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The following is a conference paper presented at the Thinking Gender conference on April 20, 2016. It is a condensed and adapted version taken from a seminar paper on engendering a women of color feminist critique of Justin Lin's debut feature film, *Better Luck Tomorrow*.

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Searching for Stephanie: Negotiating Female Subjectivity in Justin Lin's Masculinist Feature Film *Better Luck Tomorrow*

By Derek Lu

Following *Better Luck Tomorrow's* premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in 2001, during a Q&A session with director Justin Lin, an outraged viewer asked him why he had portrayed his "community" in such a negative light.¹ In response, revered Hollywood film critic Roger Ebert quickly jumped to Lin's defense, retorting that he would never have made such an accusation to a white filmmaker.² Many mainstream film critics have agonizingly debated whether the film is Lin's way of contesting the model minority label that has been forcibly ascribed to Asian Americans. In response, Lin has insisted that the film is not a "counter-comment on stereotypes." He further elaborates: "People don't want to sit there to have you explain why you need to exist. You just do, and people have to come along with it." Nonetheless, that statement belies the reality of the industry: Asian Americans have long struggled for the right to not only "exist" in Hollywood cultural productions but also to tell their own stories.

There are many ways to view and interpret a film like *Better Luck Tomorrow*. Is it a mainstream or independent movie? Is it a political or an artistic statement? Is it progressive or problematic in its representation of Asian Americans? A frequent—and somewhat superficial—

reading is that it is a crime-drama that seeks to intervene against the emasculation of Asian American men in Hollywood by portraying them as hypermasculine “bad boys.” Mainstream critics largely lauded the film for its promotion of multiculturalism, the sociopolitical state project that sanctions the institutionalization of cultural diversity. According to cultural critic James Lee, the issue with multiculturalism’s celebration of diversity is that it assumes that “recognizing and nurturing a racial renaissance in the realm of cultural production could address, even trump, the paucity of attention given to the political and economic poverty of racialized urban communities.”³ Consequently, to describe the film as a glimpse into the lived realities of Asian Americans elides the material violences that Asian Americans and other people of color have to endure in a white supremacist state—on a daily basis—in exchange for ephemeral moments of visibility and inclusion on screen.

That is precisely what Lin endeavors to do in *Better Luck Tomorrow*: to relay the stories of a group of young Asian American men on his terms, based loosely on both his own childhood and the real life murder of Stuart Tay, an adolescent who was killed by a group of high achieving Asian American high school students for suspicions of betrayal in a collective computer theft ring. Set in a multicultural suburb in Orange County, the film depicts a group of successful, assimilated Asian American youth each attempting to navigate the rough terrain of high school and cultivate the perfect portfolio of skills that will enable entry into an Ivy League college. Juxtaposed against the seemingly idyllic landscape of suburbia, the film takes startlingly violent turns as the protagonists become increasingly ensnared in a criminal enterprise that results in the grisly murder of an acquaintance. *Better Luck Tomorrow* has been hailed by film critics as the first real example of “mainstream Asian American cinema” that presents Asian American men as

possessive of a “fully fledged, three-dimensional masculinity.” But what is lost in the project of Asian male “empowerment?”

What is missing from *Better Luck Tomorrow* is an exploration of how the process of racialized subject formation is inherently gendered—precisely, that mainstream representations of Asian American men are informed by both their race and gender. In positing this reclamation of Asian American masculinity, Justin Lin pays no mind to the ways in which Asian women are differentially affected by gendered racialization and consequently produces a narrative that ultimately subjugates Asian American women. Given the theme of this conference, how can we negotiate an agentive space for Stephanie, the sole female character in the film, within this masculinist production? In this paper, I will argue that while the film makes crucial interventions against the emasculation of Asian American men in American popular culture and provides telling commentary on the material violence that neoliberalism sanctions against Asian American men, the film ultimately falls short in its utter lack of attention to the differing ways through which the neoliberal state instrumentalizes male and female bodies and predisposes them to violence. In fact, the success of the film in rewriting Asian American men’s emasculation as hypermasculinity hinges upon the blatant subjugation of both white women and women of color. Hence, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which Stephanie, despite being constructed and treated as an object for the majority of the film, is able to assert herself as a subject, one who is possessive of her individual agency, desires, and dreams.

