

Misrepresentations of Asian American
'Authenticity' in *All-American Girl*:
Sitcoms as Sites of Assimilation

Minnie Yang

FILM 356: History of American TV

Dr. Charlie Michael

December 16, 2019

The weirdness of being the first Asian American...is that people are constantly judging you. They're asking, 'Where do you fit on this idea of who we are?' With ethnic identity, there's a right way to be and a wrong way to be, and that's a really weird thing. The panic comes from not seeing Asian Americans on television, so the few images we do have of them become overly scrutinized. If you're coming into visibility, you're the first person to write the story, and it's very hard to do that first.

What is your identity if you've never seen yourself before? How do you carve it out of nothing?

– Margaret Cho (Woo)

Introduction

On September 14, 1994, *All-American Girl* premiered on ABC and became the first network television show to feature a predominantly Asian cast, largely depicting the lives of the Korean, San Francisco-based Kim family. At the sitcom's center was stand-up comedian Margaret Cho, who played the twenty-something daughter named Margaret Kim. Due to Cho's success in stand-up, the show was promoted as being based upon her well-received comedy routines and her lived experiences as a Korean American growing up in California.

Prior to *All-American Girl*, Asians and Asian Americans on American television were severely limited to roles as submissive, servile foreigners, as in *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* in the 1960s, and as defeated, victimized bodies during the Vietnam conflict, as in *M*A*S*H* in the 1970s (Kim 131, 125). *All-American Girl* was the first time in which Asian Americans could see themselves in a normalized, domestic situation with a whole range of characters, including a funny grandmother, knowing father, snappy mother, annoying brothers, and a rebellious “all-American girl.” However, these characters leaned quite heavily into racial and ethnic stereotypes that exacerbated the issues of Asian American representation. As audiences began to respond more negatively as the show progressed, the showrunners changed the storylines to focus more on Margaret Kim and her white friends, though to no avail. Mired in criticism and incoherence, the sitcom was canceled after only 19 episodes.

In order to understand the reasons why *All-American Girl* received such criticisms, I will focus on the ways in which the white creators and writers of the show claimed, reconstructed,

and substantially whitewashed Cho's narrative, both that of her personal life as well as that of her stand-up comedy routine. As a result, these alterations, which could even be considered mutations, diminished Cho's voice, body, and power, replacing them with the creators' external assertions of what they believed to be an "authentic" Asian American narrative, image, and experience. The sitcom was then promoted as having such "authenticity," especially due to the repeated emphasis on the show's basis on Cho's narrative. This created assumptions that Cho held creative control over the story, when in reality she did not. Subsequently, much of the blame for the show's lack of authenticity was placed on Cho.

To illustrate the ways in which Cho and the other Asian American actors on the show were shoehorned to fit certain expectations of "Asian Americanness," I will discuss how the American situation comedy as a television form affirms dominant ideologies and implements assimilatory rhetoric, therefore enabling these acts of whitewashing. However, I do not want to give all my attention to the white writers, inadvertently privileging their voices and subsequently contributing to the continuation of Margaret Cho's devoicing and disempowerment; therefore, I also want to emphasize Cho's circumscribed agency and the ways in which she regained and asserted her power during and after her time on *All-American Girl*.

Embodied Assimilation

In the early 1990s, Margaret Cho began to garner acclaim for her "no-bullshit" stand-up comedy routines, in which she often joked about taboo subjects and spoke out against racism, sexism, and homophobia. In a 1993 stand-up performance, Cho describes how she was called a chink while traveling in Alabama, to which she responds, "A chink?? I'm sorry—chinks are Chinese, I'm Korean, I'm a gook, alright? If you're gonna be racist, at least learn the

terminology.” During this time, ABC was giving development deals to stand-up comedians like Roseanne, Seinfeld, and Ellen. The network was also known for its array of family-oriented sitcoms, such as *Full House* (1987-1995), *Family Matters* (1989-1998), and *Home Improvement* (1991-1999). Due to Cho’s success as a comedian, writer and producer Gary Jacobs approached her with a development deal, because he “found her incredibly likeable” and loved her “very sophisticated and literate” comedy (Leff). As with the other comedians and their transitions to the small screen, the executives wanted to “‘smooth out’ the bawdiest edges of Cho’s stand-up act (in the words of Jacobs) while retaining its hip, MTV-generation feel” (Leff).

