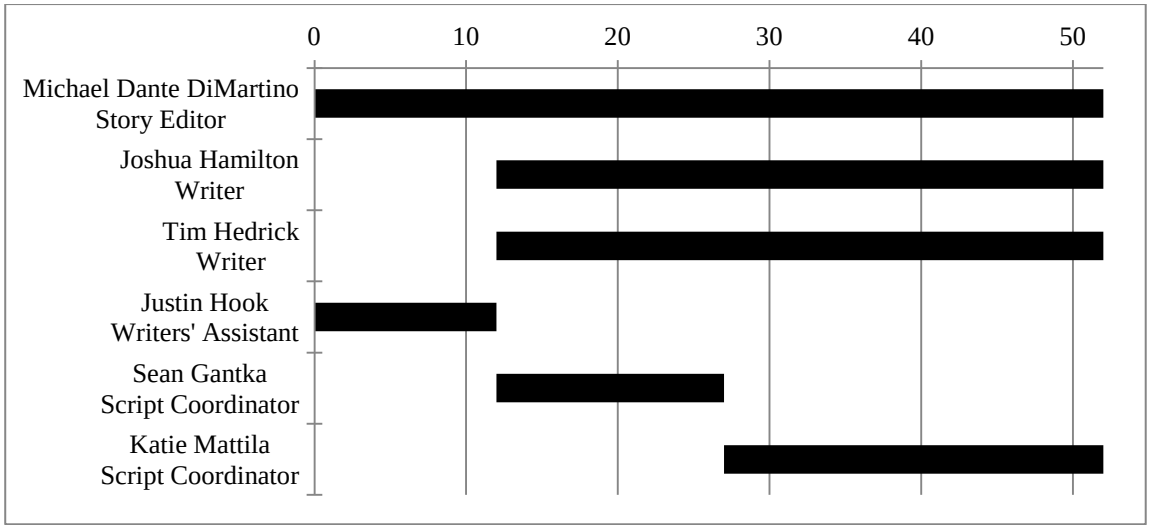
0.21 – Credited Personnel: Art Department 3, Prop Design for *Korra*.



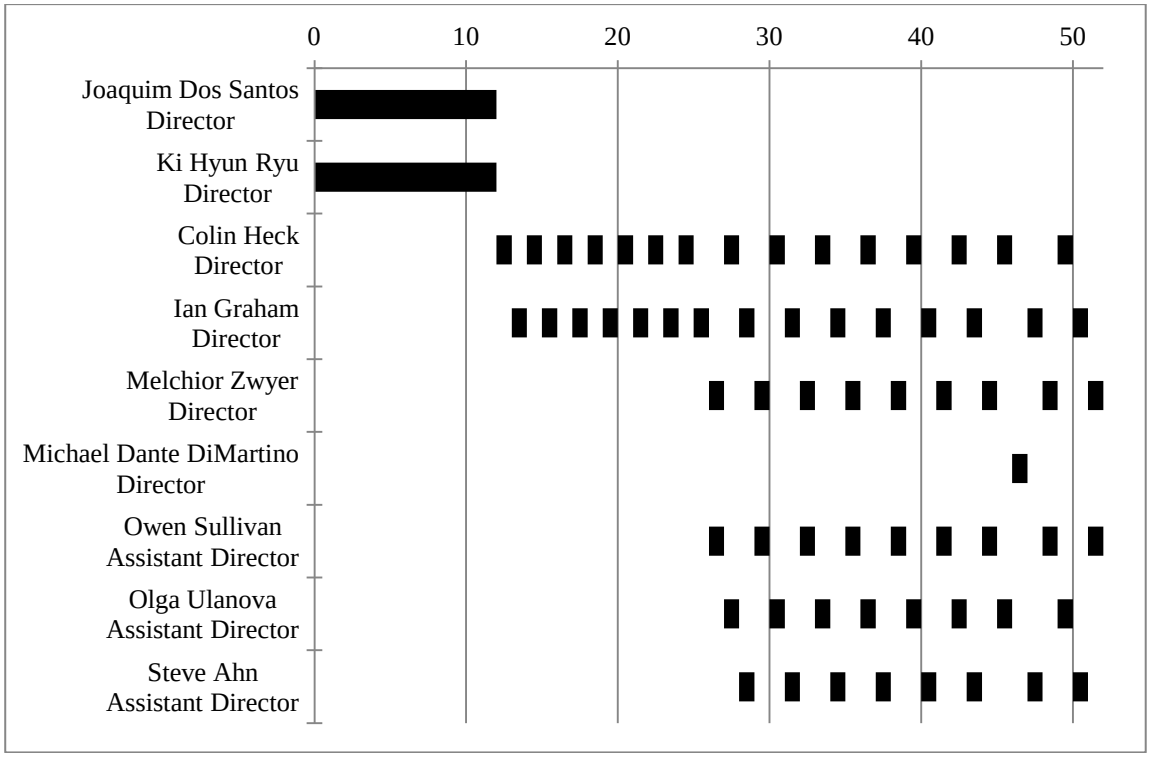
0.22 – Credited Personnel: Art Department 4, Color for *Korra*.



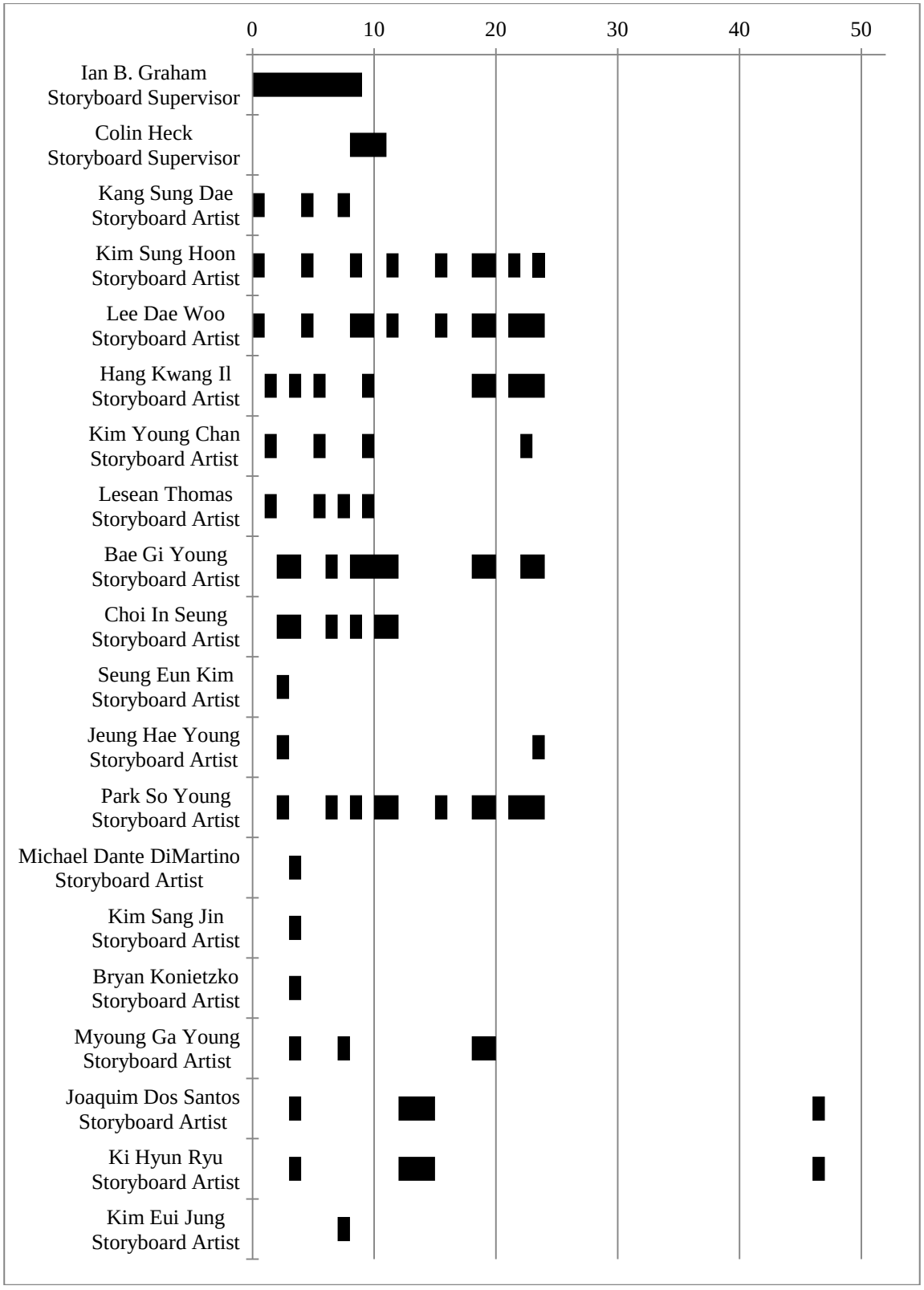
0.23 – Credited Personnel: Episode Writers for *Korra*.



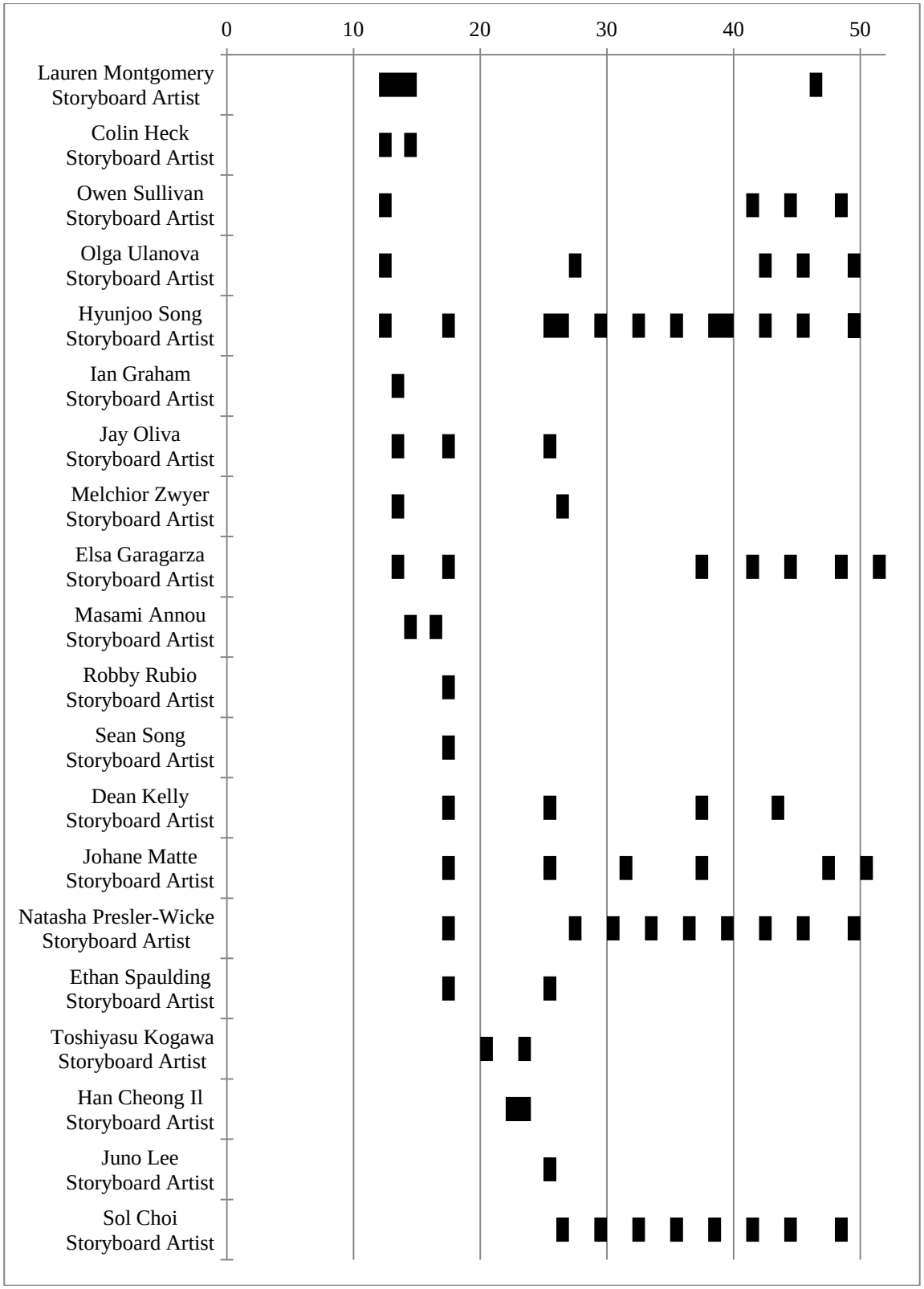
0.24 – Credited Personnel: Writing Department for *Korra*.