One of the main identity issues foregrounded in *Better Luck Tomorrow* is the model minority myth. The protagonist of the film is Ben, who is described on the DVD cover as “the overachiever.” The viewer witnesses him engage in a plethora of extracurricular activities in order to boost his college application, including volunteering at a hospital, working at a fast food

restaurant and playing on the basketball team. He quips, “The way I saw it, as long as it made it onto my college application, it was all worth it. You just can’t count on good grades to get into a decent school anymore.” Through Ben, the model minority subject can be read as possessive of an inherent (hyper)productivity – one that enables him to take responsibility for his own actions and work to amass a multivariegated skill set.

In *Race for Citizenship*, cultural theorist Helen Jun contends that it is this very hyperproductivity of Asian Americans in their ability to accumulate human capital that renders them the ideal neoliberal subjects. *Better Luck Tomorrow* presciently demonstrates that a blind adherence to neoliberal ideals has toxic consequences, as morality becomes increasingly blurred in the lives of these characters and every heinous action can be rationalized in the name of self-interest and self-preservation. For example, after Ben and his crew commit murder to help Ben get the girl of his dreams, Virgil attempts to commit suicide, but he fails, and when Daric visits him at the hospital, his primary concern is whether Virgil is “going to talk.” This thereby exposes the fact that the U.S. state’s promotion of capitalism vis-à-vis global neoliberalism is inevitably dependent upon the violent dehumanization of certain racialized bodies.

Unfortunately, Lin’s critique of neoliberalism is subsumed under his intervention against the emasculation of Asian American men in Hollywood, immortalized by characters such as Mr. Yunioshi from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and Duk Long Dong in *Sixteen Candles*. *Better Luck Tomorrow* goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Asian American men are more than just emasculated geeks – they are also athletes, drug dealers, popular, and sexually active. However, in positing this reclamation of Asian American masculinity, Justin Lin compromises the inclusion of complex female characters and consequently produces a narrative that presents Asian American women in a rather sexist fashion. The question that drives my presentation is:

How can we negotiate an agentive space for Stephanie, the sole female character in the film, within this masculinist production? I aim to use the works of interdisciplinary cultural studies scholars such as Celine Perrenas Shimizu and Uri McMillan to demonstrate the ways in which Stephanie, despite being construed as an object for the majority of the film, can be read as a subject, one who is possessive of her individual agency, desires, and dreams.

Stephanie Vandergosh is first introduced to viewers as the cute, popular, and partnered cheerleader that Ben unrequitedly has a crush on. Through a stroke of luck, they become lab partners in biology class. Her initial emasculation of Ben, through acts such as pricking his finger during lab (and literally drawing his blood!), can be regarded as a catalyst for his own metamorphosis into a masculine “bad boy.” He initially attempts to establish his masculinity by selling cheat sheets, before escalating to significantly more serious misdemeanors, such as dealing and abusing drugs.

Ultimately, Ben is compelled to commit murder, beating Steve, Stephanie’s boyfriend, to death out of jealousy over the fact that Stephanie will not leave him, even though he does not appreciate her. At the end of the movie, Ben rides off into suburban bliss with Stephanie, his “reward for a season of bad behavior.” His transformation from “feminine” to “masculine” is complete, and this evolution surely would not have been possible without Stephanie injuring his masculinity in the first place and instigating the need to affirm heteropatriarchy as the driving principle in Ben’s life. Hence, Stephanie’s primary purpose in the film is to help Ben achieve his manhood, and as such, is depicted as nothing more than a prize—a commodity of exchange—for Ben and Steve to compete for. Lin takes great care in fleshing out his male characters, but unfortunately presents Stephanie as a static entity and makes little effort to configure her character on her own terms. In an effort to recuperate the character, what are ways in which we

can read Stephanie as more than the trophy girlfriend stuck in a love triangle, and instead, as an agentive subject?