However, while the other sitcoms were built up around their comedians’ personalities, Cho had to change her own punk, unapologetic personal style to fit into a generic situation comedy, in which her “semi-autobiographical” character wore fluffy, pink sweaters and spoke like a childish valley girl. In her stand-up comedy concert, *I’m The One That I Want*, which she performed several years after the cancellation of *All-American Girl*, Margaret Cho exposed many of the issues she had to deal with during the creation of the show. She recounts how Gail Berman, another producer, told her right before production was to begin that the network was concerned with the “fullness” of her face and that she had to lose weight. Cho tells her audience, “I didn’t know what to say to that. I always thought I was okay looking. I had no idea I was this GIANT FACE TAKING OVER AMERICA!” Because she did not want to lose her role on the show, Cho lost 30 pounds in two weeks, resulting in her hospitalization for kidney failure during production. Sarah Moon Cassinelli argues how this disturbing injustice illustrates the executives’ belief that “the features [Cho] puts out in the world are not only undesirable, but somehow *fixable*” (134). While it is unfortunately common for executives to tell actresses to lose weight for their roles, this situation highlights the particularly racialized way in which the white

showrunners wanted Cho to change, namely that they treated the “fullness” of her face as a sign of her Asianness that was “alienable—something she can excise and excrete, like bodily waste” (Lee 118).

Race, Ethnicity, and “Authenticity”

Within her stand-up comedy, Cho holds complete control over her voice, body, and power. The format allows her to be as irreverent and versatile as she wants, executing jokes with nuance on her own terms. However, situation comedies generally center on familial drama and create problems that can be fixed in 22 minutes, thus illustrating “how Americans see themselves—in a glossy, idealized, and neatly packaged form” (Southgate). Therefore, within the sitcom format, Cho and her comedy consequently become boxed in and sanitized to appeal to as wide an audience as possible—primarily, a white audience. While Jacobs claimed that “Every effort was made to make the show as realistic as possible,” making sure to note that the creators hired a Korean American consultant to review the scripts for authenticity, he also asserted that he wanted viewers unfamiliar with Asian Americans to “come to find the Kims funny and warm and loving people, not so very different from themselves” (Jacobs). In an essay about the 1968 sitcom *Julia*, which centers on an African American woman, Aniko Bodroghkozy explains how white viewers came to find the black characters in the show to be “just like everyone else,” though Bodroghkozy points out that it was really only “to the extent that [the black characters] conformed to an unexamined white norm of representation,” thus suggesting that “white was the normal from which the Other deviated” (136).

In another instance, Jacobs is quoted as saying, “I would hope that people stop seeing these people as Asian-Americans... they’re just another family that you want spend time with.

Like what happened with ‘Cosby’” (Price 141). Darbi Li Po Price argues that *The Cosby Show* presented a family that was African American in their physical appearance, yet lacked most aspects of their ethnicity (140). Therefore, in a similar vein, Jacobs’ quotes reveal his belief that the only way to gain wider (whiter) audience appeal is to essentially render the Kim family’s ethnicity invisible, resulting in less specificity regarding the Kims’ Korean heritage. Instead, in order to still simultaneously achieve some level of Asian “authenticity,” *All-American Girl* generically emphasizes the characters’ race, resulting in a strange mish-mash of Asian stereotypes that create fairly one-dimensional characters, such as Grandma Kim having a pet cricket and the family’s favorite restaurant being the Happy Lucky Golden Dragon restaurant in Chinatown. The mother falls into the adversarial “tiger mom” stereotype, and the brother upholds the “model minority” stereotype as the lawful successful doctor. Strangely, however, the Kim family is Americanized at the same time. Because of the familial drama aspect of the sitcom, the humor in the show primarily arises from the family members wittily insulting each other in a wise-cracking style, which was recognized by Asian American audiences to be unrealistic and inauthentic to Korean real lived experiences, since the formula “jars the sensibility of Koreans, who esteem politeness and generally do not find personal insults funny” (Kamalipour 131, Kang).

Moreover, the creators use Margaret Kim as the assimilated American that functions as the audience’s guide into “this exotic world” while the rest of the family are the conservative, traditional Asians that always condemn Margaret for her American ways (Jung). Her Americanness is equated with “freedom, independence, and fun,” whereas the rest of her family’s Asianness, most prominently manifested through her mother, is represented as “repressed and backward in comparison,” resulting in the conception that “American” and

“Asian” are mutually exclusive identities (Kim 136). This is further emphasized in the title of the show itself; the fact that it is not called “Asian American Girl” or simply does not include “Asian” implies that being American is what is important.

For example, in the episode “Redesigning Women,” the audience is introduced to Amy, who becomes engaged to Margaret’s brother Stuart. Amy is immediately deemed a good Korean girl because of her cooking and Korean-speaking abilities, as well as her submissive and demure personality. She is defined in opposition to Margaret, who is portrayed as the rebellious American foil. After Margaret takes Amy to a club called Skank with her white friends, Amy realizes she has been too submissive in her relationship, so she becomes more assertive and breaks up with Stuart. Margaret’s mother becomes distraught when she hears the news and cries out that Amy has “been corrupted. She’s out of control. She’s, she’s... Margaret.”

