

Sharon Kwik / RAISING OUR FISTS: MORE THAN JUST PRETTY ETHNICS

North America is on the verge of a new revolution. On the heels of civil rights activists and feminists are Asian women. No longer silent (or silenced) we are speaking out. Asian women need their own category because in my opinion the first two movements have somehow managed to leave them behind. Now before you speak out in protest, take this pop quiz: name ten Asian actresses. Newscasters don't count. Having trouble? Okay, name five. One. Am I making myself clear?

I am an Asian actress. I was born in Canada and my first language is English. I am also unemployed. In the two years that I have been in the business, I have had three auditions. The first was for an Ontario Lotteries commercial that was looking for ethnic girls in bikinis. The second was for a B.C. Forestries ad in which I was the token Asian amongst a horde of tourists. The last was for a spin-off of MacGyver. This script was a piece of American propaganda about Chinese refugees embracing the land of the free with visions of democracy shining in their eyes. Even the accent was written into the script. To every person who has suffered some racial discrimination sometime in his or her life, this should come as no surprise. Well it surprised me, because I thought I was white.

Don't get me wrong, I am not visually impaired. When I look in the mirror in the morning, an Asian face stares back at me. Yet for the longest time, I failed to perceive the label. It was just a face. I speak perfect English and I carry a Canadian passport, so why should the colour of my skin or the slant of my eyes disqualify me from roles in films and television as a lawyer, doctor, teacher, or even the "girl next door"?

I grew up in a predominantly white suburb. I was the only Asian in my elementary school and one of two Asians in my high school. Strangely enough, instead of making the differences glaringly obvious, it made me deny my identity.

My parents are Chinese-Indonesian. This means my ancestors were Chinese and had emigrated to Indonesia about six generations ago. Indonesians don't consider these emigrés to be Indonesian, nor do the Chinese consider them to be Chinese. As a mixed breed, we are nothing. However, in Canada we are immigrants: currently labelled in the media as the "Asian Invasion." We were different from our neighbours. Or were we?

When I was young I preferred Kraft dinner to the Indonesian food my mother made. I adored Marilyn Monroe and James Dean. I followed the saga of "Days of Our Lives" religiously. I know the themes to "Gilligan's Island" and "The Brady Bunch" by heart. I practiced disco dancing in my bedroom. I had Donny Osmond and Shaun Cassidy records. I wore bell-bottomed pants, leg warmers and wedgies. I wanted to be popular. I wanted to be blonde and blue-eyed.

Those were the seventies and early eighties. Now it's the nineties. Have things changed? My brother is fifteen years old. All his compact discs are Black rap artists. His favourite T.V. shows are "In Living Color," "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," and "The Cosby Show." On his wall are posters of Queen Latifah and Spike Lee. His idea of beauty is Jody Watley or Lisa Bonet. He wishes he had kinky hair and darker skin. He cut his hair into a flat top with shaved sides. He follows the fashion on the MuchMusic rap videos. We differ by seven years in age and in that time the colour of pop culture has changed. I wanted to be white, he wants to be Black. Neither of us is proud to be Asian.

As Asians we are frequently mistaken for being someone we're not. People on the street think he's a gang member — untrustworthy, violent, and a menace to society. Caucasian men I meet often begin speaking to me in what they assume to be my native language. They assume I'm anti-feminist and that I'll put a man's needs before my own. They believe that I'm exotic, mysterious, and different from white women in bed. Where are these ideas promoted?

A Newsweek poll in 1971 illustrated that the average American citizen watches six hours of television per day. In 1988, there were over 657 million T.V. sets, one for every child in the world.¹ Television has a huge effect on our lives. It educates as much as it

entertains. But what is it teaching us? If it is perceived to be a mirror of our society, does that mean that North America is comprised only of young attractive women, older men, primarily a white population with the occasional Black thrown in for good measure?²

Until ten years ago, television was essentially white. Today television is broken up into Black and white. Of course Black people haven't inserted themselves into the media without a fight, but I'm wondering where Asians fit into the picture. First there were all white shows, then white shows with a token Black, then all Black shows, now there are all Black shows with a token Asian. What does this mean? What kind of progress is this?

I have no sense of my history in this country. Every film or T.V. show I watch tells me this is a Black and white world with nothing in between. Black people had Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. What heroes and heroines do Asians have? Did they even fight, or did they just quietly assimilate into white culture, forgetting their past, denying their identities? If they weren't identified as either Black or white when there were segregated washrooms, did they use the "coloured" ones?

