Geraldine Ah-Sue
M.A. Candidate in Women and Gender Studies
San Francisco State University

ReOrienting Asian/American Subjectivities: On the Cultural (Re)Writings of *All-American Girl*

As cultural spaces of the twenty-first century become further entrenched in a climate of intense globalization, the relationship between cultural representations and transnational capitalism is becoming ever more intimate. This paper treats U.S. popular culture as a primary site of economic globalization, as an "arena of consent and resistance […] where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (Hall, 2002, 192), and examines how U.S. economic interests are used to (re)produce and (re)write geopolitical histories, legacies, and memories into the gender and racial representations of Asian/American subjectivities. To this end, the short-lived 1994-1995 ABC series *All-American Girl* will be considered as a critical space where histories can be (re)composed and subjectivities (re)imagined.

As the first major-network television show to feature an Asian/American family, *All-American Girl*, starring the popular comedian Margaret Cho, was considered by many to be monumental, heralded as "the first real television look at an Asian American family" (Cho, as quoted by Carmen, 1994). In it, Cho plays a young woman, Margaret Kim, who lives with her multi-generational family, works in retail, and attends college in San Francisco, California. The over-arching theme of the show, however, is the struggle that Margaret, as an 'Asian-American,' encounters as she straddles the 'cultural line' between her 'American' life and her 'Korean' family.

From its beginning, *All-American Girl* had a deep investment in the portrayal of 'cultural difference.' However, as Stuart Hall makes clear, cultural representations are always subject to "the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power" (2003, 236), and it is for this reason that *All-American Girl's* depiction of 'multiculturalism' stands to be examined not just for what it portrays, but also for what it produces.

On the one hand, the 'multiculturalism' in *All-American Girl* requires an act of 'forgetting.' That is, it demands a 'forgetting' of imperial and colonial relations between the U.S. and Korea, a 'forgetting' of the U.S. stakes in the over twenty-million Korean soldiers and civilians killed during the Korean War (Minns, 1030), a 'forgetting of enforced Western capitalism and 'modernization' by the U.S. post-Korean War (Choi, 82), and a 'forgetting' of the *still-current* U.S. military presence in South Korea. However, these acts of 'forgetting' have as much to do with what can be gained as well as lost, where memories are not dissolved but are rather created, and where the past is reconstructed not as it was, but as it stands now [1]. From these 'absent' portrayals, what gets importantly produced is a cultural image of a Present-day, post-colonial South Korea whose freedom from the Japanese occupation is popularly narrated as a gift from the allied-forces, particularly the U.S. In turn, the U.S. also gets narrated by this Present-day multiculturalism as a free democratic society, where history is remembered as an even playing field, and where "every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are presented" (Lowe, 86).

What gets suspiciously *elided* in *All-American Girl*'s construction of national communities and histories, however, is the U.S.'s *re-colonization* of South Korea through

[1] See Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Avendt, trans. by Harry Zdin (NY: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 253-264

the creation of new markets of capitalist consumers via debt obligations to after the Korean War (Choi, 79), as well as through national reconstruction models that are directly informed by capitalist ideals of mass-industrialization and 'development' (Minns, 1026). Indeed, while South Korea presently has one of the strongest economies in the world, it is also significantly based on international exporting, especially with the U.S. If, as Saskia Sassen argues, the global economy is indeed "something that has to be *actively* implemented, reproduced, served, and financed" (Sassen, 262, emphasis mine), then these productive elisions in cultural representation must be considered as a primary sustainer of geopolitical economic relations and interests.

However, while a macro-perspective on these relationships is critical when thinking about globalization, the inscription of these relationships onto the racialization and gendering of particular bodies is also a crucial component to the mechanics of global capitalism, and it is here that I would like to turn to next.

As noted earlier, a primetime sitcom starring Asian/Americans is undeniably noteworthy; and yet, it also cannot be extracted from the millions of dollars invested and earned on behalf of the ABC network and studios (Chan, 1994). However, after several previously unsuccessful television attempts to (co)star Asian/Americans, why did ABC gamble that 1994 would be different? Interestingly, *All-American Girl* aired only one year after the wildly successful movie *The Joy Luck Club*, directed by Wayne Wang, hit the box office in 1993. While *The Joy Luck Club* established a firm place for Asian 'visibility' in mainstream cinema, it also signaled great economic potential for multicultural narratives that focused on Asian/American identities, and it was this potential that ABC was hoping to capitalize on.

One striking facet of Asian/American 'visibility' in mainstream media is the recurring theme of Asian/American female domesticity. Indeed, the story-line of *All-American Girl* shares an uncanny resemblance to *The Joy Luck Club* as both narratives seem to necessarily revolve around domestically-contained relationships between mothers and daughters. In *All-American Girl*, for example, Margaret's 'cultural struggle' as an 'Asian American' is often depicted through her adversarial relationship with her 'traditional' Korean mother Katherine, and as Lisa Lowe argues, the domesticity of such U.S. produced 'Asian' narratives is no accident, and can in fact be traced to wider transnational U.S. economic imperatives.

As Lowe notes, the cultural domestication of Asian/American bodies has much to do with the simultaneous 'threat' *and* 'resource' of a U.S-imagined homogenous 'Asia' to the U.S. economy.[2] As many Asian states began to economically compete with the U.S., especially during the postwar period, the U.S. also remained disturbingly dependent on racialized and gendered 'labor made cheap' from areas such as China, Japan, Korea, India and the Philippines (Lowe, 5). Hence, the U.S. was faced with a 'need' to 'manage' what Lowe has termed the "double-front" of 'Asia' (5), and one way of doing so was by 'managing' Asian/American subjects through nationally-domestic spaces such as U.S. policy and cultural spaces.