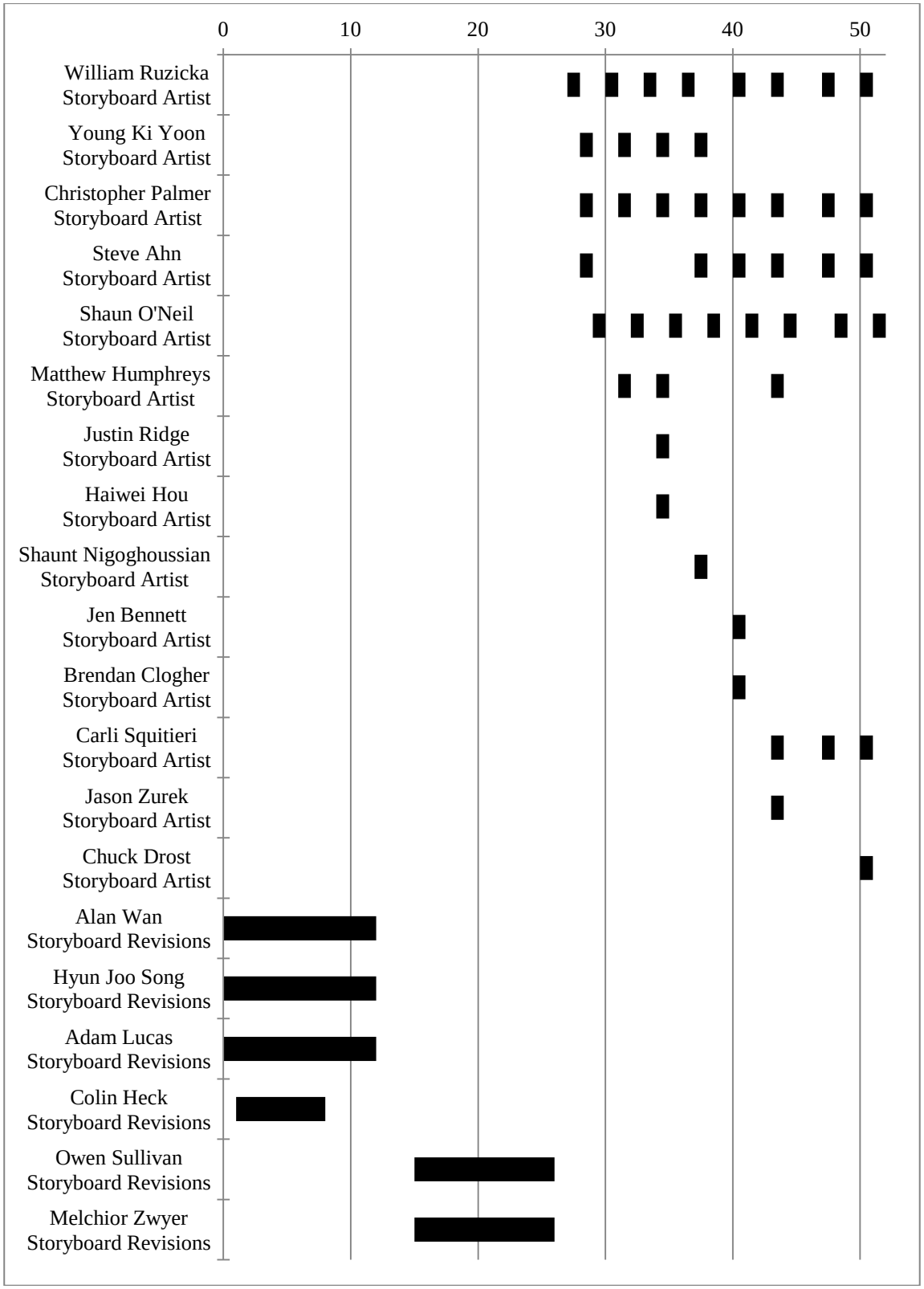
0.25 – Credited Personnel: Directors for *Korra*.



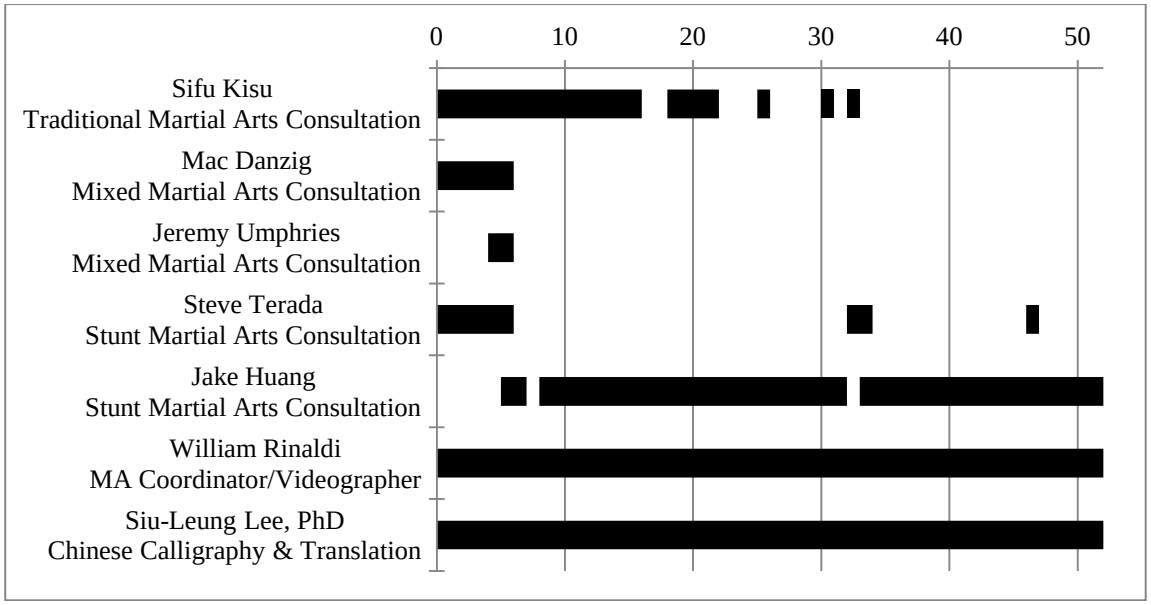
0.26 – Credited Personnel: Storyboards 1 for *Korra*.



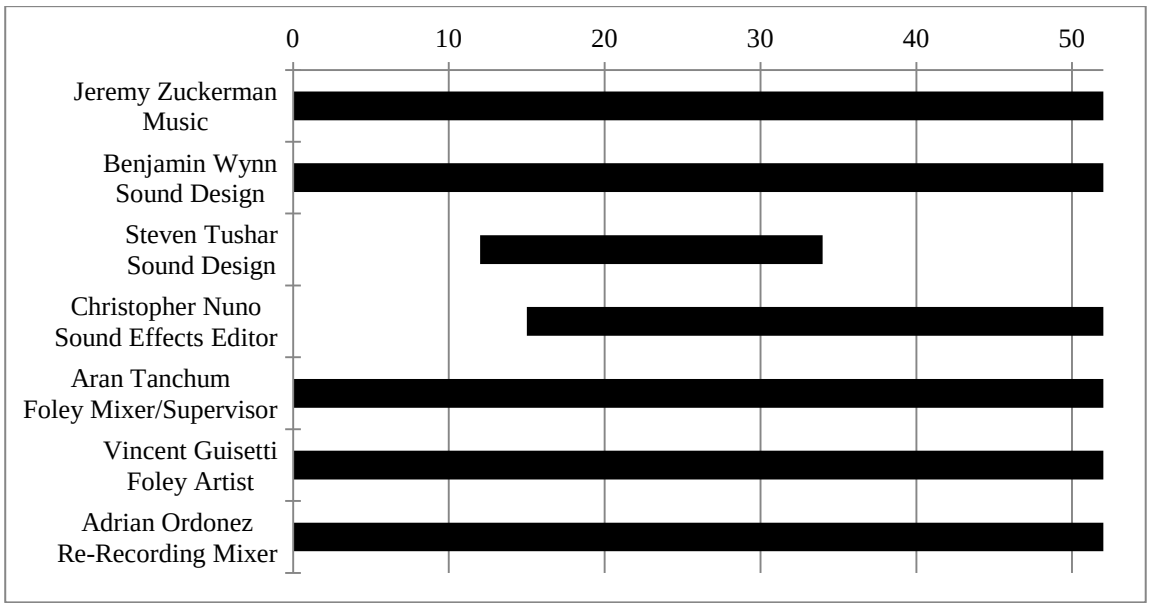
0.27 – Credited Personnel: Storyboards 2 for *Korra*.



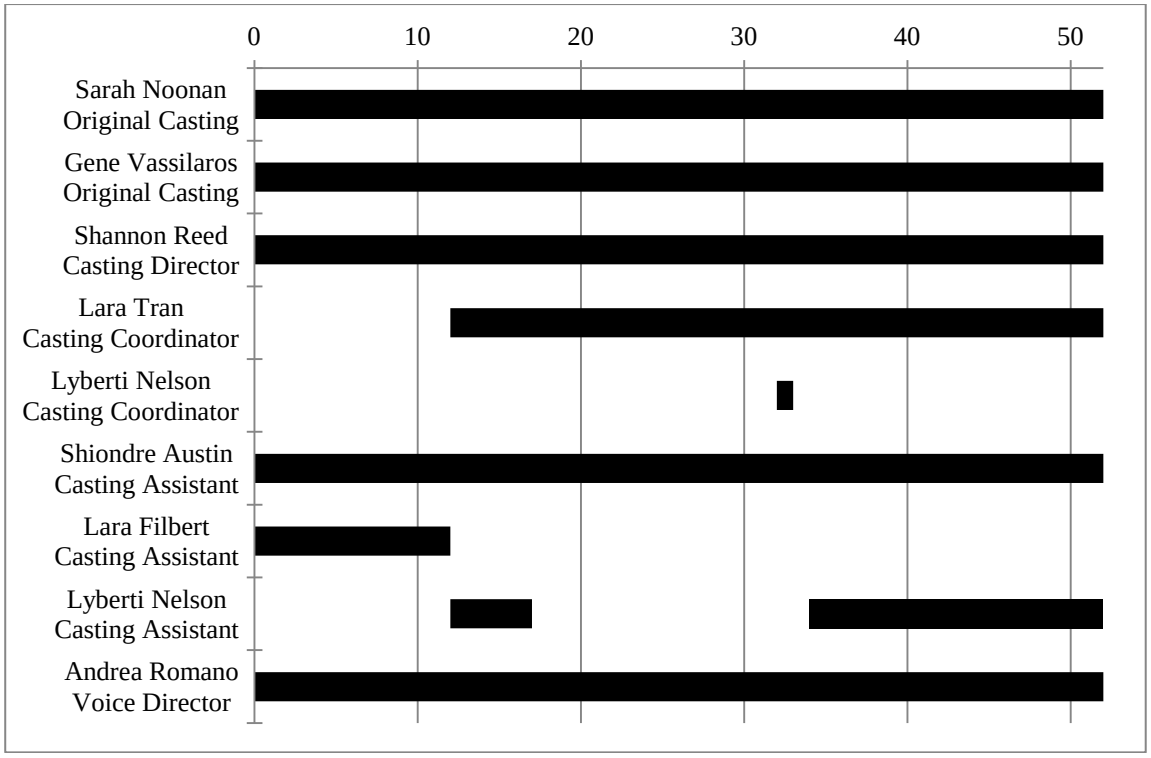
0.28 – Credited Personnel: Storyboards 3 for *Korra*.



