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The Mainstream: Choosing “Asian” or Choosing “American”

At a time like this in our society it's very critical for stories to be heard, especially those of Asian and Asian Americans. The media that has been presented to represent Asian Americans in the past has been very limiting in content and variety – especially on the mainstream stage. With those of non-Asian descent depicting the experience of the Asian American it becomes extremely harmful living in a hyper-information society where media acts as an important part of educating people about themselves and their relationship to others. There have been revolutionary texts to be some of the first to feature all Asian American casts, however those that have been praised such as Roger and Hammerstein's 1961 musical, *Flower Drum Song* and Margaret Cho's 1994 situational comedy *All-American Girl*, are inherently problematic.

*Flower Drum Song* and *All-American Girl* both were the first of their kind in their adamancy to represent Asian Americans in front of the mainstream American public. Both instead accomplished representing Asian and Asian Americans in a way that one must choose to identify as either “Asian” or “American,” suggesting that it is not possible to be apart of both worlds. This fault can be connected to the lack of Asian and Asian Americans working on the productions, which is a sensationally vital thing for accurate and subjective Asian American stories. The most effective venue is mainstream productions and what a show such as *Fresh Off the Boat* demonstrates in contrast to the

aforementioned is when a visual piece intended for large American audiences has Asian and Asian American storytellers, writers and creators there's no longer an emphasis of there being a gap between Asian and American. Vocalization from those on the production – such as Constance Wu – also has a great impact in creating Asian and Asian American characters who are able to coexist in the world created and no longer being the subject of crude jokes, orientalism or having to identify as either or.

There is no use in denying the impact *Flower Drum Song* has had in being the first texts to place Asians and Asian Americans in front of a mainstream audience. Along with that factor, the public was able to see Asian American bodies in a way that had never been shown before while addressing the transformation of Asians into Asian Americans. However, in discussing the topic, *Flower Drum Song* takes a harmful and problematic approach at looking at the term of “Asian American.” In one of the main plot points, the male protagonist, Wang Ta undergoes a bit of an identity crisis and has two females to choose from to be with romantically – one to represent his Chinese self and one to represent his American self. The juxtaposition throughout the film occurs between Mei Li, an illegal immigrant from China whose sole purpose in the United States is to wed and Linda Low, who is overtly Americanized and does not represent “true” Chinese values. What this contrast suggests for the audience and for Wang Ta – who vocalizes that he feels both Chinese and American – is that one must choose to either be Asian or to be American, but most importantly one cannot be both.

Within the first few minutes of *Flower Drum Song*, Mei Li is presented to the audience in a manner that makes her overtly “oriental” and exaggerates her exoticism. Coming directly from China as an illegal immigrant makes it known that her purpose in

America is due to a promised contract for marriage, her actions constantly steering her in that direction. Mei Li displays the classic characteristics of the stereotype that Asian females are passive, innocent and naïve. In one of the final songs – “You Are Beautiful” – she is serenaded by Wang Ta who assures that she is stunning and alluring while she avoids eye contact and is seemingly shy.<sup>1</sup> These moments such as this that Mei Li displays in the film makes her seem insecure and makes her allow others to be inspected like an animal or manufactured product only intended to be a quite Chinese wife. Although some of her traits may seem typical for a newly immigrated being from a different country, the way in which the film presents itself in comparison to the character of Linda Low enforces Mei Li’s place as the “Other.”

One of the first songs performed by the character of Linda Low in *Flower Drum Song* – “I Enjoy Being a Girl” – gives the audience a direct enforcement of what she is supposed to portray. Although being of Chinese ancestry, compared to Mei Li she solely serves the purpose of representing Western ideals and exhibiting “whiteness.”<sup>2</sup> She stands in front of three mirrors – very rarely taking her eyes off of herself – as she sings about her satisfaction of being female.<sup>3</sup> Wearing only a towel and showing off her legs, the audience is deeply urged to acknowledge her legs and being categorized as a “long-legged dame” to emphasis her Western features. It’s important to note that never do we get a close up of Linda; instead we are always fixated on her full figure or other revealing

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<sup>1</sup> *Flower Drum Song*, directed by Henry Koster (1960; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Cheng, “Beauty and the Ideal Citizenship: Inventing Asian America in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song*,” in *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 46

<sup>3</sup> *Flower Drum Song*

body part. What this does is make the audience lack any kind of emotional connection to Linda to give her more depth as a character instead of just being used as a contrast to Mei Li. We are left with Linda Low who is hyper sexualized, Americanized and aspires nothing more than to gain pleasure from the pleasure of those looking at her.