In another episode, “Submission: Impossible,” Margaret pretends to be a nice Korean girl after she begins dating a traditional Korean boy named Raymond. When he asks her if she would like to attend a Korean folk dancing event, she happily tells him “whatever you say, Raymond” in a higher voice than usual and giggles profusely to one of his jokes. However, by the end, Margaret decides she cannot maintain her act in order to be with him and reveals her true assertive, rebellious personality to him. In response, he breaks up with her. This episode relies heavily on the stereotype that Asian men are conservative and patriarchal, while Asian girls are submissive and demure. Furthermore, it perpetuates the impassable divide between “Korean girls” and “American girls,” and due to Margaret’s attempt to “pass” as a traditional Asian girl, the writing implies that “Asianness is a thing to be done, an act to be performed” (Cassinelli 136). Overall, Asianness is treated by the writers as a gimmick, something that can be put on and taken off but can never be integrated with what it means to be American.

Narrative Contestations

While the narratives surrounding the promotion of *All-American Girl* and the storylines themselves were all largely dominated by the white executives and writers, Margaret Cho was able to reclaim and reshape these narratives through her comedy special *I'm The One That I Want* and through her audio commentaries that accompanied four episodes on the DVD when it was released in 2006. Two of these commentaries include her co-star Amy Hill, who plays Grandma Kim. In the comedy special, Cho goes in depth in discussing her experiences throughout the creation of the sitcom and the consequences of the issues she faced. Her tone is biting and sardonic as she exposes, in one instance, how as the show's criticisms from the Asian American community increased, the network became scared. She acts out in front of her audience, "She's not Asian enough, she's not Asian enough! She's not testing Asian. So, for my benefit, they hired an Asian consultant. Oh yes, because I was fucking it up so bad, they had to hire somebody to help me be more Asian."

While Cho incisively denounces the way the executives treated her, she also divulges the deep ways that the show affected her. As she describes the phone call she received from the president of Disney, telling her the show was accepted for the fall season, she reveals, "It was, for the first time in my life, acceptance... I had never found acceptance until that moment. I felt real. I felt alive. I felt for the first time in my life, I was not invisible. It was a glorious feeling." Cho becomes quite vulnerable when she talks about the aftermath of the show as well, saying:

I fell apart, and I didn't know who I was at all. I was this Frankenstein monster made up of bits and pieces of my old standup acts, mixed with focus groups' opinions about what Asian Americans should be, mixed with the Asian consultant. I didn't know who I was—all I know was that I had failed. And I had failed as somebody else. It was painful.

Through her comedy routine, in which she manipulated her voice and body by imitating different executives and weaved through the experiences she wanted to shed light upon, Cho was able to control the way her narrative was presented to her audience and singularly command her audience's attention. Instead of virtually being a manipulated object of humor as she was on the sitcom, Cho becomes the creator and subject of her own humor.

The DVD audio commentaries present another interesting process of contesting and reclaiming the narratives around *All-American Girl*, particularly because they serve as authorized and legitimized paratexts that accompany the episode, which then change the meaning of the show itself. Cho and Hill further expose what they find wrong with the show through their seemingly disconnected and unapologetic remarks, holding back nothing from their commentary. Repeatedly, the two note how strange it is to watch themselves in these roles. In the episode, "Take My Family, Please," Margaret Kim gets into another conflict with her family when she makes fun of them during an impromptu stand-up routine she performs at the Happy Lucky Golden Dragon. The mother becomes angry and distressed, so the father lectures Margaret on the importance of community, to which Hill incredulously comments, "I never heard anybody say stuff like that... this was the stuff they would write that made no sense even in the community because nobody talked like that to their kids." In reference to the stereotypical narrative elements in the episode, specifically the fact that the Kims go to eat dinner at the Happy Lucky Golden Dragon restaurant, Cho pauses and says, "This is so... this episode is so wrong." The two also point out how in real life, nobody would ever actually go to Chinatown main street restaurants, illustrating the lack of authenticity that the show pushed forward.

Through this audio commentary, Cho is able to speak directly against and over her sitcom character and the Kims, most noticeably in a scene in which Margaret Kim is being condemned by her family for the stand-up routine:

FATHER: What kind of girl gets up on stage and makes fun and jokes about her family?

MARGARET CHO (Commentary): Me.

MARGARET KIM: I was just kidding...

CHO: No, I wasn't kidding.

MARGARET KIM: ... You usually laugh at my jokes.

FATHER: You embarrassed us terribly in front of the Parks.

CHO: Well fuck that, I don't give a shit...