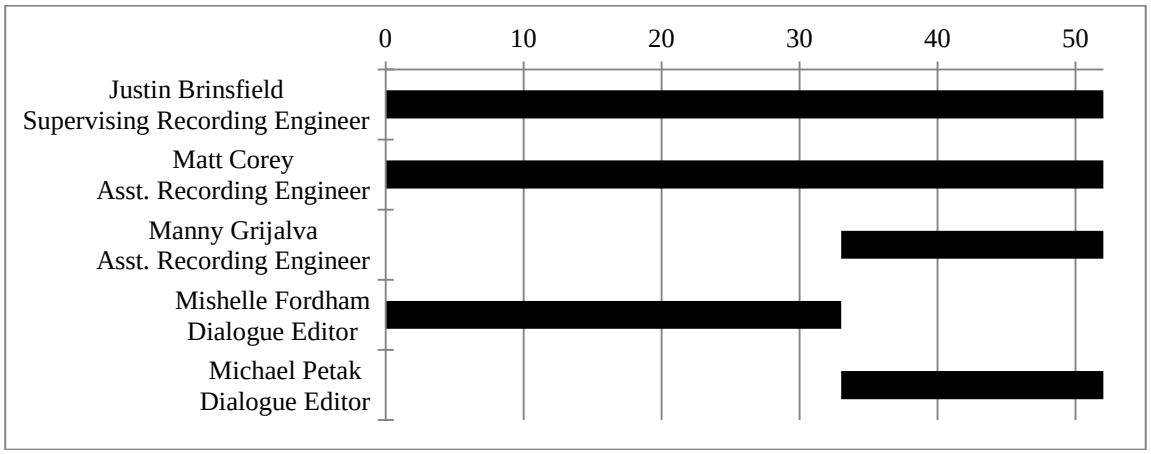
0.29 – Credited Personnel: Consultation for *Korra*.



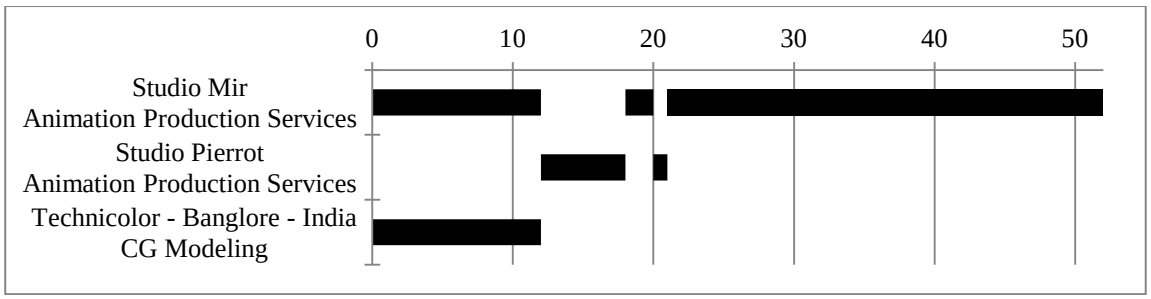
0.30 – Credited Personnel: Music and Sound for *Korra*.



0.31 – Credited Personnel: Casting and Voice Direction for *Korra*.



0.32 – Credited Personnel: Voice Recording and Editing for *Korra*.



0.33 – Credited Personnel: Overseas Studios for *Korra*.

University of East Anglia

Research and Enterprise Services
East Office (Arts Building)

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1603 591574
Email:grec@uea.ac.uk
https://portal.uea.ac.uk/ren/research-integrity

Francis Agnoli
School of Art, Media & American Studies
UEA

Thursday 1 December 2016

Dear Francis,

Our reference: GREC 16-544

I am writing to you on behalf of the University of East Anglia's General Research Ethics Committee, in response to your request for ethical approval for your project 'Animating Race: Seeing and Hearing Race in *Avatar: The Last Airbender and The Legend of Korra* '.

Having considered the information that you have provided in your correspondence I am pleased to confirm that your project has been approved on behalf of the Committee.

You should let us know if there are any significant changes to the proposal which raise any further ethical issues.

Please let us have a brief final report to confirm the research has been completed.

Yours sincerely

pp. Polly Harrison, Secretary
General Research Ethics Committee

0.34 – Individual Project Letter of Approval

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

Study Title (provisional): Animating Race: Seeing and Hearing Race in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*

You have been asked to participate in a research study I am undertaking for my Doctoral Thesis at the School of Film and Television Studies at the University of East Anglia (UEA). The purpose of the study is to explore the visual and aural ascription of race to animated bodies in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate.

- This interview is voluntary. You have the right not to answer any question. You have the right to stop the interview at any time. You have the right to withdraw at any time before the completion of this project. If you do withdraw, any data collected from you (including audio recordings and transcripts) will be destroyed.
- I will record this interview using audio capture software. At any point during the interview, you may ask me to turn off the recording device, and I will do so. Only I will have access to the audio recording. Following completion of this interview, you can be provided with a transcript for your review and consultation.
- The information you provide will not be anonymized. You have the right to retract any statement. I will not release or publish the transcript in full. I will utilize direct quotes and paraphrase in the writing of this project and possible future academic publications (including conference papers, articles, books chapters, and books).
- This project will be completed by August 2019. At your request, you will be provided with a copy of the final research.
- The interview will take about one hour. You will not be compensated for this interview.
- I am solely responsible for the design and conduct of this research. If at any time you feel you have been treated unfairly, or you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, queries may be forwarded to the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC).
- If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at f.agnoli@uea.ac.uk

I understand the procedures described above. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions and these have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

(*Please select all that apply*)
( ) I give consent for this interview to be recorded.
( ) I give consent for the following information to be included in academic publications resulting from this study: ( ) my name ( ) my title ( ) direct quotes from this interview

Name of Subject _____

Signature of Subject _____ Date _____

Signature of Investigator _____Date _____

0.35 – Consent Form.

- Has the potential to Bend all four elements, but has not learned them all yet.
- He would never kill an animal
- He does not eat meat.
- Looking for fun, not responsibility
- Avoids fighting whenever possible.
- Is very loyal to his friends.

- Appa
  - He is a bison who uses Airbending to fly.
  - He grazes from the tops of the trees.
  - He cannot talk – he only bellows.
  - He understands certain commands. Yip-yip means to fly.

- Momo
  - Cannot talk nor act like a human
  - He can be trained.
  - He can fly using his wings.

- Zuko
  - Would do anything for his father's approval.
  - His only focus in life is to capture the Avatar.

Environment:

- This is an ancient, fantastical Asian environment, primarily Chinese. There are no modern things like electricity. However, the Fire Nation is in their industrial revolution. They use steam powered ships, lay tracks to move supplies.
- The Benders powers are influenced by the seasons and other phenomena.
  - An eclipse of the sun weakens the powers of a Firebender

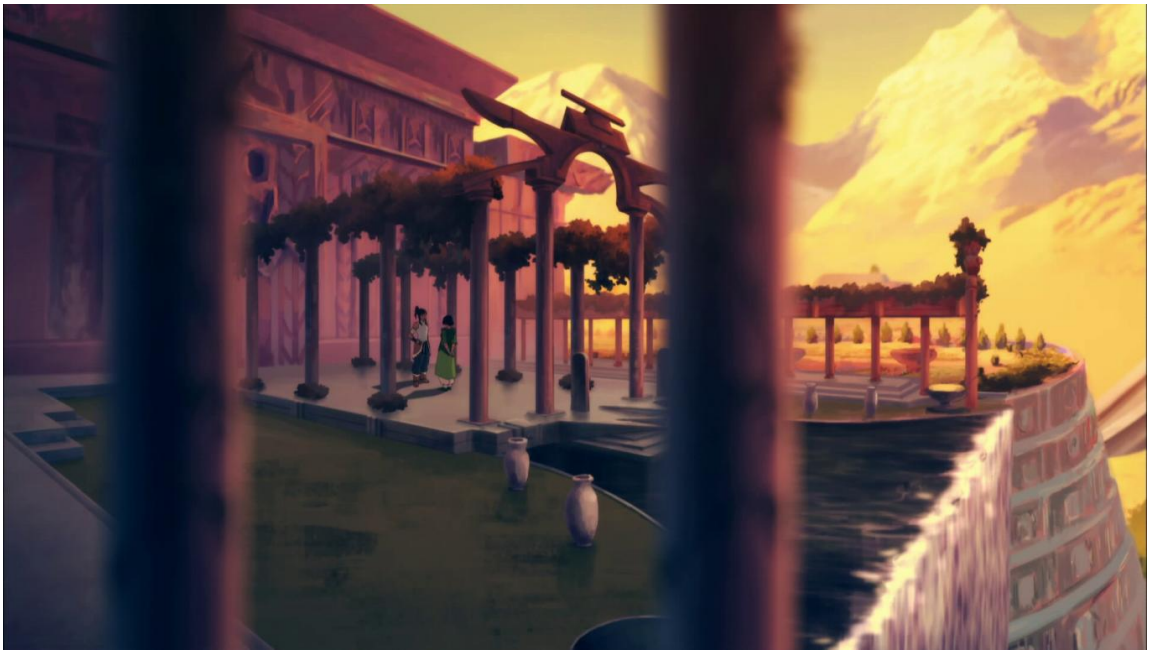
1.01 – Excerpt from alleged *Avatar: The Last Airbender* IP bible. Published on the Racebending livejournal on 1 November 2009.

1.02 – Aang and Zuko approach the Sun Warrior ruins. Still from “The Firebending Masters” (*Avatar* S2E13). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

1.03 – Jinora is inducted as a master Airbender at Air Temple Island. Still from “Venom of the Red Lotus” (*Korra* S3E13). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change* (2014).

1.04 – Aang takes a spiritual journey to the Fire Sage's temple. Still from "The Winter Solstice Part 1: The Spirit World" (*Avatar* S1E07). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

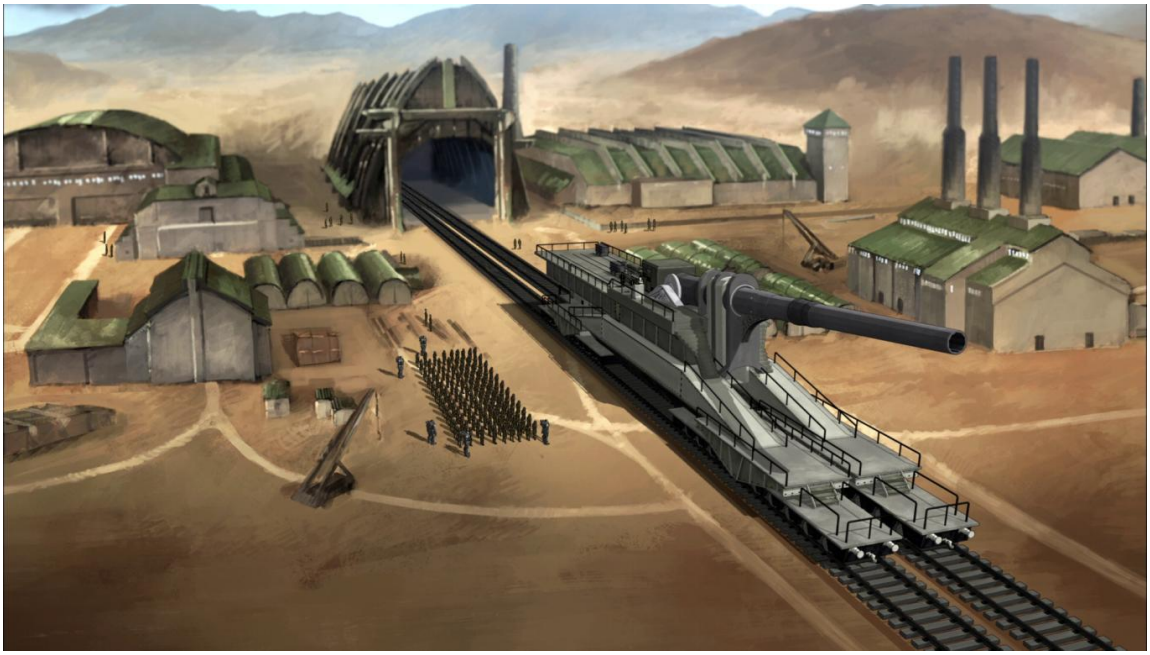
1.05 – A young Zuko sits in on a war council meeting in the Fire Lord's throne room. Still from "The Storm" (*Avatar* S1E12). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).



