

Dear Mr. Raphael Bob-Waksberg,

I am writing this letter due to a concern I have about your Netflix series, *BoJack Horseman*. The critically acclaimed series supposedly came to an end this year but rumors of another season are being reported. Specifically, I wanted to let you know that I am troubled by Alison Brie's portrayal of Diane Nguyen.

*BoJack Horseman* is an animated dark comedy that follows the life of a washed-up Hollywood actor for which the show is titled, BoJack Horseman. The show exists in a universe where some of the characters are human and others are anthropomorphic. In the first episode, we are introduced to Diane Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American writer from Boston. Diane's ethnicity is one of the first characteristics we learn about her. In this episode, BoJack meets with his agent who informs him that a ghostwriter will be hired to write his memoir. Immediately upon seeing her name BoJack mispronounces "Nguyen" and emphasizes how unusual the name is to him. A few moments later BoJack talks to his friends about Diane saying "I hate her and her impossible-to-pronounce last name. Na-goo-ya-go-goo-goo-goo-ga" (Bob-Waksberg, 2014). When BoJack and Diane finally meet he makes a comment about not knowing how to pronounce her name which she laughs off. The mispronunciation and lack of desire to learn correct pronunciations of ethnically diverse names in real life is often part of an effort to separate diverse groups of people from white groups with so-called "normal" names. The emphasis on Diane's last name being "different" is not the only mistake I believe the show made regarding the character. *BoJack Horseman* also missed an opportunity to show and represent the experiences of Asian-Americans, specifically of Vietnamese descent.

"The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated," (Hall, 1995). As Hall highlights, American media has a responsibility to not only represent the country's ideas on race but to challenge these ideas and notions. Recently the discourse around how different groups of people are portrayed in animated series has shifted. Several Netflix shows have realized the need to work on and transform their depictions of racial ideas and notions after facing criticism for their portrayals of animated characters who were not white but voiced by white actors. In June, both Jenny Slate and Kristen Bell left their respective Netflix animated series in which they both voiced Black characters despite being white women. The character of Diane Ngyugen offered Netflix an opportunity to highlight the experiences and struggles of Vietnamese-Americans and cast a Vietnamese-American actress. Instead, Alison Brie, a white actress, voiced Diane throughout the series.

In the 2017 documentary film, *The Problem with Apu*, Hari Kondabolu explores the damage *The Simpsons* has caused the South Asian-American community through their portrayal of an Indian character named Apu. The character of Apu is based on racist stereotypes and for a

long time was the only South Asian representation on mainstream television. Besides the character's racist depiction of Indians, one of Kondabolu's biggest concerns about Apu was that he was voiced by white actor Hank Azaria. The imitation of a South Asian man by a white man erased the cultural experiences of South Asian characters and made them a punchline. In *Eating the Other*, bell hooks states "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture," (hooks, 1992). When characters who are not white are included solely for the sake of having a diverse character, the media is not doing work to grow and evolve in its ideas of race. The problem with a single representation of a group of people, especially by someone outside of that group, is that it gives audiences false ideas about that group. The fact that Diane was a non-white female main character with a storyline that fully developed throughout the series cannot be overlooked. However, the show missed the chance to show her experience as a Vietnamese-American woman especially in episodes that depict her family life and even a trip to Vietnam.

I am aware that both you and Brie recently stated your regret over her casting. If there does end up being another season of *BoJack Horseman*, I hope to see a Vietnamese-American actress voice Diane and for the show to explore Diane's experience as a Vietnamese-American, particularly in the show's setting of Hollywood.

Thank You,  
Mary Kate Tramontano

Word Count: 737

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