At a crucial point in the film, Linda Low arrives at Wang Ta's graduation party with her "supposed" brother who is to approve an impending marriage between the two. Previously, Linda vocalizes that the most successful thing a women can be is a success in their gender and this scene we are introduced to the first time Linda is not considered successful as a female.<sup>4</sup> She attempts to be the Chinese girl that Wang Ta's father wants him to marry and dresses in the traditional chi-pao while trying to act Chinese. This is one of the first time's in the film that Mei Li and Linda Low interact, both of them seeming to have switched roles with Linda in a chi-pao and Mei Li in more of a Western dress. However, although they may be in a certain dress, the "true" them continues to resurface reminding the audience that both women are still inherently separate entities and cannot be both Asian and American. At one point Mei Li says to Linda, "sweet incense! Do you wear it to keep away the evil spirits?" to which she replies, "Oh, no... to attract them," another affirmation of how culturally different they are from one another.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, *Flower Drum Song* makes sure that these are the two women for the audience to view as viable wife material for Wang Ta.

It's very vital to note the character of Helen Chao who becomes the female character who is significantly marginalized and left in the dust as a romantic interest for Wang Ta. She serves as the "in between," being neither as exotic as Mei Li nor as

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<sup>4</sup> Cheng, 47

<sup>5</sup> *Flower Drum Song*

assimilated as Linda Low; she represents the only character in the film that achieves “true” cultural mixing.<sup>6</sup> It’s clear that she has feelings for Wang Ta, as revealed in her large dream sequence number, “Love, Look Away,” which displays her longing for the male protagonist.<sup>7</sup> Helen’s dream finds her running after a mannequin in a wedding dress, which she soon becomes engulfed in and we see a side of her that resembles the same focus on body that is riddled in the character of Linda Low. She dances with male dancers who are hidden by Chinese opera masks as the dream’s background music turns from soft and melodic to a bit of a nightmare.<sup>8</sup> It seems as though it’s signaling that the intertwining between her Linda Low self and her Mei Li self is not enough for Wang Ta as in the last few moments she reaches out for him and is briskly dragged away from him. Helen Chao’s character is vital in understanding what exactly *Flower Drum Song*’s end goal is – she is someone who is “neither authentically West nor authentically East” and if she were able to capture the heart of Wang Ta the film’s theme of making Asian and American into two separate entities would not be met.<sup>9</sup>

Another text that was the first of its kind – Margaret Cho’s *All-American Girl* – served the purpose of introducing the modern American television public to the day to day of a Korean-American family. Never before had there been a sitcom or show for that matter, to bring an Asian American family to the limelight of primetime. The title itself says that our main protagonist, Margaret Kim is completely westernized and fully assimilated in comparison to the family around her. Such as *Flower Drum Song* there was a clear intent that these productions were supposed to introduce the mainstream to Asian

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<sup>6</sup> Cheng, 60

<sup>7</sup> *Flower Drum Song*

<sup>8</sup> Cheng, 60

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 60

and Asian Americans but they both fiercely used characters to state that there is only the option to be Asian and overly assimilated into Western culture. *All-American Girl* best demonstrates this problematic issue in the episode of “Redesigning Women.”

In “Redesigning Women,” the audience is introduced to the fiancé of Margaret’s brother who happens to be the “perfect” Korean girl.<sup>10</sup> Although Amy – the fiancé – does not have similar speaking patterns or dress as Mei Li in *Flower Drum Song* she still represents the trope of a “traditional” Asian women who is studious, polite and serves her fiancé.<sup>11</sup> It becomes known how different Amy and Margaret are to one another immediately in the episode when Amy seems quite close with Margaret’s mom. Margaret remarks how her mother loves Amy more than her to which she responds, “Don’t be ridiculous. Amy is just a nice, sweet girl. She cares about her education, she cares about her family, she cares about the Korean community... Oh my god I do love her more than you.”<sup>12</sup> The studio audience then erupts into laughter, but what the mother’s response signifies are the qualities that she cares about – those that are aligned with being a more traditional Asian – something that Margaret is not. Throughout the episode Amy attempts to identify with Margaret’s “cool American girl” lifestyle and it seems effective, but it becomes a joke since the program is essentially telling the audience, “this is comedy, because we know she’s a Korean girl who is trying to be American, but can’t be.” This

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<sup>10</sup> *All- American Girl*, “Redesigning Women.” Directed by Terry Hughes. Written by Dawn DeKeyser (1994; American Broadcasting Company, 2006), DVD.