1.06 – Korra and Opal practice Airbending at the Beifong Estate. Still from “The Metal Clan” (*Korra* S2E05). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change* (2014).

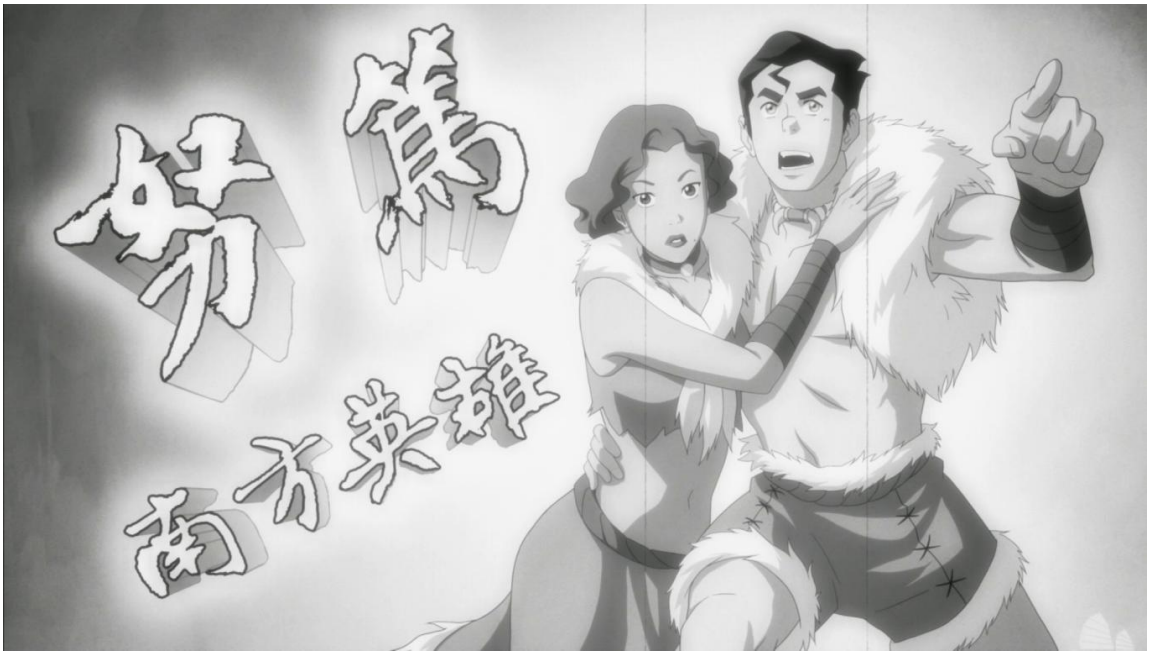
1.07 – One of Piandao’s swords is displayed in a weapons store. Still from “Sokka’s Master” (*Avatar* S3E04). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

1.08 – Sokka holds one of Piandao's sword. Still from "Sokka's Master" (*Avatar* S3E04). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

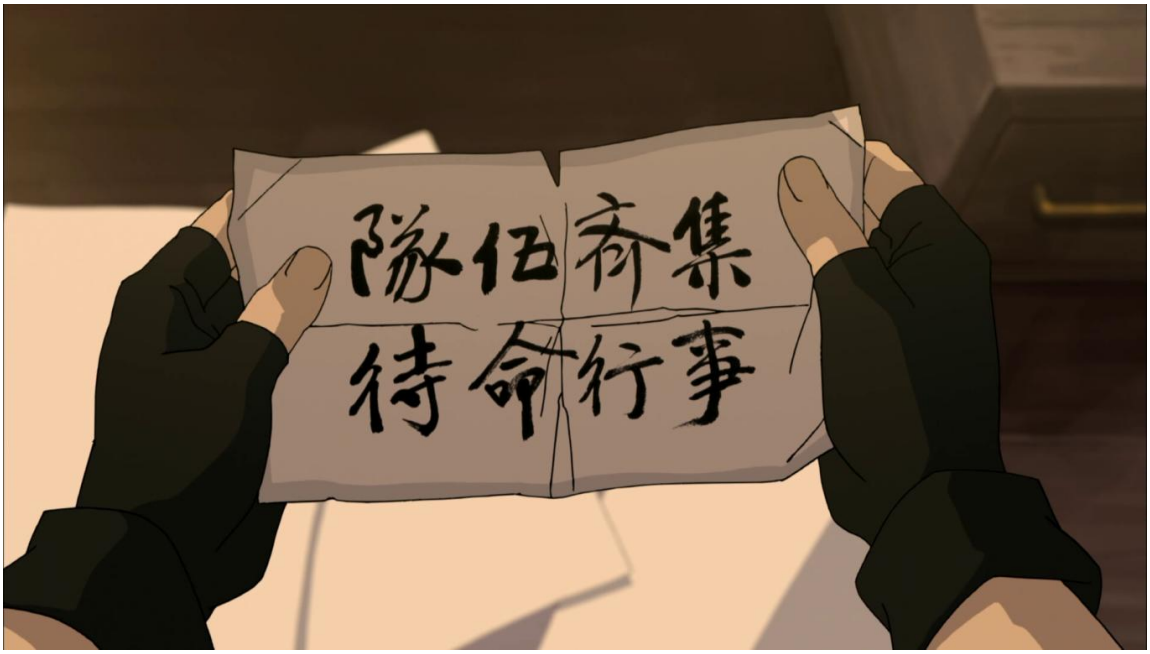


1.09 – The Earth Empire tests their spirit energy cannon. Still from "Operation Beifong" (*Korra* S4E10). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance* (2015).

1.10 – Katara reads “Abandon Hope” graffiti. Still from “The Serpent’s Pass” (*Avatar* S2E12). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).



1.11 – Bolin and Ginger pose on the title card for *Nuktuk: Hero of the South*. Still from “The Sting” (*Korra* S2E06). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits* (2014).



2.01 – Mako holds a note. Still from “The Terror Within” (S3E08). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change* (2014).

3.01 – The Pirate Barker attracts new customers. Still from “The Waterbending Scroll” (*Avatar* S1E09). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

3.02 – The Warden approaches a prisoner. Still from “The Boiling Rock, Part 1” (*Avatar* S3E14). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

3.03 – Aang yells at Joo Dee. Still from “Lake Laogai” (*Avatar* S2E17). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

3.04 – Chan reacts to Azula's flirting. Still from "The Beach" (*Avatar* S3E05). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

3.05 – Ikki does not like being left out. Still from "When Extremes Meet" (*Korra* S1E08). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air* (2012).

3.06 – Tenzin is surprised by Kya's scream. Still from "Darkness Falls" (*Korra* S2E13). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits* (2014).

3.07 – Aang, Katara, and Sokka are prisoners of King Bumi. Still from "The King of Omashu" (*Avatar* S1E05). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

3.08 – Aang, Katara, and Sokka are guests of Chief Arnook. Still from "The Waterbending Master" (*Avatar* S1E18). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

Katara – Local Color
#bd916f

Katara – S1E05
#6a8938

Katara – S2E18
#383c68

3.09 – Katara's skin tones. Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

3.10 –Mako, Korra, and Unalaq look out over the spirit portal. Still from “The Southern Lights” (*Korra* S2E02). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits* (2014).

Korra – Local Color
#a08365

Korra – S2E02
#61aba5

3.11 – Korra’s skin tones. Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits* (2014).

3.12 – Aang blushes. Still from "Original Animatic: Chapter 15 – Uncut." Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits* (2014).

3.13 – Pema fumes. Still from "Scene Bending – Civil Wars: Part 1." Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits* (2014).

3.14 – Bumi, Kya, and Tenzin recognize someone in the Spirit World. Still from "Darkness Falls" (*Korra* S2E13). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits* (2014).

4.01 – Iroh and Zuko prepare to fight Earth Kingdom soldiers. Still from "The Winter Solstice Part 1: The Spirit World" (*Avatar* S1E07). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

4.02 – Iroh exercises in prison. Still from “Sokka’s Master” (*Avatar* S3E04). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

6.01 – Opal and Kai capture a group of bandits. Still from “After All These Years” (*Korra* S4E01). Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance* (2015).

7.01 – Foaming mouth guy foams at the mouth. Still from “The Warrior of Kyoshi” (*Avatar* S1E04). Blu-ray release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Series* (2018).

References

"Aang's Gang." *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2006): 4-5.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 10: The Day of Black Sun, Part 1: The Invasion" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2008.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 12: The Journey to Ba Sing Se, Part 1: The Serpent's Pass" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2007.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 12: The Western Air Temple" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2008.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 14: City of Walls and Secrets" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2007.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 16: The Southern Raiders" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2008.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 17: Lake Laogai" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2007.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 17: The Ember Island Players" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2008.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 18: Sozin's Comet, Part 1: The Phoenix King" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2008.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 18: The Earth King" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2007.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 2: A Leaf in the Wind" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*). Viacom International Inc., 2012.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 20: Sozin's Comet, Part 3: Into the Inferno" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*), Viacom International Inc. (2008).

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 20: The Crossroads of Destiny" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2007.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 3: The Revelation" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*). Viacom International Inc., 2012.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 4: Sokka's Master" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2008.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 4: The Voice in the Night" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*). Viacom International Inc., 2012.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 5: The Beach" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2008.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 5: The Spirit of Competition" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*). Viacom International Inc., 2012.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 6: And the Winner Is..." (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*). Viacom International Inc., 2012.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 6: The Avatar and the Firelord" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 3 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2008.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 8: When Extremes Meet" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*). Viacom International Inc., 2012.

"Audio Commentary – Chapter 9: Out of the Past" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book One: Air*). Viacom International Inc., 2012.

"Audio Commentary – Episode 17: The Northern Air Temple" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Audio Commentary – Episode 18: The Waterbending Master" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Audio Commentary – Episode 19: The Siege of the North – Part 1" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Audio Commentary – Episode 20: The Siege of the North – Part 2" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Avatar Pilot Episode with Audio Commentary" (supplementary material for *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Avatar Spirits" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection (Collector's Edition)*), Viacom International Inc., 2010.

"Behind the Scenes Kung Fu Featurette" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Behind the Scenes The Voices of Avatar Featurette" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Bunch of Hotheads, A." *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2006): 44.

"Commentary on A Breath of Fresh Air" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on A New Spiritual Age" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on After All These Years" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*). Viacom International Inc., 2015.

"Commentary on Battle Zaofu" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*). Viacom International Inc., 2015.

"Commentary on Beginnings: Part 1" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Beginnings: Part 2" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Civil Wars: Part 2" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Enemy at the Gates" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*). Viacom International Inc., 2015.

"Commentary on Enter the Void" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Kuvira's Gambit" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*). Viacom International Inc., 2015.

"Commentary on Light in the Dark" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Long Live the Queen" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Night of a Thousand Stars" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Old Wounds" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Operation: Beifong" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*). Viacom International Inc., 2015.

"Commentary on Original Airbenders" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Rebirth" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on Reunion" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*). Viacom International Inc., 2015.

"Commentary on The Earth Queen" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on The Guide" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on The Metal Clan" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on The Southern Lights" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on The Terror Within" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Commentary on The Ultimatum" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Three: Change*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Debut of Nickelodeon's 'The Legend of Korra' Draws 4.5 Million Viewers." *TVbytheNumbers*, 17 Apr. 2012. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.