The library has books on Black history in the media and representations of Native people. There seems to be a void where Asians are concerned. I am beginning to think we don't exist. Searching for Asian women on television confirmed my suspicions. Yet I look out my window to see that we *do* exist, and not just in Chinatown. In Vancouver, every fourth person on the street is Asian. Asians account for 65 per cent of all legal immigration to the United States.³ The numbers increase every day, but surely you've seen it on the news? This is where we are represented in the media, whereas Asian immigration is a topic for news Asian women are newscasters. One of the most famous media personalities is Connie Chung. Her popularity precipitated the increasing appearance of Asian women newscasters. Although I know who she is, I can't find her on Canadian broadcast television. Where is she now? Another Asian woman who has received a lot of media attention is Joan Chen of "Twin Peaks." She played the character Jocelyn Packard, a mysterious widow who gets what she wants through the promise of sex. Asian women are consis-

tently portrayed as prostitutes. If we were to base our conclusions upon this character nothing has changed.

The only positive portrayals of Asian women that I've recently seen were Kim Miyori and Frances Nuyen who played doctors on "St. Elsewhere." This is a good example of non-traditional casting where race is not germane to character development.⁴ However, this show is no longer on the air.

Rosalind Chao played an Asian war bride on "After M*A*S*H"; on "Eddie's Father" an Asian woman played the housekeeper; on "Star Trek," Lieutenant Uhuru was a sex object; on "Night Court" the token Black character's wife had recently immigrated to America and spoke broken English, and on the soap opera "As the World Turns" the character Liane was the illegitimate daughter of a Caucasian Vietnam veteran. These actresses are no longer on the air.

The remaining visible Asian faces on television are male, and there aren't that many of them either. Even in advertising the Asian faces are infrequent. If Asians are shown, they are part of the milieu, a face in the crowd rather than a spokesperson for the product. According to Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Jamieson, "ads mirror not the actual population but the consuming population, and that older persons and minorities have comparatively less disposable income. So as their income rises and increasing numbers enter the middle and upper classes, their percentages on T.V. ads should increase."⁵ Considering the numbers of wealthy Asians in this country, one would assume that this would be the case.

Many of the struggles in bringing Black faces to white television are pertinent to the (in)visibility of Asian faces. As recently as 1949, Blacks were still playing caricatured menials of comic types. Sydney Poitier changed that by playing roles demanding social respect.⁶ In the late sixties, Diahann Carroll played "Julia": the most assimilated Black character ever to appear in the American mass media. The actress herself criticized the show: "Julia Baker was a 'white negro', the overly good, overly integrated, a fantasy projection of white writers acting, they felt, in a manner sensitive to decades of T.V. prejudice."⁷

In 1970, "The Flip Wilson Show" achieved a number one

standing in the Neilson ratings; television's first Black superstar. The show "had humour that aired Black comic concerns but didn't attack and lay blame."⁸ Perhaps this is partly why "The Flip Wilson Show" was so successful.

By 1984, "The Cosby Show" reached number one. This show portrays a Black family representative of all Americans. It implemented "positive role models — a Black family that had managed to escape the violence of poverty through education and unity."⁹ The Cosby characters have critics who argue, "the characters are so good they're not funny; that they're mainstream capitalists, therefore 'in essence' white; that they duck racial issues and give the false impression that racial trouble has been resolved."¹⁰ I disagree with this criticism. The show may not talk about issues but it does inspire Black pride in the masses. Besides, why couldn't Black people be mainstream capitalists?

In 1985, "A Different World" a sit-com about a Black college, aired on national television. Since that time enrollment in Black colleges increased by 30%.¹¹ This is only a small indicator of television's widespread influence. Pride in one's own race is hard to come by, especially if one is an Asian born in North America. There is the need for positive role models. Paul Yee states, "The second generation, benefitting from public education strove to escape the ethnic community/economy/ghetto. The price for integration appears to have been the dissolution of the ethnic community."¹² Ron Tanaka, an English professor at Berkeley, gathered a group of Sansei and Chinese Canadian students to discuss Asian identity. All participants shared feelings of not fitting in, not knowing Asian languages, and not being proud to be Asian. Tanaka argued that "with assimilation, Asian Canadians had acknowledged the cultural superiority of white Anglo-Canada and let it define the roles and places of its minorities."¹³ I have nothing against assimilation, to a point. I believe that when one emigrates to a new country, one should try to adapt; however, "melting pot" idealism can go astray. In the process of assimilation, does one lose one's cultural heritage and deny one's past in order to gain full acceptance in his or her new community?