STUART: And you know Auntie June. By now she's told every Korean in the San Francisco Bay Area [...]

CHO: ...see that's what I should have said.

AMY HILL: That's what you should have said.

CHO: Fuck you, fuck you, and fuck you.

AMY HILL: If the show were on HBO, it would have been a different story.

CHO: It would have been much easier.

Cho's pushback in her unrestrained remarks and criticisms change the understanding of the show as a whole. While in this episode, Cho's character vows to stop performing stand-up comedy, which is another disturbing plot element given her real life as a stand-up comedian, Cho is able to tell viewers how she truly feels and reclaim the narrative.

Conclusion

All-American Girl illustrates the fundamental problem with people telling stories that are not theirs to tell. Because the white producers and writers of this show claimed they were presenting an authentic narrative based upon Cho's life and yet did not do the work in actually learning from the lived experiences of real Korean Americans, *All-American Girl* became a bastardized story that literally diminished Margaret Cho and her Asian American co-stars and portrayed their Asianness as an unwelcome identity. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the work that Cho did to reclaim her narrative once more and empower other Asian Americans.

Bibliography

- Acham, Christine. "The *Cosby Show*: Representing Race." *How to Watch Television*, by Jason Mittell and Ethan Thompson, New York University Press, 2013, pp. 103–111.
- Biddle, Frederic M. "ABC plays it safe for new season." *The Boston Globe*, 10 May 1994.
- Bodroghkozy, Aniko. "'Is This What You Mean by Color TV?': Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in *Julia*." *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, by Joanne Morreale, Syracuse Univ. Press, 2003, pp. 129–149.
- Braxton, Greg. "It's All in the (Ground-Breaking) Family : Television: As a Sitcom Centered on Asian Americans, 'All-American Girl' Is Being Monitored by Advocacy Groups Concerned about Racial Stereotypes. Welcome to the Pressure Cooker." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 14 Sept. 1994, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-09-14-ca-38522-story.html.
- Cassinelli, Sarah Moon. "'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*, no. 17, 2008, pp. 131–144.
- Jacobs, Gary. "In Defense of 'All-American Girl'." *Los Angeles Times*, 20 Mar. 1995, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-03-20-ca-44999-story.html.
- Kang, K. Connie. "'Girl' Undergoes Major Changes Amid Criticism." *Los Angeles Times*, 11 Mar. 1995, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-03-11-ca-41514-story.html.
- Kim, L.s. "Be The One That You Want: Asian Americans in Television Culture, Onscreen and Beyond." *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2004, pp. 125–146., doi:10.17953/amer.30.1.356381678qj14622.
- Lee, Rachel C. "'Where's My Parade?': Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space." *TDR/The Drama Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2004, pp. 108–132., doi:10.1162/105420404323063427.
- Leff, Lisa. "For Margaret Cho, an 'All American' Arrival; A Fresh New Comic Finds Fodder In Generation and Culture Gaps." *The Washington Post*, September 11, 1994.
- Jung, E. Alex. "All-American Girl at 20: The Evolution of Asian Americans on TV." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 9 Nov. 2014, lareviewofbooks.org/article/american-girl-20-evolution-asian-americans-tv/?fbclid=IwAR3PTDurkJVFaZCbuEBZ6xeVLL7iUh8K4uIG0z9a3Proa-epv3A7zeRphZA.

Park, Jane Chi Hyun. "The Failure of Asian American Representation In All-American Girl and The Cho Show." *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2013, pp. 637–649., doi:10.1080/0966369x.2013.810596.

Price, Darbi Li Po. "'All-American Girl' and the American Dream." *Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism*, vol. 2 no. 1, 1994, pp. 129-146.

Southgate, Martha. "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Prime Time." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 Oct. 1994, www.nytimes.com/1994/10/30/magazine/a-funny-thing-happened-on-the-way-to-prime-time.html.

Wallis, Belinda. "American TV learns Asian equation." *South China Morning Post (Hong Kong)*, 15 Oct. 1994.

Woo, Michelle, et al. "20 Years Later, Margaret Cho Looks Back on 'All-American Girl'." *Character Media*, 25 Jan. 2019, charactermedia.com/20-years-later-margaret-cho-looks-back-on-all-american-girl/.

Viewing Links

Margaret Cho Stand-up Comedy (1993)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34ILm_gFTEY

All-American Girl (1994-1995) YouTube playlist

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH5CTSnl1w7n4MTjfkoghP130H7bOjroN>

All-American Girl episode "Take My Family, Please" with audio commentary (2006)

<https://vimeo.com/379474331/5fc278a189>

I'm The One That I Want (2000)

Part 1: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3hodr9>

Part 2: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3hodwq>