"Essence of Bending with Bryan Konietzko and Sifu Kisu, The" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 2 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2007.

"Fire Nation's Most Wanted." *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2006): 48.

"How *Avatar* Gets Its Kicks." *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2006): 42-43.

"In Their Elements." *Nick Mag Presents* (Sep. 2006): 26-27.

"Inside the Book of Spirits" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"KorraScope Interviews Jeremy Zuckerman." *YumChunks*, 21 Apr. 2014. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

"Legend of Korra, The: 2014 Comic-Con Panel Featurette" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Four: Balance*). Viacom International Inc., 2015.

"Making of Avatar, The – Inside the Korean Studios" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Making of Avatar, The – Inside the Sound Studios" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*), Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Nickelodeon Is Top Basic Cable Network in 3Q, Scores 54 Straight Quarters at Number One; Nickelodeon's Kids and Family Portfolio Posts Solid Gains for the Quarter." *PR Newswire*, 1 Oct. 2008. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.

"Nickelodeon: The Last Airbender: Legend of Korra Martial Arts Reference Demo – Fusion Comics." *Vimeo*, 9 Aug. 2011. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.

"Original Animatic: Chapter 15 – Uncut" (supplementary material on DVD release of *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Complete Book 1 Collection*). Viacom International Inc., 2006.

"Port Wine Stain (PWS)." *The Vascular Birthmarks Foundation*, n.d. Accessed 4 Mar. 2019.

"Republic City Dispatch #29: Sound of Book 2 w/ Jeremy Zuckerman and Benjamin Wynn." *Republic City Dispatch*, 3 Feb. 2014. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

"Republic City Dispatch #51: Audio Bending with Jeremy Zuckerman and Benjamin Wynn." *Republic City Dispatch*, 19 Jan. 2015. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

"Scene Bending – Civil Wars: Part 1" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Spirit of an Episode, The: A Breath of Fresh Air" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Spirit of an Episode, The: Original Airbenders" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Spirit of an Episode, The: Rebirth" (supplementary material on Blu-ray release of *The Legend of Korra – Book Two: Spirits*). Viacom International Inc., 2014.

"Voicebending." *Nickelodeon Magazine* (Feb. 2007): 44.

Acastus. "Interview with Crawford Wilson (part 1 of 2)." *AvatarSpirit.net*, 15 Nov. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. "Interview with Director Giancarlo Volpe (part 1 of 3)." *AvatarSpirit.net*, 16 Jun. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. "Interview with Director Giancarlo Volpe (part 3 of 3)." *AvatarSpirit.net*, 1 Jul. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. "Interview with Jessie Flower (part 1 or 2)." *AvatarSpirit.net*, 22 Dec. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. "Interview with Joanna Braddy (part 1 of 2)." *AvatarSpirit.net*, 30 Nov. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. "Interview with Sifu Kisu (part 1 of 3)." *AvatarSpirit.net*, 5 Oct. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. "Interview with Sifu Kisu (part 2 of 3)." *AvatarSpirit.net*, 12 Oct. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. “Interview with Voice Director Andrea Romano (part 1 of 3).” *AvatarSpirit.net*, 12 May 2007. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. “Music Interview with the Track Team (part 1 of 3).” *AvatarSpirit.net*, 26 Jul. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. “Music Interview with the Track Team (part 2 of 3).” *AvatarSpirit.net*, 5 Aug. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. “Music Interview with the Track Team (part 3 of 3).” *AvatarSpirit.net*, 12 Aug. 2006. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Acevedo, William, and Mei Cheung. “A Historical Overview of Mixed Martial Arts in China.” *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 19.3 (2010): 31-45.

Acland, Charles R. *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Aihara, Koji, and Kentaro Takekuma. *Even A Monkey Can Draw Manga Vol. 1*. Trans. Yuji Oniki. San Francisco, CA: Viz Communications, Inc., 2002.

Alff, John. “Art Deco: Gateway to Indian Modernism.” *Architecture + Design* 8.6 (1991): 57-63.

Allesandra, Pilar. “526: The Adventures of Katie Mattila.” *On The Page*, 6 Oct. 2017.

Allison, Tanine. “Blackface, *Happy Feet*: The Politics of Race in Motion Capture and Animation.” *Special Effects: New Histories/Theories/Contexts*. Eds. Dan North, Bob Rehak, and Michael S. Duffy. London: Palgrave, 2015. 114-26.

Allport, Gordon. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1954.

Altman, Rick. “Introduction: Four and a Half Film Fallacies.” *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*. Ed. Rick Altman. New York: Routledge, 1992. 35-45.

---. “The Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound.” *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*. Ed. Rick Altman. New York: Routledge, 1992. 14-31.

---. “Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism.” *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 67-79.

Ament, Vanessa Theme. *The Foley Grail: The Art of Performing Sound for Film, Games, and Animation*. 2nd ed. New York: Focal Press, 2014.

Anan, Nobuko. “Narita Minako’s *Alien Street*: Performance in two-dimensional manga space.” Adaptation, or How Media Relate in Contemporary Japan, 7-8 June 2018, Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, Norwich, UK.

Ancil, Brandon. “Did the ‘Airbender’ adaptation ever have a chance?” *CNN*, 1 Jul. 2010.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006.

Andreasen, Robin O. "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?" *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): S653-S66.

Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory Culture Society* 7 (1990): 295-310.

Aranjuez, Adolfo. "'The Legend of Korra' and Minority Representation." *Screen Education* 78 (2015): 24-27.

Arnheim, Rudolf. *Film as Art*. London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1958.

Atkins, E. Taylor. *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

Austin, Thomas. *Hollywood Hype and Audience: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1980s*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002.

Bae, Yoo-Soo Cindy, Elise Ng, and Roy G. Geronemus. "Successful Treatment of Two Pediatric Port Wine Stains in Darker Skin Type Using 595 nm Laser." *Lasers in Surgery and Medicine: The Official Journal of the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery* 48.4 (2016): 339-42.

Baek Byung-yeul. "'Drawing animation is our DNA.'" *The Korean Times*, 8 May 2015. Accessed 30 Jul. 2018.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

Banks, Miranda J. *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

Banks, Miranda, Bridget Conor, and Vicki Mayer, editors. *Production Studies, the Sequel! Cultural Studies of Global Media Industries*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Banton, Michael, and Jonathan Harwood, *The Race Concept*. Newton Abbot, UK: David & Charles, 1975.

Barkan, Elazar. *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Barker, Martin. "Introduction." *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*. Eds. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker. London: Arnold, 2003. 1-24.

Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.

Batkin, Jane. *Identity in Animation: A Journey into Self, Difference, Culture, and the Body*. London: Routledge, 2017.

Baudry, Jean-Louis. "The Apparatus." *Camera Obscura* 1 (1976): 104-26.

Bazin, André. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." Trans. Hugh Gray. *Film Quarterly* 13.4 (1960): 4-9.

Bendazzi, Giannalberto. *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*. Trans. Anna Taraboletti-Segre. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Bennett, Tony, and Janet Woollacott. *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*. Basingstoke, UK: MacMillan Education, LTD, 1987.

Berliner, Paul. *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Bevilacqua, Joe. "Celebrity Voice Actors: The New Sound of Animation." *Animation World Magazine* 4.1 (1999).

Bhaba, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalences of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28 (1984): 125-133.

Bignell, Jonathan. *An Introduction to Television Studies*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2013.

Bishop, Stacy Howard, Paul La Bounty, and Michael Devlin. "Mixed Martial Arts: A Comprehensive Review." *Journal of Sport and Human Performance* 1.1 (2013): 28-42.

Bivins, Roberta A. *Acupuncture, Expertise and Cross-Cultural Medicine*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2000.

Blacker, Ben. "Episode 154: Legend of Korra/Avatar: The Last Airbender." *Nerdist Writers Panel*, 19 Aug. 2014. Accessed 10 Sep. 2018.

Blackmon, Samantha. "Pickanninnies and Pixels: On Race, Racism and Cuphead at E3." *NYMG*, 17 Jun. 2015. Accessed 25 Apr. 2019.

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, Updated and Expanded Fifth Edition*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Booker, M. Keith. *Drawn to Television: Prime-Time Animation from the Flintstones to Family Guy*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006.

Boucher, Cheryl J., et al. “Perceptions of Competency as a Function of Accent.” *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research* 18.1 (2013): 27-32.

Brace, C. Loring. *“Race” Is a Four-Letter Word: The Genesis of the Concept*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Branigan, Edward. “Sound and Epistemology in Film.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47.4 (1989): 311-24.

Breeze, Carla. *American Art Deco: Architecture and Regionalism*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Brennan, Mike. “The Music of Avatar: the Last Airbender.” *Soundtrack*, 7 Apr. 2008. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

Brookey, Robert Alan, and Robert Westerfelhaus. “The Digital Auteur: Branding Identity on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD.” *Western Journal of Communication* 69.2 (2005): 109-28.

Bruno, Giuliana. “Spectatorial Embodiments: Anatomies of the Visible and the Female Bodyscape.” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 10.1 (28) (1992): 238-61.

Brunsdon, Charlotte. “What is the ‘Television’ in Television Studies.” *The Television Studies Book*. Eds. Christine Geraghty and David Lusted. London: Arnold, 1997. 95-113.

Buchan, Suzanne. “Animation, in Theory.” *Animating Film Theory*. Ed. Karen Beckman. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. 111-27.

Burns, Gary, and Robert J. Thompson. “Introduction.” *Television Studies: Textual Analysis*. Eds. Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson. New York: Praeger, 1989. 1-6.

Burns, Gary, and Robert J. Thompson, editors. *Television Studies: Textual Analysis*. New York: Praeger, 1989.

Caldwell, John T. “‘Both Sides of the Fence’: Blurred Distinctions in Scholarship and Production (a Portfolio of Interviews).” *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. Eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell. New York: Routledge, 2009. 214-29.

---. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

Campbell, Donald T. “Stereotypes and the Perception of Group Difference.” *American Psychologist* 22.10 (1967): 817-29.

Case, Sarah. *The Integrated Voice: A Complete Voice Course for Actors*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2013.

Chaney, Michael A. "Coloring Whiteness and Blackvoice Minstrelsy: Representations of Race and Place in *Static Shock*, *King of the Hill*, and *South Park*." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31.4 (2004): 167-84.

Chang, Christina. "Las Vegas musician helping preserve Chinese folk music, instruments." *Las Vegas Sun*, 12 Aug. 2012. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

Chang, Hsiao-hung. "The Unbearable Lightness of Globalization: On the Transnational Flight of *Wuxia* Film." *Cinema Taiwan: Politics, Popularity and State of the Arts*. Eds. Darrell William Davis and Ru-Shou Robert Chen. London: Routledge, 2007. 95-107.

Chen, Kuan-Hsing. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Childester, Phil. "'Respect My Authori-tah': *South Park* and the Fragmentation/Reification of Whiteness." *Critical Studies in Media Communications* 29.5 (2012): 403-20.

Ching, Gene. "Kisu on The Legend of Korra." *Kung Fu Magazine*, n.d. Accessed 30 Jul. 2018.

Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

---. *The Voice in Cinema*. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Ciecko, Anne Tereska. "Introduction to Poplar Asian Cinema." *Contemporary Asian Cinema*. Ed. Anne Tereska Ciecko. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2006. 1-11.

Ciecko, Anne Tereska, editor. *Contemporary Asian Cinema*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2006.

Clements, Jonathan. *Anime: A History*. Basingstoke, NH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Clevé, Bastian. *Film Production Management: How to Budget, Organize, and Successfully Shoot Your Film*. 4th ed. New York: Focal Press, 2017.

Cole, Yussef. "Cuphead and the Racist Spectre of Fleischer Animation." *Unwinnable*, 10 Nov. 2017. Accessed 25 Apr. 2019.

Condry, Ian. *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

Conway, Cecilia. *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995.