Instead of productive role models, Hollywood gives us stereotypes and caricatures. The silent film era portrayed Asians as evil

characters involved in drug or crime-related activities. The first sympathetic portrayal was the Chinese character in the film *Broken Blossoms* made in 1919. This was potentially positive “except for one flaw, his desire for a white women. Since miscegenation was the most horrible crime any Oriental could commit, death was the only solution for this illicit romance.”¹⁴ Besides “21 Jumpstreet” and “Degrassi High,” superficiality persists in depictions of male Asian characters on today’s television. “Wok with Yan,” a Chinese cooking show, and Tom Vu, a self-made millionaire, are embarrassments to Asians. I realize that there are white caricatures on television but at least they are offset with positive characters.

Asian women must constantly struggle against stereotypes in the media and everyday life. Television and films which promote misconceptions about Asian women seem to be successful in affirming these ideas in Caucasian men’s minds. For example, an article by Tony Parsons published in *Arena* magazine (Spring 1991), explains why there were so many ethnic women in the Hot 100 (females) list in the previous month’s issue. The Asian women named were Nancy Kwan, the actress who played “Suzy Wong” the “acceptably exotic and Anglicized Asian female”¹⁵ from sixties film, and “any Cathay Pacific stewardess (business class).”¹⁶ Parsons argues that Caucasian men are passing over white women in favour of these pretty ethnics. I gathered that he assumes that today’s white women are all vocal feminists, that their fight for equality in the work place has given them too much financial power and since they have become the equal of men physically they are a sexual turn-off.

Parsons assumes and maintains, however, that ethnic women are quiet, docile, and animalistic sexually. This means that they are easily dominated except in bed — what more could a man want? *Arena* magazine, where this article appeared is geared towards white middle to upper class, apparently intelligent, employed, socially aware males. Unfortunately, it echoes the stereotypes in *Sex and the Oriental*, a trashy dimestore novel published in 1965, promoted as a white man’s guide to sex in Japan.

The odds seem to be against Asian women ever breaking out of this stereotype, unless we begin making our own films as Black filmmakers have done. Writer J. Fred MacDonald says it best:

What does it suggest about American broadcasters when a minority group has achieved economic strength and constitutes a desirable consumer market, but still is unable to see itself portrayed honestly and intelligently on television? Some have suggested that the only way television will act responsibly towards blacks is when minorities infiltrate the creative aspects — as writers, directors, producers, and top executives of programming and turn their sensitivities into policies.¹⁷

Although the work of Asian women filmmakers may still be a novelty to North American audiences, they do exist: Helen Lee's *Sally's Beauty Spot*, Midi Onodera's *The Displaced View*, Pam Tom's *Two Lies*, and Lise Yasui's *Family Gathering*, to name a few. This proves an age-old axiom: if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

NOTES

1. McGrohan, *Prime Time, Our Time*, (California: Prima Publishing and Communications, 1990), 353.
2. Campbell and Jamieson, *The Interplay of Influence*, (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983), 147.
3. Sing, *Asian Pacific Americans*, (Los Angeles: National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1989), 9.
4. *Ibid.*, 27.
5. Campbell and Jamieson, 147.
6. McBride, *Filmmakers on Filmmaking*, (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher Inc., 1983), 71.
7. MacDonald, *Blacks and White T.V.*, (Chicago: Nelson Hall Publishers, 1983), 116.
8. McCrohan, 200.
9. *Ibid.*, 331.
10. *Ibid.*, 335.
11. *Ibid.*, 346.
12. Paul Yee, "Where Have All The Young People Gone?" in *Asian Canadians: Regional Perspectives*, (Mount St. Vincent University, 1981), 355.
13. *Ibid.*, 357.
14. Miller and Woll, *Ethnic and Racial Images in Film and Television*, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc. 1987), 190.

15. Okano, "Visible Difference", *Fuse*, (Spring, 1990), 36.
16. Parsons, "Pretty Ethnics", *Arena*, (Spring 1991), 20.
17. MacDonald, *Blacks and White T.V.*, 233.

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