“IF YOU’RE WHITE, YOU’RE ALRIGHT”: THE REPRODUCTION OF RACIAL HIERARCHIES IN BOLLYWOOD FILMS

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“If you’re white, you’re alright
If you’re yellow, you’re mellow
If you’re brown, stick around
But if you’re black, get back.”

The above children’s rhyme communicates a racial hierarchy of “white” over “black” within the United States. We can interpret this rhyme to mean that people of color with darker skin, such as African Americans, are the least accepted and integrated in society, while those with lighter skin, European Americans and Asian Americans, typically seen as honorary “whites”, are the most accepted and integrated. The rhyme also communicates a color hierarchy, often referred to as pigmentocracy or colorism within the African American community (Hooks 1992). This is the message Marita Golden (2005) conveys in her book Don’t Play in the Sun. One of the authors recalls a time in her childhood, when her mother also advised her against playing in the sun, as it would make her skin darker. This is significant, because she is biracial, born to a “white” father and Korean mother. Hence, according to the rhyme, she should be “alright” or at least “mellow” as an honorary “white” or model minority. Yet growing up in her small predominantly “white” town, she was never accepted as “white” nor seen as an

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1 Alphabetical order denotes equal contribution. The authors would like to thank Rodney Coates, Noel Cazenave, Bandana Purkayastha, and Thomas Volscho.

2 We problematize the concepts of “race,” “black,” and “white” by placing them in quotation marks. It has been well established that racial categories are social and political constructions that have no basis in biology (Roediger 1991; Lopez 1996; Smedley 2007). These categories were created in order to dehumanize and subordinate people of color. The concept of “race” forms the basis of racism. Therefore, we contribute to racial oppression by not problematizing it. As Noel Cazenave (2004) states, “race” should be problematized—and ultimately relinquished—not only because it is confounding…but because it is erroneous, and most importantly because it is injurious” (5). Furthermore, it is generally not acceptable to refer to Asians as “yellow” or to Native Americans as “red.” The categories of “black” and “white” are equally problematic.
honorary “white.” If anything, she was the racial other, the “chink” who threatened the sanctity of a pure, “white” town. Her status and belonging was often questioned with demands of where she was from, implying that she must be foreign-born. Her experience challenges the message conveyed in the above rhyme and the notion that Asian Americans are honorary “whites” or model minorities.

The objective of this paper is to understand how this racial hierarchy of “white” over “black” is reproduced in contemporary society through institutions such as the media, and how the representation of this hierarchy affects the lives of Asian Americans as well as their relationships with African Americans and other people of color. We challenge the notion that increasing diversity through immigration is breaking down the “black/white” dichotomy in the U.S. and the idea that Asian Americans are becoming “white” in the way that European Americans have.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004) observes that because of demographic changes, the U.S. is undergoing a transformation from a bi-racial “white”/non-“white” hierarchy to a tri-racial order of “white,” “honorary white,” and “black.” Within the category of honorary “whites,” Bonilla-Silva includes Asian Americans, Latinos, and multiracial people. Based on census and other data, he contends that Asian Americans have matched or surpassed the socio-economic standing and educational attainment of European Americans. Honorary “whites” have been allowed to achieve these wages of whiteness as a means of maintaining “white” supremacy (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Here, whiteness can be seen as a club into which some people of color are allowed entry to prevent multiracial collaboration (Ignatiev 1996). According to Bonilla-Silva, honorary “whites” express anti-“black” sentiments similar to those of dominant European Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2004).

Following Bonilla-Silva (2004), we argue that instead of presenting a significant change to the present racial order, increased immigration will actually reinforce the present “black/white” dichotomy within the U.S. as Asian Indians attempt to situate themselves on the right “white” side. Though Bonilla-Silva establishes that a tri-racial rather than a bi-racial system is emerging within the U.S., the racial hierarchy of “black” and “white” is still maintained in his model. In our analysis, we find that this hierarchy is portrayed in Bollywood films through three main themes: “Ethnic Heroes and American Dreams,” “Emotional Segregation,” and “Colorism.” Through these subtle themes, Bollywood upholds covert institutionalized racism within the media by reproducing the