Cornah, Joel. “Jeremy Zuckerman Interview.” *Sci Fi Fantasy Network*, 16 Jan. 2016. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

Corner, John. *Critical Ideas in Television Studies*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1999.

Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013.

Curran, Brad. “Interview with Sifu Kisu.” *Kung-Fu Kingdom*, 6 Oct. 2015. Accessed 30 Jul. 2017.

Daliot-Bul, Michal, and Nissim Otmazgin. *The Anime Boom in the United States: Lessons for Global Creative Industries*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Dankiewicz, Tom. Email interview. 19 Feb. 2018.

Darley, Andrew. “Bones of Contention: Thoughts on the Study of Animation.” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2.1 (2007): 63-76.

Davé, Shilpa. “Apu’s Brown Voice: Cultural Inflection and South Asian Accents.” *East Main Street: Asian Popular Culture*. Eds. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren. New York: New York University Press, 2005: 313-36.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. London: Athlone, 1986.

Denison, Rayna. *Anime: A Critical Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

---. “The Global Markets of *Anime*; Miyazaki Hayao’s *Spirited Away* (2001).” *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*. Eds. Alastair Phillips and Julian Stringer. London: Routledge, 2007.

---. “Star-Spangled Ghibli: Star Voices in the American Versions of Hayao Miyazaki’s Films.” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3.2 (2008): 129-46.

---. “Transcultural Creativity in Anime: Hybrid Identities in the Production, Distribution, Texts and Fandom of Japanese Anime.” *Creative Industries Journal* 3.3 (2011): 221-35.

Denzin, Norman K. *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence*. London: SAGE, 2001.

Desmond, Matthew, and Mustafa Emirbayer, *Race in America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006.

---. “What Is Racial Domination?” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 6.2 (2009): 335-55.

Deuze, Mark, and Mirjam Prenger, editors. *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019.

DiMartino, Michael Dante, and Bryan Konietzko. *Avatar: The Last Airbender – The Art of the Animated Series*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2010.

DiMartino, Michael Dante, Bryan Konietzko, and Joaquim Dos Santos. *The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series – Book Four: Balance*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2015.

---. *The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series – Book One: Air*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2013.

---. *The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series – Book Two: Spirits*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2014.

---. *The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series – Book Three: Change*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2015.

Dismond, Geraldyn. "The Negro Actor and the American Movies." *Close up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*. Eds. James Donald, Anne Friedberg and Laura Marcus. London: Cassell, 1998. 73-76.

Dixon, John A., Berenice Mahoney, and Roger Cocks. "Accents of Guilt? Effects of Regional Accent, Race, and Crime Type on Attributions of Guilt." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 21.2 (2002): 162-68.

Doane, Mary Ann. "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space." *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 33-50.

Dobson, Nichola. *Historical Dictionary of Animation and Cartoons*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009.

Du, Daisy Yan. *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s-1970s*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2019.

Duncan, Alastair. *Art Deco*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988.

Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2004.

---. *White*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, The. "Acupuncture." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 20 Aug. 2018. Accessed 4 Mar. 2019.

---. "Art Deco." *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 25 Oct. 2018. Accessed 20 Feb. 2019.

---. “Chakra.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 4 Sep. 2018. Accessed 4 Mar. 2019.

---. “Qi.” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 10 Aug. 2018. Accessed 4 Mar. 2019.

Ehasz, Aaron. Google Hangout interview. 10 May 2018.

Eisenstein, Sergei. *Eisenstein on Disney*. Ed. Jay Leyda. Trans. Alan Upchurch. London: Methuen, 1988.

Eleftheriotis, Dimitris. “Introduction.” *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide*. Eds. Dimitris Eletheriotis and Gary Needham. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. 1-4.

Eleftheriotis, Dimitris, and Gary Needham, editors. *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Elliott, Bridget. “Art Deco in a Tomb: Reanimating Egypt in Modern(ist) Visual Culture.” *South Central Review* 25.1 (2008): 114-35.

Ely, Melvin Patrick. *The Adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1991.

Epstein, Dena J. “The Folk Banjo: A Documentary History.” *Ethnomusicology* 19.3 (1975): 347-71.

Estrada, Gabriel S. (Nahuatl). “*Star Wars* Episodes I-VI: Coyote and the Force of White Narrative.” *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. London: Routledge, 2008. 69-90.

Farley, Christopher John. “The Legend of Korra Creators Answer Your Questions.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 Jun. 2012. Accessed 20 Mar. 2019.

Farrer, D.S. “Becoming-animal in the Chinese Martial Arts.” *Living Beings: Perspectives on Interspecies Engagements*. Ed. Penelope Dransart. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 145-65.

---. “Coffee-Shop Gods: Chinese Martial Arts of the Singapore Diaspora.” *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*. Eds. D.S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011. 203-37.

Farrer, D.S., and John Whalen-Bridge, editors, *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011);

Fisher, “In Search of the ‘Inauthentic’: Disturbing Signs in Contemporary Native American Art.” *Art Journal* 51.3 (1992): 44-50.

Fiske, John. *Television Culture*. London: Methuen, 1987.

Flynn, Joyce. “Melting Plots: Patterns of Racial and Ethnic Amalgamation in American Drama before Eugene O'Neill.” *American Quarterly* 38.3 (1986): 417-38.

Fowkes, Katherine A. *The Fantasy Film*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Fuller, Karla Rae. “Creatures of Good and Evil: Caucasian Portrayals of the Chinese and Japanese During World War II.” *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. 281-300.

Furniss, Maureen. *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*. Rev. ed. Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey, 2007.

Fuster Burguera, Xavier. “Muffled Voices in Animation. Gender Roles and Black Stereotypes in Warner Bros. Cartoons: From Honey to Babs Bunny.” *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov* 4.2 (2011): 65-76.

Galletta, Anne. *Mastering the Semi-Structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publications*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

Garagarza, Elsa. Email interview. 7 Mar. 2018.

---. Email interview. 6 Apr. 2018.

García, Raúl Sánchez, and Dominic Malcolm. “Decivilizing, Civilizing, or Informalizing? The International Development of Mixed Martial Arts.” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45.1 (2010): 39-58.

Gardner, Jared. “Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Works of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Kirk Kim.” *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*. Ed. Frederick Luis Aldama. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010. 132-47.

Geller, Pamela L. “Bodyscapes, Biology, and Heteronormativity.” *American Anthropologist* 111.4 (2009): 504-16.

Geraghty, Christine, and David Lusted, editors. *The Television Studies Book*. London: Arnold, 1997.

Giddins, Gary, and Scott DeVeaux. *Jazz*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009.

Gioia, Ted. *The History of Jazz*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Goldman, Eric. “IGN Interview: Jason Isaacs.” *IGN*, 15 Feb. 2007. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Goldmark, Daniel. *Tunes for ‘Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005.

Gombrich, E.H. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Gorbman, Claudia. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Granshaw, Lisa. "An Oral History of Avatar: The Last Airbender: Cast Looks Back As Show Celebrates 10th Anniversary of Finale." *SYFY Wire*, 30 Jul. 2018. Accessed 1 Apr. 2019.

Graves, Joseph L. *The Emperor's New Clothes: Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

Grimes, John A. *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy: Sanskrit Term Defined in English*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Halfyard, Janet K. "Introduction: Finding Fantasy." *The Music of Fantasy Cinema*. Ed. Janet K. Halfyard. Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2012. 1-15.

Hall, Stuart. "Introduction." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: SAGE, 1997. 1-11.

---. "The Spectacle of the 'Other.'" *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: SAGE, 1997. 223-90.

---. "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media." *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties*. Eds. George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981. 28-52.

Hardwick, Chris. "Episode 621: Andrea Romano." *Nerdist Podcast*, 7 Jan. 2015. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Hardy, Sarah Madsen, and Kelly Thomas. "Listening to Race: Voice, Mixing, and Technological 'Miscegenation' in Early Sound Film." *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. 415-41.

Harris, Michael D. *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Hedrick, Tim. Email interview. 21 Sep. 2018.

---. Email interview. 24 Sep. 2018.

Hendershot, Heather. "Introduction: Nickelodeon and the Business of Fun." *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for*

Kids. Ed. Heather Hendershot. New York: New York University Press, 2004. 1-12.

Hesmondhalgh, David. *The Cultural Industries*. 3rd ed. London: SAGE, 2013.

Hesmondhalgh, David, and Sarah Baker. *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*. London: Routledge, 2011.

Higson, Andrew. "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema." *Cinema and Nation*. Eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie. London: Routledge, 2000. 63-74.

Hillier, Bevis. *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*. London: Studio Vista, 1968.

Hillier, Bevis, and Stephen Escritt. *Art Deco Style*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1997.

Hilmes, Michelle. "Invisible Men: *Amos 'n' Andy* and the Roots of Broadcast Discourse." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 10.4 (1993): 301-21.

Ho Wai Sun, et al. "Laser Treatment on Congenital Facial Port-Win Stains: Long-Term Efficacy and Complication in Chinese Patients." *Lasers in Surgery and Medicine: The Official Journal of the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery* 30.1 (2002): 44-47.

Holliday, Christopher. *The Computer-Animated Film: Industry, Style and Genre*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

Holliday, Christopher, and Alexander Sergeant. "Introduction: Approaching Fantasy/Animation." *Fantasy/Animation: Connections Between Media, Mediums and Genres*. Eds. Christopher Holliday and Alexander Sergeant. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Hollywood, Denise Martino. "Nick Sticks with 'Avatar' for 3rd Season." *Daily Variety* 293.57 (21 Jun. 2006). 8. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.

Holt, Jennifer, and Alisa Perren, editors. *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Honess Roe, Annabelle. *Animated Documentary*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Hu, Tze-Yue G. *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-Building*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

Huang, Jake. Google Hangouts interview. 31 Oct. 2018.

Hume, Kathryn. *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*. New York: Methuen, 1984.

Hunt, Leon. *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger*. London: Wallflower Press, 2003.

Irwin, W.R. *Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977.

Isola, Ashley. "Yellowface, the Yellow Peril, and the Rise of the Kung Fu Master." *TCNJ Journal of Student Scholarship* XCII (2015): 1-4.

Iwabuchi, Koichi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

Iwabuchi, Koichi, Stephen Muecke, and Mandy Thomas. "Introduction: Siting Asian Cultural Flows." *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic*. Eds. Koichi Iwabuchi, Stephen Muecke, and Mandy Thomas. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004. 1-10.

Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Routledge, 1981.

Janghorban, Roksana, Robab Latifnejad Roudsari, and Ali Taghipour. "Skype Interviewing: The New Generation of Online Synchronous Interview in Qualitative Research." *International Journal of Qualitative Research in Studies on Health and Well-Being* 9 (2014): 1-3.

Jin Jie. *Chinese Music*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Johari, Harish. *Chakras: Energy Centers of Transformation*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2000.

Johnson, William. "The Liberation of Echo: A New Hearing for Film Sound." *Film Quarterly* 38.4 (1985): 2-12.

Kachru, Braj B. "World Englishes: Agony and Ecstasy." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 30.2 (1996): 135-55.

Kachru, Braj B., editor. *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982.

Kajikawa, Loren. "The Sound of Struggle: Black Revolutionary Nationalism and Asian American Jazz." *Jazz/Not Jazz*. Eds. Daniel Goldmark, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and David Andrew Ake. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012. 190-216.

Kawashima, Terry. "Seeing Faces, Making Races: Challenging Visual Tropes of Racial Difference." *Meridians* 3.1 (2002): 161-90.

Kennedy, Brian, and Elizabeth Guo. *Chinese Martial Arts Training Manuals: A Historical Survey*. Berkeley, CA: Blue Snake Books, 2005.

Kepler, Adam W. "New Animated Series Makes Inroads in Ratings." *The New York Times*, 14. Sep. 2012.

Keppy, Peter. “Southeast Asia in the Age of Jazz: Locating Popular Culture in the Colonial Philippines and Indonesia.” *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 44.3 (2013): 444-64.