Feminist film scholar and filmmaker Celine Parreñas Shimizu proposes a reading of the character that contradicts the notion that Stephanie is a mere foil for the male protagonists. Shimizu argues that although the fact that Stephanie is potentially a porn star reproduces the hypersexual fantasy of Asian American women, the film does not condemn her for her potential transgression of feminine respectability politics. Instead, by juxtaposing that alongside her other character traits—the cheerleader and adoptee who wants to be a police officer—Shimizu contends that we can read her as an empowered, sexually liberated young woman who possesses her own passions. Furthermore, even though the film is centered on Ben and Steve’s contest for Stephanie’s love, Shimizu believes Stephanie is more in control of her choices than the audience is led to believe. In her interpretation of the final scene of the film, in which Stephanie drives off into the sunset with Ben by her side, Stephanie, according to Shimizu, is determined to get out of suburbia, and “men do not matter—whether [with] Ben or Steve, she will leave this place and become a cop.” Despite the grisly murder Ben has committed and the psychic trauma he now has to endure in order to be with her, we ultimately do not know if she reciprocates his feelings. In this light, Stephanie can be read as a sexually empowered young woman who will stop at nothing to achieve her dreams, and men are just collateral damage on her way up and out of the stifling confines of suburbia.

In spite of her hopeful reading of Stephanie’s potentiality to transgress the confines of the heterosexual love triangle in which she’s been emplaced, Shimizu nonetheless presents a portrait of desire in *Better Luck Tomorrow* on rather masculinist terms. She argues that “privileging the phallus and the penis in this story leads to Ben’s body functioning as a loaded gun that explodes

in the act of killing the other who reaped the rewards of his romantic work,” referring to her boyfriend Steve constantly impeding in his efforts to win her over.⁴ Essentially, Shimizu’s theory is that Ben is the embodiment of a phallus that is locked, loaded and ready to explode because it has been denied its pleasure. In Ben’s eyes, the only remedy for this “psychic castration” is murder, which allows him to eliminate his competition and finally “achieve relief and access literal and symbolic power in life.”⁵ However, it is slightly disconcerting that Shimizu makes little attempt to critique the film’s conception of desire as defined exclusively through the phallus and its needs. If she believes that for Stephanie, men do not matter, and her end goal is to escape suburbia to pursue her dream career, then why does she need a man at all? What is achieved in positioning her within not one but two heterosexual relationships throughout the course of the film?

Alternatively, perhaps there is a way in which her very objectification provides a means of expressing agency. In *Embodied Avatars*, performance scholar Uri McMillan seeks to interrogate the presumption that objecthood always results in injury by postulating: “What happens...if we reimagine black objecthood as a way toward agency?”⁶ Through analyzing the works of black female performers who become simulated beings, or what he terms “avatars,” he demonstrates how this manner of “performing objecthood” allows for the “circumvention of prescribed limitations on black women in the public sphere.”⁷ While I realize the stakes are vastly different, given that McMillan is writing about real women and Stephanie is a fictional character, I believe this lens can nonetheless be applied towards reading Stephanie. This is because although for the majority of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, Stephanie is constructed as a foil, regarding her objecthood not as injurious but rather performative allows for a reconfiguration of the power dynamics of the love triangle within which she is emplaced. To reiterate, Shimizu

reads Stephanie as depriving the phallus, or Ben's body, of its carnal pleasures, and in doing so, shows that she is actually more in control than the diegetic narrative makes it seem because the viewer does not know whom she actually desires.

This is where my reading of the ending of the film and Stephanie's character arc diverges from Shimizu's. I would contend that in the final scene, when she invites Ben into her brand new car, she is actually making a choice. Although she has not heard from Steve and is visibly concerned about him, she nevertheless drives off into the sunset with Ben. If her ultimate goal is to leave the suburbs and become a cop, then why does she need a man by her side? Being an "empowered young woman," she can surely accomplish that on her own. And yet, she decides she would like Ben's company, and in fact, she is the one who approaches him! For that reason, I would argue that in that moment, she makes an agentive choice: she may not need him to achieve her dreams, but she wants him to join her on her journey, and the film does not chide her for not remaining loyal to Steve.

As the screen fades out, Ben cryptically confesses that for the first time in his life, he does not know what the future holds, creating an unsettling "resolution" for our hero whose entire life thus far has been built upon having all the answers. I believe this last scene is a pivotal moment in the transformation of Stephanie's character as well. From being rendered a malleable object used as a tool to buttress Ben and Steve's masculinities, to taking charge of her love life and ultimately choosing Ben, forgoing her boyfriend Steve in the process, Stephanie has forged a path toward subjectivity – one that is premised upon the performance of objecthood.