<sup>11</sup> L.S. Kim, “Be The One That You Want: Asian Americans in Television Culture, Onscreen and Beyond,” *Amerasia Journal* 30, no. 1 (2004)

<sup>12</sup> *All- American Girl*

occurs while Margaret will never please her traditional Korean mother who doesn't understand American life and abandons any alignment with her Asian heritage.<sup>13</sup>

While it is most effective for Asian and Asian American stories to be told through the mainstream because of there's a wider variety of audience that will be met, there hasn't been a large amount of titles to do so in an adequate manner. *Fresh Off the Boat*, which is loosely based off the life of chef and personality Eddie Huang, has been a continuous hit amongst audiences and praised for its portrayal of an Asian American family. *Fresh Off the Boat* aired for the first time nearly twenty years after *All-American Girl* and it seems as though ABC – the network that both shows were and currently are on – attempted to correct the wrongs brought on by *All-American Girl*. Certainly the show is not perfect and has received similar criticisms that there are characterizations in the show that can be misrepresented of the Asian American experience, but it does not claim to be representative of all Asian Americans.

*Fresh Off the Boat* makes the effort to use its characters in a way of representing them as Asian and Americans. They are able to live comfortably in American culture, without having to abandon their original culture of being Chinese while it also not acting as the forefront of crude jokes. The purpose is to show the audience how the Chinese American family sees America from their perspective instead of the culture they're surrounded by characterizing them. One of the ways this is able to occur is the show's use of the character of Jessica, the mother of the Huang family. Being an immigrant on the show, ABC could have made the choice to repeat what they had done on *All-*

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Moon Cassinelli, "'If We Are Asian, Then Are We Funny?': Margaret Cho's 'All-American Girl' as the First (and Last?) Asian American Sitcom." *Studies in American Humor*, New Series 3, no. 17 (2008): 132

*American Girl* by creating another juxtaposition between Asian and American. Jessica does not become the stereotype of “only” being Chinese and shying away from American culture. Instead, like the rest of her family she suggests that, “Asian is not Other, and Whiteness is not necessarily the ideal.”<sup>14</sup>

Challenging what has been done in the past with Asian American representation needs to come from the accessibility for Asian and Asian Americans to tell the story and have input on such a scale with a large audience like *Fresh Off the Boat* has. For example, Constance Wu who plays Jessica has been very outspoken about Asian American representation in the media and her vocalization about her character has been one of the reasons why *Fresh Off the Boat* has not fallen into the hole of becoming another *All-American Girl*. “I’m less nervous about my input on small details. I’ll be like, “We’re showing generic Asian food in this scene – if you change the food to a 1,000-year-old black egg with tofu and scallions, it will be a little more specific,” and specify is just better for character, and it’s more interesting than, say, tofu and rice.”<sup>15</sup> That kind of input may seem miniscule, but the ability to not take aspects of Asian culture and make it generic is another step towards the shift of valid representation.

The creation of the hegemonic society we live in begins and ends with the media discourse that the public is exposed to. The most effective way to change that is to display true and accurate representations of Asian Americans to the mainstream public where there’s a larger audience and more accessibility for it to be seen. Not everyone has

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<sup>14</sup> L.S. Kim, “Asian America On Demand: Asian Americans, Media Networks, and a Matrix Stage,” in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media*, ed. Lori Kido Lopez and Vincent N. Pham (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017) 178

<sup>15</sup> Jenny Zhang, “The Lenny Interview: Constance Wu,” *Lenny Letter*



the ability to view independent projects at festivals and those who do are usually more educated in matters of representation and diversity. A major breakthrough in Hollywood is necessary – only if the way Asian Americans are presented is in a specific and definite way. *Flower Drum Song* and *All- American Girl* had positive intentions but they only ostracized the Asian American community and told the public that there was no possibility of being apart of two different cultures. *Fresh Off the Boat* has become a piece of text to not generalize the Asian American experience in an effort to not create two separate worlds – “Asian” and “American” – for the characters. The use of storytellers, directors, writers and even contribution from actors who are of Asian heritage is the only way that this can be accomplished.

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