Keys, Jobia. “Doc McStuffins and Dora the Explorer: Representations of Gender, Race, and Class in US Animation.” *Journal of Children and Media* 10.3 (2016): 355-68.

Kim, Jeesun, and Chris Davis. “Knowing What to Look For: Voice Affects Face Race Judgements.” *Visual Cognition* 18.7 (2010): 1017-33.

Kim, Joon Yang. “Animated Interracial Romantic Fantasies: Japanese Male and Non-Japanese Female Characters.” *Japanese Animation: East Asian Perspectives*. Eds. Masao Yokota and Tze-Yue G. Hu. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013: 223-41.

---. “Critique of the New Historical Landscape of South Korean Animation.” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1.1 (2006): 61-81.

Kim Soyoung. “Genre as Contact Zone: Hong Kong Action and Korean *Hwalkuk*.” *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*. Eds. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 97-110.

Kim, Sue. “Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in The Lord of the Rings Films.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.4 (2004): 875-907.

King, Richard C., Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo. “Animated Representations of Blackness.” *Journal of African American Studies* 14.4 (2010): 395-97.

King, Richard C., Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo, and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, editors. Animated Representations of Blackness [Special Issue]. *Journal of African American Studies* 14.4 (2010).

Klein, Hugh, and Kenneth S. Shiffman. “Race-Related Content of Animated Cartoons.” *The Howard Journal o Communication* 17 (2006): 163-82.

Konietzko, Bryan. *Tumblr*, 28 Jun. 2013. Accessed 18 Apr. 2018.

---. *Tumblr*, 2 Jul. 2013. Accessed 18 Apr. 2018.

---. “Korra Crew Profile: Sylvia Filcak-Blackwolf.” *Tumblr*, 31 Jul. 2013. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

KORRA NATION. “Book 3 Moving to Digital Release!” *Tumblr*, 24 Jul. 2014. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.

Kotlarz, Irene. “The Birth of a Notion.” *Screen* 24.2 (1982): 21-29.

Kushins, Eric R. “Sounding Like Your Race in the Employment Process: An Experiment on Speaker Voice, Race Identification, and Stereotyping.”*Race and Social Problems* 6.3 (2014): 237-48.

Kraidy, Marwan. *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006.

Lafayette, Jon. “Nick Continues Saturday Streak; Cable Net Rules Daypart for Eighth Consecutive Season.” *Television Week*, 6 Jun. 2005. 7. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.

Lai, Sam Kaden. “Episode 59: Growing Up Avatar-American.” *Imaginary Worlds*, 8 Feb. 2017. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

Larson, Stephanie Greco. *Media & Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.

Lasswell, Mark. “Kung Fu Fightin’ Anime Stars, Born in the U.S.A.” *The New York Times*, 28 Aug. 2005. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

Lee, Cynthia Kwei Yung. “Beyond Black and White: Racializing Asian Americans in Society Obsessed with OJ.” *Hastings Women's Law Journal* 6.2 (1995): 165-207.

Lee, Joonkoo. “Three Worlds of Global Value Chains: Multiple Governance and Upgrading Paths in the Korean Animation Industry.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 25.6 (2019): 684-700.

Lee, Marissa. “Interview with the Track Team: The musicians behind The Legend of Korra.” *Racebending.com*, 27 Mar. 2012. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

---. “Statement from Dao Le, Animatic Editor.” *Racebending.com*, 31 Jul. 2009. Accessed 11 Mar. 2019.

Lee, Siu-Leung. Email interview. 30 Jan. 2018

---. Email interview. 31 Jan. 2018.

---. Email interview. 13 Feb. 2018.

Lehman, Christopher P. *The Colored Cartoon: Black Presentation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007.

Leonard, Elisabeth Anne, editor. *Into Darkness Peering: Race and Color in the Fantastic*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997.

Leong, Jane. “Reviewing the ‘Japaneseness’ of Japanese Animation: Genre Theory and Fan Spectatorship.” *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia's Film Journal* 7.1 (2011): 20-25.

Levin, Tom. “The Acoustic Dimension: Notes on Cinema Sound.” *Screen* 25.3 (1984): 55-68.

Li, Siu Leung. “Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity. *Cultural Studies* 15.3/4 (2001): 515-42.

Li Xiaoxiang. *Origins of Chinese Music*. Trans. Wong Huey Khey. Singapore: Asiapac Books Pte Ltd, 2007.

Linn, Karen. *The Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994.

Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Liu, Ed. “From Tiny Toons to Brave & Bold: Toon Zone Interviews Voice Director Andrea Romano.” *Toon Zone,* 5 Aug. 2008. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. “Toon Zone Interviews Joaquim Dos Santos on Directing ‘Avatar’.” *Toon Zone,* 22 Jul. 2008. Accessed 30 Jul. 2018.

---. “Toon Zone News Interviews Bryan Konietzko & Mike DiMartino on ‘Avatar the Last Airbender.’” *Toon Zone,* 22 Apr. 2008. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Loader, Alison. “We’re Asian, More Expected of Us: Representation, The Model Minority, & Whiteness on *King of the Hill*.” *Animated Studies* 5 (2010).

Lopez, Lori Kido. “Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15.5 (2012): 431-45.

Lorge, Peter Allan. *Chinese Martial Arts from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Lotz, Amanda D., and Horace Newcomb. “The Production of Entertainment Media.” *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies*. Ed. Klaus Bruhn Jenson. New York: Routledge, 2012. 71-86.

Lu, Amy Shirong. “What Race Do They Represent and Does Mine Have Anything to Do with It? Perceived Racial Categories of Anime Characters.” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4.2 (2009): 169-90.

Lu Shengli. *Combat Techniques of Taiji, Xingyi, and Bagua: Principles and Practices of Internal Martial Arts*. Trans. Zhang Yun and Susan Darley. Berkeley, CA: Blue Snake Books, 2006.

Lu Zhouziang, Qi Zhang, and Fan Hong. “Projecting the ‘Chineseness’: Nationalism, Identity and Chinese Martial Arts Films.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 31.3 (2014): 320-35.

Luther, Catherine A., Carolyn Ringer Lepre, and Naeemah Clark. *Diversity in U.S. Mass Media*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

MacDonald, Susan Lee. “The INNERview #61 - Yoo Jae-myung (유재명), Animation director.” *The INNERview With Host Susan Lee MacDonald*, 2 May 2013. Accessed 30 Jul. 2018.

Mandala, Susan. *The Language of Science Fiction and Fantasy: The Question of Style*. London: Continuum, 2010.

Marcello, Starr A. “Performance Design: An Analysis of Film Acting and Sound Design.” *Journal of Film and Video* 58.1/2 (2006): 59-70.

Marchetti, Gina. “Martial Arts, North and South: Liu Jialiang’s Vision of Hung Gar in Shaw Brothers Films.” *EnterText* 6.1 (2006): 74-110.

---. *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.

Marlow, Eugene. *Jazz in China: From Dance Hall Music to Individual Freedom of Expression*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2018.

Mason, Jennifer. “Qualitative Interviewing: Asking, Listening and Interpreting.” *Qualitative Research in Action*. Ed. Tim May. London: SAGE, 2002. 225-41.

Matthes, Erich Hatala. “Cultural Appropriation Without Cultural Essentialism?” *Social Theory and Practice* 42.2 (2016): 343-66.

Maurice, Alice. “‘Cinema at Its Source’: Synchronizing Race and Sound in the Early Talkies.” *Camera Obscura* 48.17 (2002): 31-71.

Mayberry, Carly. “Nick Makes Room for More ‘Avatar’.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 15 Sep. 2006. Accessed 19 Apr. 2017.

Mayer, Vicki. *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

---. “Studying Up and F**cking Up: Ethnographic Interviewing in Production Studies.” *Cinema Journal* 47.2 (2008): 141-48.

Mayer, Vicki, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell. “Introduction: Production Studies: Roots and Routes.” *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media*

Industries. Eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell. New York: Routledge, 2009. 1-12.

Mayer, Vicki, Miranda J. Bans, and John T. Caldwell, editors. *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.

McKevitt, Andrew C. "'You Are Not Alone!': Anime and the Globalizing of America." *Diplomatic History* 34.5 (2010): 893-921.

Metzger, Sean. "Charles Parsloe's Chinese Fetish: An Example of Yellowface Performance in Nineteenth-Century American Melodrama." *Theatre Journal* 56.4 (2004): 627-51.

Meza-Leon, Juan. Skype interview. 21 Jul. 2018.

Miller, Evan. "The Gallery: Elsa Garagarza." *Anime News Network*, 31 Jan. 2009.

Miller, Toby, editor. *Television Studies*. London: BFI, 2002.

Mills, Brett. "After the Interview." *Cinema Journal* 47.2 (2008): 148-53.

Minister Faust. "Sifu Kisu on Martial Arts Mastery and Designing – Choreographing the Bending of Avatar the Last Airbender (MF Galaxy 069)." *MF Galaxy*, 14 Mar. 2016. Accessed 30 Jul. 2018.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity, and the Ideal Figure*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Mittell, Jason. "The Great Saturday Morning Exile: Scheduling Cartoons on Television's Periphery in the 1960s." *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. Eds. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison. London: Routledge, 2003. 33-54.

Montagu, Ashley. "The Concept of Race." *The Concept of Race*. Ed. Ashley Montagu. New York: Collier Books, 1964. 12-28.

Moon, Krystyn R. *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s-1920s*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

Morris, Meaghan, Siu Leung Li, and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu, editors, *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

Napier, Susan J. *Anime from* Akira *to* Howl's Moving Castle*: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Navarro, Hector. “Episode 1: Bryan Konietzko & Michael Dante DiMartino.” *Nick Animation Podcast*, 13 May 2016. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. “Episode 30: Jeremy Zuckerman & Bryan Konietzko.” *Nick Animation Podcast*, 27 Jun 2017. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

---. “Episode 46: The Legend of Korra Cast.” *Nick Animation Podcast*, 20 Oct. 2017. Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.

Nededog, Jethro. “‘The Legend of Korra’ Creators: 5 Things You Didn’t Know About the New ‘Avatar’ (Guest Blog).” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 13 Apr. 2012. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

Nercessian, Andy. *The Duduk and National Identity in Armenia*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001.

Neupert, Richard. “Trouble in Watermelon Land: George Pal and the Little Jasper Cartoons.” *Film Quarterly* 55.1 (2001): 14-26.

Newman, Michael, and Angela Wu. “‘Do You Sound Asian When you Speak English?’ Racial Identification and Voice in Chinese and Korean Americans’ English.” *American Speech* 86.2 (2011): 152-78.

Ngai, Sianne. "‘A Foul Lump Started Making Promises in My Voice’: Race, Affect, and the Animated Subject." *American Literature* 74.3 (2002): 571-601.

Nornes, Abé Mark. “The Creation and Construction of Asian Cinema Redux.” *Film History: An International Film Journal* 25.1-2 (2013): 175-87.

Oatley, Chris. “Interview with ‘Korra’ and ‘Dreamworks’ Artist, Frederic William Stewart :: Arcast #95.” *The Oatley Academy Artcast*, 2 Jun. 2017. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. New York: Routledge, 1986.

Pallant, Chris, and Steven Price. *Storyboarding: A Critical History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Pao, Angela Chia-yi. “False Accents: Embodied Dialects and the Characterization of Ethnicity and Nationality.” *Theatre Topics* 14.1 (2004): 353-72.

Perlmutter, David. *America Toons In: A History of Television Animation*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.

Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992.

Porteous, J. Douglas. “Bodyscape: The Body-Landscape Metaphor.” *The Canadian Geographer* 30.1 (1986): 2-12.

Pratt, Mary Louis. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Radano, Ronald, and Philip V. Bohlman, editors. *Music and the Racial Imagination*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Rapatahana, Vaughan, and Pauline Bunce, editors. *English Language as Hydra: Its Impacts on Non-English Language Cultures*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2012.

Redmond, Sean. “The Whiteness of the *Rings*.” *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. London: Routledge, 2008. 91-101.