In conclusion, while *Better Luck Tomorrow* may disavow the racist representations of Asian American men in classic Hollywood cinema, it blatantly and unapologetically subjugates women in order to empower Asian men and prove that they define the terms of their masculinity,

not white institutions or women. Simultaneously, while Justin Lin poses salient critiques of the material and structural violences of neoliberalism on Asian American bodies, they are presented strictly in heteropatriarchal terms. What would a more carefully considered intervention against racialized masculinity discourses have looked like? Perhaps he might have taken a page out of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, which itself was a response to the Orientalist dramatic production *Madama Butterfly*.⁸ As cultural anthropologist Dorinne Kondo carefully details in her seminal essay on *M. Butterfly*, at the crux of Hwang's play is a meditation on the fluidity of gender expression, sexual desire, fantasy, and power. In *M. Butterfly*, Gallimard is a white Frenchman who falls in love with a Chinese woman invented by a Chinese man named Song. Some might classify this as a "gay" relationship, but Kondo, in relaying the author's intentions, asserts that that would be remiss because in Gallimard's mind, he fell in love with a woman, so it is a firmly heterosexual liaison in his eyes.⁹ The question of who is in control becomes even more convoluted. One might assume that Gallimard would be the one who holds power since he is a white, high-ranking diplomat, but Song, being the "object" of his desire, has the ability to deny Gallimard pleasure. Hence, Song becomes, like Stephanie, the feminized object of desire cruelly depriving the phallus of pleasure, and this eventually leads to Gallimard's suicide. As Hwang effectively demonstrates, binaristic constructions of identity categories become moot in a story like *M. Butterfly*, in which the characters' identities are constantly in flux. His critically adored play proves that it is in fact possible to critique insidious representations of Asian American men, mediated by white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, without resorting to the objectification and subjugation of women.¹⁰ Such an approach attentive to the manifestations of gender violence would have engendered a much more nuanced take on Asian American youth

identity formation and thereby resulted in a critique of neoliberalism all the more sharp and unsettling.

As Ella Shohat and Robert Statham have opined, “the act of criticism is itself part of the process of dismantling systems of domination.”¹¹ That is presumably what Justin Lin endeavored in the making of this film. Likewise, I hope I have made a critical intervention in Asian American Studies/cultural studies scholarship by utilizing a women of color feminist critique that draws attention to the ways in which we can negotiate a female character’s subjectivity within a masculinist Asian American production. Through the interdisciplinary works of Helen Jun, Celine Parrenas Shimizu, and Uri McMillan, I have attempted to negotiate Stephanie’s subjectivity within this masculinist production by demonstrating the ways in which Stephanie is in fact able to articulate her individual ambitions and desires in the face of objectification. And by adopting reading practices that refuse the spectatorial position that consigns Stephanie to the part of a trophy girlfriend, we can begin to understand the ways in which a film meant to empower Asian American men might also have something interesting to say about the utility of Asian American women as well.

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¹ *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Justin Lin, 2001).

² Margaret Hillenbrand, "Of Myths and Men: *Better Luck Tomorrow* and the Mainstreaming of

² Margaret Hillenbrand, "Of Myths and Men: *Better Luck Tomorrow* and the Mainstreaming of Asian American Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 47 (2008): 58.

³ James Kyung-Jin Lee, *Urban Triage: Race and the Fictions of Multiculturalism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xxviii.

⁴ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 158.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Madama Butterfly* (Giacomo Puccini, 1904).

⁹ Dorinne Kondo, "*M. Butterfly*: On Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity," *Cultural Critique* 16 (1990): 21.

¹⁰ Maya Jaggi, "Profile: Maxine Hong Kingston." Despite the widespread acclaim, there are nonetheless critics of *M. Butterfly*. One of the most prominent is once again Frank Chin, who excoriated Hwang for perpetuating Orientalist tropes about Asian Americans. This raises provocative questions about the stakes for Asian American cultural productions both within and without the community that are outside the scope of my paper.

¹¹ Kent Ono and Vincent Pham. *Asian Americans and the Media*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 44.