The legacy and present-day practice of this imperative is made eerily clear in an *All-American Girl* episode entitled "Booktopus," in which the Kims' bookstore is in jeopardy of going out of business due to a nearby opening of a mega book store owned by Booktopus Inc. At first, Booktopus offers to buy-out Kim's Books, however, this offer

[2] The homogenization of multiple nation-states into an imagined area of 'Asia' is critical to simultaneously establishing both the 'foreignness' of Asian/American subjects as well as the 'acceptance' of the U.S. nation-state (Lowe, 5).

is eventually retracted and the corporate giant instead decides to open their own store across the street. Thankfully, the plot is finally resolved after Margaret forces Booktopus to relocate – an important point we will return to in a minute.

First, however, it is important to note how this episode's narrative is tied to the politics of Asian/American labor in the U.S. Because the U.S. has historically necessitated the exploitation of Asian laborers for its own nation-building projects – for example, on the sugar plantation fields in Hawaii during the mid-1800s (Okihiro, 38), on the transcontinental railroad in California in the 1860's (Saxton, 294), or in the garment and cigar-rolling industries of San Francisco during the latter half of the 19th century (Mei, 373) – it is significant that the episode concludes with the Kim family keeping their small, U.S-bound business, while Booktopus Inc. remains as a multi-million-dollar corporation that is able to freely relocate. In this way, the episode effectively echoes the U.S. interest of 'containing' the rise of 'Asian' economies, here symbolized by Kim's Books, while at the same time also ensuring the continuation of their economic contribution to the U.S. Kims Books must therefore be minimally maintained as an ever-present source of income for and within the U.S., but can never be allowed to financially exceed Booktopus Inc.

Furthermore, as the title *All-American* Girl alludes to, there is also a curiously gendered aspect to 'Asia's' 'double-front' in relation to the U.S. While the gender politics of (trans)national labor as a 'resource' to the U.S. is an important and necessary conversation, today I would like to focus on the ways in which Asian/American female sexuality has been historically perceived as a 'threat' to the U.S. economy, and how these sentiments are maintained in the present moment through popular culture.

[I'd like to show a clip now to further illustrate this point. This is the final scene in the "Booktopus" episode, when Margaret finally 'figures out' how to chase Booktopus away – show clip, starts at 18:18, lasts for 1 m 42 sec]

[Apart from the retrospective look at interior décor during the 1990s, there is a lot going on in this clip!] Most obviously, this clip shows how it is ultimately Margaret's racialized sexuality that 'saves the day' in the end, and in an arena with such high political stakes, this is no coincidence. The presentation of Margaret's sexuality as a *threat* to Booktopus is significant as Asian/American female sexuality has been historically imagined as a danger to white U.S. economic growth. Indeed, during the late 19th century, with the growing number of available Asian/American laborers in the U.S. particularly after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, that all-too familiar sentiment of 'immigrants' (read: Other) taking American (read: white) jobs needed to be addressed, and Asian/American female sexuality proved to be a convenient nexus for all of these concerns. Through popular cultural narratives about 'dirty' Chinese Prostitutes or the immoral practice Japanese/Korean Picture Brides, for example, the stigmatization of Asian/American female sexuality and its threat to the white U.S. nation was used to literally contain the reproduction of potential Asian/American laborers. Not only did the cultural stigmatization of Asian/American female sexuality eventually lead to institutional management through policies such as the 1875 Page Law or the 1904-1905 Gentleman's Agreement Act, but in the emphasis on heterosexual reproduction, the U.S. also reinforced heteronormativity as a crucial aspect of cultivating its citizenry and its economy, and secured it as a nation-building ideology. Thus, in *All-American Girl*, almost a century later, in this clip when Margaret seductively says, "nice lookin' boy you

got there Mr. Spencer. It would be a shame if something were to *happen* to him," it is difficult to not see the present-day reiteration *and* reinforcement of the historically perceived 'threat' of Asian/American female sexuality to the American free-market and its future.[3]

However, while popular culture can oftentimes be a place of domination, it is also a site of constant struggle, an "uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value" (Bhabha, 1994, 247), where power is not exerted but *relayed*. It is precisely within this unsettled meaning that popular culture offers a mode of resistance. Although *All-American Girl* attempts to write a kind of 'neutral' history into U.S. cultural memory, there is nevertheless a 'difference' that persists in *returning the gaze*[4]. When thinking about the ways in which 'difference' can be a site of resistance, Homi K. Bhabha notes that it is precisely the 'difference' that 'requires' neutralization that ironically poses the most threat to forces of authority (126). Through its ground-breaking Asian/American cast, Margaret's ambivalent relationship to cultural stereotypes, and the show's continual emphasis on 'difference,' in many ways, *All-American Girl* reminds its viewers of what 'Asian-ness' means to the U.S. imaginary, thereby deconstructing 'difference' through its partial, but always present *insistence*. In this way, the *re*-presentation of 'difference' also serves to *recall* the 'taboo memories,' to use Ella Shohat's language, that are meant to be forgotten, thereby demolishing *and* re-membering what Asian/American cultural subjectivities might mean in cultural circuits. While popular culture does not necessarily

[3] See Nayan Shah's "Perversity, Contamination, and the Dangers of Queer Domesticity" in his book *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (CA: University of California Press, 2001) pp. 78-104

[4] See bell hooks' article, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Amelia Jones (NY: Routledge, 2003) pp. 94-105

entail a ‘recovery’ of resistant Asian/American subjectivities and histories, it can, importantly, reOrient our departures to re-write the possibilities that ‘difference’ can signify – from ones that collude with economic dictation, to those that refuse to be profited from. This, as Stuart Hall argues, is why popular culture matters (2002, 192).

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