Robins, Anthony. *New York Art Deco: A Guide to Gotham’s Jazz Age Architecture*. Albany, NY: Excelsior Editions, 2017.

Robinson, Seth. “Joaquim Dos Santos Ready to Tell THE LEGEND OF KORRA.” *Newsarama*, 10 Apr. 2012. Accessed 30 Jul. 2018.

Robinson, Tasha. “*Legend of Korra*’s Michael Dante DiMartino and Joaquim Dos Santos.” *The AV Club*, 13 Apr. 2012. Accessed 30 Jul. 2018.

Rogers, Amanda. “Asian Mutations: Yellowface from More Light to the Royal Shakespeare Company’s the Orphan of Zhao.” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24.4 (2014): 452-66.

Rogers, Richard A. “From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation.” *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 474-503.

Rojek, Chris. *Cultural Studies*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007.

Rosen, David, and Peter Hamilton. *Off-Hollywood: The Making & Marketing of Independent Films*. New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1990.

Royal, Derek Parker. “Introduction: Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narratives.” *MELUS* 32.3 (2007): 7-22.

Ruh, Brian. *Adapting Anime: Transnational Media Between Japan and the United States*. Dissertation. Indiana University, 2012.

---. “Conceptualizing Anime and the Database Fantasyscape.” *Mechademia* 9.1 (2014): 164-75.

Ryan, Alexandra. “Globalisation and the ‘Internal Alchemy’ in Chinese Martial Arts: The Transmission of Taijiquan to Britain.” *East Asia Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 2.4 (2008): 525-43.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 25th Anniversary Ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

Sammond, Nicholas. *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

Santaolalla, Isabel. “Bodyscapes of Silence: The Figure of the Mute Woman in the Cinema.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 7.1 (1998): 53-61

Santos-Granero, Fernando. “Hybrid Bodyscapes: A Visual History of Yanesha Patterns of Culture Change.” *Current Anthropology* 50.4 (2009): 477-512.

Savas, Kaya. “Composter Interview: Jeremy Zuckerman.” *Film.Music.Media,* 11 Oct. 2013. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

Schick, Michal. “SeptBender Interview: Jeremy Zuckerman discusses music-bending on ‘The Legend of Korra’.” *Hypeable,* 23 Sep. 2013. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

Schodt, Frederik L. *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2002.

Seidman, Irving. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. 2nd ed. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998.

Sergi, Gianluca. “Actors and the Sound Gang.” *Screen Acting*. Eds. Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer. London: Routledge, 1999. 126-37.

---. “In Defence of Vulgarity: The Place of Sound Effects in the Cinema.” *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* 5 (2006).

Shah, Hemant. “‘Asian Culture’ and Asian American Identities in the Television and Film Industries of the United States.” *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 3.3 (2003).

Sharifian, Farzad, editor. *English as an International Language: Perspectives and Pedagogical Issues*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2009.

Shingler, Martin. “Fasten Your Seatbelts and Prick Up Your Ears: The Dramatic Voice in Film.” *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* 5 (2006).

Shipton, Alyn. *A New History of Jazz*. Rev. ed. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Sifianos, Georges, “The Definition of Animation: A Letter from Norman McLaren.” *Animation Journal* 3.2 (1995): 62-66.

Sifu Kisu. *Tumblr,* 18 May 2014. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

---. *Tumblr*, 30 Dec. 2014. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

Simensky, Linda. "The Early Days of Nicktoons." *Nickelodeon Nation: The History, Politics, and Economics of America's Only TV Channel for Kids*. Ed. Heather Hendershot. New York: New York University Press, 2004. 87-107.

Sito, Tom. *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006.

Sluis, Ageeth. *Deco Body, Deco City: Female Spectacle and Modernity in Mexico City, 1900-1939*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

Slusser, George, and Eric S. Rankins. "Introduction: Shadows of the Magic Lamp." *Shadows of the Magic Lamp: Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film*. Eds. George Slusser and Eric S. Rankin. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985. vii-xvii.

Smedley, Audrey, and Brian D. Smedley. *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012.

Smolko, Joanna R. "Southern Fried Foster: Representing Race and Place through Music in Looney Tunes Cartoons." *American Music* 30.3 (2012): 344-72.

Solomon, Charles. "Toward a Definition of Animation." *The Art of Animation*. Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1988. 9-12.

Spivak, Gayatri Shakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Gary Nelson and Lawrence Grossber. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 271-313.

Stahl, Matt. "Privilege and Distinction in Production Worlds: Copyright, Collective Bargaining, and Working Conditions in Media Making." *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. Eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell. New York: Routledge, 2009. 54-67.

Suan, Stevie. "Anime's Performativity: Diversity through Conventionality in the Global Media-Form." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12.1 (2017): 62-79.

Subtirelu, Nicholas Close. "'She Does Have an Accent but…': Race and Language Ideology in Students' Evaluations of Mathematics Instructors on Ratemyprofessors.com." *Language in Society* 44.1 (2015): 35-62.

Summers, Sam. "High Fantasy Meets Low Culture in *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010)." *Fantasy/Animation: Connections Between Media, Mediums and Genres*. Eds. Christopher Holliday and Alexander Sergeant. London: Routledge, 2018. 227-42.

Sung, Angela. Skype interview. 17 Feb. 2018.

Szeto, Kin-Yan. *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2011.

Taberham, Paul. "A General Aesthetics of American Sound Design." *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 13.2 (2018): 131-47.

Teo, Stephen. *The Asian Cinema Experience: Styles, Spaces, Theory*. London: Routledge, 2013.

---. *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Tetri, Emily. Email interview. 27 Mar. 2018.

---. Email interview. 10 Mar. 2019.

third ear audio. *Tumblr*, 9 Mar. 2013. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

---. *Tumblr*, 11 Mar. 2013. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

---. *Tumblr*, 3 May 2013. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

---. *Tumblr*, 9 Jul. 2013. Accessed 10 Aug. 2018.

Trausch, Tim, editor, *Chinese Martial Arts Media Culture: Global Perspectives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018).

Toll, Robert C. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Tschang, Feichin Ted, and Andrea Goldstein. "The Outsourcing of 'Creative' Work and the Limits of Capability: The Case of the Philippines' Animation Industry." *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* 57.1 (2010): 132-43.

Tulk, Janice Esther. "An Aesthetic of Ambiguity: Musical Representation of Indigenous Peoples in Disney's *Brother Bear*." Ed. Rebecca Coyle. London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2010. 120-37.

Tushar, Steve. Email interview. 28 Apr. 2019.

---. Skype interview. 22 Jun. 2018.

Ueno Toshiya. "Techno-Orientalism and Media Tribalism: On Japanese Animation and Rave Culture." *Third Text* 13.47 (1999): 95-106.

Uhrig, Meike. "AnimOtion: Animating Emotions in the Digital Age." *Emotion in Animated Films*. Ed. Meike Uhrig. New York: Routledge, 2019. 3-12.

Ulanova, Olga. Google Hangouts interview. 22 May 2018.

Varney, Janet. Email interview. 20 Sep. 2017.

---. Email interview. 21 Sep. 2017.

Vasconcellos, Eduardo. “Interview: Avatar’s Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino.” *IGN*, 6 Sep. 2007. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

Vasudev, Aruna, Latika Padgaonkar, and Rashmi Doraiswamy, editors. *Being and Becoming: The Cinemas of Asia*. New Helhi, India: Macmillan India, 2002.

Vats, Anjali, and LeiLani Nishime. “Containment as Neocolonial Visual Rhetoric: Fashion, Yellowface, and Karl Lagerfeld's ‘Idea of China.’” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99.4 (2013): 423-47.

Vick, Tom. *Asian Cinema: A Field Guide*. New York: Harper Collis, 2008.

von Gunden, Kenneth. *Flights of Fancy: The Great Fantasy Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2001.

Wakeman, Frederic E. *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

Wallestad, Thomas J. “Developing the Visual Language of Comics: The Interactive Potential of Japan’s Contributions.” *Hyōgen Bunka* 7 (2012): 3-12.

Walter, James. *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2011.

Wang Guangxi. *Chinese Kung Fu*. Trans. Han Huizhi, Wang Wenliang, and Kang Jin Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Wang, Ze, et al. “‘You Lost Me at Hello’: How and When Accent-Based Biases Are Expressed and Suppressed.” *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 30.2 (2013): 185-96.

Wartenberg, Thomas E. “Humanizing the Beast: *King Kong* and the Representation of Black Male Sexuality.” *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. 157-77.

Webb, Charles. “Interview: Paging, Dr. Fight! A Chat With ‘Legend of Korra’ Art Director and Co-Executive Producer Joaquim Dos Santos.” *MTV*, 23 Apr. 2012. Accesed 30 Jul. 2018.

Wells, Paul. *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008.

---. *Animation: Genre and Authorship*. London: Wallflower, 2002.

---. *Animation and America*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.

---. “‘Smarter Than the Average Art Form’: Animation in the Television Era.” *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*. Eds. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison. London: Routledge, 2003. 15-32.

---. “To Affinity and Beyond: Woody, Buzz and the New Authority.” *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*. Eds. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker. London: Arnold, 2003. 90-102.

---. *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Wells, Paul, and Samantha Moore. *The Fundamentals of Animation*. 2nd ed. London: Fairchild Books, 2016.

West, David. *Chasing Dragons: An Introduction to the Martial Arts Film*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Whalen, Andrew. “On Its 10-Year Anniversary ‘Avatar: The Last Airbender’ Creators Give an Oral History of the Finale.” *Newsweek*, 19 Jul. 2018. Accessed 10 Sep. 2018.

Whaley, Deborah Elizabeth. *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015.

Wickert, Marc. “Dana White and the Future of UFC.” *Fight Times*, 1 Oct. 2004. Accessed 20 Mar. 2019.

Wimberly, Kris. “TAN – Ep43: Color Compositing Supervisor, Sylvia Filcak-Blackwolf.” *The Animation Network Podcast*, 7 Mar. 2016. Accessed 8 Mar. 2018.

Winant, Howard. *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Windover, Michael. *Art Deco: A Mode of Mobility*. Quebec City: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2012.

Winston, Michael R. “Racial Consciousness and the Evolution of Mass Communication in the United States.” *Daedalus* 111.4 (1982): 171-82.

Wojcik, Pamela Robertson. “The Sound of Film Acting.” *Journal of Film and Video* 58.1/2 (2006): 71-83.

Worley, Alec. *Empires of Imagination: A Critical Survey of Fantasy Cinema from Georges Méliès to* The Lord of the Rings. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2005.

Wu, Frank H. *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.

Xu Lingna and Dai Zeyu. “Regaining the Sense of Being a Shanghainese: A Study of the Revival of Art Deco as an Apparatus of Cultural Memory from an Intercultural Perspective.” *Intercultural Communication Studies* XX.1 (2011): 234-48.

Yeh, Wen-hsin. “Dai Li and the Liu Geqing Affair: Heroism in the Chinese Secret Service During the War of Resistance.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 48.3 (1989): 545-62.

Yoon, Hyejin. “Globalization of the Animation Industry: Multi-Scalar Linkages of Six Animation Production Centers.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 23.5 (2017): 634-51.

Young, Helen. *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Young, James O. *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Young, James O., and Conrad G. Brunk, editors. *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Yu Wenxin, et al. “Shorter Intervals of East Asians with Port-Wind Stains with Pulsed Dye Laser Are Safe and Effective – A Prospective Side-by-Side Comparison.” *Photomedicine and Laser Surgery* 36.1 (2018): 37-43.

Yuen, Nancy Wang. “Performing Race, Negotiating Identity: Asian American Professional Actors in Hollywood.” *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*. Eds. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou. New York: Routledge, 2004. 251-68.

Zane, Edwin. Phone interview. 3 Mar. 2018.

Ziff, Bruce, and Pratima V. Rao. “Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis.” *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. Eds. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997: 1-27.

Ziff, Bruce, and Pratima V. Rao, editors. *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Zinder, David. *Body-Voice-Imagination: A Training for the Actor*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Ziolkowski, Steve. Phone interview. 31 May 2018.